



SOMETHING
ABOUT EVE

THE CERTAIN
HOUR

THE CORDS OF
VANITY

FROM THE
HIDDEN WAY
THE JEWEL
MERCHANTS

DEMONS IN
GRANBURY'S
NECK

THE EAGLE'S
SHADOW

THE LINEAGE
OF LIONFIELD

THE
LIONFIELD

BRIDE
McBRIDE

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ART
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Oliver
Rosenberg
Fitter

FOUR

The
BOOK
HOUSE
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The Poison Garden

By
Turtle Wexlen



White Heather

21 December 2001

Dear Professor Snape,
Perhaps I should no longer call you
that. You haven't been my teacher for
four years. I don't know how I would refer to you
if not by that old, familiar title. I call the rest
of my former teachers by their first names, but I'm
not sure I could ever call you Severus. I have to
laugh when I imagine your reaction to such famili-
arity. We never were familiar, the two of us.

I suppose it doesn't matter what I call you. You
can hardly care anymore. You're dead. Probably.

Horace Slughorn is dead as well (definitely).
His passing is much more recent than yours: the
lingering effects of a curse he took during the
Battle of Hogwarts. Since I was in my second
year of being his apprentice, I'm covering his

classes for the remainder of the year — and only the remainder of the year. I'm not coming back next autumn. Following your lesson plans and helping the students limp along through their OWLs and NEWTs is fine, but as you know, I have no real talent for Potions. I can follow directions, but I lack that creative spark and instinct. I've spent the past two years trying to prove otherwise. It's time to stop lying to myself. Time to find out what I really want to do with the rest of my life. Also, if I am forced to endure another term of trying to prevent students from causing fatal explosions, I may end up murdering the lot of them.

Minerva has taken me along on interviews to offer my opinion of my potential replacements. So far, none have been suitable. The other day, I found myself thinking that one applicant's fingers were too short and stubby, his hair too light. As my objections had nothing to do with his skill, I was forced to face the truth: I could not imagine him as Potions Master of Hogwarts simply because he is not you.

I don't know why I continue to write these letters. I don't know why I keep desperately searching for you in the face of every tall man with dark hair. Perhaps because your survival remains an

unanswered question, and you know how I've always felt about those.

It's not as if you would be pleased to know I mourn you. You would sneer and call me sentimental or mawkish or — worst of all in your eyes — Gryffindor. You would give me that glare you always shot my way when I waved my hand in the air and sought your attention and approval. That glare is so wrapped up in my introduction to the magical world. It's hardly any wonder that Hogwarts doesn't feel like Hogwarts without it.

Yes, yes, I know. Typical, sentimental Gryffindor. Sorry, sir.

This has gone well beyond the zero inches of parchment I'm sure you would have requested if you'd had a say in the matter. As always, I hope you are at peace.

And thank you, with all my heart, for everything.
— Hermione Granger

The low winter sun glinted off of the grey stone memorial as Hermione approached, letter in hand. The breeze that whipped her curls around her face stung her cheeks and made summer feel years away.

Hermione stopped in front of the place where her former professor's name was etched above his list of (possibly) posthumous honours. In that spot, propped up against the stone, were the bloody lilies.

Literally bloody. Red spelled out accusations such as mur-

derer or traitor on the white and pink petals. The memorial had long ago been charmed to protect it from being vandalised. One person had chosen to circumnavigate the charms by placing his hateful graffiti on the flowers that shared Harry's mum's name. It had caught on.

Hermione snorted. Three years since Snape's (likely) death, and still the bouquets were all those who wished his name struck from the memorial thought to leave. She might not have truly known him, but she knew enough to be certain he would have loathed their lack of originality more than their intended insults.

Except, perhaps, for the petals that said *coward*. He'd never been able to tolerate that particular lie.

Hermione transfigured her letter for Professor Snape into a sprig of white heather. Something that flourished in acidic conditions. It was for luck and protection, unless her memory failed her. If she could, she would offer him protection from the hordes of lily bearers. Not that he'd ever needed her protection. It had always been the other way around.

"Hello, Granger," a familiar, drawling voice said.

Glancing back over her shoulder, Hermione gave him a brusque nod. "Malfoy."

Draco moved to her side and gave a drooping lily blossom a nudge with his polished shoe. "Unimaginative." He stared at Hermione's offering of heather with an inscrutable expression. "How often do you come to visit?"

"More often than he'd like, I'm sure."

"Once is more often than he'd like most people to visit him." Hands in his pockets, Draco smirked at her. It wasn't the icy, calculating smirk of old. He smirked like he knew her.

She'd caught him doing that, once or twice, when they'd met in Diagon Alley. Sometimes he gave her a curt nod and moved on, barely able to make eye contact. That had made the most sense; she could see why he'd struggle to face her after the events at his family's home. A few times he'd glared

at her as if he'd had the breath knocked out of him and replaced by pure anger. Once, at a charity ball in aid of war orphans, he had asked her to dance. He ran hot and cold, and she didn't understand what made him flip back and forth.

Hermione shrugged to herself. She'd stopped trying to work out his motivations in their sixth year.

"It's unfortunate that his nose was forever captured in stone," Draco said, pointing to the engraved portrait of Snape.

Hermione scowled. "There was nothing wrong with his nose." "If you say so."

Crossing to the far end of the wall, Draco traced his fingers over the letters of Charity Burbage's name. He'd seen Professor Burbage die, hadn't he? Something about the former Muggle Studies professor had come up at his trial. Hermione couldn't remember the details — if she'd ever known them to begin with. Those days were all a grief-soaked blur.

Draco conjured a bunch of yellow zinnias and tucked them safely beneath Professor Burbage's name. Somehow, the moment seemed too intimate to watch. Hermione looked away and occupied herself with vanishing the lilies.

"I guess I'll see you at the Ministry this evening," she said once every last petal was gone, eager to make her escape.

Draco studied her for a moment before giving his response. "Yes." He cleared his throat when his voice came out rough and choked. "I wouldn't miss it. Later, Granger."

As Hermione strode back towards the battle-hardened castle, she didn't see Draco bend to cast Finite Incantatem on her bouquet. With a smile that would have looked fond on anyone else's mouth, he read her letter.

Parvati waved at Hermione as the latter wandered into the Hospital Wing. In spite of flicking her wand over a young Hufflepuff who had somehow managed to grow himself a sixth finger on his left hand, Parvati was already wearing

floaty, deep purple dress robes.

"Are you looking forward to the ball?" Hermione asked with a chuckle.

"I'm looking forward to a break," Parvati said. "There you are, Mister Emerson. In the future, I would advise against performing unfamiliar charms with your non-wand hand. Try to refrain from undoing my work on your way back to your common room."

The boy scurried away, flexing the repaired hand. Parvati's gaze followed him with an exasperated expression that was so like Madam Pomfrey, it almost made Hermione laugh.

Madam Pomfrey herself came striding out of her office and regarded her apprentice with a glint of amusement in her eyes. "Lovely robes, Parvati. I hope you've charmed them to repel vomit and blood if you're going to wear them for the rest of the afternoon."

Parvati gave an airy wave of her hand. "This isn't my first day. Of course I did."

"I knew I'd trained you well. Hello, Hermione." Madam Pomfrey tutted. "You're looking a bit peaky, dear. Are you feeling well?"

"I'm fine, thanks. I just came to check your stock levels," Hermione said. "How are you doing on Pepperup?"

"A little low now that cold season is in full-swing, but I'm perfectly capable of brewing more myself. Go on, off to your quarters with you. Take a nice bath, eat a proper meal, and try to relax for a while."

Relaxing when her future was entirely undecided was not in the offing. Getting her pulse below a hundred beats per minute when she didn't know what direction her career would take was equally out of the question. Hermione would attempt the long bath and the food — preferably with the company of a thick book that had nothing to do with Potions.

"Toast doesn't count as a proper meal, for the record," Parvati said.

Hermione grinned. "I'll go, but only because I cannot stand here and listen to such lies."

The enormous bathtub was Hermione's favourite part of Snape's quarters. She still thought of the rooms as his. No one else had inhabited them between his residence and hers. Slughorn had demanded larger rooms. The Carrows had been put up in the chambers for visiting professors near the Headmaster's office. Hermione could understand why he'd wanted to place those two where he could have kept a closer eye on them.

A swish of Hermione's wand sent water flowing from the taps. Unscented. She'd had enough of scent that day. The path down to the dungeons had been a minefield of students who thought perfume that assaulted nearby people was the perfect accompaniment to formal attire.

As she shrugged free from her outer robes, something in the pocket made a thunk against the tile floor. Strange.

Using her wand, just to be safe, she levitated the mystery object out of the folds of black fabric. It was a small book — not much bigger than her hand — bound in a silver cover that had tarnished with age. A phoenix decorated the front, its intricate tail feathers wrapping around the side in a latch that held the book shut. Hermione had never seen it before.

Ginny's misadventures with books from unknown sources sprang to mind. As the current Defence teacher, Bill and his years of experience as a Curse Breaker were only a Patronus away. In spite of knowing it would take a matter of minutes to find Bill in the castle, Hermione began casting her own diagnostic spells. Suppressing her curiosity had never been her strong suit.

Spell after spell revealed nothing malicious about the book. Hermione frowned. Taking it to Bill for a second opinion was the prudent thing to do, but she trusted her own spellwork, didn't she?

She risked a glancing touch with a fingertip. Nothing. Working her thumbnail beneath the catch, she let the book

flap open. A sharp tug pulled at her heart. Everything swirled into whiteness and screeching and squeezing.

When Hermione stumbled onto something solid and was finally able to refocus, only one thing had changed about her surroundings: a pale man who bore a striking resemblance to a young Severus Snape stood at the sink with a towel slung low around his waist, looking ready to kill her on the spot. Hermione barely heard his deep baritone over the roaring in her ears.



Belladonna

20 June 1987

Tom Riddle was going to return. Horace's loose lips had seen to that. Not that Tom wouldn't have eventually found the information on his own. He was nothing if not determined. Strolling to Fawkes's perch, Albus ran a wrinkled hand along the phoenix's brilliant scarlet and gold feathers.

When Tom came back, they would need Severus. Young Harry Potter was the weapon; Severus was their eyes and ears. But would the loss of a childhood friend and a desire for revenge be enough to keep Severus on their side? While Albus didn't believe Severus would ever again be loyal to Tom, he did wonder if his double agent might someday decide that self preservation was the better option.

Albus could see the softening of Severus's grief in recent days. Though Severus still blamed himself for Lily's death and still mourned her, the emotions weren't as sharp and consuming. Albus doubted the appearance of Harry Potter in a few years would do anything to reignite that flame. If anything, Harry would only remind Severus of the least pleasant of his very unpleasant school days.

If only Albus could find some way to —

"Headmaster." Severus himself appeared in Albus's fireplace, scowling as if faced with a particularly incompetent batch of first years. "We have a problem. May I come through?"

"Certainly," Albus said. The word had barely left his lips before Severus sprang from the green flames, frog-marching an unfamiliar woman who had been bound with Incarcerous.

At a guess, she was not much younger than Severus — all wide brown doe eyes, with hair as curly as Severus's was lank. The woman had the look of a warrior about her: that combination of scars and rigid posture that Albus had seen on too many of his former students, thanks to Tom. Her gaze darted from Severus to Albus and back again as if she couldn't decide which one she wanted to look at more.

She seemed to decide on Severus, in the end.

"There's something wrong with the wards," Severus said. "This witch Apparated into my chambers — into my *bathroom*."

Oh, dear. No wonder Severus looked so flustered.

"I didn't Apparate," the woman said. "Like I said before, I opened a book, and —" Her words cut off. As she turned her eyes away from Severus's, her lips quirked up the tiniest bit. "Sorry, Professor. That won't work. I had a very good teacher."

An Occlumens. Hmm. Albus wondered if steam might come out of Severus's ears without the aid of Pepperup Potion. Before Severus could let loose whatever insult was perched on the edge of his sharp tongue, the woman cleared her throat and spoke again.

"What year is it, please?"

Oh. This was interesting.

"1987, my dear," Albus said. "What year do you think it should be?"

Not 1987, judging by the way her jaw dropped open. She mumbled something about it not being possible, then narrowed her eyes at both of them.

"You could have taken Polyjuice," she said. "Or this could all

be an illusion. Why did I touch that book? Well done, Hermione. Apparently you learned nothing about constant vigilance."

"Ah!" Albus said. "You must know Alastor."

"I do. And a few years from now, I know both of you. Unless you are impostors." Glancing at Severus, she laughed softly. "I half believe only Severus Snape could sneer at me like that."

If she was telling the truth, the catch in her voice spoke volumes about Severus's odds of survival. Albus sighed. He would regret it.

"If you know us, perhaps you can think of questions that will provide sufficient evidence of our identity, Miss..." Albus said.

"Granger. I'm Hermione Granger."

Severus glared at his employer. "By all means, instead of interrogating the intruder, let's answer her questions. Perhaps next you'll conduct interviews for a new Defence teacher among the inmates at Azkaban."

Hermione ignored this. After tapping her foot for a few seconds, she asked Severus, "What nickname did Lily Evans use for her sister?"

"Tuney," Severus said between gritted teeth, but only after Albus prodded him to reply.

"And what did dear Tuney ask of you in a letter when she was a child?" Hermione asked Albus.

"To be accepted into Hogwarts."

"Right. Well. If I am somehow in the past, then I need to get back to my own time as soon as possible. There are so many things I could ruin. Professor Snape, that book you took from me is what brought me here. Someone put it in my pocket. I don't know who, exactly, but I definitely have my suspicions. Be careful with it. When I —"

Severus placed the silver book on the Headmaster's desk and flipped it open with a wave of his wand before she could finish her warning. The pages held a calendar that ran from 20 June 1987 to 21 June 1988. The former date was highlighted in red.

"This seems to suggest you will be with us for a year and a day, Miss Granger," Albus said.

An interesting choice. Like the marriages of old that bound a couple for either as long as love lasted or for a year and a day.

Hermione's curls flew back and forth as she shook her head. "I can't. Professor... we win. Voldemort comes back, and Harry defeats him — for good. I don't want to do anything that might change that."

"I quite agree," Albus said. "I wonder if you might consent to providing some memories for me to view?" Albus removed the Incarcerous and gestured to his Pensieve. "I would like to take you at your word, but — "

"I wouldn't," Severus said. He kept his wand trained on Hermione as he placed her wand back in her hand.

With a roll of her eyes that did nothing to endear her to Severus, Hermione extracted strand after strand of silvery memory. Albus raised an arm to prevent Severus from approaching the Pensieve.

"Just me for now, I think," Albus said. There were, undoubtedly, some things Severus did not need to know if he was to spend a great deal of time with Tom rifling through his head. "You stay here and entertain our guest, Severus."

Leaning over the stone basin, Albus let himself fall into Hermione's memories. She began with a scene on the Hogwarts Express: her younger self meeting Ronald Weasley and a boy who could only be James and Lily Potter's son. Moment after moment showed Hermione's friendship with Harry throughout the years, always fighting at his side. Yes, yes. Albus got her message. She was loyal to him. Very good. Hermione didn't show Harry vanquishing the much-altered Tom, but she did allow a glimpse of the aftermath of the final battle — of Tom's thin and wasted corpse being carried away from the rest of the fallen and Harry telling his friends that he'd had to face death in order to remove the Horcrux within him.

It was certainly for the best that Severus had not viewed the memories. Albus paced to his desk and picked up the book. As the silver phoenix that wrapped itself around the cover shimmered, he smiled to himself. He'd been thinking he needed a solution to a problem, and now, quite possibly, here she was.

"I wonder why I chose to send you back," he said. "It will be fun to find out."

Hermione must have been one of Severus's students. The way she arched an eyebrow at the Headmaster had to have been learned from Professor Snape. "You, sir?"

"The phoenix on the cover suggests as much, don't you think?"

"No," Severus and Hermione said in unison.

"Hmm, well. Time will tell."

Albus weighed the book in one hand. Such a small thing. If it *had* been Albus to send Hermione tumbling back to this time, could he use the book to delve into his own past and right some wrongs? To unlock the piece of his heart that he'd trapped on a frozen rock in central Europe? To save them both?

With a final, lingering caress of the cover, Albus returned the book to Hermione. No. Those past wrongs had proved he could not be trusted to start down that path. The temptation for more and more and more was always too great.

"Tell me, Miss Granger," he said, "are you familiar with anyone else at Hogwarts in this time?"

"Well, with the exception of the current Defence teacher, I think I probably know all of the staff. Among the students... Bill and Charlie Weasley. Nymphadora Tonks. Hestia Jones. If I'm really going to be stuck here for another year, I'll know some of the students who arrive in the autumn. Oliver Wood. Percy Weasley. Penelope Clearwater."

"Hmm. We'll need to come up with a disguise for you. A glamour should do nicely."

Albus set about spelling her hair into a sleek pixie cut and camouflaging the scars that marked her dark skin. A new

beauty mark here, a slightly bigger nose there. The eyes were a conundrum. Green? No, probably best avoided. Darker brown, then. A tap of his wand, and her hair lightened a few shades.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger. "You cannot seriously intend for her to remain at Hogwarts the whole time."

"Of course not. We'll have to find somewhere else for her to stay during the summer. You know that." Somewhere Severus could watch her closely. Albus cheerfully transfigured a quill into a pair of spectacles that made Hermione's darker eyes look quite striking, if he did say so himself. "But we needn't go all the way to Azkaban for our next Defence teacher, Severus. Miss Granger is going to be with us long enough to fill the position, and she has plenty of experience defending against the Dark Arts."

"I don't know why I'm surprised," Severus said. "This isn't even the most ludicrous interview you've held for the position since I've been here."

Hermione snorted. "I believe it."

"Now, a name," Albus said. "I think we will call you Professor Hughes. It's a common enough name in the Muggle world, which will save people asking awkward questions about your family. Unless you've any objection to posing as Muggle-born?"

"I shouldn't. I am Muggle-born. Oh!" Hermione's eyes widened. "I think Percy Weasley once made an offhand comment to me about a Professor Hughes."

"Splendid! That must mean you accept. Have you any preferences for a first name?"

Hermione's search for inspiration in the gadget-filled corners of Albus's office ended at Severus. Interesting.

"Heather."

"Heather Hughes." Albus beamed. "That's fun to say, isn't it? I do enjoy alliteration."

"Delightful," Severus drawled. "Do you know what would be far more entertaining for her to say? The Unbreakable Vow.

It's not alliterative, I'll grant you, but it will possibly prevent her from attempting to kill us in our sleep."

Hermione muttered something about him being too fond of that particular solution. Albus put up a token, twinkling protest, but he allowed the debate to end with Severus getting his way. It was necessary. Kneeling on the hard floor opposite Hermione, Albus grasped her forearm while Severus loomed over them with his wand drawn.

"Will you, Hermione Granger, vow to not willingly reveal to anyone in this time apart Severus and myself that you have come here from the future?" Albus asked.

"I will," Hermione said without hesitation. The first tongue of flame wrapped itself around their joined arms. Its heat was more like the nagging prickle of sunburn than passing one's hand over a fire.

"And will you vow to not work against Harry Potter or any member of the Order of the Phoenix while you are here in this time?"

"I will." Again, no pause to consider the words. The second flame intensified the burn.

"And those who have died in the war in your time... Will you vow to not willingly warn anyone of their impending deaths?"

Ah, there it was. Hesitation. To her credit, Hermione didn't look at Severus. Her grip tightened as she drew in a trembling breath.

"I will."



Rue

20 June 1987

Entertain our guest. Merlin. It was going to be a long year.

Severus stalked down the corridor, his long strides forcing Granger to almost jog in order to keep up. Why had she come here? No one could dive into the past without being tempted to change something — save someone, buy a winning Muggle lottery ticket, convince their past self to avoid ever getting involved with someone who referred to all of their exes as “crazy.”

Granger had to want something. Albus hadn’t bloody sent her here, and Severus refused to believe she’d not intended to end up in this time, at this place.

Well, perhaps the *precise* location of her arrival had been an accident.

It was a shame Albus had included that final clause in the Vow, though he had specified *willingly*. Granger could survive unwillingly handing over whatever information could be forced from her. Apparently Severus would have plenty of time to attempt to lower her guard, as he was tasked with being her babysitter.

He wondered how he would die. Would it be quick? A messy,

protracted affair that would make him beg for it in the end? The way she’d looked at him — all breathless disbelief — had made it plain that he would not survive the coming war. Not that he’d ever expected to meet any other fate after he’d switched sides.

Unless he was mistaken, Granger mourned him. He could use that.

Reaching into her pocket, Granger drew her wand. Bracing himself to counter an attack proved unnecessary. The spell she cast was benign. It was also one of *his*.

“Muffliato,” she said. And then she started spewing her thoughts at Severus as if the two of them were confidants. Maybe they would become friends at some point between his time and hers, but he doubted it. “I wish I knew what Dumbledore was thinking, if it was actually him who brought me here. It’s so dangerous. What could possibly be worth the risk? He’s always plotting something, isn’t he?” Her eyes narrowed as her voice turned mocking. “Oh, a woman from the future. Why don’t I make her a professor? Though I suppose it makes more sense than some of his other appointments.”

Severus couldn’t argue with that last bit. He made a non-committal noise.

“Why, exactly, did you land in my quarters?” he asked.

“Err, well. They’re my quarters in the future. I teach Potions.”

Severus looked down his nose at her. “Do you indeed?”

Granger opened her mouth to answer, but a blur of black robes and bubblegum pink hair made her pause. Miss Tonks skidded towards them on stocking feet — where were the child’s shoes? — and toppled to one side. Slashing his wand through the air, Severus cancelled Granger’s spell.

“Five points from Hufflepuff for running in the halls and being out of uniform, Miss Tonks,” he said.

“Sorry, Professor.” Miss Tonks righted herself. Catching sight of Granger, she put on that curious expression of hers that always meant danger in the Potions classroom. Know-

ing the girl as he did, Severus suspected she was milliseconds away from impertinent questions about Granger's presence.

"This is Miss Hughes," he said. "She'll be your Defence Against the Dark Arts professor next year."

Miss Tonks brightened. "Really?"

Having met the dunderhead currently teaching Defence, Severus could well understand her enthusiasm for the change. While Miss Tonks peppered Granger with questions, Severus studied the latter's reactions. She wasn't bad. If he hadn't heard the crack in her voice in the Headmaster's office, he might not suspect that, like him, Miss Tonks was going to stumble her way into death sometime during the second war. Severus kept his face cemented into a neutral expression even as his stomach sank.

After Miss Tonks finally wandered off down the corridor at a more sensible pace, Granger renewed the Muffliato.

"You know how I said up in the Headmaster's office that I had a good teacher?" she said, closing her eyes like she couldn't bear to watch Miss Tonks vanish around the corner. "That was her."

Severus shook his head as if to clear it. "Miss Tonks taught you Occlumency?"

"In my sixth year, yeah. She becomes an Auror."

No wonder death was poised to take her, then. But if Miss Tonks was to become an Auror, she would need... Oh. Oh, no. Severus groaned.

"I am to endure her spilling ingredients and upending cauldrons all the way up to NEWT level?" he asked.

"Afraid so." Granger's smile was bittersweet and nostalgic. "And then she'll join the Order, so you'll have to put up with her knocking things over at Headquarters as well."

"Of course I will." He rolled his eyes and heaved a put-upon sigh. "I was never officially inducted into the Order, you know. You could perform a mercy killing without violating the terms of your Vow."

Severus spread his arms wide as if to welcome the Avada. Granger must have left her sense of humour behind in the future. With the sort of long-suffering look often sent his way by Narcissa and Charity, she dissolved the Muffliato and sped ahead towards the exit. Severus was right behind her as they reached that day's entertainment: the final Quidditch match of the year.

Up in the stands, Albus beckoned Severus and the interloper towards the two seats next to him. Severus relished the warmth of the summer sun on his back as they ascended the steps. The temperature in the dungeons was the same year round: cold. The sort of bone-deep, damp cold that was impossible to fully chase away with Warming Charms and layers of clothing. Moments above ground when the sun was out were to be savoured.

The higher they climbed, the more careful Granger's movements became. She kept her gaze straight ahead, refusing to look over the railing, which she gripped tight in her shaky hand. A sensible enough fear, he supposed. Severus had always loved being up high, able to see anything and anyone that approached. It helped that he could catch himself without the aid of a broom if he fell. Obviously Granger did not possess such a skill.

Once Severus and Granger got settled in their seats, Albus introduced her as Heather Hughes to a few nearby members of staff. Granger's easy smile was ever so slightly slower to appear upon the introduction of Quirrell. Interesting.

"I just realised I don't even know who's playing," Granger said.

"Slytherin and Gryffindor," Severus said. "Which team will you support?"

"Hmm. I think I should wait to declare any sort of House allegiance until I work out which is the better team."

"A sensible plan." Albus nodded. "Oh, by the way, Heather, I took the liberty of owling a former student who has been looking for a lodger. She'll be happy to have you let her spare room for the

summer. She's Severus's neighbour, so he'll be right next door."

Severus had known the identity of the former student before Albus announced that "Heather" and Severus would be living in close proximity. Naturally. At least Albus was ensuring she was watched.

Severus was, however, dubious about Granger's willingness to live in the dodgiest part of Cokeworth. The two-up two-down houses on Spinner's End had yet to be dragged out of industrial decline. The whole neighbourhood was a squalid hole of litter and lead paint, fit to be inhabited only by rats.

Severus should have left it behind years ago. He could afford to do so, now. There were plenty of other houses with telephones — houses without ancient plumbing and rising damp. He didn't need to remain shackled to that one, just in case. And if Mum got really desperate, she could overcome the habits of half a lifetime and use a bloody owl.

Except she wouldn't. So, there he stayed.

"We'll be living next door to each other all summer?" Granger asked. "Guess that's my choice made for me, then. I'd rather have a peaceful life."

A swirl of her wand made a giant, animated snake head appear atop her glamoured hair. Hissing, the snake snapped its fangs. Severus blinked.

"A friend of mine used to do this to show which House she was supporting," Granger said with a grin. "She was the best Quidditch commentator."

"Oh, don't tell me you're a Slytherin," an all-too familiar Irish accent cut in. "You'll break my heart, love."

Aidan Lynch climbed over Quirrell to flash what he probably thought was a charming smile at Granger. Prat. Severus watched Granger carefully, trying to make it seem as if he didn't glance her way at all.

"I went to school in America, so no," she said with a shrug. "But one of the bravest people I've ever known was in Slytherin."

Albus had mentioned that Granger was friends with Harry Potter. Lily's son couldn't end up in Slytherin, could he? It would almost be worth the headache of protecting the boy from the children of Death Eaters if that happened. James Potter's reaction to his son being a Slytherin would have been priceless. Severus might actually end up liking the boy, against all odds. Albus looked at Granger with that damnable twinkle.

Laughing, Lynch crossed his arms. "The Slytherin in question must have conned you, then."

"And you are?" Granger asked, her voice cold.

"This is Aidan Lynch, our current Defence professor," Albus said.

"Nice to meet you." Granger dismissed Lynch by angling her body towards Severus. With a huff of disbelieving laughter, Lynch clambered back over Quirrell. Granger waited for him to take his seat again before she whispered to Severus, "I'm amazed he lasted the full year."

Why was she trying to ingratiate herself to him with all of this pro-Slytherin, anti-Aidan Lynch talk? She hadn't been a Slytherin herself. Of that much, Severus was certain. Ravenclaw, maybe, or Hufflepuff. A Gryffindor would choke on the words if they ever tried to praise his House.

"As am I," Severus murmured back. "He's a Quidditch player, not a defence expert."

"Really?"

"That's why he's leaving. He received an offer to play for the Irish national team."

"Ah." Granger's lips parted as if she'd just remembered something, but all she said was, "He reminds me of a Quidditch player I once knew. What were his lessons like, do you know? Did he teach the students to defend themselves against Bludgers?"

Severus scoffed. "He certainly isn't qualified to teach them defence against anything else."

"That's disappointing. These kids *need* to learn how to

defend themselves against far more than Quidditch equipment." There was that sinking sensation again. "I'm going to do better than my own Defence professors. All but two were abysmal. I have to do better." Frowning, Granger turned her attention towards the pitch, where the students were getting into position. A second later, she recast *Muffliato*, grabbed Severus's arm, and said, "We should bet Lynch that Slytherin wins the House Cup this year."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Do you happen to have insider information that led to this sudden flash of inspiration?"

"Of course I do, but Slytherin are in the lead, aren't they?"

"By over a hundred points, yes."

"There you go. You know what Muggles say about a fool and his money soon being parted. With that much of a lead, he'd be a fool to take the bet."

"Quite." Severus studied her face. Her rent would be cheap enough, but she would need some funds. She hadn't arrived with much on her person apart from that book. "How will Slytherin fare next year? Should we convince Lynch to make it double or nothing when the time comes?"

Granger grinned. "I couldn't possibly say." The sight of Sybill's garish yellow and violet robes a few rows ahead of them made that grin turn less smug and more devilish. "I just had another flash of inspiration. How unethical would it be if I tried to convince Trelawney that I'm a Seer?"

Severus did *not* laugh. She clearly wanted him to do so.

What else did she want from him?



Henbane

21 June 1987

Hermione had skipped so far past exhausted that she was woozy and nauseated, but she still couldn't sleep. Pacing back and forth in her temporary quarters, she went over her situation for the thousandth time.

Out of everyone she'd seen just before hurtling into the past, Draco was probably the most capable of sneaking the book into her pocket. But to what end? The idea of him being in league with Dumbledore was too preposterous. If Dumbledore was right about being the one to orchestrate it, his portrait could have instructed any number of people in the castle to carry out his wishes. Hermione raked her fingers through her short, glamoured hair. She was unlikely to obtain any answers on that front until she returned to her own time.

Speaking of returning to 2001, none of the books on time magic in the library had offered any hope there. In desperation, Hermione had tried asking the Room of Requirement for a way back to her own time. It had confusedly coughed up a room full of clocks — none of which were some as yet undiscovered forward moving Time Turner. She'd checked.

In 1987, Pettigrew remained a member of the Order, even

if everyone did believe him to be dead. According to the terms of her Vow, she couldn't act against him. Sneaking into the Burrow to drown Scabbers was out of the question. Telling Dumbledore what had truly happened with Sirius and Pettigrew wouldn't get her anywhere; Dumbledore was quite insistent about events being allowed to play out as she remembered them.

Not interfering was the sensible, safe option — the one that would be sure to usher in the Voldemort-free future she'd left behind. But that future didn't have Tonks. It didn't have Remus, Fred, Colin Creevey, Dobby, or Lavender. It probably didn't have Snape.

Could she spend her year Horcrux hunting? Obtaining the locket, ring, and diadem on her own would certainly be possible. Nagini wasn't yet a Horcrux. The journal... Well, Snape was friendly with the Malfoys. He might help, even if Dumbledore would refuse.

The cup would be an issue. Could Hermione really hope to stage another Gringotts break-in? If, by some miracle, she did, that would only leave one. Harry.

He was almost seven at that precise moment, probably fighting the spiders for pillow space in his cupboard under the stairs. If Harry's life wasn't tied to Voldemort's via his stolen blood, he wouldn't come back after sacrificing himself. He would simply be gone. Forever.

Even if Hermione could make herself cast the curse — even if it wouldn't come out as that strangled scream she'd released when she'd seen Hagrid carrying Harry's limp body — Harry had been included in those she couldn't act against. The Vow wouldn't allow it. Not that it would have ever been a serious possibility. Not for her.

She ached to find some other way to purge Harry of that fragment of Voldemort's soul. Stealing him away after the fact and depositing him on the doorstep of the Burrow to be

raised by a loving family was a nice fantasy, but that was all it was. A fantasy.

Closing her gritty, tired eyes, Hermione sighed. Percy had been taught by Professor Hughes. When a twelve-year-old Hermione had complained to him about Quirrell failing to teach them anything useful in Defence, he'd said something like, "It's a shame you couldn't have had Professor Hughes. She was brilliant." Until seeing Quirrell at the Quidditch match, she'd forgot he'd taught Muggle Studies in the years before he'd gone to Albania and decided that turbans were the hottest accessory of 1991.

And, Merlin, how was she going to survive having Percy as a student? Getting stuck in the '80s for a year was clearly something that fit into the timeline she knew. So, if she couldn't save everyone, could she save some of them? One of them?

She was a Potions Mistress... nearly. If she gave Snape a gift consisting of certain potions, would that count as a warning? Would the Vow let her know when she was in danger of breaking it?

As a test, she imagined herself telling Tonks, "You are killed by Bellatrix on the second of May, 1998." Her wrist tingled. That was promising, but she would need to tread carefully, maybe include a few other potions in her gift as well.

Hermione flopped onto the bed. The linens at Hogwarts still smelled like lavender and chamomile in 1987. Even after the battle, that scent had always made her feel safe. Deep breaths in through her nose didn't bring sleep or quiet her racing mind, but they did ease the tension in her shoulders.

She'd never thought about Snape's life at this point in time — in this hazy space of peace between the wars. Even if saving him was impossible, Hermione wanted to find some way to make his life... if not easier, then at least a bit brighter. She couldn't be there on his side when everyone else in the Order thought him a traitor, but maybe she could offer him friend-

ship during this year. The way he'd behaved towards her when she'd been his student wasn't exactly promising in that regard, but he was an extraordinarily talented actor. Stranger things had happened.

22 June 1987

Standing in front of the mirror, Hermione clasped and unclasped the necklace Dumbledore had given her. He'd cast a charm on the little silver snowdrop pendant. Whenever she put it on, her glamour shimmered into place — a clever bit of magic that would save her from needing to renew the glamour every morning. The third time her face changed, the mirror scoffed.

"I'd leave it on, dear," the mirror said. "It's a vast improvement."

Hermione laughed. "Thanks."

Just to be safe, she cast an Unbreakable Charm on the chain. She then tucked her few items of clothing into the rucksack she'd borrowed from Dumbledore. It had sequins.

At least she now had more than one pair of knickers in her possession. Thank you, Aidan Lynch, for taking her bet and supplementing her meagre funds. He'd saved her from spending every evening cleaning the clothing she'd been wearing upon her arrival. She would still need some sort of part-time job to see her through the summer, but she had enough to last for a week or two. Maybe more. She had no idea what anything cost in 1987.

Crossing to the window granted Hermione a glimpse of pink hair in one of the Thestral-drawn carriages. Tonks bounced up and down, chattering to her friends about whatever she had planned for the school holidays. Hermione turned away.

Snape had told her to wear Muggle clothes, but part of her was still surprised when she answered his knock to find him dressed in jeans and a black t-shirt. She was so used to seeing Snape buttoned up in layer upon layer of black that like this, he seemed stripped down.

Hermione's cheeks heated as she flashed back to seeing him *genuinely* stripped down, all of that scarred, pale skin on display.

"What?" Snape asked, staring back at her.

"Nothing. I just... I've only ever seen you in wizarding clothes before."

"Well, we both know that's a lie. You've also seen me in a bath towel." Snape smirked as Hermione's face grew warmer still. "We're going to a Muggle area. Wizarding clothes draw attention, and Muggles tend to frown upon people parading around in naught but a towel. Are you ready?"

Instead of waiting for her to reply, he turned on his heel and set off. He really was a fan of making people hurry to keep up with him, wasn't he? Operation Friendship was not off to a brilliant start.

Hermione could have reached their destination on her own. She knew exactly where they were going; she'd been to Spinner's End with Harry to help cast the wards that kept vandals out of Snape's home.

God, Harry. He was going to have so many questions when she told him about this. If only it'd been him who had been sent back. He could've got some closure, mended that open wound left behind by guilt. Then again, Harry probably would have suffered an attack of his *saving people* thing and created a paradox by destroying each and every last Horcrux, including his younger self. Best avoided.

On the journey to the Apparition point, Hermione amused herself by pondering what the rest of her friends would have done in her situation. Both Ron and Ginny would have gone straight to Little Whinging to kidnap Harry, consequences be damned. George would have raced to the Burrow to warn Fred and his younger self before he was bound by any Unbreakable Vows. Neville likely would have come to the same conclusions as Hermione, but he would have taken full advantage of the opportunity to stand up to Snape as an adult. Parvati would

have insisted she didn't have time for this nonsense. She'd have gone straight to Madam Pomfrey to pick up her apprenticeship where she'd left off. Luna... There was no telling.

The second Hermione gripped Snape's arm outside the gates, he whirled around on the spot and the familiar sensation of Apparition squeezed around her. His spinning wasn't so impressive in a t-shirt.

They landed in a rubbish-strewn alley, almost stumbling over the shell of a broken television. After checking to make sure their appearance hadn't been witnessed by any Muggles, Snape led her two streets over to Spinner's End. It looked identical to the street Hermione had seen over a decade later, with one exception: there was an extra house tacked onto the end of the row, cosied up to Snape's home. A Fidelius that wasn't yet cast? Snape opened the peeling, warped front door of the extra house with a jiggle of the handle and a bump from his shoulder. He didn't bother to knock.

"We're here," he called out as he and Hermione entered a dim, narrow room that smelled like dust and old plumbing. The furniture was sparse and utilitarian: only a rust coloured sofa, a coffee table with chipped veneer, and a deflated looking beanbag. The far wall had a tide mark of damp that made it bow out a little. Above that line was a collage of magical photographs.

Pounding footsteps sounded from the back of the house, and a few seconds later, a woman with blonde hair and a semi-familiar face appeared. Hermione couldn't match a name to the face until the woman supplied it.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Charity."

Professor Burbage? Since when did any of Hermione's professors wear torn jeans and have at least a dozen piercings in their ears? Apart from the rosy-cheeked face and the blonde hair, the only part of Charity that bore any resemblance to the teacher Hermione used to know was the ring on her left hand: a twist of golden vines with a tiny chip of a ruby. Profes-

sor Burbage had never been without it.

"Nice to meet you," Hermione said. "I'm Heather."

"Give me just a sec to check something, and I'll show you to your —"

"I'll show her," Snape said. "I'll meet you in the garden when I'm through."

When Hermione and Harry had been at Spinner's End to set the wards, Snape's house (and presumably this one) had backed straight up to a neighbouring garage. No garden. Hermione could hear the intermittent whir of power tools and thrum of engines from the garage as she followed Snape up the stairs. He led her to a room with a single bed and a crooked wardrobe, shutting the door softly behind them.

"You know Charity?" he asked.

"Not very well, but yeah. She was my Muggle Studies professor. I took it for a year."

Snape huffed out a laugh. "*Charity* ends up teaching Muggle Studies? She's been living here for five years now, and I'm relatively certain she still thinks Muggles talk to each other on the fellytone."

Hermione smiled at him. "She wasn't bad, actually."

"You're a better liar than I originally thought. Do avoid telling Charity that you're from the future. I have no wish to suffer through Albus's pouting if you should be so inconsiderate as to get yourself killed by the Vow."

"Your concern is heartwarming, really." Still smiling, she shook her head. "It'll be fine. I'm going to spend all next year pretending I've never met a bunch of people who have known me most of my life. This will be good practice."

"I suppose." Snape seemed like he wanted to say more, but instead he sniffed and backed away towards the door. He left her with a look that spoke volumes about what would happen if she stepped out of line.

Getting settled didn't take long. A wave of Hermione's wand,

and her clothes flew out of the hideous sequinned rucksack and into the wardrobe. She peered out of the window to get a look at this garden.

The garage was mostly the same, apart from the fact that the paint on the yellow sign wasn't yet peeling quite as much. But in between the two end houses and the garage forecourt was a weed-choked rectangle of grass. The fence panels had been removed between Snape's garden and Charity's, leaving a wider space, though they'd left the posts in. Two little wooden sheds stood on either side of the post nearest the garage.

Charity emerged from the shed on her side, falling into a crouch as she deflected a hex that was sent her way by Snape. Hermione felt a momentary pang of alarm as the two of them traded jinxes, until Charity failed to block one and Snape paused to cancel the jinx and demonstrate what she'd done wrong. As the duel resumed, the mechanics at the garage kept working, completely oblivious. Every time a spell hit the perimeter of the garden, it dissolved.

Hermione couldn't help but watch Snape's fluid movements. He dodged and cast and countered in a way that made it look effortless. He'd been skinnier during her years as his student, she realised. Not that anyone would call his current appearance anything but lean, but in those days he'd seemed to survive on little more than black coffee and stress.

Charity fell onto her stomach to avoid a hex. When she pillow'd her head on her crossed arms instead of getting up, Snape nudged her leg with the toe of his shoe. Whatever Charity said in response made him smile. A *genuine* smile. Hermione had never seen him do that before. The Snape she knew was all smirks.

So that was how he looked with a friend. It suited him.



Iris

27 June 1987

Unlike Parvati, Charity believed that toast should form the foundation of every meal. Toast with butter and Marmite, scrambled egg on toast, cheese on toast, spaghetti hoops on toast, toast with chocolate spread, toast with jam — all were acceptable at any hour of the day, and to be eaten standing up in the narrow galley kitchen.

That morning's offering was beans on toast (*it counts as a vegetable, Heather*). As Charity gulped down the last mouthful, she motioned to the DAILY PROPHET with her fork.

"Anything look promising today?" she asked.

"Maybe," Hermione said. "Wanted: gardening assistant. Duties will include caring for plants of both Muggle and magical origin without getting in my way. Imbeciles and layabouts need not apply."

Charity's laugh rang out over the clink of plates as she charmed a sponge to wash the dishes. "Is Severus looking for someone to help him get his garden into shape?"

"It does sound like him, doesn't it? Think he'll give me the job?"

"That depends," a silky voice said from behind her. Not so much as a creaky floorboard had announced Snape's

approach. He was just *there*. Charity's dopey looking pygmy owl rather spoilt the effect of his stealthy appearance by alighting on his shoulder and nipping at his ear. Snape ignored it. "Are you willing to submit to a Silencing Charm, should I deem it necessary for my sanity?"

"Probably not, no."

"It's just as well I didn't place the advertisement, then." An enthusiastic nuzzle from the owl earned it a sneer from its perch. "Desist."

"Dionysus, leave Severus alone," Charity said. "You know he's not a cuddler."

Unperturbed, the owl turned its affections on Hermione and did its best to transform her glamoured hair into a literal bird's nest. Typical. Snape didn't even attempt to conceal his amusement.

"I can't duel this morning," Charity said, her scarlet and gold feather-shaped earrings swaying back and forth as she gathered up various books she'd left propped open. "Too much to do."

"You aren't designing more products for Zonko's, are you?" Snape asked. "I still haven't forgiven you for the Nose-Biting Teacup."

Charity winked. "Someone has to keep your students entertained."

"For the good of society, you'd be better off keeping them imprisoned."

With a chuckle, Charity dashed off to her shed. Most days since Hermione's arrival in Cokeworth had seen Charity tinkering in the shed while Hermione looked for jobs and explored the town. Snape seemed to spend most of his time in his house, alone, but Hermione had no doubt that he was watching her. There was no other reason for the Cokeworth Library to feel as if every shelf had eyes. Plus, well, he was *Snape*.

How the hell was she ever going to gain his trust? If she didn't, he'd get in her way by suspecting all of her efforts to

save his life. He just had to be her friend, whether he liked it or not. OK, so his life didn't need quite as much brightening as she'd originally suspected, but friends trusted each other. He certainly seemed to trust Charity.

A lump formed in Hermione's throat. She wished she could remember how Charity would die.

"I could duel you," she said, placing a hand on Snape's arm as he turned to leave. "I could use the practice, if I'm honest. It's been a few years since I duelled anyone. I need to brush up on my skills if I'm going to teach Defence."

His ever-inscrutable gaze flitted from her hand up to Dionysus. "Is your passenger going to assist you?"

"Tempting as that idea is, I think he'd be more of a hindrance, don't you? Do you want to help me dislodge him?"

"Not particularly, but I will."

Both Snape's touch and his voice were surprisingly gentle as he coaxed the owl to give up its seat on her head. Long fingers brushed against her hair as Snape whispered, "Come now, let go, you overgrown pigeon."

"He must sense that I'm a cuddler," Hermione said.

Snape deposited a puffed up Dionysus on the windowsill. "The ridiculous creature is shameless and stupid enough that it would cosy up to the Dark Lord if given the chance."

"Was *he* a cuddler?"

Without missing a beat, Snape said, "Only with his teddy bear."

Now there was a mental image. As she fought to swallow her laughter, Hermione followed Snape into the garden. There was no warning before he cast his first spell, but she hadn't expected one. Her Protego was too late, too weak; his wordless Stinging Hex sliced straight through it and raised a welt on her leg. Snape smirked.

Well, she was never going to manage to earn his trust if he didn't respect her. Refusing to so much as wince at the pain in her leg, she didn't give herself time to question her next move.

He could counter it. The purple flame of Dolohov's curse shot towards him as Hermione sliced her wand through the air. His Shield Charm was sturdier than hers, but the impact of her spell still made him take a step back.

Watching Snape's stoic face as they circled around each other, Hermione tried a Body-Bind Curse. He responded with an onslaught of attacks. Striking back wasn't an option. Simply defending required every bit of her concentration.

Each hex, each curse brought Snape closer. And then, when they were almost toe-to-toe, he switched his form of attack. A foreign consciousness pierced her mind, searching for her next move. Before Hermione could push Snape out of her head, he found a memory: the last time she'd seen Tonks alive.

With a grin, the Tonks in Hermione's memory winked at her before running off into battle. Hermione's stupid, stupid heart clenched. She'd tried again and again to block that moment out with happier memories, but it was like painting over wallpaper. The seams always showed.

Desperate to break the connection, she resorted to Muggle means and shoved Snape against his rickety shed. *Why* had she ever let herself lose focus around him? Thinking of Tonks helped; she really had been a brilliant teacher. Hermione's shields snapped up, forcing Snape out. The instant she was alone in her head again, she fell back on an old classic. She set his shirtsleeve on fire.

While Snape was distracted with extinguishing the blue flames, Hermione seized the opportunity to fling a Stinging Hex at his leg. It hit.

"Expelliarmus," he said dispassionately. Hermione's wand flew into his hand. Duel over.

They were still standing too close. At that moment, the same town was too close. Backing up, Hermione wiped the sweat from her forehead. Silent and still, he watched her.

"Don't," she said between ragged breaths. If he mocked her

for anything he'd sensed in her thoughts, she wasn't sure she wouldn't fulfill his request for a mercy killing.

"Muffliato," Snape said. His own breathing wasn't exactly steady, which gave her a tiny thrill of triumph. "Where did you learn that curse? Dolohov?"

Hermione almost did a double-take. The Snape she knew would have seized the opportunity to hit her where it hurt. He'd never pulled any punches before. What was different now?

"Oh," she said. "That. I saw it used silently in battle a couple of times, but an Auror friend gave me the actual incantation. It became quite popular with Death Eaters who were on the run after the war. One of my projects for my Mastery was to formulate a more effective treatment."

"Oh?" One side of his mouth tugged up. "Did you manage to improve upon my work?"

Oh, hell. Madam Pomfrey had conveniently left that part out when they'd discussed the many potions required to cure the damage caused by Dolohov's curse. Hermione should have known.

"Not really, no," she said. "That one ended up being a bit of a dead end."

The potions she'd created had been... not complete failures, but they had far more side effects than Snape's original cure. One of the potions had ended up being a marvellous remedy for Fairy Mange infestations in cats, though. Mr Filch had very nearly smiled at her when she'd given him a vial for Mrs Norris.

Snape folded his arms together over his narrow chest. "And what led to that dead end?"

"Well, for a start, I switched out the Doxy Eggs and Fluxweed in the Nerve Regenerating Potion for, err, a few recently discovered substances. I have a Magizoologist friend who keeps me well-stocked in new ingredients. My additions meant the potion worked faster, but the mice I was using as test subjects kept getting jaundiced."

Before Hermione could explain that a standard Liver Tonic had caused paralysis when combined with what Luna had insisted was Nargle venom, Snape asked, "How did you stabilise it without Fluxweed? Unless you also removed the Erumpent Horn?"

"No, I left that in. I used a charm — a modified version of Protego, actually."

In spite of her mention of *foolish wand waving*, Snape almost, almost looked intrigued. If she squinted. And ignored the sneer.

Was this the key to getting close enough to save him? Talking about Potions was easy; Hermione could do so all day. She could fill several hundred feet of parchment on the subject. Not that she would. Giving him essays was no way to remain on his good side. Excitement sparked at the idea of picking his brain over the latest developments in their field — the first such thrill she'd felt about anything related to Potions for quite some time. She would need to buy some back issues of *POTIONS QUARTERLY* once she had an income.

The muffled ring of a telephone came from Snape's house. He didn't bother to say anything in parting; he simply left her there to wonder who on earth would be ringing him.

"Now, Dionysus," Hermione said, "this is very important. It's my CV. I want you to take it to this address, please. It's a bit far from here, and I do apologise for that, but if you do a good job, I'll sneak you a few extra owl treats when you get home."

Dionysus hooted. That sounded like an agreement to Hermione. Opening the window, she watched him fly off into the darkness.

The CV was almost entirely fabricated. Her only reference was Dumbledore, which didn't look great, but in addition to earning straight Os in Herbology, she'd always helped her father in the garden during the school holidays. If she managed to get hired for the gardening assistant position, she was

confident she could do the job.

With that task out of the way, Hermione headed back up to her bedroom. She'd sat on her bed agonising over the wording of the CV just moments before, but in the time it had taken to send Dionysus off on his journey, someone had hung a basket from her doorknob. Not just any someone. Snape. Inside the basket, she found an unlabelled vial of dark orange potion and a note written in his familiar, spiky scrawl.

This may prove useful if we duel again in the future.

SS

Uncorking the bottle, Hermione took a careful sniff to confirm her suspicions. The astringent burn of armadillo bile hit her right away. And, yes, there was definitely ginger root. She barked out a laugh.

That bastard. He'd given her Wit-Sharpening Potion.

"Charity!" Hermione shouted. "Do you have a cauldron I can borrow?"





28 June 1987

The first thing Granger did upon seeing the interior of Severus's house was to stare, open-mouthed, at his overcrowded bookshelves. No one had ever reacted to his home with wonder before. Charity and Narcissa always remained neutral, the latter expertly concealing the revulsion she surely felt. Granger looked at his dingy sitting room as if it was a palace.

"Oh," she breathed, taking a few steps towards the books without being invited.

"By all means." He gave an exaggerated wave of his arm. "Do come in."

Granger pushed her fake glasses up the bridge of her nose. "What are the odds of you letting me borrow any of these?"

"That depends. What do you have to offer me in return?"

"I'm tempted to promise you my firstborn. It'd be a fair exchange, I think."

"Do you seriously think I would want to be burdened with anyone's child? And I won't be swayed by that potion you're carrying, either."

In the face of so many pages to be read, Granger had apparently forgotten all about the vial of pale lavender

potion she held clutched in one hand. When she passed it to him, he raised it up so the potion caught the light.

"That has nothing to do with your books," she said. "It's repayment for the little gift you left for me the other day."

A Cheering Solution, expertly brewed. Textbook perfect. He could tell she'd minced the daisy roots exactly as the standard instructions advised.

Severus's lip twitched. "I cannot imagine why you think I need this."

"You need it about as much as I need that Wit-Sharpening Potion, I imagine." Granger grinned at him. "Anyway, have a think about how I might convince you. I need to head off; I have a job interview."

"For the gardening assistant position? It's part-time, correct?" Severus waited for her nod of confirmation. "That's a shame. I was rather hoping you'd find a position that would keep you occupied for a minimum of eighty hours per week."

Granger made a pensive hum. "Maybe I should have brewed a double batch."

Algernon Longbottom introduced Hermione to his garden — and to himself — by showing her the shipment of hippogriff manure he'd just had delivered.

"It's, um." Hermione coughed. "It's certainly very... fresh, Mr Longbottom."

"Call me Algie," he said, shooing away one of the big black flies that buzzed around them.

It was then that she realised how, precisely, he was related to Neville. Great Uncle Algie. The one who had shoved Neville off of Blackpool Pier and dangled him out of an upstairs window in an effort to force him to display magic.

Algie wasn't in the Order. No pesky Unbreakable Vows prevented Hermione from plotting against him. It was something to consider.

Algie kept up a running commentary about the plants as they skirted around a large pond that teemed with gillyweed and bulrushes. A few fat toads poked their heads above the murky green water. Trevor's relatives?

"How many Climate Charms do you have in this garden?" Crouching down, Hermione brushed her fingers over the Mediterranean heat that enclosed the gillyweed. "It's extraordinary. Oh! Is that a witch's ganglion?"

The blood-red bulb throbbed as if to answer her question. Algie beamed.

"Thank Merlin you aren't a complete idiot. The last person I interviewed couldn't even tell the difference between *Gymnopilus esculenta* and *Morchella esculenta*."

Straightening back up to her full height, Hermione tilted her head to one side. "Are you planning on having your assistant do much foraging for wild mushrooms in your garden?"

"No, but one never knows what the day will bring. I need to know I'm in the company of someone I can rely upon if we happen to get stranded in the wilderness."

And this was a likely outcome when shifting hippogriff manure from one end of the garden to the other? Algie scratched his bushy grey beard. If he'd been born a Muggle, he would have been one of those who stockpiled tinned food and constructed a bomb shelter in preparation for Y2K, Hermione decided.

"I've spent rather a lot of time camping," she said. "I can identify all of Britain's native mushrooms, and I know how to clean and skin a rabbit both with a spell and by hand."

With a decisive nod, Algie took a cutting from a spindly white starthistle that was surrounded by a circle of snow. A twist and flick of his wand made the sprig grow roots.

"Plant this at home," he said. "If you can keep it alive long enough to bring me the flowers that appear on the fourth day, you're hired."

30 June 1984

Granger's starthistle scratched against Charity's kitchen window, its charmed bubble of snow and ice rocking back and forth in the summer storm. Severus was reluctantly impressed that it was not only alive, but flourishing. The Rebounding Charm that Granger had cast on the plant to protect it from duels had the added benefit of making the duels somewhat more challenging. Charity still wasn't entirely ready for that level of difficulty, but Severus craved it.

Granger bent over a simmering cauldron, her ingredients lined up on the worktop like soldiers. Tincture of thyme, Occamy eggshell, powdered rue. The potion shimmered a deeper gold with every stir.

"Now, what could you be planning that requires a surfeit of luck?" he asked.

She kept counting her anti-clockwise stirs until she reached twenty-five. "It's a gift. I don't intend to take it myself."

"Why do I not believe you?"

"Goodness knows. You're usually such a trusting soul." As she increased the heat and sprinkled the powdered rue over the top, her stirs grew more vigorous.

"Where did you acquire the funds for the Occamy eggshell?"

"Charity already had the ingredients." Granger jerked her chin towards the shed, where Charity was, as always, toiling away on her experimental Charms. "I promised I'd brew enough for her to have a dose as well."

Severus scowled. He didn't need to ask where Charity had obtained the ingredients. She'd kept almost all of Gideon Prewett's old Potions supplies. Severus had been allowed a few items from the sacred Gideon shrine over the years, but Granger just sauntered in and had all of this shoved at her? Why had Charity not asked him to brew the Felix Felicis?

He'd been here before, hadn't he? Before much longer, Granger would undoubtedly start asking Charity why she

was friends with him, and then —

"Are you OK?" Granger asked, her voice soft.

"Yes."

The reply was automatic, though it shouldn't have been necessary in the first place. He shouldn't have let anything show in his expression. Severus steadied his breath, stacked up the cold bricks of his wall. Allowing himself to become lazy simply because the wizarding world was at peace was unacceptable. Not when he knew he would someday have to face the Dark Lord again.

Granger's eyebrows pulled down as she continued to create luck for Charity. "Felixempra." Raising her wand, she traced a figure eight over the cauldron. "There. I do love a charmed potion."

"Do you? They have their uses, to be sure, but I've always found them to be somewhat restrictive."

"I suppose I like them because modifying Charms comes more naturally to me. I understand the structure — the logic. Potions is like not only learning another language, but another alphabet as well."

On a hunch, Severus asked, "Who supervised your apprenticeship?"

"Horace Slughorn."

Ah. Well, no wonder. Being stuck in this time could be good for her, if she had any talent for Potions at all — a big *if*. With room to experiment, she might learn how to be at least somewhat innovative, rather than building off of the accomplishments of others. Slughorn's lab was no place to learn anything other than how to be a sycophant.

"I've been wondering something," Granger said, "Why do you and Charity duel so often?"

"I need to keep my skills sharp. During the school year, I frequently duel with Filius and Minerva."

He offered no explanation for his choice of summer duelling partner. That was Charity's story to tell, and none of

Granger's business.

Teaching Charity how to defend herself was the least Severus could do. She still didn't know he'd been there when her world had fallen apart. Didn't know that even though they'd barely been acquaintances at the time, he would have saved Gideon for her, if he could have. Didn't know that if he hadn't already been working for the Order, *that day* would have sent him running to Dumbledore's side.

Forcing those memories back where they belonged, Severus produced the vial of raincloud grey potion he'd brewed for Granger.

"This may prove useful if we are to spend a significant amount time in one another's company," he said, placing it next to her cauldron. "We'll get along better if you take it."

Pursing her lips, Granger stared at his creation. As he'd predicted, she refused to ask the potion's purpose. He wouldn't have told her. Anyone who couldn't untangle such a simple puzzle on their own had no business teaching Potions.

"Is this going to be our new hobby?" she asked. "Trading passive aggressive insults through potions?"

"How do you know it's an insult?"

"I spent six years as your student."

Her eyes, when she met his gaze, were as guarded as they'd been that first day. Dipping into her mind when she'd been distracted by their duel had been a test. Now that he had a better feel for her defences, it would be that much easier to work his way beneath her shield once she trusted him. Bit by bit, he'd pretend to let her in until she thought they were friends.

"Only six?" he asked. "I will escape the dungeons at last?"

Granger stiffened for just a heartbeat before she shrugged. "I'm going to escape them myself when I go back. I don't intend to carry on teaching."

"Oh? What will you do instead?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I considered being a Ministry drone before I sat my NEWTs, but I don't think I'll go that route. Back then, I was still idealistic enough to think I could change the system from the inside. I have enough friends working there to know better, now."

"Even the most mediocre witches and wizards are wasted there." Saying *she* would be wasted there would be too far, too fast. She'd likely accuse him of being a Polyjuiced impostor. Again. They would have to build up to him attempting anything in the neighbourhood of a compliment. Watching her tuck the ingredients away, he asked, "Which House were you in?"

"Which House do you think I was in?

That meant she was going to make him guess. How tedious. At that precise moment, he leaned towards Ravenclaw. In spite of her claims of idealism, a Hufflepuff would have found her bet with Aidan Lynch to be unforgivably unfair.

"I'll let you know when I decide," he said.

He had six months until the Felix Felicis was mature, nearly a year until she was scheduled to blink back to her own time. He would get his answers.

Hermione checked her work again. There it was, the same result. Her first instinct about Snape's potion had been correct. The polar opposite of a Cheering Solution, it was designed to make someone exceedingly grumpy.

I can teach you how to bottle misanthropy. Hmm. It didn't have quite the same ring to it, somehow.

Chuckles to herself, Hermione began scribbling ideas on the back of a receipt from Tesco. Another standard potion wouldn't do for her rebuttal. She would have to create something from scratch.



Pennyroyal

2 July 1984

Algie was a bloody sneak.

The starthistle had not produced the spiky, star shaped blossoms Hermione had expected. Instead, several deep purple, trumpet shaped flowers had sprouted from the branch that morning. Algie had created a magical hybrid of starthistle and belladonna.

It was a clever way to test her abilities, she had to admit. Anyone could purchase starthistle blossoms at an apothecary. This way, he could be sure she'd kept the plant alive herself.

Marching up Algie's drive, Hermione rapped her knuckles against his front door. A shout came from within, commanding her to hold her hippogriffs, as if she'd been knocking for the past ten minutes.

"Aha," Algie said as he opened the door, taking the sprig of starthistle and belladonna from her. "Very good. You can start today, I presume?"

"I can, but I hope you didn't want me to return the whole plant. My neighbour has already laid claim to it. He's a Potioneer."

"Not a problem. Take all the cuttings you like. I have a few other hybrids around here that may interest him. Now, let's get started. We've a lot of hippogriff manure to shift. If

we get enough done by lunch, I might tell you how I managed to ensure the belladonna portion of the plant blooms in icy conditions."

4 July 1984

The combined scents of newly dug earth and fresh, green leaves enveloped Hermione as she pressed soil around the base of her latest offering from Algie: the lovechild of henbane and Angel's Trumpet. Charity's garden now had several plants for each day Hermione had worked. They were equally split between Algie's hybrids and ordinary plants of extraordinary quality.

"If you keep up your current pace," Snape said, "you'll need to expand into my garden by the end of the summer."

Hermione looked back at him over her shoulder. "Would you mind?"

"I could be persuaded to accommodate you."

She laughed. Each of Algie's creations had sent him into a flurry of research. Standing up, she dusted her hands off on the seat of her jeans and cast a speculative stare at his garden.

"If I'm going to plant anything in your garden, it'll have to involve aconite in some way."

"Why in Merlin's name would I need aconite? I'm not friendly with any werewolves."

"Oh, believe me, I know. But aconite symbolises misanthropy."

Instead of taking her teasing as an insult, he made a quiet exhale that sounded almost like a laugh.

"You may as well begin now," he said. "I know of a place where you can obtain a cutting from an impressive specimen."

She didn't stop to ask where they were going; she simply took his offered arm and waited. With a breath-stealing squeeze, the bright, open sunshine of Charity's garden was replaced by the soft green light of a dense forest. Everything around them was alive, buzzing with magic.

"The Forbidden Forest?" Hermione asked in a whisper.

Snape nodded. "Just beyond the outer wards. I discovered it in my first year of teaching."

A year which he would have spent going back and forth between his two masters. Hermione shuddered.

The aconite was, indeed, an exquisite plant. Far bigger than the Muggle variety, its deep indigo flowers would not have looked out of place in Hagrid's garden, blossoming alongside his gigantic pumpkins. A group of little roe deer watched from a distance as Hermione sliced off one of the smaller leaves and cast the charm to make it grow roots. After a moment's consideration, she took another cutting for Algie.

Tilting her head back to gaze up at the tall, tall forest canopy, Hermione gave voice to one of the many questions she had about this past version of Snape.

"Can you fly yet?"

He looked down his nose at her. "Obviously. I've been able to fly since I was eleven. Can't you?"

"Barely." She chuckled. "I meant without a broom, though. You could, in my time."

"Ah. Yes, I can."

"Can you teach me?"

"No."

"Why not? Is it Dark?"

"Like all magic, it depends upon intent." He lapsed into his teaching voice, the cadence so familiar that Hermione found her fingers itching for a quill to take notes. "In most cases, it is not overtly harmful. There is a vast spectrum of shades between the Killing Curse and Expecto Patronum. Broomless flight's place on that spectrum is not why I doubt your ability to learn."

"I'm perfectly capable — "

"I was not speaking of your skill, or any lack thereof. The flight itself may not be Dark, but it is powered by Darkness. The more Dark spells a person has cast, the more successful their efforts will be. Do you truly think you meet the requirements?"

"You might be surprised. I was researching cures for Dolohov's curse, remember? I cast it quite a few times."

"Hmm. Very well, but if you find yourself stuck up a tree, don't expect me to come to your rescue. You'll have to wait for the fire brigade. Stow your cuttings somewhere; you'll need to take both of my hands to start."

Drawing her lower lip into her mouth, Hermione paused for a moment to consider what she was about to do. Going all panicked and high-pitched would not win her any points with Snape.

"How much concentration do you need to manage it?" she asked, resting the aconite against a tree.

"Not a great deal. Why?"

"I'm a bit afraid of flying. I've tried brooms, thestrals, hippogriffs, dragons — "

"Dragons?"

"Oh, you'll see." Flashing him a grin, Hermione grasped his hands. His skin was slightly rough, callused from years of brewing. Repeated rubbing of a knife handle over a spot on his left middle finger had created a raised bump. "Anyway, I never took to flying in any form. I tend to become a bit clingy when I get more than two or three feet off the ground."

"There will be no *clinging* today. Why do you wish to learn yet another method of flight if it frightens you?"

"If I know I can catch myself, I might be less afraid."

Snape's only response to this was a derisive sniff. Tightening his grip on her hands, he took a step towards her. The roe deer inched closer as well, their delicate hooves not making a sound.

"As I said, successful unsupported flight requires tapping into one's Darkness. As I cast it, you should be able to feel some of the effects. Pay attention. Volate."

The deer skittered away. One doe remained a second longer than the others, staring at Snape and Hermione with big, solemn eyes. Taking to the air was not what made

Hermione draw in a sharp gasp. Heat spread over her body, radiating out from the point where his skin touched hers. It was as Dark as he'd promised, as if drawn directly from that secret place within everyone that whispered forbidden things.

"Vol... You-Know-Who taught you this way?" she asked.

"Absolutely not. I created this spell."

"Oh."

Hermione tried to focus on the sensation of flight, to absorb what she was supposed to be learning, but all she could feel was heat and closeness and skin. *Snape*, she reminded herself. *This is Snape*. The quickening of her heartbeat didn't care — not with such a delicious spell pulsing through her and warming her blood. *His* spell. Snape's gaze drifted to her mouth. Before Hermione could decide whether to lean in or retreat, they came back down to earth with a thud.

"That should be sufficient," Snape said. "Your turn."

Nearly an hour later, Hermione hadn't managed actual flight, but she had managed to slow her descent when leaping from a tree. She could catch herself, after a fashion.

She'd also almost convinced herself that there had been nothing to her momentary flicker of... all right, she could name it: *attraction*. It had been attraction, but it had also been a fluke. A blip. Purely physical. She'd never once had some sort of schoolgirl crush on him. Not even when he'd delivered that speech about Dark Magic at the start of her sixth year. Not even a little. Everyone had bizarre, impulsive thoughts, now and then. Such thoughts didn't mean anything.

Or perhaps this was why other witches and wizards used brooms. Unsupported flight induced madness.

"No," Snape said as Hermione once again failed to levitate off the ground. He held his hands out to her. "Come here, and do try to actually pay attention."

Hermione shuffled away from him. "Actually, we should probably be getting back, don't you think?"

Snape arched an eyebrow. This time, when he looked at her lips, his stare was calculating. It left her cold.

Charity paused in the hallway, peeking into Hermione's room. "What are you working on?" she asked.

"A potion." Waving a hand at the papers spread over the bed and floor, Hermione groaned. "Snape and I have a bit of a battle going on."

"A Potions battle?"

"Yeah. Do you think Professor Dumbledore would give me a phoenix feather if I asked? Or, wait, is it even his to give? I think I might have to ask Fawkes directly."

"No idea, I'm afraid." Perching on one of the few clear spots on the bed, Charity held out a plate piled with custard creams and chocolate digestives. "Biscuit?" She waited until Hermione was discontentedly nibbling on a custard cream before she spoke again. "Phoenix feathers? Are you trying to make some sort of healing potion?"

"Sort of, I guess. I'm not really sure."

Hermione was entirely sure. In addition to her next move in their battle, she was working on formulating one of the potions that would be tucked into her potentially life-saving gift to Snape. She just needed to obtain a feather from Fawkes or a hair from someone who could come to Snape's aid in the Shrieking Shack. Acquiring both a feather *and* a hair would be preferable. Narcissa Malfoy seemed the most likely candidate for the hair. Hermione knew Narcissa would be at the Battle of Hogwarts, as well as being indebted to Snape for saving her son's life.

The potions *had* to work. Both of them. She could do this. She could push past the boundaries of the rules and risk ruining a few cauldrons, as Horace had once advised her to do. Maybe some of Algie's experimental plants...

"Well, just don't make your potion anything to do with

de-greasing his hair," Charity said. "I tried mentioning it once. He didn't speak to me for about a month."

Hermione remembered the weeks following the end of the war, when George's hair had looked like a ginger version of Snape's. Taking care of himself hadn't been a priority when he couldn't stand to look in a mirror. What were her chances of convincing Snape of the merits of therapy? Considerably less than when she'd broached the topic with Harry and George, that was for certain.

Dusting the biscuit crumbs off of her pyjama top and onto the floor, Charity opened her mouth to say something else. Hermione, absorbed as she was in her notes, missed the moment when Charity's words died on her tongue. She also missed the cause of Charity's silence.

The silver phoenix book that had transported Hermione to 1987 had been left out on her bedside table. To most people, it would look like a fancy diary. Not to Charity. Charity's face went pale as her lips pressed together into a thin line.

Hermione didn't notice.





Hemlock

5 July 1987

Fawkes swooped out of the open sitting room window, soaring over the rosebushes that lined Albus's front path. So much haste usually meant a visitor — one who was likely to coo over Fawkes. Albus's knees creaked as he hauled himself out of his favourite armchair. As expected, a guest stood with her hand on the wrought iron gate at the end of the garden. Hermione. Sticking to the shadows, Albus watched his familiar greet the woman from the future.

"Hello," Hermione said.

Fawkes, knowing a soft target when he saw one, hopped from a lilac bush to a fence post and blinked at her imploringly. Hermione indulged him by stroking his head.

Albus had long suspected that phoenixes had their own version of Legilimency. It was how they determined the worthiness of their companions, how they knew which friends were loyal and which were false. Fawkes had been fond of Severus for years now, though Severus would almost certainly deny it.

Hermione held Fawkes's gaze as if they were locked in a silent conversation. A few moments later, Fawkes let out a

low, mournful song. The prickling of Albus's skin reminded him of something his mother used to say about unexplained shivers. *Someone is walking over my grave.*

From such a distance, Albus couldn't see the tears welling up in Hermione's eyes, but he caught the movement of her hand as she dashed those tears away. And then Fawkes did something he hadn't done since Ollivander's visit decades before: he plucked one of his own tail feathers.

"Oh." Sniffling, Hermione accepted the gift. "Thank you."

Well. There it was. Proof of her loyalty to Albus. He *had* to have been the one to send her to this time.

6 July 1987

Charity's kitchen was several degrees hotter than the rest of the house — hotter than standing outside beneath the midday sun. Severus's shirt clung to his skin as he waded into the purple steam that fogged the air. Granger balanced on one foot at her makeshift brewing station and scratched the back of her bare leg with her other foot. She had two cauldrons on the go at once. A ruined pewter cauldron sat in the sink, its base blown completely off.

Albus had altered Granger's face and hair beyond recognition, but her body was still the same — or Severus assumed it was. She'd been in voluminous teaching robes the first time he'd seen her. Her soft curves suggested someone who spent a lot of time curled up with books, which certainly fit. Tucking her wand into the back pocket of her Muggle shorts, Granger weighed a pinch of shredded flutterbloom petals. Was that a jar of owl feathers? Was she trying to cure a sickly dragon?

"Are you finally preparing your response to my last potion?" Severus asked.

Granger jumped, but didn't drop a single extra petal onto the scale. "Yes." She shuffled around to block his view of the other ingredients. "No cheating. You can't see it till it's finished."

"I am all aflutter," Severus said in a flat voice. "Where is Charity? In her shed?"

"I assume so. I haven't seen her all day."

When Severus leaned over the worktop to wipe the condensation from the window, he caught sight of a golden and scarlet feather that absolutely did not come from an owl. It was in a corked bottle, shielded by thick glass.

"How did you get that?" he asked.

Granger weighed her words as carefully as she'd weighed the petals, rubbing her wrist and licking her lips before she replied. "I visited Dumbledore yesterday. Fawkes gave it to me."

Severus had tolerated the flamboyant buzzard for years without being offered a feather. He would be checking her story with Albus. No matter how the feather had come into her possession, Granger couldn't intend to use such a precious ingredient in a potion meant for Severus. It had to be for someone else. Miss Tonks, perhaps?

Granger interrupted his train of thought by chuckling to herself as she dipped a stirring rod into the left cauldron.

"What do you find so amusing?" he asked.

"I was just thinking about my arrival in this time." Glancing at his thunderous expression, she shook her head. "No, I wasn't laughing at... That is, I mean, there's nothing you should feel... Err. Hell." To her credit, she kept stirring the potion as her words kept digging a deeper and deeper hole. "I was undressing for a bath when I found the book. What made me laugh was thinking about how much more awkward it could have been if I'd opened the book a few minutes later."

Severus scrutinised the way Granger avoided making eye contact with him. During her flying lesson, he had briefly entertained the idea that she was attracted to him. Could he have been correct? How could he tell?

His experience with such interactions was limited. He had, on occasion, ventured to London or Edinburgh, cast a glamour

to conceal his ugliness, and indulged in a holiday romance with a Muggle tourist who neither wanted nor expected the relationship to extend beyond the date on her return ticket. His true face had only ever made an appearance with one woman — one witch — but *that* experience certainly wasn't applicable to this situation. They'd mostly come together out of spite. And Narcissa always made sure the lights were switched off.

No, he had to have misinterpreted Granger's reaction.

Granger cleared her throat. "Anyway, I've been meaning to ask: did you use any of Horace's lesson plans when you took over his classes?"

"Absolutely not."

"I didn't think so. I relied pretty heavily on yours when I started teaching Potions, but I'm going to have to bin everything Lynch gave me and start from scratch. I'm glad I have the summer to prepare. And at least I already have plenty of experience with students who are determined to put themselves in mortal peril by not paying attention."

Severus smirked. "It's unfortunate that schooling at Hogwarts coincides with the students' teen years. Such a hideous age — both for those going through it and those forced to interact with them."

"Would you like teaching if you had older students? Potions apprentices and the like?"

He sneered. "Young adults are almost worse than adolescents. Their horrid hormones may have evened out, but they think they know *everything*."

Laughing, Granger lowered the flames under both cauldrons and turned to face him. "You're only, what, 27? It wasn't all that long ago that you were a young adult."

"Nonsense. I've been 40 since I was born."

"You know, I half believe it. Is there any age you do like? Others who were born middle-aged, perhaps?"

"If magic manifested earlier, I might not entirely loathe the

prospect of teaching younger children."

Her eyebrows flew up. "Seriously?"

"The tantrums and the whining are exceedingly tiresome, but the very young tend to possess a great deal of curiosity. I dislike attempting to teach those who do not wish to be taught. The world is still new to younger children, and they are often eager to learn." Pausing, he took in her wide-eyed, mirthful expression. "What?"

"Just remembering my first class as your student. I'll let it be a fun surprise for you." She patted his shoulder in a way that felt alarmingly like she was consoling him over some future injury. "Hmm. I'm trying to picturing you with a class full of five-year-olds, and all I can see is the lot of them bursting into tears."

"That does seem likely."

Her fingers rested on his shoulder for a few beats longer. "Have you spent much time around young children?"

"Only in small doses." Taking advantage of their proximity, he attempted a peek at her notes. His efforts earned him a light shove from Granger. "Do you know the Malfoys?" he asked.

Granger's reply was slow to arrive, her voice hushed and cautious. "Yes. I do."

"Draco is an amusing child."

"Really? Draco *Malfoy*? You're sure?"

"Quite. Before Bellatrix — you know of Bellatrix, correct?"

"Unfortunately, yes. We've met."

"Have you? Gods, is she going to be released? You're certain you won't reconsider that mercy killing?"

"Not when you're in the middle of a story. That would be rude."

"Fair point. Before Bellatrix was thrown into Azkaban, I once saw Draco vanish her hair with accidental magic after she refused to return a toy he'd thrown at her. When Draco worked out that Bald Bella made me laugh, he vanished Rodolphus's hair as well."

Leaning closer, Granger grasped his arm as if he'd told her

the most scandalous secret she'd ever heard. "I will give you my entire first month's pay if you give me a Pensieve memory of Malfoy vanishing that cow's hair." A ding from the timer charm she'd cast made her pull away and turn back to the cauldron she'd been stirring. She didn't object to Severus watching over her shoulder as she decanted the pale pink liquid into a crystal vial.

"For you," she said, presenting it to him with a flourish. "Not that I imagine you'll take it."

She hadn't bothered to cork the vial. Severus took a delicate sniff. Earthy cinnamon, heady flitterbloom, fresh lovage, the sickly sweet scent of honeywater. And something else he couldn't pinpoint. Something almost like rose petals, but not quite.

"It has some petals from one of Algie's creations," Granger said after she'd watched him cast a few diagnostic spells. "A cross between rose, valerian, and silverweed."

Severus huffed out a laugh. "Is this concoction of yours meant to befuddle me into speaking only in compliments?"

"It is." Popping a cork in the top, she flashed him a wry smile. "We'd get along so much better if you took it, don't you think?"

"I would likely go completely silent for lack of anything to say."

"Like I said: so much better." Her tone softened the words into the sort of teasing statement she might use with a friend. "That one is all for me." She pointed to the still-bubbling turquoise potion in the other cauldron. "It's going to be a Summoning Potion. Hopefully. More of a Go Away Potion in my case, really." With a half smile, she held up the jar of owl feathers. "I'll be able to make Dionysus bugger off to a location of my choosing instead of perching on me."

Severus peered at her work. Too much herbaria, but she would have to discover that on her own. Did she intend to use Fawkes's feather in that potion as well — to create the means to summon him to someone's side? Unlikely. Fawkes would only come to the aid of those who demonstrated extraordi-

nary loyalty to Dumbledore. A potion wouldn't change that.

"You used moonseeds, of course?" he asked.

"I did."

"It will work on humans, then."

"Theoretically, yes. And no, I'm not giving you a potion that will make me leave you alone."

Severus made a noncommittal hum. He could either point out that he could easily work out the formula for such a potion, or he could take a step, make her think her plan to befriend him was working. "Did I see *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Potioneers* in the front room?"

"Maybe."

"That settles it, then. I must allow you to borrow some of my books. You'll only continue to pollute your mind with Ulric Urquhart's rubbish, otherwise."

Granger's face lit up with a grin. Perfect.

7 July 1984

Severus expected to find Granger when he answered the knock at his door. He even scooped up the small stack of books he'd selected for her, but a different woman stood on his doorstep — one who wanted nothing to do with his library.

"Narcissa," Severus said, smiling at her. "What a pleasant surprise."



Wormwood

“I wouldn't, love,” Charity said as Hermione bounded towards the front door. “He has company. Trust me, he won't appreciate being disturbed.”

“Oh.” Shifting her borrowed book from one hand to the other, Hermione rocked back on her heels. A whole afternoon without any potions to brew, books to read, or gardens to tend stretched out in front of her. After much frustration and grumbling at cauldrons, she'd worked out the issue with her Summoning Potion. Too much herbaria. The new batch had hours left before it would be ready for testing. Perhaps she could fill the time with lesson plans — a task that would undoubtedly be easier with access to Snape's library.

The beanbag made a rustling sound as Charity stood up. “Why don't we go down to the pub for a bit?” she asked. “I feel like Severus is always looming over us. We haven't had a chance to just have a chat and get to know each other. Let's take advantage of him being busy for a change.”

“Yeah, sure. That sounds good.”

As Charity slammed the front door and jiggled the key in the stubborn lock, Hermione glanced over at the drawn cur-

7 July 1984

tains of Snape's house. Did he have company or... *company*? Not that it was any of her business, of course.

Reaching the local required a long walk down an alley that stank of fox. The smoke-clouded pub was laid out like a rabbit warren, with little alcoves and rooms branching off all over the place. The threadbare red carpet was disconcertingly sticky. Hermione doubted the line up of grizzled patrons perched on the stools at the bar changed very often.

"I'll get the first round," Charity said as she led Hermione to one of the alcoves. "What would you like?"

Once Hermione gave her order of a pint of cider, Charity darted off to the bar. Hermione settled into one of the wobbly chairs. Someone had carved "Gaz is a TWAT" into the table. Charming.

"I should have warned you before we left the house," Charity said as she returned, plonking Hermione's cider down over the *TW* in *TWAT*, "if you need to use the loo, I'd advise going across the road to the petrol station. I braved the toilets here once. Never again."

Hermione took a sip of her drink. Dry and strong, it stung the back of her throat. "Did you grow up in Cokeworth?"

Charity laughed. "Oh, goodness, no." Her accent switched from the thick local drawl to something that would not have sounded out of place coming from Narcissa Malfoy's lips. "I was raised in Buckinghamshire. I didn't know Cokeworth even existed until Severus and I became friends."

"At school?"

"No." Charity's high, melodic voice flowed back into her usual way of speaking. "I mean, we did know each other, but not well. I was a few years ahead of him. I think the only time we actually spoke at Hogwarts was when I welcomed him to Slytherin when he was a firstie."

"Wait, you were in Slytherin?"

"Of course." Charity straightened her posture and gave Hermione a supercilious smile. "The Burbages have always been

Sorted into Slytherin. So have the Rosiers — my mother's family. Well, except for my second cousin, Faith. She was a Hufflepuff. The hat threatened to put me there as well. It came around to my way of thinking when I threatened to set it on fire."

How was this the same woman who would become the kindly Muggle Studies professor who doled out sweets to any student who looked the slightest bit stressed? Prior to falling into the past, Hermione would have echoed the Sorting Hat's opinion. Professor Burbage had seemed all Hufflepuff.

"Anyway," Charity said, "tell me about growing up in America. You don't have any sort of accent."

"No, I promised my gran I would keep my accent when my parents decided to move. I was ten, so not long after we arrived, I was shipped off to Ilvermorny. It's... Hmm. Being Muggle-born, I'm rather glad I was able to go to school there, given what I've heard of the climate at Hogwarts."

"You're Muggle-born?" Charity perked up. "I didn't know that. My fiance's brother-in-law is fascinated with Muggles. If you ever meet him, never let on that you're descended from them. He'll pester you endlessly with questions about plugs and electricity and such."

Hermione's stomach sank. There were other wizards who took an interest in Muggles, but not many. What was it Mad Eye had told Harry about Mrs Weasley's brothers? It had taken five Death Eaters to kill them?

"Fiance?" Hermione asked. "I didn't know you were engaged."

"Late fiance. His name was Gideon. He fought against You-Know-Who, and... Well. You can guess the rest."

"I'm so sorry," Hermione whispered.

Twisting the ring on her left hand, Charity sighed. "I've spent every second since wishing for a Time Turner. I realise they don't really work like that. I could only go back a few hours, I couldn't change anything that didn't already happen, blah blah blah. It's all wishful thinking on my part, and they

say horrible things happen to wizards and witches who meddle with time, but I'd sure as hell take the risk if I could, you know?"

"Yeah." The word scraped against Hermione's throat, roughened by too many secrets. "I know."

Charity swigged her drink — something clear and bubbly. Gin and tonic, perhaps. "That's sort of how I ended up in Cokeworth. My family disowned me for taking up with a blood traitor." Another swig. "Severus ran into me when I was busking in Muggle London after the war. Next thing I knew, I was packing my bags and telling my Diagon Alley friends all about the low cost of living up here. Still not sure how Severus sold me on it. He's a sneaky one."

"He is, indeed."

If not for Voldemort, this woman would have been known to Ron and Ginny and the rest of the Weasley kids as Auntie Charity. Hermione ached to hand over the silver phoenix book, to let Charity go flying back to rescue Gideon.

"How did he sell you on it?" Charity asked. "Cokeworth, I mean."

Hermione's eyes stung as she fought to swallow every emotion that surfaced. "He told me about his library. Why has *he* stayed here so long?"

Charity's expression closed off. "The ambiance, I guess." She gestured to Hermione's mostly full glass. "Another?"

Narcissa's bishop delivered a brutal killing blow to Severus's knight. Damn.

"Something on your mind?" Narcissa asked.

Yes. "No."

Severus's thoughts refused to focus on the chessboard. Instead, they kept stubbornly drifting back to his cauldron. What to brew next for Granger? Something to make her speak only in insults would be too obvious. Also, what if she was fool enough to actually take it? He ordered one of his rooks to

topple a pawn, just to get his turn out of the way.

Narcissa hummed. "Did I tell you that Rosalind Bulstrode's husband ran off with their Muggle neighbour?"

Most likely. "I don't believe so."

Could he get away with attempting Legilimency on Granger again anytime soon? Probably not. It would take months, by his estimation, before she grew comfortable and complacent enough to lower her guard. He needed to wait to strike until her guilt over his likely death was always at the forefront of her mind. Until she would miss him.

Maybe he could brew something to lure Dionysus to Granger, so the owl followed her around even more than it currently did. Shared laughter helped to form friendships, did it not?

"Barry and the Muggle have a *child* together," Narcissa said. "A daughter. Rosalind only just found out, and the daughter is *Draco*'s age. Can you imagine missing something like that for seven years? The child lived right next door, for Merlin's sake."

Severus arched an eyebrow. "People often fail to see what is right in front of them."

There was a script to these visits. First: wizard's chess and gossip. Severus usually won, while Narcissa did most of the talking. At some point during the game, when she thought he wasn't paying attention, Narcissa would glance at the wall that separated his house from Charity's. She'd never mentioned Charity's name. Not once.

Charity, on the other hand, had *plenty* to say about Narcissa's occasional visits.

Eventually, if Severus and Narcissa followed the script, they would end up in his creaky bed. Sometimes he wondered if Lucius should thank him — if Narcissa would be half as doting if she didn't take this secret revenge whenever she was annoyed with her husband.

At that moment, all he wondered was whether Granger was allergic to any potions ingredients. If they were to con-

tinue this game, he needed to ask. Albus would be cross if Severus made her go into anaphylactic shock.

The shrill ring of the telephone interrupted Narcissa's glee-ful declaration of checkmate. She jumped in her seat, startled by the sound. Suppressing a groan, Severus crossed to the telephone table.

Which version of Mum would it be today? Sober, weepy Mum? Drunk, incoherent Mum? Either way, she'd be wanting funds.

"Hello?" he said. Maybe it would be a wrong number.

A wet sniffle came through the line. "Severus?"

Sober, weepy Mum, then.

"Yes. Hello, Mum."

"Should I go?" Narcissa whispered as Eileen started her usual monologue.

Severus nodded, trying to look appropriately apologetic. The last thing he wanted was for Narcissa — for anyone — to overhear the Snapes' latest money woes. Giving anyone that sort of ammunition against him was unacceptable. While Narcissa slipped out of the front door, Severus listened to Eileen skip over the details of what had made her cry. He'd send the money, even if the bulk of it would end up going to Tobias. It was damage control, buying Eileen a few extra nights of peace here and there. More than he'd been able to do when he was younger. Not as much as he could do, if she'd let him.

"You can always stay here," he said. "I'll come get you."

"Your father wouldn't—"

"What is he going to do about it? What *can* he do? Nothing. Particularly not if I place him under an Imperius Curse."

"Severus," Eileen said. "Don't be silly."

He was entirely serious, but he let it drop. As always. It wasn't the possibility of Aurors carting Severus off to Azkaban that put that quiver of fear into her voice, he knew. It was Tobias. It was the same thing that kept her from going to the Muggle police whenever things once again turned predictably

ugly: the fear that somehow, Tobias would find out. Almost as dangerous as the hope that this time, Tobias genuinely meant every sweetly whispered apology, every declaration of love.

Severus should have cast the curse anyway. Merlin knew Tobias deserved it, and then some. But Eileen had been granted few opportunities to decide things for herself. So he'd keep offering her his magic, his protection, on the off chance that one day she would surprise him.

Severus felt drained by the time Eileen rang off. Not two seconds after he slumped down onto his sofa, someone knocked on the front door. Granger.

"Hi," Granger said. "Can I interest you in a duel?"





Oleander

7 July 1987

The purple fire of Dolohov's curse sizzled through the air towards Severus. She was fond of that one, wasn't she? Dodging out of its path, he closed one hand around Granger's wrist. She had no time to yank away or release another curse before he took to the air, dragging her with him. With a yelp, Granger wrapped her legs and her free arm around him.

"Severus Snape, if you drop me, I swear —"

"We are all of three feet off of the ground. Now, shall we get back to the duel, or do you wish to continue with your impression of a limpet?"

Tightening her grip on him, Granger tried to take control of the flight. He knew her magic — knew the sharp burn of her curses, the meticulous flow of her brewing. This was different. Feeling her tap into the Darkest spells she'd ever cast, his skin warmed. It was like that intoxicating pull that had seduced him to the Dark years ago, at once both forbidden and welcoming. The hand still holding her wrist drifted up between her shoulder blades, as if trying to pull her magic closer along with her body.

The tempting lure of it helped Granger succeed in reduc-

ing their altitude until the unmown grass was just below Severus's feet. Falling the rest of the way, he pressed her against the fence and jabbed his wand into the hollow under her jaw. Something bright and blue burst behind his eyes, and Granger was gone. He saw only his own empty sitting room, even though he could still feel the sun on his back and Granger's body entwined with his.

"Don't let me interrupt," a familiar voice said. The artificial distraction dissolved, replaced by a very real distraction in the form of Charity. Crossing her arms, she tapped one foot as she smirked at the two of them. "In fact, would you mind moving about a metre to your left? I was going to work on some new projects; I won't be able to see you if you stay where you are."

Granger let out a shaky laugh. "Call it a draw?" she asked, disentangling herself from Severus. He didn't consent to her ruling, but he did remove his wand from her jugular.

"Spoilsports," Charity said. The smirk faltered almost imperceptibly as her gaze fell to the ground. "I'll be in my shed if you need me."

Granger followed Severus back into his house without waiting for an invitation.

"Did you want something else?" he asked as she locked and warded his door behind them. All he wanted was an early night with a book.

"A way back home would be nice, but I doubt that's in the offing." Her hands rose to her necklace. "Do you mind if I just..." A click of the clasp made her glamour vanish. Dark brown curls tumbled around her shoulders, and her face shifted to one Severus hadn't seen since the day they'd met. Her body remained the same. "Can I be myself for a little while?"

"Very well."

"Thanks." Removing her fake glasses, she sighed. "That duel wasn't quite the stress relieving activity I'd hoped it would be."

Severus shrugged. It hadn't helped him work out any of his

frustrations either, but he hadn't expected it to. "What was that nonverbal spell you cast near the end?"

Severus's shields had been firmly up, but they'd been useless against her illusion spell. At a guess, the spell's creator had designed it to make a scene play out directly over the target's eyes, rather than attacking the mind. It would have been far more effective if he hadn't been touching her at the time, but—

"Oh, it was one of mine," Granger said, and that revelation was like feeling her fly again. "It's just something I was playing around with when I got burnt out on Potions research just before..." As her voice trailed off, she grabbed her wrist. A brittle gasp of laughter escaped her lips. "You have to be joking. I can't even tell you... Ouch. It happened years after... Fine. Fine."

"Are you quite well?"

"Not really, no. Doing battle with an Unbreakable Vow is beyond frustrating, though I suppose I should be grateful it warns me when I get close to breaking its terms. I could just drop dead because I'd failed to think before I spoke. Professor Dumbledore would object if I spent the rest of the year as a hermit, wouldn't he?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

Granger sat on the sofa and hugged her knees to her chest. "Even without the Unbreakable Vow, there are some people I wouldn't be able to warn. I can't remember the details, which sounds horrible and callous. There were so many. I've a strong suspicion that with my knowledge of the future, teaching in this time might drive me slightly mad."

"All teaching drives one slightly mad."

She attempted a laugh. "You certainly never seemed fond of it. If I'd had any idea I would end up here..."

"If you'd had any idea, I'd wager you would have left that book alone."

"Maybe. I don't know. I might have tried it anyway, just in case I could save someone." The way she looked at him felt

like it should have broken the Vow. "And if I'd stayed in my own time, I never would have learnt how to fly."

Severus scoffed. "You still haven't." Lowering himself down next to her, he scrutinised her half-familiar face. "You believe my future self won't agree to continue your lessons?"

They stared at each other for a long moment. Granger blinked first.

"We never found..." Pausing, she rubbed the spot on her wrist where the Vow had taken hold, testing its grip on her. "I haven't seen you since the war ended. Harry thinks you're off on your own somewhere, and you don't want to be bothered by anyone."

"That's... a reasonable hypothesis."

"Yeah."

"Do you agree with him?"

There was that Vow-shattering look again. Severus couldn't decide whether he liked it or not.

"I want to," she said. "Very much so."

Severus's heart behaved like he was back in his role of spy, skipping over several beats as his pulse ramped up. Granger studied him as if memorising his features. As if she might miss him when she went winging back to her own time.

This was his moment — far sooner than he'd anticipated. He could cast Legilimens, force information about his probable death from her mind. Instead, he sat there as Granger leaned forward and brushed a barely-there kiss over his cheek. A friendly kiss. Something Charity would do. Nothing more.

"Thanks for the duel," she said. "And for letting me vent and have a break from being Heather for a few minutes."

With that, she refastened the necklace, smiled at him through the glamour, and left.

8 July 1987

Hughes,
The potion may help to retain some of your sanity when you

begin teaching. I brewed a batch for myself as well. See that you don't give me cause to use it before September.

The other item is offered free of charge. You will need to visit Dumbledore to view it; I do not own a Pensieve.

— SS

Hermione was nearly late leaving for work. She hated being late, but the puzzle of Snape's latest gift took longer than expected to unravel. If her work was correct, he'd created a potion for selective hearing. The user would only hear others speak if what they had to say was both interesting and well-informed. All stupidity and boring observations would be filtered out. Chuckling to herself, she placed the bottle of emerald green potion next to the jar of swirling Pensieve memory. If those silvery clouds didn't contain the memory of Bald Bella, as he'd called her, then Snape was a horrible tease.

Algie wasn't waiting in the garden when she arrived in Northumberland, so Hermione set herself the task of weeding the stinging firethorn patch. Why Algie had chosen to cross a nettle with a firethorn, she would never know. A flameproof scarf tied around her hair and a pair of dragonhide gloves that went up to her shoulders offered some protection, but not enough.

As she uprooted dandelions and other interlopers, Hermione's thoughts drifted to Charity. Specifically, the last time she could remember talking to Professor Burbage. It had been at the Yule Ball, right after Ron had spectacularly ruined everything. Professor Burbage, who'd had a few extra laugh lines to go along with Charity's same old grin, had cradled Hermione's hand in hers and dropped a chocolate into her palm. The same way she always had when Hermione had been stretched thin from too many spins of the Time Turner.

"I hope you aren't running yourself ragged again this year, Miss Granger," Professor Burbage had said.

"No, Professor." Hermione's fingers had closed around the sweet, crinkling the cellophane. "Thank you."

"Chin up, my girl. He's not worth it."

They'd smiled at one another in passing after that, but there had been no words exchanged between them. Not that Hermione could recall.

Leaning back and examining her progress, Hermione wiped the sweat from her brow. The stinging firethorn seemed intent on conspiring with the July sun to roast her to death, but her mind remained elsewhere. About a decade into the future, to be precise.

If only she could warn Snape about Charity's death. About anyone's death, for that matter. He was going to hate her when it happened. She hadn't even been able to mention Horace's passing to him, and Horace hadn't succumbed to the lasting damage from Dolohov's curse until years after the war.

At least Fawkes had understood her — or she thought he had. All she'd done was think that she needed his feather, being careful to avoid any specifics that would break the Vow, but the phoenix had read something in her that had brought tears to her eyes. It had been like being at Dumbledore's funeral and like learning of Snape's true loyalties. Like hearing the list of the dead for the first time. The Vow hadn't offered one warning sting during the whole ordeal. She wondered whether that was because Fawkes didn't count as a person, or because whatever information she'd imparted to him hadn't been given willingly. Maybe some combination of the two.

"Ow," Hermione hissed, recoiling from a tendril of stinging firethorn that slashed across her neck. "Shite."

A gasp came from a nearby privet hedge, followed by a muffled giggle. Following the sound led Hermione to a smaller version of a familiar, round face. Neville.

"Hello," she said, only just resisting the urge to hug him. "I'm Heather."

"Hi," he said in a tiny voice. "I'm Neville."

"Sorry about the language." Hermione solemnly shook his offered hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"That's OK. Uncle Algie says way worse. Way, way, way worse." Crouching down, Neville plucked a dock leaf from a flower-bed that Algie had ordered Hermione to leave wild. "Here. This will make your sting go away."

"I think that's an old wive's tale," Hermione said. "Dock leaves don't actually help with nettle stings."

He faltered for a second, as if doubting himself, then said, "I think these are different. Uncle Algie fertilises them with murtlap essence. They worked on me when I tripped and fell into the stinging firethorn."

"Oh. Right." Rubbing the leaf over her neck brought instant, cooling relief. Hermione sighed. "That's much better. Thank you. I wouldn't have thought to... Did you say you *fell* into the stinging firethorn patch?"

"Yeah. It hurt a *lot*."

"I'm sure you were very brave."

"Not really, no."

Neville followed along with a handful of the murtlap dock leaves as Hermione went back to her weeding. Sprawled out on the grass at a safe distance from the stinging firethorn, he cautiously began asking questions and making observations about every plant he could see. Which, in Algie's garden, was a considerable amount. Even at not-quite-seven, Neville's future career path was obvious.

"Can Squibs do any Herbology?" he asked, twisting a blade of grass between his chubby fingers.

"To some extent, sure. There are some plants they can't safely handle, and there are some plants that won't grow without the proper charms, but there's no reason a Squib couldn't tend to any number of plants that are also grown by Muggles. Why do you ask? You're not a Squib."

"*I might be.*" Neville whispered as if this was his deepest, darkest secret. "I've never done any magic."

Hermione gave a firm shake of her head. "You're probably just a late bloomer. But even if you are a Squib, so what? Neither of my parents were born with magic, and they've done all right for themselves."

Neville scrunched up his nose as he gave her statement serious consideration. "Uncle Algie and Gran wouldn't like it."

"Good thing it's your life, then, and not theirs."

"Quite right," a gruff voice said from behind them. Whirling around, they were faced with a grimly smiling Algie. "A late bloomer. That's what you are, lad. We'll force that magic out of you yet."

Hermione winced. *Not quite* the bit she would have chosen for Algie to focus on. Poor Neville.





Heliotrope

12 July 1987

Hermione fell out of the Pensieve laughing. Bald Bella was quite possibly the best thing she'd ever seen. She was half tempted to send Draco Malfoy flowers once she returned to her own time. If she didn't kick his arse for possibly sending her to 1987 in the first place. Wiping the tears of mirth from her eyes, she sank down on one of Dumbledore's overstuffed floral print sofas.

"Dear me," Dumbledore said with one of his twinkling smiles. "I'm not sure I've ever seen Severus make someone laugh like that. You two are getting on, then?"

"Err, I guess so. We definitely get on far better now than we did in my time, but that's not saying much."

"As you were one of his students in your time, I can't say I'm surprised. I wonder if—"

His voice trailed off as a ghostly, glowing white shape leapt through the wall and landed in the centre of the room. It was a deer — a hind, almost as big as Ginny's horse Patronus. Inchng towards Dumbledore, the hind studied Hermione for a beat before opening her mouth and speaking one word in a familiar baritone.

"No."

Dumbledore chuckled as the Patronus dissolved. "I suppose Severus decided my request wasn't worth wasting the parchment to respond." A nibble of a rich tea biscuit left a scattering of crumbs in his long beard. "Or he was feeling dramatic. Perhaps a little of both. I sent an owl to him not long before you arrived. It concerns you as well, but I thought Severus would be the more difficult one to convince."

"Oh?" Hermione said absently, still staring at the spot where the Patronus had been.

Harry had said Snape's Patronus was a doe — multiple times. Ron had used that word as well, leading Hermione to picture something smaller than the hind. Then again, did she really expect Ron and Harry to be able to correctly identify different species of deer? She knew better than that. Lily Potter's Patronus being a hind made more sense, if it was actually the mate to James's stag.

She hadn't viewed Snape's memories for herself. Harry had been quite adamant about only showing as many people as was required to obtain a full, presumably posthumous pardon for their erstwhile teacher. Hermione hadn't had the heart to tell him that Snape probably wouldn't appreciate the discretion, given that Harry had shouted out Snape's most closely guarded secret to a battlefield full of people.

Harry had told her some of what he'd seen, though. Among those memories he'd described had been that moment in Dumbledore's office. Once she'd taken over the position of Potions professor, Hermione had spent several slow classes trying to picture Snape declaring his unwavering love for his long-lost friend with a shout of *Expecto Patronum*. Always, he'd said. After so many years. That sort of devotion was difficult to imagine.

"I thought the two of you could lead a Defence Club at Hogwarts next year," Dumbledore said.

Fawkes made a clicking noise and nudged Hermione's arm

with his beak. As she ran her fingers over his warm feathers, she released a pent up breath. Being around the phoenix was soothing — like curling up next to a fire on a rainy November day. She'd never had much cause to be in his presence when she was a student. Back then, she'd mostly found his beady-eyed stares unsettling. Had he recognised her?

"A Defence Club sounds like a great idea," she said. She would latch onto anything that would give Tonks and others the slightest advantage. "I don't mind leading it on my own if you can't convince Professor Snape to help. Or we could ask one of the other professors. I've seen firsthand how skilled —"

"Oh, Severus will come around. He always does."

24 July 1984

The scene that greeted Severus in Charity's narrow kitchen was one of utter chaos. Batter-coated bowls cluttered the sink. Flour dusted the worktop. Something that looked like strawberry jam had created bizarre graffiti on one of the chipped cupboard doors. And at the centre of the sugary destruction, Granger and Charity giggled over their attempts to repair what might have once been a cake.

"Hi," Charity said, flashing him a grin over her shoulder. "You'll have to excuse the mess. Heather thought I should expand my repertoire beyond various things on toast, so we made a Victoria sponge. Though I'm still not convinced it wouldn't go well on toast."

"A nutritious choice," Severus said. Their creation had a river of buttercream and jam flowing from between two lumpy, misshapen layers. It looked like it had more in common with a dish sponge than a sponge cake. The only thing that seemed right about it was the smell: sweet vanilla and tart strawberries.

Severus had seen Charity brew before. She was passable — not at all sloppy. Granger was neat and precise and had the potential to be brilliant. He would wonder how two reason-

ably skilled brewers were such messy bakers if his own few and far between experiments in the kitchen hadn't led him to the conclusion that Potions talent did not necessarily translate to cooking talent.

"I have something for you," Granger said. From the jam-painted cupboard, she produced a bottle of violently yellow potion. "It might come in handy when you're teaching."

Before Severus could so much as guess at even one of the ingredients of the potion, Charity piped up with the answer.

"If you drink it, your voice will go all high-pitched and you'll be able to make a screeching noise that is only audible to teenagers. We hid behind Mrs Cooper's hedge and tested on those kids who are always loitering outside the corner shop. It was brilliant. You have to try it, mate. It only lasts for about a minute, though. Heather said it'd be a shame to alter your voice any longer than that."

"Did she?" Severus asked, suppressing a smirk at the way Granger tried to covertly glare at Charity.

"Mhm," Charity said around a mouthful of buttercream. "Hey, we're going on a picnic. Do you want to come along?"

"Eating your cooking outdoors, on the ground? Thank you, no."

"We were going to pick up some packaged sandwiches," Granger said. "Charity wanted to look around Algie's garden —"

Severus agreed to accompany them as soon as the location was revealed. If he ate, however, it would be either in a chair or standing up. He saw no point in getting his food closer to ants and dirt by lounging on a blanket. No amount of magical hybrid plants were worth behaving as if tables had never been invented.

Armed with egg and cress sandwiches, the cake, a thermos of tea, and some limp greenery trying to pass itself off as a salad, the three of them arrived at Algie's garden. A small boy with round cheeks who looked about the same age as Draco was there, playing by the entrance. Alice and Frank Longbottom's son.

Granger greeted him by name. Neville Longbottom wasn't

one of her many dead, Severus guessed. Her smile for him was too easy, too bright for that.

Tugging on Granger's arm, the boy stood on his tiptoes to whisper to her in a voice that was easily overheard. "Your friend looks scary."

Good. Severus wasn't losing his touch.

Granger and Charity both laughed, but it was Charity who answered first.

"He is, mate, believe me."

"Don't listen to her, Neville," Granger said. "Here, we brought cake. Do you want some?"

Opening the picnic basket, Granger cut him a thick slice of the lopsided monstrosity. Severus would have to have a word with Dumbledore about her potentially endangering children.

"Ah!" a man with a bushy grey beard said as he approached the group. "Is this the Potions Master? Right, come along, then. I suppose you'd better see the exploding snapdragons."

Severus opted to take along his share of the tea. If he was lucky, the food would be gone by the time he returned.

Algie's garden was more than worth the price of eating on the ground, it turned out. Severus could have lost himself in research among the trailing vines and swaying trees for years. For every plant he recognised, there were several more that were Algie's inventions. Neville must have been born with a greater than average sense of self preservation, if he frequently played among so many poisonous, dangerous plants without getting himself killed. That would be a refreshing change in the classroom.

By the time Severus returned to the picnickers, he discovered Granger on her own, stretched out on a tartan blanket.

"Charity went to catch toads with Neville," she said, shielding her eyes from the sun as she looked up at him. When Severus conjured a chair, she shook her head almost fondly.

"I wonder whether Undetectable Expansion Charms have any

negative effects on soil," he said. "Drainage, nutrients... Hmm."

Leaning back to rest on her elbows, Granger grinned at him. "Did your wander with Algie inspire you to make some more ambitious plans for your garden?"

"And for Charity's garden, yes."

"Of course. I don't suppose I can convince you to help with the Defence Club in exchange for adding to your garden, can I?"

"No."

"Shame. You'd probably have much more success when the time comes to teach them the Patronus Charm."

"Because I'm so well known for being happy?"

"Because I've always struggled with that particular spell."

"Have you, indeed?"

"Well, *only* that one."

"And flight of any sort."

"Hey, now. Are you compiling a list of my shortcomings?"

Yet more proof that she had not been sorted into Slytherin.

"Of course I am," Severus said.

With a laughing roll of her eyes, she gave one of his legs a light shove. As Granger and Severus lapsed into silence, Charity and Neville ran back and forth in pursuit of what seemed to be an escape artist of a toad.

"Algie nearly stepped on one of the toads the other day," Granger said. "He was so annoyed by them always getting underfoot that he cast a charm to make them avoid humans. Do you reckon I should tell those two?"

Severus barked out a laugh. "Absolutely not."

"That's what I thought."

Across the garden, Charity caught Severus chuckling at Granger's words. Charity's shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath as she offered up the most unconvincing smile he'd ever seen on her face.

What was wrong with her?



Begonia

1 August 1984

“**W**hat do you think of Heather?” Charity asked, her tongue darting out to wet her lips as she dunked a chocolate digestive into her mug of tea.

Severus took a sip from his own crumb-free drink. “What do you think of her?”

“I like her.” The biscuit stayed submerged in the tea for too long; a chunk of it broke off and splashed back into the mug. “She’s easy to live with, and she puts up with your surly arse skulking around. Plus, Dionysus adores her. He’s an excellent judge of character.”

Severus snorted.

“Laugh all you want, my friend,” Charity said. “He is. He took to you right away, you’ll recall, and he dive-bombed Lucius Malfoy the one time they encountered each other.”

“I forgot about that.” Severus took a moment to bask in the memory of Charity’s owl swooping down Spinner’s End and clawing at Lucius’s precious hair. The stupid bird had been lucky to escape the altercation with its life.

“I’ll never forget it. It was brilliant.” A bourbon cream was next to be submitted to Charity’s recklessly extended biscuit

dunking technique. Severus wondered whether she did things like dunk biscuits and talk like she was the one who had been brought up in the dodgiest bit of Cokeworth to underline the fact that she no longer belonged in her parents’ buttoned-up Pureblood world. “How did Dumbledore find her, anyway?”

Why the interest in all things Granger? Severus kept his expression neutral.

“I believe she wrote to him and applied for the post,” he said.

“Oh. Well, that’s boring. I was hoping he saw her in some amazing duel or something, taking down a Dark Wizard. And you never answered my question. What — ”

A knock at the door cut her off. With any luck, it would be Granger herself, leading to a change in topic. Discussions about Granger involved a certain amount of lying, by necessity. Severus could spin falsehoods for Charity all day, but he didn’t enjoy doing so.

“That’ll be Heather now,” Charity said as she bounded over to answer the door for him. “She was working on another potion for you when I left.”

Luck, as it turned out, was not on his side. Narcissa’s face paled at the sight of her former friend. The last time Severus had seen the two of them in the same building, he’d been a second-year watching the seventh-year versions of Charity and Narcissa saunter arm-in-arm through the corridors of Hogwarts.

“Cousin Cissy,” Charity said with the sort of smile that looked like a challenge to a duel. That was right, they were cousins, weren’t they? Their mothers were both Rosiers. “It’s been a long time.”

Regaining her composure, Narcissa smothered whatever it was that always made her glance at Charity’s house during her visits to Spinner’s End. Likely the same thing that caused her to occasionally ask leading questions about Severus’s current batch of students.

“Burbage,” Narcissa said coldly, proving she would no more

seek a reconciliation with Charity than she would tell Miss Tonks to call her Auntie Cissy. "Severus, I do apologise for showing up unannounced. I didn't realise you had company."

"What brings you to Cokeworth?" Charity asked, all wide-eyed innocence. She knew exactly what brought Narcissa to Cokeworth.

The previous summer, when Charity had been in one of her more morose moods, Severus had offered her that scrap of potential blackmail material to use against one of the people who had deserted her. Charity had grimaced, said he should be gravely concerned about the possibility of getting frostbite on his cock, and asked him to never again attempt to cheer her up.

"Wizard's chess," Narcissa said. "Severus is the most talented player I know. I enjoy the challenge."

In the days leading up to the first time they'd fallen into bed together, Severus had noticed how bored Narcissa had been — how her eyes had glazed over when speaking to the people who were supposed to be her friends. A master of seduction he was not and would never be, but initiating their affair had been simple. All he'd needed to do was really see her.

Charity crossed her arms. "I guess some things never change," she said. "You always did take on better players. You never beat me, if memory serves." With a wave at Severus, she added, "I'm going to go see how Heather is getting on. I'll talk to you later."

"Who is Heather?" Narcissa asked once she and Severus were alone.

"Burbage's housemate." Charity was only ever *Burbage* when he was speaking to Narcissa, playing the part. "Heather Hughes. She's going to be the Defence teacher at Hogwarts next year."

"Oh? I don't recognise the name." Narcissa twisted her wedding ring back and forth on her finger. "Muggle-born?"

He forced a sneer. "Yes."

"Well, that's unfortunate. Do me a favour and tell Lucius

she's a Half-blood if the subject comes up, would you? He'll never consent to Draco attending Hogwarts if they're hiring Muggle-borns as professors. That's actually why I'm here. I can't stay long. Lucius and I were talking earlier, and he's quite determined to send Draco to Durmstrang. I was wondering if you might help me change his mind."

Why did something a little bit like relief ripple through Severus at the news that her visit would be a brief one?

"You believe I can convince him?" he asked.

"I'm confident that between the two of us, we can say the right things to nudge him in that direction, yes."

Severus chuckled. "Not that confident, if you think we'll need four years to accomplish the task."

"I want it decided sooner, rather than later. I want Draco closer to home... Closer to people who can steer him away from following anyone with grand plans to change the world."

That guiding force was not Severus. It couldn't be, no matter how he might wish otherwise.

"No one wants to change the world these days, Narcissa," he said, ignoring the churning of his stomach.

She rolled her eyes. "Every generation has at least one. No matter how good their ideas may be, it never ends well for them. Most get caught before they accomplish much at all."

"I'll see what I can do," Severus said. He knew Draco ended up at Hogwarts; taking credit for it would do no harm. Perhaps he could talk Lucius around to the idea by suggesting Lucius become one of the school governors. Lucius certainly had the funds to buy himself the position.

"Thank you," Narcissa said. A familiar hand brushed over his shoulder and down the length of his arm. "I need to get back."

As Narcissa ducked into the alley opposite Severus's house, the Knight Bus roared up Spinner's End and came to a screeching halt. Severus blinked several times, but the scene in front of him didn't change. The passenger who got off of

the bus was his stooped, unsmiling mother. Eileen squinted at the spot where Narcissa had vanished, then shrugged and marched up to Severus's front door.

"Mum," he said. "What brings you here?"

"I'm afraid I have some bad news. I thought it best to tell you in person." Eileen took a breath as if steeling herself to hear the news as well. "Your father died last night."

Good was Severus's immediate, knee-jerk reaction. That seemed about right. Good.

He let her words hang in the air for a few beats — long enough for Eileen to set her tattered suitcase next to the sofa and remove her sunglasses. The skin around her left cheekbone was shiny and faintly yellow, suggesting recently applied bruise paste.

"I see," he said. "How?"

"He fell."

Severus caught his disbelieving scoff before it materialised. How often had Tobias given a similar excuse to Muggle police officers, nurses, doctors, neighbours? *She fell.*

Eileen could surprise Severus after all, it seemed.

"I will need a few moments to prepare if I'm to help conceal a murder," he said. "I'm rather out of practice."

"There's nothing to conceal." She twisted her fingers together, her voice wobbling slightly. "He fell down the stairs and broke his neck. It was a tragic accident."

How bizarre that Severus had inherited his talent for Occlumency from the Muggle side of his family. Tobias had never had any tells. None. Seeing his father lie had been a recurring theme of Severus's formative years; it was where he'd learnt the art.

"Very well," Severus said. He could scour his parents' home later, ensure the Muggle authorities would agree with Eileen's assessment of the situation.

Eileen sighed. "Will it inconvenience you if I stay here for a few days? I can't stand being in that place right now."

Severus had offered so many times. He could hardly refuse. "That would be fine."

The sound of Eileen's snores pushed past the door of Severus's childhood bedroom, filling the entire house. Christ. He hoped he didn't sound like that when he slept. Given that he'd inherited her nose, he probably did. Throwing up a Silencing Charm, he snapped his book shut. Even before his mother had started her nasal symphony, he hadn't been able to concentrate on the words.

If Eileen had planned Tobias's *accident*, she'd done an admirable job of concealing the evidence. Severus had found nothing amiss during his expedition to her home. Likely, it had been a spur of the moment decision: a shove to help Tobias along as he'd wobbled at the top of the stairs. The full weight of what she'd done almost certainly hadn't pressed down on her until he'd landed in an unmoving heap.

Even after Severus had wandered through that dusty, silent place, the news of his father's death didn't seem entirely real. Lucius had offered to have Tobias killed, once. Not long after Severus's defection from the Death Eaters, Lucius had said, "I wonder why the Dark Lord hasn't ordered you to trim your family tree. I would have dealt with it as soon as I could hold a wand if I had a filthy Muggle father walking around. If you can't manage the job yourself, you need only say the word. I'll send Crabbe and Goyle to do it."

That night, Severus had fucked Lucius's wife for the first time.

Severus wiped a hand over his face. Meandering down memory lane was not how he wanted to spend his evening. He needed fresh air. Book in hand, he retreated to Granger's garden.

He'd started thinking of it as hers, recently, rather than half his, half Charity's. Granger was the one bringing it to life. Nothing should have bloomed in Cokeworth, but Granger's garden was flourishing. Conjuring a chair as far from his house

as possible, he drew in a few jasmine scented breaths. The sky was still the hazy purplish pink of twilight. Not enough light to read by, but enough to make out the shapes of various umbrella-like leaves and delicate but deadly blossoms. It was the Potioneer's garden he should have created for himself. Bit by bit, breath by breath, the tightness in Severus's chest began to melt away.

Before he could cast Lumos and open his book, Granger appeared in the yellow rectangle created by Charity's open door. She approached with a smile and a glowing glass bottle.

"I thought it was my turn," Severus said, holding his hand out to accept the gift.

"It is, but I got impatient. I've been trying to perfect this for ages, and I couldn't resist showing off now that I have." She shuffled her feet. "Muffliato. Full disclosure: it's not my invention. It's a technique I read about in *Potions Quarterly* not long before I came here. I, um... I have a theory that it might be able to warm you up when you're working in the dungeons. It's not something you can make for yourself, or I would have been making vats of it when I taught Potions. It has to be made by someone else."

Instead of liquid, the vial was full of swirling clouds — like bottled sunshine or a golden version of Pensieve memory. The glass was warm to the touch.

"Interesting," he said.

Granger rubbed her wrist as she turned to look up at the pair of dirty brick houses. "I never told you that Charity's house isn't visible in my time, did I?" she asked.

She knew very well that she hadn't. Severus motioned for her to continue.

"I suspect it's under a Fidelius Charm," she said. "The gardens, too. I thought your house backed right up to the garage before I arrived in 1987."

"Did you?"

"Mm." She spoke in that plodding, cautious way that meant she was struggling against the bonds of the Vow. "I would think anyone close to you would want to... to leave the country entirely, given what you'll have to do."

The world fell out from beneath Severus as Granger's words — her warning — sank in. *Don't just put the house under a Fidelius Charm. Make Charity flee to another country.*

Charity was going to die.

His hands trembled once, nearly fumbling her gift. Flicking the vial open, Severus inhaled. He hadn't been cold, exactly, but breathing in the vapour was like realising he hadn't been genuinely warm in a very long time. Foreign emotions bubbled within him: a bittersweet mixture of regret, respect, and something that flirted with the edge of affection.

"Anyway, I'll let you be," Granger said, cancelling her Muffliato. She turned back towards the house, and Charity was going to die.

"Hughes," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Stay."





Blue Periwinkle

1 August 1987

What the hell was she doing here? Glass crunched under Hermione's trainers as she followed Snape down a dark alley. All of the streetlights were broken, but he seemed to have no trouble finding his way by the scant moonlight. For once, he was content to stroll, rather than forcing her to run to keep up with his long strides.

The walk had been Snape's idea. Also Snape's idea: the bottle of vodka they'd purchased from the corner shop. She couldn't blame him for wanting a drink, given the information she'd finally managed to sneak past the Vow.

Snape's steps almost halted as they passed by a dilapidated playground, but he carried on until they were once again in his garden, perched on a pair of conjured chairs. Opening the vodka, he passed it to her.

The moment was so surreal, Hermione almost wanted to make a time capsule of it for her younger self to discover during her first year. That girl never would have imagined herself sitting in a garden in Cokeworth, aiming towards drunkenness with Professor Snape.

Hermione took a hesitant drink. It tasted like a headache

in the making — like it could easily remove the rest of the flaking paint from Snape's shed. Another moment for the time capsule followed after she handed the bottle back to him: Snape put his mouth where hers had just been and took a gulp. She watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed.

Hermione's heart tripped over itself as she thought about the fact that he'd actually tried the Warming Vapour. While she'd been standing right next to him, no less. If she'd imagined him using it at all, it would have been in the depths of winter, in the bone-chilling damp of the dungeons.

The main ingredient in the Warming Vapour was a captured sigh. The vapour was created with a specific person in mind; it would warm that person only if the brewer's feelings towards them were positive. This particular vial would work only for Snape. If anyone else touched it or inhaled the contents, they would feel no change.

Charity had been Hermione's test subject when she'd been trying to perfect the half-remembered technique. The Charity-inspired cloud had been sky blue, hopeful and bright.

"Oh!" Charity had said. "I feel cosy and warm and... fond? It's like a hug in a bottle. Except I also feel a bit guilty and sad, so I guess it's more like a hug at a funeral. Was guilt what you were aiming for? Did Severus say something mean?" Holding the vial up, she'd scrutinised the contents. "You're gonna need a lot more of this stuff, if that's the case. It will not be a rare occurrence."

What had Snape felt? Making the vapour was one thing. Actually untangling her emotions towards Snape and putting names to them was something else entirely. Most days, he felt like her only familiar touchstone in this time. The closest thing to home.

Why had he asked — well, commanded — her to stay? Probably to get her drunk so he could have another crack at using Legilimency on her. As she thought about just dropping her shields and letting him in, her wrist burned.

Fine. Stupid Vow.

Snape scowled up at the sky as if it was to blame for everything — what had already happened, what was yet to come. A lazy flick of Hermione's wand sent bubbles of light floating towards the stars. They popped as soon as they reached the boundary of the charms that kept the garden from prying Muggle eyes.

She'd conjured similar bubbles not long ago, from her point of view, when she'd sat with George at the Burrow one evening right after Horace's death. George had sent zigzagging magical fireworks after her bubble lights, shattering them so they'd spread out like new constellations. Then he'd told her, "Since you're so obviously bloody miserable in your chosen career, I feel I should tell you that you could have a very promising future creating products for a marvellous little joke shop. Or, if that doesn't suit, any number of people would fall over themselves to hire you, because you're Hermione Fucking Granger. You really should consider the joke shop, though. It's an obvious choice for you. You've always been such a prankster."

Sighing, Hermione turned her gaze back to Snape. "I miss my boys," she said.

"Do you collect them?" he asked, still scowling. "My, your life back in your own time is far more interesting than I ever imagined."

"I do collect them, I suppose — in a purely platonic fashion. My life is disappointingly lacking in polyandry."

"How very dull. You should seek out my older self when you return."

She sputtered on a mouthful of vodka. "He would not be willing to add more polyandry to my life, believe me." If he was even alive.

"No, you're probably correct. I am not naturally inclined to share." Leaning closer, he snatched the bottle from her hand. "I suppose Potter is one of your platonic collection?"

"Yeah. He and Ron Weasley are the main ones. And after spending so much time at the Burrow, Ron's brothers are like brothers to me as well." She listed all of them, making it a point

to leave out Fred. Even though Snape likely couldn't do anything about collapsing walls, she wanted to send the message to *someone* that Fred Weasley no longer laughed and breathed and told jokes in her time. Her wrist prickled. "There's also Neville, of course. I can see him in this time, but it's different."

"Not as different as seeing me, I'd imagine."

"Definitely not. Is it weird interacting with me, given that I've known you so much longer than you've known me?"

"As you have indicated that you never knew me well, no. Not particularly."

The world felt warmer and fuzzier as the alcohol tingled through her system. Her head was just starting to get that pleasantly woozy sensation. Taking another drink, Hermione shuddered. The taste hadn't improved.

"It's definitely weird to think that you must have already known me when I became your student," she said.

"When I saw you sorted into Hufflepuff?"

Hermione grinned. If she had control of her travels through time, she wouldn't go straight back to 2001. A pit-stop in the summer after her first year would be required, so she could come back to Spinner's End and tease Snape about not being able to guess right away that she'd been sorted into Gryffindor.

"Do you think so?" she asked.

"It's not my final answer." Snape took another swig of vodka before he passed it back to her and muttered, "It *has* to be either Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw."

She chuckled into the mouth of the bottle. "Let me know when you decide."

"I will." He narrowed his eyes. "Were you a Hatstall?"

"Almost. The Sorting Hat didn't spend as long debating with me as it did with Neville, but it felt like forever when I was up there."

"Where does Longbottom end up?"

"Gryffindor."

"No, really."

"It will take him some time to gain any confidence, but he absolutely belongs there. He's very brave."

Snape sneered as if he'd just been presented with one of Neville's Potions assignments. "Hmm."

As Hermione turned her attention back to the stars, an absurd urge to fly welled up within her. Her thoughts skipped over every terrifying magical flight she'd ever taken, focusing instead on her flying lesson in the Forbidden Forest with Snape. The way his magic had caressed her skin was more dangerous than any broom.

"Is it always like that when you teach people to fly?" she asked.

"You will have to be more specific. Is it always like what?"

Topsy courage mingled with Gryffindor brashness, burning bright in her chest until she said, "Arousing."

Snape coughed out a laugh. "I have no idea. I've not attempted to teach anyone else. I only invented the spell a couple of years ago, and I haven't exactly advertised my discovery. According to you, I'm going to teach the Dark Lord at some point, yes? Given how many Dark spells he has cast, he likely will not require a hands-on demonstration."

"Thank Merlin for small favours."

Some part of Hermione — likely a drunk part — wanted broomless flight to remain something that was only theirs, not shared with and sullied by Voldemort. But giving Voldemort such a power would help Snape gain favour, maybe get him out of a tricky bind. Voldemort was welcome to it if it kept Snape safe.

"Can I have another lesson sometime?" she asked before she could think better of it.

The way he looked at her then, she expected to feel the slicing invasion of Legilimency. Instead, Snape leaned closer and dragged the snowdrop pendant back and forth on her necklace.

"Perhaps," he said. The metal, warmed by his touch, fell back to her chest as he stood up. "Come with me."

Opening the door to his shed required the dropping of several wards. Inside the windowless space was his Potions laboratory. Something pink and viscous bubbled in a golden cauldron, but Snape shooed her away before she could get a closer look. The alcohol was apparently affecting him as well; he was content to conjure a blanket and sit on the floor, rather than producing another pair of chairs.

"It will keep my cauldron out of your line of sight," he said.

"If you aren't going to let me see what you're brewing, what are we doing in here? It's not exactly ideal for a flying lesson."

"I'm not taking you flying when we've been drinking. We are here because it will keep my mother and... Charity from seeing us."

Hermione wouldn't have noticed the slight pause before Charity's name if she hadn't been listening for it. His face gave nothing away.

"Your mother?" she asked.

"She's visiting. Hold still."

Reaching behind Hermione's neck, Snape unclasped her necklace. Curls tumbled free and grazed his wrists as the glamour dissolved, revealing her true appearance.

"Better," he said, dropping the chain and pendant into her palm.

Hermione let her head fall back to thunk softly against the shed wall as her belly swooped. Good Lord. He was going to be the death of her. What the hell was she supposed to do with this Snape who teased instead of mocked, who wanted to see her real face? He glanced down at her mouth, and she just... wanted. If she was honest with herself, she'd felt a tug towards him since that first flight. Maybe even before. Maybe it had been building since he'd left her that first, snarky potion.

Or since she'd stumbled into his bathroom when he was clad in only a towel.

"I really never knew you at all, did I?" she asked.

"Probably not."

He was close enough that she could feel the warmth of his breath. Close enough that she hardly had to tilt forward before her mouth connected with his. It was barely a kiss — just a quick brush of lips and an awkward bump of noses — but for that brief, miraculous instant, Snape kissed her back.

"How intoxicated are you?" he asked, drawing back to look into her eyes.

Intoxicated enough to take what she wanted without fully considering the consequences.

"Hmm," she said. "On a scale from one to ten, with one being not at all, and ten being Sybill on Christmas morning, I'm about a six. Maybe a seven. What about you?"

"Somewhere around a five, I believe. It might be a six once I stand."

He didn't try to kiss her again, but somehow, it didn't feel like a rejection. She let her head droop onto his shoulder, her pulse skipping around a little when he allowed it. His scowl was still present, though not quite as deep as it had been.

"Is now a good time to ask you again to help with the Defence Club?" she whispered.

"Absolutely not."

"Well, I had to try."

"Of course you did. Hufflepuff."

14



Yellow Hyacinth

2 August 1987

Even before Hermione opened her eyes, everything was too bright. Someone needed to turn off the sun. Groaning at the pounding in her skull, she squinted into that horrible light... and almost screamed. A woman with tear-swollen eyes and lank salt and pepper hair stood over her.

"Good morning," the woman said, smirking in a way that Hermione instantly recognised. This had to be Snape's mum.

At some point after she'd dozed off the night before, Hermione had apparently been moved to Snape's sofa and bundled up in a worn, crocheted blanket. He must have levitated her there. Gasping as vodka-fogged memories sharpened and became clearer, she scrambled for her wand to cast an *Obliviate* on her companion. Only the weight of her necklace against her chest stopped her. Oh. Glamour back in place. Snape must have seen to that as well.

After they'd kissed. She'd *kissed* Snape. And lived, it would seem.

"Err, good morning," Hermione said in a croaky voice. "Mrs Snape?"

The smirk trembled and collapsed. "Call me Eileen. And you are?"

"Heather Hughes. I live next door. It's... nice to meet you."

"Mm. Come on, then. You look like you are in desperate need of some coffee."

Coffee wouldn't extinguish the sun, but it would likely help to exorcise the demon that was hammering on Hermione's brain. She followed Eileen into Snape's kitchen. It was the mirror image of the same room in Charity's house, with everything swapped to the other side. Opening a crooked cupboard, Eileen took out two mugs — the *only* two mugs. Snape had two of everything: cutlery, dishes, glasses. Hermione supposed he wasn't the dinner party type.

On the only occasion Snape had ever made Hermione a hot drink, he'd done so using magic to heat the water. Eileen did everything the Muggle way, fighting with a hob that looked like it hadn't been used since Snape was a child. Eventually, she set a mug full of black coffee down in front of Hermione.

"Severus doesn't seem to have any milk," Eileen said as she bent over to search for it. The fridge made an unhealthy gurgle when she shut the door. "Or anything except an expired jar of mustard. He does eat, doesn't he?"

"He does. I've seen him do it." Hermione tried the bitter, burnt-tasting drink. "Shopping, on the other hand, not so much."

Reaching into a pocket on her Muggle dress, Eileen produced a dented flask. She poured a glug of what smelled like whisky into Hermione's mug, followed by a more generous dose into her own.

"Hair of the dog," Eileen said. "Best thing for it."

"Oh. Um, thanks."

Eileen crossed to the window and gazed out into the garden. The changes had to have surprised her, but she said nothing about them. Only their occasional sips broke the silence, until the boom of a male voice intruded: a mechanic at the garage, shouting at a coworker. Eileen flinched.

"Are you enjoying your visit so far?" Hermione asked, for lack of anything better to say.

Eileen blinked at her. "Severus didn't tell you the reason I'm here? My husband died. So, no, I would have to say the visit hasn't been particularly enjoyable."

"Oh." Wishing she could sink into the floor and disappear, Hermione wrapped her hands tighter around her mug. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," a familiar voice said.

Snape strode into the kitchen, looking not nearly as hungover as he should have been. The sudden lightness in Hermione's chest at the sight of him couldn't be blamed on the splash of whisky in her coffee. He held her gaze a moment too long, leaned in a bit too close as he squeezed past her to get to the cupboard. She absolutely did not replay their kiss in her mind. Not more than twice, at any rate.

"Severus, really," Eileen said with a jagged sigh. As she flipped open a book he'd left on the side, her sigh almost transformed into a screech. "Severus Snape! *What* did you do to this book?"

Hermione craned her neck to see his cramped, spiky handwriting filling every margin. Snape had crossed out entire paragraphs — entire pages.

"I improved it," he said coolly.

"You desecrated it!"

"If the author wished to avoid the desecration of his text, he should have endeavoured to be less idiotic."

Eileen grumbled under her breath and gave the book an apologetic stroke. Snape transfigured a bowl into a Hagrid-sized mug, which he filled with the remainder of the coffee. As he sipped it, he kept casting piercing glances in Hermione's direction, like he was trying to read her like one of his books. She wondered if he wanted to scribble notes and corrections in her margins.

"Hughes," he said, finally, "do you still want another flying lesson?"

Hermione fought to smother a smile. It was a bad idea. If they flew again, she wouldn't need vodka to encourage her to kiss him. Temptation curled around her like his magic had,

opening her lips like another kiss.

"Yeah," she said. "I think I do."

"Very well." He let his fingers ghost over hers, out of Eileen's line of sight. "Let me know when."

Instead of tinkering in her shed, Charity was lying in wait for Hermione to return. The way she sat on the sofa and thumbed through a book didn't fool Hermione.

"Well *hello*," Charity said, her eyes bright with enough mischief to rival a Weasley twin. "Were you at Severus's all night? You dirty little stop out. I would say tell me everything, but he's like a brother to me, so maybe just the highlights."

"Nothing happened." Much. "I fell asleep on his sofa."

"Really?" Charity's shoulders sagged. "I was kind of hoping he'd take up with you and finally tell my cousin to get lost."

The words took a second to push their way past Hermione's good mood and splinter through her. When they did, it was like being dropped mid-flight.

"Oh," Hermione whispered. Crossing her arms over her midsection as if to shield herself from this revelation didn't stop the fall. "He's in a relationship? He never said."

Charity shuffled over to the hob and stirred whatever concoction she was planning to slather onto toast that morning. "I'd hardly call it a relationship. She's married. And I'm just now realising that I probably shouldn't have told you all of this. Shit. Do me a favour and don't tell Severus that I let it slip, OK?"

"Yeah, of course." Staring down at her hands, Hermione picked at a broken nail. "You don't like your cousin?"

"That's... a complicated question. Narcissa cut ties with me when I got involved with Gideon. I hate her politics and how she treated me — how she treats most people, really — but she was my best friend from the time we were babies. It's harder than it should be to forget the good years, you know?"

"That's understandable," Hermione somehow managed to

say around the lump in her throat.

Narcissa. Snape was having an affair with *Narcissa Malfoy*? Cold, elegant, stunningly beautiful Narcissa Malfoy?

Had Draco known? Had *Lucius*? Had it still been going on when Snape was Hermione's teacher? Something in her gut twisted to think of him being tangled up in sheets with Narcissa after an afternoon spent looming over Hermione in Defence Against the Dark Arts. Which was ridiculous. He'd been her teacher — an adult, free to tangle up with whom-ever he chose. She hadn't even *liked* him back then. Respected, yes, but there had been no yearning, no daydreams, not even a hint of butterflies. She'd abstained from crushes on teachers after the events of her second year.

Hermione clenched her jaw as her stubborn heart insisted on continuing to sink and sink and sink. Had Narcissa been his *company* that day his curtains had been drawn and Charity had warned Hermione against interrupting him?

"Oh, is it nine already?" Hermione asked, looking at her watch. "I need to get to work." She didn't. Algie wasn't expecting her till noon, but he wouldn't mind if she turned up early. Getting away from Spinner's End would help her stop thinking about Snape and Narcissa. Maybe.

"OK." Charity gave Hermione a carefree, easy smile. "See you later."

The steps creaked under Hermione's feet as she hurried up to her room. She wasn't going to distance herself from Snape, but kissing him had clearly been a mistake. Friends. That was best. They could be friends, and she could keep pushing against the Vow's restraints and trying to save his life.

Flinging open her wardrobe, she picked up the cursed, hated book that had brought her here. The days she'd completed were all marked through with a red X. She still had a lot left to go.

3 August 1984

The script was the same as always. Pleasantly surprised greeting (the surprise had been genuine, if not exactly pleasant), wizard's chess (he was going to win), and gossip (nothing he could use). Somewhere along the way, Severus must have forgot his lines, lost the last few pages. The thought of ending the game and progressing to the finale left him colder than the dungeons. His attention kept drifting back to that night in his shed — to that innocent nothing of a kiss with a woman he hadn't intended to kiss at all.

They had plenty of time. Eileen wouldn't be back for ages, as his food stores had allegedly been dire enough to necessitate a grumbling walk all the way across town to the big Sainsbury's. But certain neighbours could come over at any moment with gifts of potions and sweetly flirtatious smiles and clues about how to save the life of someone beloved. If Granger found out about Narcissa, there would be no additional flying lessons.

He wanted there to be additional flying lessons.

"I've met someone," he said.

One brief, drunken kiss didn't amount to much. There wasn't anything there but the barest hint of possibility. Claiming a developing relationship was, however, the most convenient route out of his affair with Narcissa. He couldn't afford for her to become offended and sever the friendship.

Narcissa commanded a knight to take one of his rooks before she replied. "Have you? Is it serious?"

"Not yet."

"Mm." She almost smiled. "It's equal parts refreshing and unsettling to see you so optimistic. Is it anyone I know?"

"I don't believe so. She's Italian. I met her at a Potions conference." Pretending to waffle over his next move, he tapped his fingers on the edge of the table. "She shares my parentage."

Those were the magic words. He couldn't confess to being

interested in his Muggle-born neighbour; Narcissa had disowned her favourite cousin for running away with a blood traitor. Claiming he had a Pureblood lover would likely result in Narcissa feeling slighted, as if she'd been replaced, because what Pureblood witch would ever want him for more than an affair? A Half-blood was attainable, in his league. Narcissa knew him well enough by now to realise that if he entered into a committed relationship, he wouldn't stray. He could pretend to pursue a Half-blood, and Narcissa could pretend to be happy for him.

"I wish you all the best," Narcissa said. "If things go well, you must bring her to the Manor for dinner so Lucius and I can meet her."

That sounded as appealing as letting Hagrid cater all of his meals for the next school year.

"I would enjoy that," Severus said. "I'm meeting Lucius for lunch next week, did I tell you? I intend to start selling him on the benefits of joining Hogwarts' board of governors."

The way Narcissa clasped his hand felt like more of an ending than his earlier confession. Her grip was sure and strong, as if projecting her confidence that her son's future would be safe with Severus.

Maybe it was a family trait, this tendency to betray women who cared about him. An inherited weakness, like bad knees or being a Gryffindor.

"I'm so lucky to have you as a friend, Severus," she said.

"Nonsense. I'm the lucky one." Visions of funny, smarmy little Draco being branded with the Dark Mark consumed Severus's thoughts, as persistent and strangling as Devil's Snare. He finally took his move. "Checkmate."

Rubbing her exhausted eyes, Charity paced back and forth in her shed. Severus had given her the strangest look when she'd seen him that morning. He clearly knew something was

wrong. She was being too obvious, but she wasn't as good as him at hiding her worries behind a mask. Maybe the Sorting Hat had been right about her. Then again, telling Heather about Cissy hadn't exactly screamed Hufflepuff, had it? The metallic taste of blood invaded her mouth as she chewed on her chapped lower lip.

At this rate, Severus was going to start thinking Charity was in love with him or something. Honestly, it would have been easier if she was. Maybe then she could make herself truly hate Cissy. Maybe then she could move on and let her dead be buried in every sense.

One wall of Charity's shed was charmed to allow her to see out into the garden. It was a better view these days: butterflies and flowers and fat bumblebees. The latest addition was on Severus's side: some shrub Charity didn't recognise. It had spiky thorns, jagged leaves, and blossoms as dark as Severus's eyes.

A few days before, Severus had chatted to Heather while she'd planted it, a half-smile curving his thin lips. And that expression, that one right there, was what made worry tighten its grip around Charity's throat. Because he didn't know, did he? He had no idea Heather would only be with them for a short time before the book dragged her back to her own time. And not even Charity knew what Heather's true intentions were, no matter how much she genuinely liked the other witch.

The book. Pushing aside half-finished products for Zonko's and several stone cold cups of tea, Charity unearthed the little silver phoenix date book. Her version had much less tarnish than the one in Heather's possession. How far into the future did Heather belong?

Charity had been working on the book for years, trying to modify the magic that let one turn back minutes by turning back pages. She'd managed to extend the time it could travel, reaching almost an hour, but it was fragile and unstable. Once she ventured into the realm of months and years, she doubted

it would survive more than a single return journey. She would get one attempt, and one attempt only.

There was no second book, as far as she knew. Gideon and Fabian had shared this one, keeping it a secret from the Ministry and — more importantly, according to them — their sister. To those two, it had been nothing more than a toy. Something they'd made because they could. They'd always had a knack for inventing.

Maybe Charity would manage to make another book, somehow. She owed Severus that much. He'd spent so much time teaching her how to protect herself, never asking why. Maybe she could send herself back in time to save Gideon and Fabian as well as bringing Heather to this time. For Severus. And, hell, for Heather, too.

Charity scoffed. And maybe Cissy would turn up on her doorstep full of hugs and apologies, and Severus would make neon pink his signature colour.

It would have been easier if she could have fallen in love with Severus and he could have loved her back, perhaps, but there had only ever been one love for Charity. And she was going to save that love. She was going to obliterate the timeline in which Gideon had died. She was. No one could stop her.





Love-in-a-Mist

3 August 1987

Eileen folded a carrier bag to save for later, the same way she'd always folded used wrapping paper when Severus had been a child. The plastic crinkled beneath her fingers as she pressed it into a neat square.

"A Gobstones league?" she asked. "Goodness, it's been years since I played. Decades. I doubt I'd make it past tryouts. Where's it based?"

"New Zealand," Severus said.

"New Zealand?" Placing her hands on her hips, Eileen glared at him as if he was once again seven years old and she'd caught him going through the books about the Dark Arts that she'd hidden in the loft. "If you want me to leave, there are options that don't involve international portkeys."

"I simply thought you might like a fresh start."

Eileen tucked her carrier bag into a drawer. "My parents took me to Spain once. It cured me of wanting to go abroad ever again. It was too bloody hot, for a start, and all of the food was different. I couldn't get a decent cup of tea..."

Good gods. Next she was going to complain about people speaking Spanish there. Severus had been a fool to think

that convincing Eileen to leave the country would be easy. Allowing her to remain nearby once he resumed his role as spy would be as good as aiming his own wand at her and casting Avada Kedavra. Or, more likely, several rounds of the Cruciatius followed by a Killing Curse.

"I do like the idea of a fresh start," she said in a softer tone. "I was... I was thinking I might like to change my name. I don't want to go back to my maiden name, mind. I'd like something entirely new."

Given the way her parents had refused to help when Eileen had realised what sort of man she'd married, Severus couldn't blame her. He had been four or five when it had happened — when Eileen had buttoned him up in his too big, second-hand coat and had taken him to the home of a sour-faced man and a reedy woman who'd had a nose like his. After several rounds of *honestly, what did you expect? He's a Muggle*, the woman had offered to let Severus stay in that sterile, silent place. Only Severus. Eileen had wavered for a split-second, until a panicked Severus had clung to her arm. At the time, he hadn't understood why she'd considered it.

"Maybe I'll change my appearance as well," Eileen said, wringing her hands together. "I'll have to fabricate an employment history, won't I? I've no idea how I'm going to support myself, otherwise. The only job I've ever had was stocking shelves at Flourish and Blotts, and that was years ago."

The Flourish and Blotts debacle. As a child, Severus had hidden outside this very kitchen, listening to yet another of Tobias's poisonous rants. *You think I'm never going to get another job, is that it, Eileen? Maybe I'd have more luck finding something if my wife had some fucking faith in me.*

That had been the summer following Severus's first year at Hogwarts. After that, he'd had to travel on his own or with the Evans family to shop for school supplies in Diagon Alley. How would Tobias have felt about Eileen's more recent wind-

falls of cash if he'd known they'd come not from lotto scratch-cards or bingo winnings, but from their son?

"You will obtain employment in the same way as generations of Slytherins before you," Severus said, aiming his wand at the kettle to start water boiling for tea. "Nepotism."

Gardening was wonderfully meditative. After digging in the soil at Algie's and at Spinner's End, Hermione felt more at peace with the whole Snape situation. Yes, she still felt a bit bruised, but they'd not made each other any promises. Nor should they. They belonged to different times; any romance between the two of them would only lead to heartache. If he survived, she couldn't expect him to still want her in thirteen years — particularly not after his time as her teacher.

"Are you terribly busy?"

Shielding her eyes with one hand, Hermione looked up from the weeds she'd been pulverising. Eileen was a tall, skinny shadow in a baggy dress, standing in just the right place to blot out the sun.

"Nope, not at all," Hermione said. "Did you need something?"

"I was wondering whether you might like to join me for a trip to Diagon Alley. I have to run a few errands, and I was hoping for some company. Severus has other plans."

Plans with Narcissa? Hermione decapitated a drooping flitterbloom.

Right. Maybe she needed a bit more of that meditative gardening. Or a bookshop.

"Sure," she said. "I haven't been to Flourish and Blotts in far too long."

After a quick dust of her knees, a scrub of her hands, and a bit of wandwork to transform her Muggle clothes into robes, Hermione was ready to go. Eileen studied the resulting outfit with her lower lip caught between her teeth.

"Would you mind doing mine as well?" Eileen asked. "I've

never been very good at transfiguring clothes. They always end up either too big or threadbare or both." She stood with her arms held wide, smiling appreciatively at the robes that flowed over her body with a few twirls of Hermione's wand. "That will do nicely, thank you. How are you at apparating?"

"Not bad. I've only ever splinched someone once, and that was in an extremely stressful situation."

Eileen wrapped trembling fingers around Hermione's arm. "I'll let you drive on the way there, then."

Up close, Hermione could see a sheen of sweat on Eileen's forehead and upper lip. Spinning on the spot, Hermione concentrated on making her apparition smooth and gentle. It didn't seem to work; Eileen's complexion was even paler when they landed in the Leaky Cauldron, but she soldiered on towards the exit, scowling to rival her son. At an impatient, pointed look from Eileen, Hermione tapped the appropriate brick with her wand to open the archway to Diagon Alley.

Gringotts was their first stop. Eileen counted out Muggle money to be exchanged, adding several handfuls of pennies to the small pile of notes and other coins that she shoved towards the surly goblin teller. Next, they went to Flourish and Blotts. Eileen stopped in the middle of the ground floor, closed her eyes, and breathed in deep, as if coming home after a long, exhausting absence.

Hermione could relate.

It felt almost luxurious, having a companion who was content to wander the aisles with her, drifting apart and back together again and again as they browsed. Padma had been happy to join Hermione for long visits to the library during their final year at Hogwarts, but Madam Pince had been particularly cantankerous that year, appearing around every corner to lecture them about some imagined crime against books.

Hermione let herself become so absorbed in the 1987 selection at Flourish and Blotts that she almost missed Eileen

ducking out of the shop. Abandoning her intended purchases, Hermione followed. Eileen's true reasons for visiting Diagon Alley were none of Hermione's business, of course, but Eileen still didn't look at all well. Snape would be furious if Hermione let anything happen to his mum. Or that's what she told herself.

The August heat and the bustling crowd outside felt more stifling than it had before. She needed Harry and Ron and an invisibility cloak for this sort of thing. A flash of the dark green robes she'd transfigured for Eileen appeared up ahead, then vanished inside Ollivander's. *Oh.*

Sidling along the rough brick of the outside wall, Hermione peeked into the window of the wandmaker's shop. A smiling Mr Ollivander pressed a wand into Eileen's shaking hand. To Eileen's apparent astonishment, the end glowed bright and golden as the wand chose her.

Eileen clasped the stick of willow to her chest, bowing her head so her hair hid her face. Hermione remembered that warm, uplifting rush — like finding a piece of herself that had always been missing.

Urged on by Mr Ollivander, Eileen tried out a spell: *Lumos*. Hermione had to squint against the joyful brightness of it, like that light had been bottled up inside Eileen for years, building and building. How long had Eileen been without a wand? Harry had said something about Snape's dad hating magic, hadn't he?

Hermione placed a hand over the plummeting weight in her stomach. She had no right to watch this reunion of magic and witch without an invitation. None at all. Turning on the spot, she rushed back to Flourish and Blotts to wait for Eileen's return.

Albus bent to sniff a purple blossom that clashed fantastically with his orange robes. It was the first time he'd seen the changes Granger had made to the garden at Spinner's End. Upon noticing the new riot of colour from the kitchen

window, he'd insisted upon being given the grand tour.

"I remember your mother as a student," Albus said. "Such a quiet child — and clever. So clever." He shook his head, his deep frown saying what he did not: *such a waste of potential*. "She undoubtedly has the necessary magical skill, and I recall her being quite passionate about her respect for books. You're correct that Madam Friese has been making noises about wanting to retire for some time now. I'm sure she'd be more than willing to take on an apprentice next year, but Severus... Madam Friese does not give second chances."

"One chance will be all that is needed. I'll see to it."

Staring into the distance at the pink clouds that scudded past the setting sun, Albus sighed. "Have you gleaned some information from our guest that prompted the idea to change your mother's name and hide her under a glamour?"

"Granger has revealed no information at all about my mother. Didn't the Unbreakable Vow see to that?" Severus didn't attempt to keep the venom out of his voice. As heat chased clenching muscles up the back of his neck, he realised how he'd come to loathe the way the Vow circled Granger's wrist in pain when she so much as thought about erasing names from her list of the dead. Her own invisible Dark Mark, pulling her puppet strings. And locking it around her had been Severus's idea — Severus's magic, even. "Mum is the one who mentioned the possibility of a new name. She wishes to reinvent herself. A mid-life crisis, probably. I think it would be wise to avoid having anyone too obviously attached to me in the future. Not protecting her — from both sides — would be inexcusable. I can distance myself from friends, make them hate me if necessary, but my mother will always be a target."

"She will, I'm afraid." Albus clasped his hands behind his back. "Hmm. In that case, I have a suggestion for a name. Irma Pince. Tom gave me the idea, believe it or not. It's an anagram of —"

"We are *not* using an anagram."

Of all the absurd suggestions. Before Albus could attempt to make his case, Eileen and Granger popped into view near the shed, both of them dressed in robes and holding bags emblazoned with the Flourish and Blotts logo. They'd gone on an outing to Diagon Alley? Together? *Why?*

"Hello, sir," Eileen said to Albus, stepping forward while Granger hung back.

"Eileen." Albus beamed one of his twinkliest smiles at her. "It's so nice to see you again."

"Likewise."

Granger didn't glance at Severus for longer than a second. He didn't get any sort of twinkly smile from her — not even when Dumbledore's back was turned and Eileen excused herself to put her purchases in her room.

Fuck. What the hell had Eileen said to her?

"I wonder if you might settle a debate for us," Albus said to Granger, enclosing the three of them in a Muffliato once Eileen vanished into the house. "May I ask who the librarian was during your time at Hogwarts?"

"Irma Pince."

So, using her as a crystal ball to see into the future was fine when it suited Albus, but not when lives were at stake? As much as Severus understood why Albus insisted upon steering towards the future that Granger knew, he really did want to hex his employer at times.

Albus chuckled. "You see, Severus? Tom isn't the only one who can play with anagrams."

"Anagrams?" Granger said. Pushing her fake glasses up her nose, she shuffled through the possibilities. "Anemic rip, carmine pi, rip in mace... oh! I am Prince? Or I'm a Prince?" She turned a wide-eyed gaze towards Severus at last, but it was nothing like the way she'd looked at him the previous morning. There was no request for additional kisses in this look. "Are you telling me that your *mum* is Madam Pince?"

"So it would seem," Severus said, irrationally pleased that she'd worked it out. Ravenclaw edged into the lead in the Granger House Cup. "I still say it's idiotic, though I suppose being saddled with the name Irma will serve her right for calling me Severus."

"I've always liked your name," Albus said.

Severus rolled his eyes. "You would."

Granger went quiet, waiting until Albus went off to examine the plants on Charity's side before she spoke again. "I can't believe Madam Pince has been your mum this whole time," she said. "I've known her nearly half my life. The Vow won't keep me from telling you about her, though now I'm wondering whether I ever really knew anything about her at all. She's still the librarian after the war. Still terrifying students who dare to mistreat books or speak above a whisper in her presence. I sat next to her at lunch just a few hours before I landed in your bathroom."

Severus wanted to kiss her for offering up that scrap of information. His mum would survive. Granger seemed determined to keep doing that — keep giving freely what he would have otherwise attempted to steal. Doubting a kiss would be welcome, he settled for letting his fingers trip down along the spot where the Vow held her. He gave her hand a grateful squeeze.

Granger faked a smile, looking as if she'd lost something — lost him. Perhaps she had decided to distance herself due to his likely death. No, more likely Eileen had said something embarrassing, horrifying, incriminating, or all of the above. That was what mums did. Particularly his.

Still, Granger didn't pull her hand away.



Jonquil

4 August 1987

Madam Pince took shape beneath the shimmering waves of Snape's magic. Her hair became solid steel grey, rather than black threaded with strands of white. Her eyes shifted colour to hazel and took on a different shape, her cheeks grew more sunken, her skin faded to a somewhat less sallow shade. Only Eileen's nose remained the same.

"Are you certain you don't want to change the nose?" Snape asked. "It seems unfortunate to waste the opportunity."

"There's nothing wrong with your nose," Hermione said.

"I quite agree," Eileen said. "It's distinctive."

"Yes, well, we're aiming for unremarkable, Mother."

"All of those bullies who mocked it when I was a schoolgirl... If I change it, it's like they *win*. The nose stays."

"I think you should keep it," Hermione said. "You look perfect as you are."

Snape had asked Hermione to watch the process of applying the glamour so she could alert him to any differences between his finished spell and the Madam Pince she knew. Hermione had agreed because it dovetailed nicely with her plans to save his life.

He deserved to be saved. If she still went a little weak in the knees when she remembered flying with him, it made no difference. She would get over it. Friendship and obtaining some hair for a Summoning Potion were on today's agenda. Hermione had one such potion brewed for Fawkes, waiting for Snape to uncork it in 1998. She had originally intended to use Narcissa Malfoy as her backup plan if Fawkes didn't come when called to the Shrieking Shack.

Knowing that Eileen was Madam Pince changed things. Unlike Narcissa, Eileen would fight on the side of the Light. It would be far easier for Eileen slip away after Voldemort's fall. Hermione smiled, remembering the one glimpse she'd had of Madam Pince during the Battle of Hogwarts. On their way to the Chamber of Secrets, Hermione and Ron had come across Madam Pince lecturing Mr Filch about the idiocy of staying to fight when he couldn't defend himself. The librarian had barely paused in her tirade to incapacitate a Death Eater.

"Here," Hermione said now as Eileen stood in front of a mirror and tried to decide what to do with her new, longer hair. "Let me help."

Madam Pince's coiled chignon was easy enough to replicate. By the time Hermione finished, she had a few fine, dark hairs hidden away in her pocket, ready for her second Summoning Potion.

5 August 1987

Apart from the knot that masqueraded as Severus's stomach whenever he saw Charity, one side effect of knowing about her looming death was that he found it far more difficult to deny her anything. How else would he have found himself wandering around a chocolate-box village, answering daft questions about the ways of Muggles? He should have lured her to Algie's garden with the promise of another picnic. Granger was at work; she could have joined them on her lunch break.

Severus couldn't work out whether Granger's feelings

towards him had genuinely cooled. His thoughts on the matter went back and forth, never settling on a firm conclusion. Eileen had been quite insistent that they'd not discussed him at all. A likely story. Well, the potion in his shed was nearly ready. Granger's reaction to that would possibly illuminate things.

He certainly wouldn't humiliate himself by offering her more flying lessons. She was aware of his interest. He refused to look desperate.

The white-clad men on the village cricket pitch weren't a fraction as enchanting as Algie's plants. Rather than holding Severus's attention, the occasional crack of the bat and hushed smatterings of applause threatened to lull him to sleep where he stood.

"What are the rules?" Charity asked.

"I honestly have no idea," he said. "I've never paid any attention to cricket. And before you ask about other Muggle games, I can guarantee I know next to nothing about them as well. I prefer Quidditch. I'd even rather watch Gobstones, which I absolutely loathe. Unfortunately for me, my mother has joined a Gobstones league in New Zealand."

"Really? Good for her. I'm glad she's having an adventure."

Severus made a noncommittal hum. Lying to her left a bitter taste in his mouth, but he couldn't risk information about his mother being dragged from Charity with the Cruciatus Curse if she was captured during the war. If he failed her.

In actuality, Eileen had left for Hogwarts that morning, armed with her own glamour-linked necklace. She was to begin learning Madam Friese's system before the start of term. As Madam Friese's system mostly seemed to consist of behaving as if students were committing a sin simply by being in the same room as her beloved books, Severus was confident that Eileen could master it. Especially as he'd caught the scent of powdered griffin claw on Eileen's breath. Affronted that she'd not asked him to brew for her, he'd sneaked into her room and scrutinised the alcohol withdrawal tonics she'd

purchased from a substandard Diagon Alley apothecary. They were annoyingly flawless.

Slumping forward, Charity kicked at a tree root that had burst through the pavement. It wasn't near the anniversary of Gideon Prewett's death; that date had been seared into Severus's mind when it had happened, no matter how he'd tried to forget. What had her looking so downcast? In spite of her claims that he should never again attempt to cheer her up, he decided it was safe to try the opposite of his previous approach.

"I saw Narcissa the other day," he said. "You'll be pleased to hear that she likely won't be visiting as often. I informed her that it would be best if we carried on as friends."

Charity gaped at him. "Seriously?" She waited for his nod of confirmation before adding, "Thank fuck."

"No, quite the opposite."

She laughed, but it wasn't a Charity laugh. Something about it rang false. "I was right, wasn't I? You got frostbite."

"What you are is ridiculous."

They strolled down a side street, past a garden that hummed with laughter and overlapping conversations.

"Do you think the Defence Against the Dark Arts position is really cursed?" Charity asked.

He knew it was. The Dark Lord had boasted about it on multiple occasions. "Perhaps."

"Do you remember Professor Malone? He's still in the Janus Thickey Ward. It doesn't bode well for Heather, does it?"

Ah. "I believe Hughes only agreed to take the position for one year. She intends to move away next June. That will reduce her risk of serious injury and death, I should think." It wasn't a complete lie. Time travel could be counted as moving away, after a fashion.

"She told you she's leaving?"

"She was very clear about the length of her stay when she accepted the job."

A year and a day. The knot in Severus's stomach tightened in a way that convinced him that eating at the village pub had been a mistake.

16 August 1987

"Air pollution," Charity said, tapping her Muggle pen against her lips. One corner of her mouth was stained blue with ink. "Four letters. Hmm. Ooh, frog. That fits."

Hermione snort-laughed. "Why bother even doing the crossword if you're going to put down anything with the right number of letters, no matter whether it has anything to do with the clue?"

"Hey, I'd like to see you try to breathe air that's full of frogs. And my way is more fun. I do look up the correct answers when they're published, thank you very much. I am making some effort to learn about Muggles. I already know a lot more than most Purebloods — enough that no one in Cokeworth suspects me of being at all unusual. Well, except for Mrs Cooper, maybe, but I maintain anyone would mistake her yappy little dog for a rat."

"I'll get you some decent books before I leave for Hogwarts. About Muggles, not dogs that look like rats."

The newspaper rustled as Charity drew her legs up onto the sofa and hugged her knees to her chest. "That would be nice. It'd give me something to do. It's always quiet around here when Severus goes back to work, but it's going to be extra quiet this year. I might have to start talking to the rat-dog just to stay sane."

"I'm not sure that's quite the mark of sanity that you think it is." Hermione chuckled. "I'll probably pester Snape when we first get there, asking him to bake horrifying creations with me and encouraging him to fill out Muggle crosswords incorrectly. I'm going to miss living with you."

Even if Snape didn't manage to save Charity, Hermione

was glad she'd had this chance to get to know the real Professor Burbage, to transform her into far more than a few fuzzy memories and a name on a war memorial. Charity deserved to be known. And Hermione would do everything she could to tip the scales in favour of Charity's survival.

"Likewise." Charity licked her inky lips. "Grumpy, seven letters. Well, that obviously has to be Severus, which means frog is wrong, since that doesn't start with a U."

"You amaze me."

A sleepy Dionysus stretched his wings and hopped down from his perch. The two witches were treated to his effusive, cuddly manner of greeting: first Charity, then Hermione. Charity stroked his head as she repeatedly inhaled as if about to speak, only to let the air out in a frustrated sigh.

"You know," Charity said at last, "Severus ended things with my cousin."

A breath caught in Hermione's throat. It didn't change anything. It didn't. They still belonged to different times. She'd still watched him bleed out on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. Her heart, never one to listen to reason and logic, gave a little flip.

"Did he?" she asked.

"Mm. Apparently, all they've done this summer is play wizard's chess and gossip like a couple of old hags. Can't say I'm surprised."

Hermione didn't know how to interpret the look Charity gave her then. It was almost like the piercing focus of Legilimency, like Charity was trying to stare straight through to the gymnastics routine taking place behind Hermione's ribcage.

"Be gentle with him, yeah?" Charity said. "I meant it when I said he's like a brother to me. He's the closest thing to family I have, and... You worked so hard on that garden. It'd be a shame if I had to bury you in it."

Snape himself came striding in, carrying with him the fresh, herbal scent that came from brewing beautifying or hair curl-

ing potions. There was something else layered beneath it — something sweeter, almost like spiced honey.

"Hughes," he said, "the potion in my shed has finally matured, if you wish to see the finished product."

"All right," Hermione said cautiously. Why was he taking her out to his shed instead of just giving her the potion or leaving it hanging on her doorknob, the way he usually did?

If he had brewed her something to improve her looks, she was by no means going to be gentle with him.

"By the way, Charity?" Hermione said over her shoulder as she followed Snape out of the sitting room. "Air pollution, four letters: *smog*. Which means that grumpy, seven letters is probably *peevish*."

"Did I not just threaten to bury you in the garden?" Charity asked. "Go play with Severus and stop ruining my crossword by making it correct, know-it-all."

Out in his shed, Snape cast Muffliato before he siphoned some of the glittery, red-violet potion out of the cauldron and into a vial. For once, he didn't wait for her to work out its purpose.

"This," he said, "will allow anyone who knows your true appearance to see through your glamour. The next time you wish to — how did you put it — be yourself for a while, you needn't take the risk of removing your necklace."

He'd started brewing this before they'd kissed, before he'd tugged her into this shed to see her real face. The sheer complexity of the magic needed to accomplish such a potion nearly made her arm shoot up into the air with a thousand questions about his process. Instead, she took a sip.

It felt like drinking a Muggle beverage: just the taste of tart berries and juniper on her tongue, and then nothing. A conjured mirror revealed that the potion had worked, but when Hermione raised a hand to touch a curl, it passed right through until she felt her shorter, glamoured hair beneath her fingertips.

"You have to tell me how you accomplished this," Hermione said.

"Do I?" The tone of his voice was almost like a smile.

She tried out a genuine smile of her own. "Yes. And thank you, by the way. This is brilliant. How long will it last? Would it work on someone who somehow learnt the secret, or is it keyed to just the two of us and Dumbledore? How long have you been working on it? Are you sure it won't work on anyone who doesn't know about the glamour?"

Predictably, Snape only answered her final question. "Of course I'm certain." He glowered at her. "Were you like this in my classroom? Endlessly pestering me with questions?"

Hermione smirked. "I don't think it's a good idea for me to tell you too much about the future, do you?"

"Merlin. You even turned your answer into a question. I'm doomed."

Not if she could help it, he wasn't.





Lady's Slipper

29 August 1987

Somehow, Severus found himself walking along the filthy river with Granger, holding a tray full of sweet woodruff that she'd claimed would help her fill the patches of dry shade in the garden. For some insane reason, she wanted Muggle plants to sprinkle among the extraordinary gifts from Algie.

Peering at him over the plants she carried, Granger gave him the same smile she'd been giving him for weeks. It was slow to build, like he was some sort of secret she'd just uncovered. Her reaction to his glamour vanishing potion hadn't told him much, in the end. Overwhelming intellectual curiosity was just Granger being Granger. Those smiles, though. They were *something*.

Not that he had a hope of interpreting them. He would have felt more comfortable deciphering her reactions to him if he'd believed her to be plotting his demise, if he was honest with himself. All of his usual instincts didn't exactly translate to this scenario. The possibility of asking Narcissa for advice flitted into his mind and out again. Probably not wise. She'd taken their parting with calm grace, but that would be pushing her too far.

Severus wasn't sorry to have ended things with Narcissa, no matter whether things with Granger ever advanced beyond... whatever it was they were currently doing. Any fire that had once burned between Severus and Narcissa had clearly fizzled out; they hadn't ventured past chess and conversation since... when? Easter? Better to leave plenty of space between the death of their affair and the start of the second war. As Narcissa was married to Lucius, she was at enough risk of being used as a pawn by the Dark Lord. And Severus would never choose saving Narcissa over seeing the true end of Lily's murderer.

What would Lily have thought of Granger? When Severus tried to conjure up her likely reaction, the only thing he could imagine was Lily as she'd been at age 13, giggling and teasing him about having a crush. A familiar iron fist constricted around Severus's chest, as strong as if it had been days instead of years. Merlin, but he missed his friend.

"Do you know whether the third edition of Ingrid Lázaro's *A Muggle History of Britain* has been published?" Granger asked, her voice a welcome intrusion on his thoughts. "I'll settle for the second edition, if I must, but the third is better."

"I have no idea. Why do you ask? You can't possibly need it."

"I promised Charity I'd find her some good books on Muggles before I left for Hogwarts. I asked your mum in my last letter if she had any recommendations, but she said she's woefully behind on reading anything other than fiction."

"Wait. Stop. In your last letter? You have been corresponding with my mother?"

"Yeah, a bit."

"Good gods, why?"

"Because she wrote back to me when I sent her a note saying I hoped her apprenticeship was going well so far?" Her uncertain tone made it sound like a question. "And then I wrote back to her, and here we are."

Granger had become penfriends with his mum? Well, that was unsettling.

"Also," Granger continued, "the magic she's learning is absolutely fascinating. I had no idea what was involved in controlling the Restricted Section. *Hogwarts: A History* only touches on the basics."

There was something about the way her eyes lit up when she spoke about learning something new that almost made her glamour fade into the background, as if she'd taken a dose of the potion he'd brewed for her. Which she hadn't actually done since that day in his shed — not once. Bloody inconsiderate of her.

"I still say we should have driven," Severus said. The garden centre was in an irritatingly open area, with no convenient alleys for apparition. The sun had decided to behave as if they weren't in England that day, burning through every Cooling Charm that Severus cast.

"I don't think my license would be valid in this time, and I don't want to risk needing to Confund a police officer," Granger said.

"I don't have a driving license at all, but that does not prevent me from borrowing Mrs Cooper's car when needs must."

"And Mrs Cooper thinks Charity is the one she needs to worry about." Nudging his elbow with hers, Granger grinned. "The last time I was in a car before I came here, it didn't go so well. It belonged to Ron; he was so excited to show it off. What he didn't realise was that his brother George had linked a charm to the speedometer. As soon as we hit 40 miles per hour, the car turned invisible. It was still *there*; Muggles outside the car could see it just fine, but to everyone inside the car, it looked like it had fallen away and we were hurtling along the road supported by nothing." She wrinkled her nose. "Still not as terrifying as riding a broom, if you ask me."

Severus groaned. "How old is that Weasley? George? How many years of relative peace do I have before he's my student?"

"His first year will be 1989. And you also have his twin, Fred,

to look forward to."

Granger flexed her wrist. Another name for the list of the dead.

"I now doubt your entire story about being my student," Severus said. "Clearly, I will be retiring no later than next year."

She laughed, the sound equal parts fond and amused. "I would, too, if I was faced with teaching the Weasley twins. Dumbledore never could have talked me into taking the DADA post if I'd landed in 1989. Hmm. Do you think your mum would ever do an errand for Dumbledore, by the way? Ever since I found out that she's Madam Pince, I've been wondering if she could have been the one to slip the book into my pocket. She definitely had ample opportunity."

Severus shrugged. "Perhaps. Albus can be quite persuasive." And manipulative. "Do you truly think he was the one who sent you here?"

"Not particularly. I don't really have any other suspects, though. When I first arrived, I immediately suspected Draco Malfoy. I saw him just before it happened, at the war memorial."

So, Draco would remain free to wander outside of prison walls — free to approach a bastion of the Light. Perhaps Severus wouldn't fail him entirely.

"What's Draco like?" Severus asked. "Does he still make insufferable harpies go bald?"

"Ugh, please don't call Bellatrix insufferable. You were fond of calling me that when you were my teacher, and I'd rather not be lumped together with *her*, thank you."

"Very well. Only you will be insufferable."

She shifted the plants in her arms as she pondered his question. "As for Draco, I think he was genuinely changed by the war. He was a horrible little bully when we were kids, so I know he has a cruel streak, but he's not as ruthless as his father and Baldy. We aren't friends — not by a long shot — but we're civil in my time. He asked me to dance at a charity event, which he never would have done before the war. Wouldn't

have wanted to muddy his hands." Granger missed the slight clenching of Severus's jaw. "I've never seen him make anyone go bald outside of your memory, but he'd probably still think it was hilarious to make me arrive in your bathroom."

"I see. Do you have any other suspects?"

"Not really. Draco was the only unusual sighting that day. I can't even imagine what anyone would want to accomplish by sending me here. Maybe an enemy looking to get me out of the way? I have a few of those floating around. Oh, or it could be one of Harry's more deranged fans. He has plenty, and most aren't fans of me, thanks to the lies that always get reported about us."

Severus could easily picture James Potter's son basking in that level of fame and glory. Revolting.

"It's been strange since the end of the war, in a lot of ways," Granger said, flexing her wrist again. "The end was... was particularly *insufferable* for Tonks."

At the chilling, entirely unsurprising realisation that Miss Tonks would be killed by her own aunt, Severus thought of Narcissa's sly questions about his students.

"I don't expect you to be able to... Most of them, it'd be impossible," Granger said. "Especially for someone in your position. It's unfair, lightening my guilt by forcing you to share it."

The expression on her face was so open and kind that Hufflepuff rocketed back into the lead. Lily would have liked Granger, Severus decided. No question.

"I'm not sharing a thing," Severus said, mostly because he didn't want her to stop trying to slip hints past the Vow. "You greatly overestimate my capacity for guilt."

She knew far too much about the depths of his guilt; he could see it in the way her gaze skittered away from his. Had Dumbledore broken his promise and revealed Severus's secrets to Potter? The very idea of the boy being made aware of something so private made Severus's skin feel too tight.

Ofcourse Potter had told Granger. Severus took a moment to prod at how he felt about that. Mostly, he thought the hot flush spreading through him was annoyance. It wasn't her *knowing* that he minded; it was that anyone other than Severus had been the one to tell her. How disturbing.

31 August 1984

On her last day at Algie's, Hermione chose one final plant: white heather, like she'd left at the memorial for Snape. It seemed fitting. Droplets of water clung to the tiny flowers: leftovers from the late summer downpour that had made the garden smell like it had been washed clean.

"Well, you managed to not kill everything," Algie said. "You'll come back next summer."

"If I can, yes. Be nice to that great nephew of yours, OK?"
"I'm always nice."

And Gregory Goyle was always witty. At least Hermione knew that Neville survived. In her time, he was alive and well and ensconced in happy domesticity with Ron. When she got back, she would have to ask Neville if he wanted her and George to help him get some very belated revenge.

With a gruff goodbye from Algie, Hermione spun on the spot and landed back in the alley near Spinner's End. It had rained in Cokeworth, too, but it had left the town smelling like wet laundry that had been forgotten in the washing machine overnight. Hermione hurried home along water blackened, cracked pavement. Calling out a hello in case Charity was actually inside instead of tinkering in the shed, she passed through the house and into the garden.

The Protego was a reflex; it sprang to her lips and her wand before she fully registered the dirty orange light of a hex arcing towards her. Through the barrier of her shield, Snape stared at her, his wand still sparking. Charity, the intended target of the hex, had ducked instead of casting a Protego of her own.

"Shit," Charity said, straightening up. "Sorry about that, Heather. You all right?"

"Yeah, fine, thanks. No harm done."

"Good," Snape said. "You're still hesitating," he added, turning to Charity. "You need to be ruthless."

"It's hard to be ruthless when I don't want to hurt you."

He looked offended by the suggestion. "You won't."

"Well, OK, probably not."

"I can brew some Polyjuice and duel you as Lucius, if that will help."

Hermione and Charity talked over each other, replying at the same time.

"Please don't," Hermione said.

"No way, mate," Charity said. "I might not be able to hurt you, but what about Dionysus? You know how riled up he got when he saw Lucius. I can't let you put yourself at risk like that."

One corner of Snape's mouth twitched. "Fine," he said. "In that case, I think you would benefit from attempting to duel two people at once, if Heather will agree to join us."

Seeing how determined Snape was to teach Charity to defend herself, Hermione had to clamp her arms to her sides to prevent herself from reaching out and hugging him.

"If Heather agrees?" Charity said. "What about if Charity agrees? I'm not sure I do."

"Trying to manage two attackers simultaneously will force you to strike as if you actually want to hit your opponents. Ready?"

Hermione set her pot of heather next to the back door and drew her wand. Fighting at Snape's side was nothing like fighting against him. Once or twice, his magic washed over her, protective and warm. In spite of the staggering power behind them, his Shield Charms felt almost gentle. The hexes and jinxes he aimed at Charity, on the other hand, were anything but. Hermione cast like the war was raging all around them; she wanted Charity to become an expert duelist as much as

Snape did. Under the constant assault, Charity had no choice but to hit back like she meant it. Hermione had a cut on her upper arm and a painful sting on her leg by the time she disarmed Charity and brought the duel to a close.

Wiping her sweaty forehead, Charity sagged against the fence. "That's quite enough of that, I think."

"For now," Snape said. "That was almost acceptable. Certainly an improvement on your earlier efforts."

Charity rolled her eyes. "Thanks, Professor. And now, if you will excuse me, I'm going to get back to work."

She reclaimed her wand and vanished into her shed, leaving Hermione and Snape alone in the garden, the air still charged from their spells.

"I'll get you some Essence of Dittany," Snape said, motioning to her arm. "Just a moment."

As she watched him vanish into his house, Hermione swallowed the urge to run after him and start pouring out her heart. All of her reservations about getting involved with him still stood. She would likely lose him at the end of this. But would it truly hurt any less if they were never more than friends? During those airless, desperate moments in which she'd believed Harry to be dead, she'd been certain she would never recover from the blow.

Snape returned, bottle of brown liquid in hand. Standing close, he applied several drops to her cut. Once the green smoke cleared, he rubbed a thumb over the healed wound.

"I'm going to miss this garden," Hermione said. "You'd better not let it die off when I'm gone."

She hadn't fully acknowledged what she was doing at the time, but she'd added in more mundane plants to make it like him: half Muggle, half magical, with poison and thorns and darkness and light.

"I have no intention of wasting so many valuable ingredients," Snape said. "Though I would rather you stayed. To

tend the garden, of course. I hate weeding."

"Of course."

They were both single. In the years to come, he would protect their world with everything he had. He made her laugh, and he liked seeing her real face, and he just felt *necessary*.

The ridiculous desire to grab his hands and fly him up towards the lingering rainclouds shot through her. Ridiculous, because she couldn't even make *herself* fly, let alone another person. This time, she thought she might almost succeed. She felt weightless, as if she could float like those bubbles of light she'd sent into the sky the night they'd kissed. Their feet remained planted on the ground, but Snape was still close — so close.

Hermione had promised Charity she wouldn't let the stuff about Narcissa slip, but she could tell him everything else that had been weighing on her mind. Without moving so much as a centimetre away from him, she cast Muffliato.

"Look," she said, "I'm... Well, obviously I'm attracted to you. But..." *I watched you die. I was still mourning you when I came here.* Searing heat coiled around her wrist. "I've been hesitant because we're from different times. When you were my teacher, you — "

"You do not owe me an explanation." Sneering, Snape took a step away from her. "If you're trying to let me down gently, you needn't — "

"I'm not. I was working up to giving you the whole Mr Darcy speech, in which I tell you how much I like you while also listing all of the reasons I shouldn't."

Snape took a moment to absorb this. "In vain you have struggled?" he asked, the scowl softening a little. "That speech didn't work out particularly well for Mr Darcy, if memory serves."

"No, definitely not. And he sort of focused on how inferior he found her, and I don't find you inferior at all. It wasn't the best comparison, I grant you." Not least because Mr Darcy's had been a proposal, which hers was decidedly *not*. "I do

like you, though. Very much. I've just been stuck in my head recently, thinking things through."

The step he took towards her felt like a victory. "Naturally," he said. "I would expect nothing else from an insufferable Ravenclaw."

Ever since Snape had given her the potion that revealed her true face, Hermione had taken to carrying it around with her. Simply looking at the vial felt like drawing in a breath of Warming Vapour. Or how she imagined such a breath would feel, at any rate. For the first time since that day in his shed, she brought the vial to her mouth and took a sip.

"Better," he said, his voice rough.

If her stay in the past was limited, they had no time to waste, did they? All the encouragement she needed was him glancing down at her mouth; Hermione launched up onto her tiptoes to kiss him. It was so much more than their previous, vodka-muddled attempt. His long fingers slid over her back, pulling her closer. He nipped at her bottom lip and he tasted like oversteeped tea and their teeth clacked together when she lost her balance and it was all perfect, perfect, perfect.





Wisteria

1 September 1984

It was Granger's idea to travel via the Hogwarts Express. Why she wished to surround herself by a horde of noisy, hormone-addled dunderheads any earlier than absolutely necessary was beyond Severus, but he went along with it. Clearly, she was a bad influence. He didn't mind overmuch. After he'd agreed to her mad plan, she'd joined him on his sofa for a leisurely snog before they'd set out for London.

A Very Serious Talk about what they were doing lurked on the horizon. Severus could sense it, like a hex perched on the tongue of an opponent. For the time being, she seemed content to carry on as if replacing passive aggressive potions with kisses was perfectly ordinary and expected. He was not going to complain.

Charity accompanied them to Kings Cross. On Platform 9¾, she kissed a smear of red lipstick onto Severus's cheek, then Granger's. Severus wiped his away.

"Be good," Charity said, drawing Granger into the sort of rib-crushing hug that Severus refused to submit to in public.

"I'll do my best," Granger said. "I'll be back to check on the Felix Felicis at Christmas."

"You'd better. And you're coming to my New Year's party, right?"

"Of course."

Granger looked at Charity like she was soaking up as many details about her as possible, imprinting the moment on her memory. If Severus hadn't already known Charity was going die during the war, that look would have revealed the horrible truth.

Levitating their trunks behind them, Severus and Granger boarded the train and found a blessedly empty compartment. Charity waved at them from the platform like a mum sending her kids off to school. Granger kept a bright smile aimed at the window until the train pulled out of the station.

"Muffliato," she said in a suddenly tear-strangled voice. "The war gets really bad after my sixth year. I don't know how... I don't remember..." Wincing, she grabbed her wrist. "I'm sorry."

She didn't know how Charity died? Why the hell not? Studying Granger's reflection in the window, he caught the wobble of her chin. Severus wavered for a second before placing his hand on the cushioned seat and letting his little finger hook over hers.

"It is sufficient," he said, using the thumb of his other hand to wipe the remnants of Charity's lipstick from her cheek.

A rough timeline would have to be enough. If that was all she could give him, he would make it work. Charity would leave the country after Granger's sixth year, even if Severus had to resort to using the Imperius Curse.

The door of the compartment slid open, admitting Hestia Jones, Charles Weasley, a stumbling Nymphadora Tonks, and a bespectacled ginger boy who could only be another Weasley. Cancelling the Muffliato, Severus shifted his hand away from Granger's.

"Sorry, sir," Charles said. "All the other compartments are full. Mind if we join you?"

"Yes," Severus said, earning himself an elbow to the ribs from Granger, "but as the Headmaster will likely object if I make you stand in the corridor for the entire journey, I suppose I can do nothing about it. Sit."

"Hello again," Granger said, smiling at Miss Tonks as the

children squeezed together on the opposite seat. Severus had almost forgotten that he'd introduced Miss Tonks to Professor Hughes on the day of Granger's arrival. It seemed so long ago.

"Wotcher, Professor," Miss Tonks said. Beaming, she introduced each of her companions. When she reached the younger Weasley, she ruffled his hair, much to his apparent consternation. "And this is Percy, Charlie's little brother. It's his first year at Hogwarts."

"Oh, that's exciting," Granger said. "Where are you hoping to be Sorted?"

"Gryffindor, of course!" Charles said before Percy could so much as open his mouth.

Percy drew himself up and stuck his nose in the air. "I can speak for myself, thank you, Charlie."

Gods. He sounded like even more of a prat than William. Severus groaned internally at there being so many more Weasleys to come. At least this latest one wasn't responsible for any disappearing cars, as far as Severus knew.

"And?" Miss Jones asked, adjusting the Ravenclaw tie she was already wearing. "Is it Gryffindor you want, or somewhere else?"

"Well, I do want to be Sorted into Gryffindor," Percy said, though he didn't sound entirely certain. It would be difficult to go against the grain in a family full of Gryffindors. Weasleys were *always* Gryffindors. As were Prewetts.

"What a shame," Severus drawled. "Should you wish to strive for loftier heights than your brothers, I'm sure Hufflepuff would be happy to have you."

Ow. Granger was lethal with that elbow.

"We would," Miss Tonks said. Her absurd hair shifted from bright pink to yellow and black. "As clever as you are, you'd get us a tonne of House Points, Perce. You might even finally get us some points in Professor Snape's class."

Severus scoffed. "Miss Tonks, I have not awarded a single point to any House in my entire career at Hogwarts. I have

no intention of breaking that record."

Miss Jones and Charles huffed out exasperated sighs, while Percy looked as if earning points from Professor Snape had just become his own personal mission. Oh, joy.

"I'll wear you down, sir," Miss Tonks said, flashing him a smile that was all impertinence. "I still have a few more years. One of these days, I'll brew a potion so perfectly that you just won't be able to help yourself."

"Given my experience of being your teacher up to this point, I would say you are far more likely to wear down my sanity by constantly spilling ingredients and causing near explosions."

She waved his comment away. "I almost always get an O in the end, though, don't I?"

She did. Once the ingredients actually made it into her cauldron, she demonstrated an infuriating level of natural talent. Severus chose to offer nothing more than a raised eyebrow in response to her question.

"Is that true, about the points?" Granger asked when the children lapsed into a debate about whether Charles or Miss Jones had earned more points the previous year (Miss Tonks was not even in the running). Severus could see Granger scanning her own memories of being his student as her eyes narrowed. "You've never awarded any at all? Not even to Slytherin?"

"I have never seen the need."

She laughed.

"Hufflepuff," Severus murmured to Granger as Abbott, Nigel approached the Sorting Hat.

Granger said nothing, but the twitch at the corner of her mouth gave her away. Severus was right. The boy nearly fell over from the hearty slap on the back he received from Miss Tonks when he joined the Hufflepuff table. As each new student took their turn, Severus whispered his prediction to Granger. Most of the time, he guessed correctly. To be fair, it

was hardly a guess when many of those called forward had relations whose House affiliations were known to Severus.

"Has the ceremony always been so long?" Eileen asked from Granger's other side as Minerva read out the name of Flint, Marcus (Slytherin, unfortunately). "I remember it going faster in my day."

"It gets longer every year," Severus said.

Only when Minerva reached the end of the tedious alphabet did Severus hesitate to name a House.

"Weasley, Percy!"

Percy glanced at his brothers, who grinned at him from the Gryffindor table. Everything about the boy was shaky and unsure. His eyes squeezed shut behind his glasses as Minerva lowered the hat onto his head. Severus squinted.

"Ravenclaw?"

Granger's eyebrows winged up. Wrong. The Sorting Hat also struggled to reach a decision. It hunkered down around Percy's ears, taking its time as it mulled over the options. If the boy genuinely belonged in Miss Tonks's House, it wouldn't cause him this level of anxiety. His family would tease him, to be sure, but in a good natured way that demonstrated they weren't the slightest bit upset. Perhaps...

"Slytherin."

Granger kept her expression entirely blank. The hat hemmed and hawed a few moments longer before finally bellowing out that Percy would join his family in Gryffindor. Disappointing.

"Percy is quite ambitious," Granger said softly as Wood, Oliver (Gryffindor, obviously) sprinted towards the hat for his turn. "He's also very dedicated to his studies. I could imagine him doing well in Slytherin or Ravenclaw, to be honest."

Over at the Gryffindor table, the elder Weasleys broke away from congratulating their brother to welcome Wood into the fold. Percy didn't look any less unsettled.

Hermione was on her own after the Welcome Feast. Snape (Severus?) had a meeting in Dumbledore's office. To speak

about their time travelling visitor and how the remainder of summer had gone, no doubt. Hermione wondered if Snape (definitely still Snape) would tell Dumbledore about the recent developments between them. She needed to have a talk with Snape, herself. Specifically: what were his thoughts on the topic of fidelity? Given that he'd had an affair with a married woman, it seemed prudent to find out.

Halfway to her new quarters, a sniffling noise from an alcove drew her attention. Casting Lumos, Hermione peered into the little nook and came face to face with a crying Percy.

"P — Mister Weasley, what are you doing here?" Breaking the rules? *Percy?* On his first day? "You should be in your common room. Did you get lost?"

"N-no." Removing his foggy glasses, he wiped his cheeks. "I didn't want to cry in front of... everyone, really. I'm sorry, Professor."

Hermione crossed her arms. "So am I. Five points from Gryffindor." She held up a hand when his reddened eyes widened in alarm. "You can earn it back in my class tomorrow if you apply yourself." Crouching down on the floor next to him, she patted his back. "Now, tell me what has you so upset. I realise we don't know each other that well, but I'm not a bad listener."

Percy toyed with the hem of his robes and stared at the bright beam still emanating from Hermione's wand. "It's silly."

"I doubt I'll think so. Try me."

"I w-want to go home." The words burst from him in a rush. "I've been looking forward to coming to Hogwarts for as long as I can remember, but now that I'm here... I think the Sorting Hat made a mistake. Do you think the Headmaster would let me try again? The Hat seemed so sure I would do well in Gryffindor, so I let it put me there, but... Ravenclaw would be better. I'm not brave. I'm really, really not. My little brothers scare me most of the time. I don't know anyone here apart from Bill and Charlie and their friends, and the castle is enormous and confusing, and the staircases move. Who decided staircases should move? I just know I'm going to be late for

all of my classes and then I'll fail and I'll *never* be Minister for Magic. And on top of all of that," he added his final confession in an embarrassed whisper, "I really miss my mum and dad."

Oh, Percy. Hermione fought to swallow an affectionate smile.

"Right," she said. "None of that is silly. I've never cared for moving staircases, myself. You'll get the hang of them, though, and I promise you'll get to class in time to pass with flying colours. And no, I don't think you can try the Sorting Hat again. I doubt it would say anything different, even if you did. You don't see bravery in yourself, but it clearly did. And who says brave people are never afraid? I'm friends with several very brave people, and all of them are afraid of *something*. Being scared doesn't make someone a coward. Bravery is all in your actions, not your thoughts or feelings."

He sniffled again. "I guess."

Dropping the Lumos for a second, Hermione conjured a handkerchief for him. "As for missing your parents: that is hard at first, I know. I missed my parents a lot when I went away to school, but it'll get easier with time. You'll get caught up in learning new things in all of your classes, and before you know it Christmas will be here and you'll be on your way home to visit. You'll have so many exciting things to tell them by then. And just think how proud they'll be if you go home with the news that you... have the highest marks in your year." Hermione had nearly said *if you come home with the news that you are the first student to be awarded points by Professor Snape*, but she didn't want to set the kid up for certain disappointment. Highest marks, on the other hand — that, Percy could do. "Now, let's get you back to Gryffindor Tower before Mr Filch catches us and we both get into trouble."

Percy giggled. Pettigrew spoilt the moment by peeking his horrid little rat face out of Percy's pocket as the boy stood up. Catching sight of Hermione's thunderous expression, Percy shrank back.

"Professor? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I just really, *really* hate rats."



19

Arborvitae

1 September 1987

Fawkes would not stop staring. Impertinent turkey. Severus stared right back, doing his best to project his displeasure that Fawkes had failed to offer him a feather before giving one to Granger. Fawkes tilted his head to one side and bent to ruffle his beak in his tail feathers as if about to tug one free. But no, he was only scratching an itch. Tease.

To show the bird how unbothered he was, Severus yawned and plucked a sweet from the dish on Albus's desk. It tasted like cherries and tooth decay.

"Did the rest of your summer go well?" Albus asked as he settled down into his chair.

Severus swallowed the crunched-up shards of sugar. "It was reasonable."

"And how are you and Hermione getting on?"

"Well." Severus braced himself for a lecture or a disgusted look. Possibly both. He felt fifteen again, sent to the Headmaster's office after being dragged into yet another unbalanced fight. "I believe her to be trustworthy, but I confess I can no longer be relied upon to remain neutral. My objectivity has been compromised."

"Oh?" Rather than narrowing his eyes or looking down his nose at Severus, Albus did that infuriating twinkling thing he was so fond of. "Do tell."

Severus's insides squirmed. It was one thing to report tales of the Dark Lord's depravity; it was something else entirely to divulge information about his own private life.

"We have become... involved."

Albus lit up at this declaration. "Why do you look so dour?" he asked. "This is excellent news, Severus."

"Is it?"

"Of course. Love always is."

Severus had not said love. He had not meant to imply anything in the same neighbourhood — the same city, even — as love. If he told Albus that like was a better term, it would likely come across as protesting too much. He let a frown do the talking for him.

Albus chuckled. "I confess I had hoped something like this would happen. I'm happy for you."

Albus had wanted Severus to begin a relationship with a time traveller whose younger self would soon be one of Severus's students? Severus scrutinised his employer. Indeed, that twinkle was entirely smug, as if Severus's confession was both expected and wanted. Had Albus been anticipating this since that first day Granger had landed in Severus's bathroom? He rifled through his memories of that day — of Albus's every word and expression.

Had the insufferable — no, not insufferable. Granger was insufferable. Had the intolerable, meddling old arse seen a pretty, Muggle-born witch from the future as a way to bind Severus more firmly to their cause? How the fuck did Albus not know, after all they'd been through, that the memory of Severus's first friend was still enough?

Lily would *always* be enough.

And when Severus had witnessed Gideon and Fabian

Prewett's brutal deaths, Albus had been there for the quivering, vomiting aftermath. How had Albus not felt the seismic shift in Severus then?

"Is that why you believe your future self was the one to send her here?" Severus asked. "Granger is supposed to be, what, a gift for my loyal service as your spy? An anchor to keep me dedicated to the Light?" As if he hadn't been entirely dedicated since the day he'd come grovelling to Albus for help. "She's not a *thing* to be given."

"Of course she isn't," Albus said. "That's the sort of tactic Tom would use. I assure you, I have nothing but the greatest respect for Hermione." Rising out of his chair, Albus crossed to Severus's side and rested a heavy hand on the other man's shoulder. "One of these days, I hope to convince you that not everyone who expresses happiness for you is harbouring some secret agenda. I meant what I said. It brings me joy to see you happy. Nothing more."

Gritting his teeth, Severus smothered the tiny, childish desire to take Albus at his word. "Is there anything else, or are we through here?"

Albus sighed. "I doubt we'll accomplish anything more this evening, so yes, we should probably conclude the meeting. Goodnight, Severus."

Fawkes kept staring as Severus marched out of the Headmaster's office. Without much thought on Severus's part, his feet carried him down to the quarters that had been set aside for Granger. Deep in the dungeons, not far from his own rooms, they were guarded by a portrait of a witch who had taken a dislike to Severus in his first year, when she'd seen him fighting with Black and Potter. She didn't abide roughhousing of any sort, as she was still fond of informing him when he crossed her path. Ignoring the glower the portrait sent his way, Severus rapped his knuckles against the edge of the frame to summon Granger.

"Hi," Granger said, taking his hand and guiding him into her sitting room, away from the tutting portrait. She had changed into a pair of baggy pyjama trousers and a Celestina Warbeck t-shirt that he thought she might have pilfered from Charity. Her face had been scrubbed clean, and she smelt of toothpaste and soap.

"I sincerely hope you aren't going to team up with Charity and force me to listen to that noise on the wireless at Christmas," Severus said, tracing a finger over the C in Celestina.

She grinned. "I should, but I won't. I can't stand most wizarding music, Madam Warbeck included. I like wearing this shirt when I feel homesick, though. It reminds me of being at the Burrow at Christmas. I've gone there every year since the end of the war. If you ever want to get on Molly Weasley's good side, tickets to see Celestina Warbeck would be a safe bet, by the way. Molly adores her."

"Noted." Severus let his hands trail along her ribs, coming to a stop on her hips. "Are you homesick?"

"Not at the moment. I'm good right now." She rubbed her thumb across the deep furrow between his eyebrows. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. This is how I always look after a meeting with Albus."

"Hmm."

Severus unclasped her necklace and tried to focus on the way she rose up to brush her lips against his once she was free from the glamour. His heartbeat turned heavy and sluggish, his thoughts racing to stack up all of the reasons Albus could not have been the one responsible for her time travelling. He didn't have many.

"I've been thinking about how you ended up in this time," he said, drawing back slightly. "Would you allow me to examine your memories from that day? I might catch something you missed."

"Oh." She rubbed her wrist. "All right, I suppose so, although part of it was at the war memorial. It has names and... and one

face. I'll have to hide it unless I want to trigger the Vow."

They settled onto her sofa, facing one another. Granger looked up at him with wide, trusting brown eyes that were at once both strange and familiar.

"Legilimens."

Entering Granger's mind was much like kissing her: soft and warm and welcoming. So different from his sneak attack during their first duel. Severus waited, quiet and still, for her to lead.

She started off with breakfast in her quarters before dawn. The rooms were identical to the ones he currently inhabited; she hadn't changed anything apart from adding a few framed photographs, an orange lump that was possibly a cat, and several stacks of books that wouldn't fit on the overcrowded shelves. The faces in the photographs were unknown to Severus, save two. Neville Longbottom still had the same smile, and Harry Potter looked *far* too much like his father. When Memory Granger wrapped a set of thick outer robes around herself, the pockets were empty.

Her thoughts sped past a shivery, snowy walk around the lake and an uneventful couple of hours spent looking over lesson plans (plans which were in Severus's handwriting) before leading him through her memory of lunch: rich stew that she stirred, more than ate. As it was a few days before Christmas, a handful of students and teachers all sat at the same table. Hagrid was still there, nattering on to Minerva about some unholy hybrid creature he'd created. Most of the staff from Severus's time were present, with a few new additions. The only ones missing were Severus, Albus, Kettleburn, Madam Fries, and Quirrell. One of the additions was an older William Weasley, who had met a set of claws face-first at some point before he'd accepted the Defence position.

Granger sat between a glamoured Eileen and another addition: a dark haired woman in trainee Healer robes. Severus

tried to study every move of Granger's companions, but the memory wouldn't cooperate. Granger kept staring down at her stew. Given half a chance, he knew he could tell if his mother had been planning something, even when she wore her Madam Pince face. If only Granger would have actually *looked* at her.

After Granger finished pushing her food around, she retired to the library to sit next to a window and write a letter she wouldn't — or couldn't — let Severus read. He felt the changes she made; she never would have fooled even the clumsiest Legilimens into believing the scene hadn't been altered. While everything else remained clear, the words that flowed from her quill looked as if they were obscured by a haze of tears. The subject had to be something about those lost in the war. Emotions that didn't belong to Severus washed through him, a bit like a diluted version of his Warming Vapour. Respect and regret accompanied each stroke of her quill. Only the affection was absent.

Letter in hand, she ventured out onto the grounds and approached a wall of stone that appeared as smooth and dark as the lake. The memorial, he supposed. Gifts of flowers and cards and cuddly toys had been left at certain spots along the wall. As she approached what looked like a white and red blur, anger elbowed its way into her cocktail of emotions. A swirl of her wand transfigured her letter into a sprig of white heather, which she rested against the base of the memorial, next to whatever had infuriated her so.

Ah. She'd written a letter *to* the dead, not *about* the dead. Who was the recipient? Miss Tonks? The Weasley twin?

"Hello, Granger," a deep voice said. Severus guessed the speaker's identity before Granger turned to greet a tall, grown up Draco. His manner of speaking was painfully similar to that of the Draco in Severus's time — drawling and smug. Only the pitch was different.

"Malfoy," she said with a nod.

Draco raised a foot to nudge the rage-causing lump of red and white. "Unimaginative," he said. "How often do you come to visit?"

"More often than he'd like, I'm sure."

"Once is more often than he'd like most people to visit him."

What was that look Draco gave her? Was his smirk meant to be flirtatious? That smarmy little brat. Severus would deduct ten points the second Draco was Sorted, just for that smirk.

"It's unfortunate that his nose was forever captured in stone," Draco said, motioning at what still appeared to be a blank wall.

Well. That confirmed it. It was Severus's name on that memorial. His face, his letter from Granger. His red and white pile of... hate mail?

Granger scowled. "There was nothing wrong with his nose."

Why would she say that? Severus picked at the edge of the scene, searching for signs that she'd altered it to spare his feelings. The only changes he found were the ones he already knew about: those details which would reveal the identities of the dead. His stomach gave an uncertain little flip.

"If you say so," Draco said. Prat.

When Draco turned to walk past her, his hand brushed her robes. Severus couldn't focus on the details, since Granger hadn't, but Draco certainly had the time and opportunity to slip something into her pocket with that touch.

At the far end of the wall, Draco ran gentle fingers over what Severus assumed was another redacted name. The owner of the name merited a conjured bouquet of yellow zinnias. An absent friend? Instead of watching Draco as she should have done, Granger turned her back on her former enemy (she was such a bloody Hufflepuff) and occupied herself with vanishing Severus's hate mail.

"I guess I'll see you at the Ministry this evening," she said.

Draco let her question hover between them for a moment before he replied. "Yes." He cleared his throat. "I wouldn't

miss it. Later, Granger."

Why the hell would they be meeting up at the Ministry, and why was Draco looking forward to it? Severus would have to make it a twenty point deduction.

After Granger left the memorial, she returned to the castle for a discussion with Poppy and the trainee Healer — Parvati. And then she was back in her rooms, discovering the book in her pocket. Severus's heart lurched as her curiosity unravelled into fear and everything flashed white.

She let her thoughts pause on the image of Severus, towel-clad and shouting, until he withdrew from her mind.

"You know," Granger said, chewing on her lower lip for a second before she slid onto Severus's lap, "at the time I was too alarmed to realise what a lovely introduction to the past that was. Apart from the yelling at me bit, obviously."

Severus snorted. He nearly told her that she needn't to try to flatter him with pretty lies, but as saying such things would probably make her move from her rather pleasant position, he decided to let it go.

"I can't be certain," he said instead, wrapping his arms around her, "as you were apparently inclined to focus on the most inconsequential things, but I think Draco is the most likely suspect."

"Well, then." She smiled at him in a way that he felt in the pit of his stomach. "If that's the case, Dumbledore *definitely* isn't responsible for it."

"You're certain?"

"Absolutely. Shall we burst his bubble by telling him?"

"Of course not. He's far easier to deal with when he thinks he's controlling everything." Tilting his legs so their torsos pressed closer together, Severus tightened his hold on her.

"Snape — err, Severus? Argh. I feel like I should call you by your first name, considering, well, this," she gestured back

and forth between the two of them, "but I've only recently started to get used to not automatically calling you sir."

"Have you? I would not be averse to you calling me sir."

She swatted his shoulder. "Well, you certainly aren't going to call me Miss Granger."

"No? Which desk was yours in my classroom? We could go in there, and —"

"Severus!" she squeaked, looking so delightfully scandalised that he had to chuckle.

"Ah. You *can* use my first name."

"Apparently so." With a huff of laughter, she tucked a stray lock of his hair behind his ear. "Are you going to use mine?"

"That depends. What were you working up to saying when you had your sudden crisis about what to call me?"

She directed her words at the buttons on his collar. "I just kind of wanted to make sure we were on the same page. I'm obviously not seeing anyone else, in this time or my own..."

Severus froze. If the inspiration for this conversation was what he suspected, then Charity had the biggest mouth ever, damn her. She was lucky he was so intent on trying to save her bloody life, or he'd start plotting her death.

"Nor am I," he said. And even though it felt like dropping his Shield Charm in the middle of a battle, he added, "Nor do I want to."

It seemed to be the right answer. Granger — Hermione, he supposed — relaxed into his arms and trailed slow kisses along his neck.

"Good," she said. "Same page it is, then."



Arum

2 September 1987

In 2001, a quick walk around the lake had been part of Hermione's morning routine. Brush teeth, shower, pick at breakfast while reading a book, walk. Sometimes Parvati joined her, but more often than not Hermione went alone, carrying a recently penned letter. She'd left so many letters at the memorial: for Tonks, for Fred, for Remus. Once, she'd left notes for Colin and Lavender.

Mostly, though, the letters had been for Severus. Everyone else was missed — desperately so — but she knew who they were. She knew why Colin had sneaked back to the castle, Gryffindor that he was. She knew that Fred wouldn't have wanted to die so painfully young, but he would have taken some comfort in the fact that he'd at least gone laughing, even if it had been at a joke made by Percy. Severus had left her with question after unanswered question.

Hermione had no intention of letting her walking habit lapse in 1987. Instead of Parvati, Severus kept pace next to her, his black robes in full billow. Out near the centre of the lake, a pair of merfolk poked their heads above the surface of the dark water. Waving a hand at them, Hermione screeched

a greeting in Mermish, causing Severus to stop in his tracks and stare at her as if she'd taken complete leave of her senses.

"Ah, sorry," she said. "I should have warned you. Mermish can be a little alarming when you're not expecting it."

"A little." A smirk played around the corners of his mouth. "You know Mermish?"

"Not fluently — not even close. I just learnt a handful of phrases after an event in my fourth year. I found it fascinating, but more important things took precedence, and my goal of becoming proficient in Mermish sort of fell by the wayside."

If her attention wasn't currently split between teaching her students how to defend themselves and brewing up a way to save the man next to her, Hermione would take another stab at learning Mermish. Maybe she'd pick it up again when she returned to 2001, if all went well.

Then again, she had an unfinished Potions Mastery looming over her in that time.

The merfolk returned her greeting, possibly sounding confused. It was difficult to tell in Mermish, and Hermione was distracted from her analysis by the back of Severus's fingers brushing against hers for several paces. Deciding to interpret this as an invitation, she caught his hand in hers and held it. He didn't pull away.

"Why did you say you'd see Draco at the Ministry when you ran into him at the memorial?" he asked as they neared the spot where the memorial would eventually stand.

"Oh, that. The Ministry have held a ball on the winter solstice every year since the end of the war, to celebrate the return of the Light."

The ball had been something of a compromise with Harry. He'd flatly refused to attend any Ministry events on the second of May, but he'd agreed to allow them to parade him around on the solstice event on the condition that they used it as a fundraiser for causes that were close to his heart —

mostly child welfare and magical orphans. Bless him, he'd also offered to make them cough up a few Knuts for S.P.E.W., though he'd still called it spew.

How would Harry react when she told him about her relationship with Severus? In her imagination, Severus was there with her when she did so. He was older and more battle-scarred, like her former teacher, but he still wore her Severus's smile when he looked at her.

"A ball thrown by the Ministry?" the non-imaginary, younger Severus said. "That should be classified as the fourth Unforgivable."

"It's not my favourite event, but it's not so bad. I like to dance, and the food is always good. It'd be better if it didn't have so many pompous Ministry officials trying to act like they did a bloody thing to help during the war."

"Hmm. If you saw my future self at this Ministry function, would you call him sir?"

She squeezed his hand. "Not a chance."

Even as Hermione's wrist burned with everything she was forbidden to say, the older Severus reappeared in her imagination. It was easier than it should have been to picture him dancing with her, laughing with her, kissing her, touching her.

Unlikely, she told herself.

"I wonder how that meeting would go," she said. "Would your future self look at me and see the woman you kissed in the '80s, or the student who annoyed you in the '90s?"

"I've no idea. The encounter would undoubtedly be more pleasant than the last time I ran into a former student. The pompous imbecile asked if I wanted his autograph."

Hermione snorted. "I didn't know you taught Gilderoy Lockhart."

"Only for a year, mercifully. How did you guess it was him?"

"Oh, I had to put up with him for a year as well." Most of which she'd spent infatuated with him, but Severus didn't

need to know that. "I wouldn't say he actually taught me anything about Defence, but he —"

"Hermione," Severus said, the sound of her name in his voice still new and exhilarating, even when it was in that horrified tone, "stop. I am going to find a way to add another clause to your Unbreakable Vow. You are not to reveal such terrifying details about the future to me. *Lockhart becomes a professor?*"

"It wasn't all bad. I'm quite certain there were moments you enjoyed, actually. A word of advice: when he asks you to help with his Duelling Club, you should accept. Trust me."

Severus's dubious sniff didn't dim her smile. With another squeeze of his hand, she kissed his shoulder.

"If I saw your future self at the Ministry ball, I'd definitely ask you to dance," she said. "And if that went well..."

"If that went well?"

Her face heated, but she refused to let herself back out of saying it. "I'd ask you for another flying lesson."

Something about Severus's responding silence inspired a pleasurable twist low in Hermione's abdomen. Veering off of the path, he led her into the forest. They dodged stinging nettles and stepped over mossy, fallen trees until they came to a sheltered clearing. Like the last time they'd ventured into the Forbidden Forest together, a few little roe deer scattered at the sight of them.

Taking both of Severus's hands, Hermione moved in close. He must have been up early brewing; he smelled like fresh, green herbs.

"Say the incantation," he said. "I'm curious to find out whether your experience was typical."

Remembering how the dark pulse of his magic had made her want him, she obeyed. Their feet didn't leave the ground. Not even a centimetre. Hermione concentrated harder on every dark spell that had ever shot from her wand. Nothing. She couldn't so much as raise him up on tiptoe.

Before she could end the spell and admit defeat, Severus pressed his lips against hers, quick and hard, as if he couldn't wait a second longer. Hermione didn't object; she went all too willingly as he pinned her against the rough trunk of a tree and threaded his fingers into her hair. No sensible voice piped up in the back of her head to remind her that it was reckless, foolish, letting themselves get carried away where anyone could stumble across them. Her only protest came when he dared to remove his mouth from hers, and even that was short-lived; it transformed into a sound of approval when he fumbled with the clasp of her necklace.

"It is an admittedly small sample size," he said as the glamour melted away, his breath hot on her neck, "but I would say that yes, it is always arousing to feel someone use that spell."

Hermione tried to laugh. It came out as more of a needy whimper. "I'll keep that in mind."

She felt his smile against her lips. Slipping a hand into her robes, Severus cupped her breast. All around them, the forest was quiet. Only their gasps and murmured encouragements cut through the silence.

"We're going to be late if we don't head back soon," she said, trying to tug him even closer.

Severus groaned. "Most likely." Something almost insecure flickered in his eyes. "Do you want to stop?"

"Absolutely not."

His chuckle was as dark as his magic. Deft fingers unbuttoned her trousers, and then those same fingers slid into her knickers, seeking and stroking and driving her completely mad.

"Would you let him do this after your flying lesson?" Severus whispered. "That future me?"

Drawing in an unsteady breath, she dug her fingernails into his shoulders. "Yes."

"Good."

His movements sped up until she quivered and fell apart,

her scream muffled by his mouth covering hers.

As her racing pulse slowed, Hermione pushed a hand through his hair and studied his young, unlined face. God, she ached to tell him everything she knew. Every battle, every hardship, every fucking snake bite. The reminder of her limits flared to life around her wrist. Stupid, *stupid* Vow. She tried to console herself with a gentle brush of her lips over his neck, as if kissing it better over a decade in advance. When she reached for the buttons of his robes, Severus stopped her.

"As much as I would love to stay here and continue this," he said, fishing her necklace out of his pocket, "Albus will likely send a search party if we're late. We should go."

Hermione bit down on the inside of her cheek. "I'm coming over to your quarters after my Defence Club finishes this evening."

"Yes." Those dark eyes locked with hers. "You are."

The day dragged and dragged and *dragged*. Hermione introduced herself by her false name, lectured about the lure of the Dark Arts, tried to prevent students from maiming each other when she instructed them pair off and duel. There were the usual troublemakers, the show-offs, and the students who lagged behind the others. Not so very different from teaching Potions, even with the change of subject matter.

And then there was Bill Weasley. Bill, whom she had always thought of as being so cool and laid back, was a red-headed, male incarnation of her younger self. Every time she asked a question, his hand shot into the air. The rest of the class barely bothered to try. She'd known he'd received twelve O.W.L.s, but before she'd been his teacher, she would have pictured him sitting at the back of the class, smiling and quietly competent. Nope. Not quiet at all.

Hermione wondered if the whole thing was some sort of payback. By the time she got to a double lesson with the first year Slytherins and Gryffindors and had to face Percy's

dogged pursuit of House Points, she was certain it was.

Percy was the first to arrive at the inaugural meeting of the Defence Club. He showed up early, with a ream of parchment and several spare quills. So early, in fact, that Hermione put him to work helping her set up. Not that he seemed to mind. He was delighted to show off the *Wingardium Leviosa* he'd been the first in his Charms class to master.

"I left Scabbers in my dorm, by the way," he said as they stood back to admire their handiwork. They'd cleared the classroom of desks and set up crash mats, duelling dummies, and targets. "Since you don't like rats."

"That was very considerate of you, Mister Weasley. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I've been thinking I might give him to my little brother, actually. It would teach Ron some responsibility to have a pet."

It wouldn't. Ron would always be Ron. Percy would have to learn that the hard way.

It was a shame the Vow prevented her from feeding Scabbers to one of Hagrid's hippogriffs, since it forbade her from acting against any member of the Order. When she lost herself in fantasies about going through with it, her wrist burned. Even if she *could* do away with the rat, she wasn't certain if she *would*. Pettigrew was central to what would happen in the years to come. How would it change if someone else brought Voldemort back — someone who wouldn't end up owing Harry a life debt? Butterflies and hurricanes.

Hermione and Percy got through a game of Exploding Snap before more students started trickling in. Popular Muggle fashion had made more of an impact on the wizarding world than Hermione would have expected before she'd landed in 1987. The classroom was a cloud of Elnett hairspray, crowded with big hair and frosted lipstick. One of the few Slytherins in attendance even had a mullet.

A tall, black-clad figure crept in behind Tonks, Charlie,

and Hestia. Severus. He'd decided to help? When Hermione grinned at him, he sent her a wry smile that brought back a moment she'd almost forgotten.

During her sixth year, she'd once come to this classroom to ask Professor Snape about the Patronus Charm. She'd always struggled with it, and Harry hadn't been able to help her work out why. When she'd requested Professor Snape's advice, he'd given her that same wry smile.

"Ah," he'd said, and she'd known it had been a mistake. She should have asked Professor Flitwick. "Have you finally discovered something you cannot learn from a book, Miss Granger? There's no secret trick. Your success with casting a corporeal Patronus is dependent upon selecting a suitably strong memory. Something that never fails to make you smile — perhaps hand-waving and reciting the contents of textbooks? I frequently employ the memory of you... partially transformed into a cat."

A beat of silence had passed between them. He'd looked so serious that she'd foolishly said, "You don't really, do you, sir?"

"Of course not," he'd said in that dry voice she'd known so well. "Amusing as that was, do you have such an inflated sense of self-worth that you suppose any of my happiest memories involve you?"

Now, facing his younger self, the hairs on Hermione's arms stood up. Had he been telling a partial truth and making it sound like a lie? *Did* any of his happiest memories involve her?

Well. She would soon find out.



Ranunculas

2 September 1987

She had packed her toothbrush. Severus didn't know why he found this endearing. It was practical — a necessity for an overnight stay. Perhaps what made him smile was the way she'd retreated to the bathroom the instant they'd arrived in his quarters, saying she needed a minute. He'd heard the brushing a short while later. Hermione's parents were dentists, she'd told him once. Perhaps dental hygiene was her version of a favourite quilt: comforting familiarity, with bristles and a minty aftertaste instead of time-softened fabric.

Severus ran his tongue over his own crooked teeth. Hmm.

His wand hand itched to reach for the glamour he'd used with Muggle women. It wouldn't work. Hermione knew his face. He couldn't even transform his skinny, pale body; she'd already seen him mostly undressed. Viewing her memory of the event had proved that she recalled every detail about his physique with startling clarity.

And yet, here she was, cleaning her teeth in his bathroom, planning to stay with him all night.

Dropping onto his sofa, Severus tilted his head back to gaze up at the ceiling. As the Potions Master's quarters had

no windows, some enterprising former professor had charmed the ceiling to give the rooms a bit of natural light. It was similar to the view offered in the Great Hall, but the Potion Master's sky gave the impression of looking up from beneath the surface of the lake. The waxing gibbous moon was a pale, wavering smear, distorted by every ripple of the water. Briefly, he considered letting only the moonlight illuminate his quarters, but no. He wanted to be able to see Hermione's body. He would leave the candles burning bright.

Finally, she emerged from the bathroom, sans glamour-linked necklace. As he stood up to greet her, he wondered if she'd left her bravado in the forest.

She hadn't.

"Tell me what would happen next," she said, "after I let the future version of you touch me."

He didn't have to consider his answer for long. "Perhaps I'd take you to my classroom and bend you over your old desk," he said with a teasing smirk.

She grinned. "It's *my* classroom in that time."

"Very well, I'd use your current desk instead of the one you had as a student, then. Would you let me?"

The grin softened, turned almost shy. "You know I would."

He did, he had to admit, which made it easier to say, "What about at the Ministry? Maybe, after we danced at the ball, we wouldn't be able to wait until we were out of the building. We would have to find an empty office or a supply cupboard where I could touch you and taste you and fuck you as soon as possible."

She took a step closer, sounding a bit out of breath when she said, "Yes. Yes to... all of that."

He didn't attempt to hide his chuckle. He hoped he managed to hide the blush that tried to tint his cheeks.

"Perhaps," he said, "feeling nostalgic about tonight, I'd simply bring you to these quarters and tell you to take off your clothes."

He paused for a beat, taking in the way she leaned towards

him even though they were still a metre apart. Before he could work up the nerve to say, "Hermione, take off your clothes," as he'd planned, she raised her chin and seemed to gather her courage in a way that made him almost wonder if she'd been a Gryffindor. Crimson and gold continued to colour his thoughts as she undressed, her gaze never breaking away from his. Her clothing swished to the floor, one article after another: robes, shirt, trousers, bra and knickers. Severus swallowed hard.

"Come here," he said.

A few quick strides and she was in his arms, reaching up to bring his mouth down to hers. Sliding a palm to her chest, he felt her heartbeat racing as fast as his own. Severus made no move to undress himself; he simply explored her soft, bare skin with greedy, greedy hands.

"All right," she said between kisses, smiling against his lips and giving his robes a tug, "let's see what you were hiding under that towel."

He laughed. It was easy to help her with his many buttons and shrug out of his own clothes — far easier than it had ever been before, even when he'd hidden under a glamour. The sensation of her naked body pressed against his was enough to steal his breath. When she slipped a hand between their bodies to touch him, it was like feeling her attempt at flight all over again.

Severus's fingers flexed against her hips. She needed to stop, or this would be over before it started. But, oh, he wanted her to never, ever stop. Forcing himself to distract them both with his lips and tongue, he trailed kisses down her abdomen, lower and lower, until he knelt in front of her. His breath ghosted over her thighs. She trembled.

"Yes to all of it?" he asked with a glance up at her face.

Hermione squirmed. "God, yes."

Well. Far be it from him to deny her. They'd covered touch already; placing one of her legs over his shoulder, he moved on to taste. Hermione wobbled a few times, her fingers tight-

ening painfully in his hair to steady herself. His jaw began to ache, and his knees protested at the hard stone floor, but he didn't care. Not when she gasped and moaned his name.

They didn't make it to the bed, in spite of his intentions to carry her there if necessary. Once she was able to speak in full sentences, she dragged him onto the sofa and reminded him — in a rather bossy tone, he thought — that she'd said yes to all of it.

"Impatient," he said, brushing his lips over the curve of her breast.

"Yes." Strong legs hooked around his hips. "Very."

"You can be quite assertive at times." He swept her wild hair out of the way so he could better see her face. "You're not a Gryffindor, are you?"

As Hermione shook with laughter beneath him, Severus couldn't help but join in. He'd never known sex could involve laughter and still be good.

And, gods, it was good. Extraordinary. He quite agreed with the deliciously pleased sigh she made when he slid into her — with the whispered yes and the fingernails that scored lines down his back. Her head tilted back against the cushion as her mouth fell open and her eyes shut, but now and then she blinked up at him, holding his gaze as steadily as she had when she'd removed her clothes, as if trusting him with her mind as well as her body.

He was very, very glad he'd left the lights on.

3 September 1984

Hermione was a bed hog. Severus woke up on the edge of the mattress, one of her hands splayed over his chest and one of her thighs resting on his groin. His left arm had gone numb, as she'd claimed the attached shoulder as her pillow. Vast acres of space on her side of the bed, and she chose to crowd him.

At least she was still very naked. In the gentle morning light from the enchanted ceiling, he could see every dip and curve he'd memorised the night before. Well, he could see it all once

he moved the interfering bedclothes out of the way. Severus looked his fill and then tucked the sheet back around her.

How did the morning after usually work in a relationship? He refused to believe most people behaved like Muggle films, dashing out to fetch coffee and pastries. If Hermione expected such treatment, she shouldn't have pinned him to the bed like this. It was her own fault that she was without croissants and pains au chocolat. And anyway, he didn't care for pastries. If the first time they'd tumbled into bed together had been in Cokeworth, he would have sneaked next door to pilfer some toast, perhaps.

Such a romantic.

Right. His arm was going to drop off if she didn't bloody move soon. And even though it was the arm with the Dark Mark, he preferred to keep it.

"Hermione," he said, voice roughened by sleep.

She let out a little sigh, like the sound she'd made the night before, and wriggled against him. Severus waited. She snored.

"Hermione." Nothing. Pinching her arse with his free hand, he added, more sharply, "Granger."

"Ow." She smacked her lips together a few times, then stretched her arms overhead and let out a mighty yawn. Squinting up at him, she gave him a lazy grin. "Hi."

"Hello."

Shuffling around so his arm was finally free, she peppered sleepy kisses over his neck and chest. That bravado he'd mistakenly thought she'd left in the forest was definitely as present as it had been the night before; she proved as much when her fingers skimmed down over his belly to wrap around him, her touch warm and firm. Severus held a breath for so long that his lungs started to burn.

And then she did what he'd done earlier: she picked up the sheet and *looked*. He watched her face as she watched her hand moving up and down over him. Her lips were slightly

parted, her expression rapt.

Fuck. He had never wanted anyone the way he wanted her. The previous night hadn't blunted the need; if anything, it had sharpened it.

"Is this really happening?" Hermione whispered. "Am I going to wake up on my bathroom floor and find out I've hit my head and the past few months have all been a dream?"

Severus fought to keep his voice steady, biting back a moan. "It feels rather real to me."

She made a noise somewhere between a hum and a chuckle. The sheet rustled and bunched around his legs as she shifted up onto her knees, the chilly dungeon air making him shiver. He didn't have a prayer of remaining silent as she straddled his hips and sank down with that same sigh. He cursed and groaned, but that was fine — perfect, even, because when he begged her to go faster, she did.

He decided he liked the morning after.

"Severus?" she said, later, when the bright light from the ceiling accused them of being late for breakfast.

"Mm?"

"I was just wondering which alternate House I would choose for you, since you've now guessed every one except Slytherin for me." She traced a finger through the coarse black hair on his chest, zigzagging onto the ticklish path of an old scar. "Did the Sorting Hat consider putting you anywhere other than Slytherin?"

Rolling over so they were nose to nose, he nodded. "It did, briefly." The hat had offered him a choice between wisdom in Ravenclaw and power in Slytherin. "Where would you place me?"

"Well, definitely not in Hufflepuff." They shared a brief laugh. "And I doubt you would have been happy in Gryffindor, though I meant it when I told Aidan Lynch that you are one of the bravest people I've ever known."

Severus's hand, which had been inching up from her hip to her chest, stopped. He recalled that conversation with the

former Defence professor, right after Hermione's arrival in 1987. At the time, when she'd spoken of some nameless, brave Slytherin, he'd wondered whether she could possibly have been referring to Harry Potter, of all people. She had meant *Severus*?

He didn't know what to do with this information.

"Ravenclaw would have suited you, I think, so that's my answer," she said, poking him in the side when he didn't immediately respond. "Am I right?"

"Yes."

Hermione looked insufferably smug, but she nestled closer to him and seemed content to ignore the rising sun for the moment, so he let the matter rest.



Bittersweet

12 September 1987

Hermione reached up to secure her hair into a bun with a quill before remembering the glamoured pixie cut. It was less satisfying, somehow, to have her hair already out of the way when she was immersing herself in a project. From her table near a library window, she caught a glimpse of Severus teaching Eileen how to more effectively sneak up on students. Good Lord, that was adorable. And the fact that she'd just thought the word *adorable* in relation to Severus Snape just proved how strange her life had become.

The books she'd piled onto the table formed more of a slight hill than a mountain. Hermione raked both hands through her infuriatingly short hair. This tiny stack was all the library had to offer on the subject of magical antivenins. Well, she'd known this would be the most challenging of the potions that would hopefully act as a lifeline for Severus. She would have to make do.

Adjusting her fake glasses took the place of toying with a stray curl as she took enough notes to make her hand cramp. Lacking a sample of Nagini's venom made the whole endeavour feel insurmountable. Then again, the Healers had managed

to save Arthur, and their knowledge about the snake wouldn't have filled a thimble. Stretching her sore fingers, she closed her eyes and concentrated. What did she know for certain?

Nagini's venom caused profuse bleeding. Something to encourage clotting would be necessary, perhaps with some version of a Blood-Replenishing Potion built in if she could swing it. Behind her eyelids, the snake struck at Severus's neck again and again and again. It had happened so quickly. He'd been gone almost as fast as he'd been able to pour out the silver clouds of his memories.

Look at me.

Instead of the dusty, soothing scent of books, Hermione swore she could smell blood. Her eyes stung.

Could she create a time-delayed potion? Something Severus could take before the fact that wouldn't activate until he was bitten? If she added a modified Draught of Living Death as well, she could put him into a suspended state until Fawkes or Eileen or both could tend to him. That would have the added benefit of improving the clotting of his blood. But how would she tell Eileen that Severus wasn't truly dead? Did Potions talent run in their family? Maybe Eileen would recognise the signs, few as they were.

No. Hermione couldn't rely on maybe in this case. She needed some way to spell out — oh! Marietta Edgecombe elbowed the vision of Severus's attack out of her scowling, spotty way. Hermione could infuse the antivenin with a variant of her old DA hex and make the boils form the words LIVING DEATH on his chest.

That was quite enough to be getting on with, at least to start. She took a deep breath. The library smelt like the library again.

The pink glow of sunshine through closed eyes dimmed as a shadow fell over her. When she looked up, Severus was there, inspecting her not-a-mountain of books.

"What are you working on?" he asked, flipping open the

cover of ASIAN ANTI-VENOMS.

Hermione didn't need the touch of fire on her wrist to tell her to skirt around the truth. "Just something for my Mastery," she said. If she actually managed to create the potion she'd envisioned, it would certainly earn her Mastery.

"Hmm. I see." Without commenting on the obvious lie, he dropped into the chair next to her and positioned himself close enough to sneak a hand onto her knee under the table. "In that case, I have a few volumes that may be of use. If you —"

The overexcited *tap-tap-tap* of a beak on the window drew their attention. Charity's little owl, Dionysus, hopped and hooted to be let in. He was carrying two letters: one for each of them.

"Keep the blasted thing out of sight," Severus whispered as Hermione opened the window. "There will be far more shrieking than my eardrums can handle if certain librarians and librarians-in-training see an animal near their precious books."

Dionysus didn't need to be told twice; he perched on Hermione's lap — on the leg that wasn't already occupied by a warm palm. It put him in close enough proximity to lean over and nuzzle Severus's hand when the mood struck him. Such a cuddler. She stroked the owl's soft, feathery forehead as she read.

Dear Heather,

About bloody time you told me about you and Severus. Yes, I already knew. I saw you from my shed when you were snogging in the garden. Also, Severus mentioned it in his letter, which arrived just before yours, so he technically beat you to the punch.

I don't have to repeat my threats about burying you in the garden if you hurt him, right? Good.

Did I ever mention that one of your students

is my cousin Andromeda's kid? Nymphadora Tonks. Andromeda is the one person on my mum's side who still speaks to me (she married a Muggle-born, so it would be rather hypocritical of her if she didn't). She's great, in spite of her questionable naming choices. You'll meet her at my New Year's Eve party.

You might also meet Gideon's sister, Molly, though I don't know whether she'll come. I ran into her at Kings Cross after I dropped you two off. She has about a billion children. You will have met a few of them already: Bill, Charlie, and Percy Weasley. I like Molly. She's protective and loving and sometimes a little scary (in a good way), but I don't know how to talk to her now. I don't think she knows how to talk to me, either. It's not right, is it? We should be each other's support system. We're the two people who loved him most in the world, but when we're together, it's like we can't even look at each other without thinking about what we both lost.

It's coming up on the anniversary of his death. The 24th of this month. Six years, now. I usually go up to Hogsmeade on the day, and Severus comes down to the Three Broomsticks to keep me company when he gets the chance. Do you want to join us this year? It sounds like a

laugh a minute, I know.

Anyway, when I saw Molly at the station, we went into our usual awkward silence, and I just sort of blurted out the invitation. Her husband is the Muggle-obsessed brother-in-law of Gideon's that I told you about, by the way. Be warned, just in case they do show up.

Cokeworth is quiet. Well, as quiet as it ever gets with Mrs Cooper's yappy rat dog and the garage and the usual middle of the night shouting arguments. I guess what I really mean is that it is lacking in noises from next door and the spare bedroom. I'm enclosing a picture of the garden. I know you just saw it less than two weeks ago, but it looks pretty right now with the changing leaves. If you were here, we could force Severus to go on another picnic with us. Also, I wanted to prove to you that I've been taking care of your plants.

How is Hogwarts treating you? Give Severus my love, and have some for yourself as well.

Love,
Charity

"You told Charity about us?" Hermione asked, fishing around in her bag for an owl treat.

Severus squeezed her knee. "Of course. Charity says she invited you to the Three Broomsticks on the 24th. Are you going to go?"

"Of course. Now, tell me more about these books that might be of use."

18 September 1984

Severus ran a slippery, honey scented bar of soap over Hermione's shoulder and down to her breast. Rather than a touch meant to excite, it was comfortable and almost cosy: a touch for the sake of being close. Smiling at him, she tipped her head back so the spray from the shower ran through her hair.

"You really don't have to get me anything," she said.

Severus scoffed. "Yes, I do."

He might have been unfamiliar with morning after pastry etiquette, but he was certain that the birthday of one's girlfriend (gods, that word sounded so juvenile) required some sort of gesture. If she'd given him some warning, he could have put more thought into it before, ultimately, asking Charity what the hell to give her.

"It's not actually my birthday, though, is it?" she said. "I left my time in December and got here in June. It's six more months till I'll actually be twenty-three."

Repeated banging from the other room cut off Severus's protests. Hermione's eyebrows drew together.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Someone at the door, I think."

Likely a Slytherin student needing some sort of assistance. At this hour of the morning, it had to be a matter of life or death in order for them to risk his wrath. He didn't bother attempting to dry himself; he simply threw on a dressing gown and rushed to answer the knock. Hermione followed, pulling on her necklace before she shrugged into a spare dressing gown that swallowed her. She ducked behind the door to be out of sight as it opened.

Instead of a distraught student, he discovered his mother waiting there, pale and shaking.

"Severus," Eileen said, barging in before he could stop her. "I found... Oh! Heather, you startled me." Blinking, she looked back and forth between Severus and Hermione, taking in their wet hair and state of dress. "Oh."

Severus cleared his throat. "Mum, what did you need?"

"I found a Boggart in my quarters. It's locked in a bedside table for now, but it won't stay there. Honestly, what kind of school are they running here? What other infestations am I going to find?"

The snappish words didn't fool him. The way she turned her wand over and over in her hand like a comfort object was new, but he recognised that high-pitched, defensive tone. She'd tried to banish the Boggart herself, hadn't she?

"Oh, could I please have it?" Hermione asked. "To show my students. I'll have them get rid of it, I promise."

Eileen shrugged. "I suppose, if you must."

"Excellent," Severus said. "Now that that's settled, Mum, I'm sure you'd like to get an early start in the library."

"So I can be crushed by a rickety bookcase that's been half-eaten by termites?" Eileen inched away from the door, stepping further into his quarters. "Someone should tell the board of governors about the state of this place. It's disgraceful."

As if he'd found his own silver phoenix book, Severus was transported back to those nights when Tobias had vanished, when Eileen had tried to make a game out of camping out together in the sitting room. He hadn't realised until much later that she'd done it because she hadn't wanted to be alone. Somehow, he still felt too young to deal with this.

He'd been a fool, hadn't he, to think things with Eileen would remain smooth and untroubled? Yes, she'd been reunited with her magic, and yes, Tobias had done the considerate thing for once and died, but a few alcohol withdrawal potions and a library apprenticeship couldn't undo decades of being powerless.

What was he supposed to do? How was he supposed to fix her? "That reminds me," Hermione said, "I found some doxies in my classroom when I arrived. It was probably the fault of the former professor; I wonder if he used to have your quarters as well, Eileen. I wouldn't be surprised. I've been meaning to mention it to Dumbledore. Why don't we go see him together?"

Eileen pretended to mull this over before she agreed.

"Brilliant," Hermione said. "Just give me a few seconds to get dressed, and we'll head off. Severus, would you mind swinging by your mum's quarters and taking that bedside table to my classroom?"

"That would be fine," he said.

Hufflepuff. She had to be. Why else would she be so kind to his mum?

"Severus," Eileen said as Hermione vanished into the bedroom, "why didn't you tell me that you and Heather are seeing each other? I hope Pomona hasn't written to her niece yet."

"What does Pomona's niece have to do with anything?"

"We were going to set you up with her." Eileen delivered this information as if it wasn't the most ridiculous thing Severus had heard since the days when Lockhart had been his student.

"I assure you," he said, "you were not."

"Well, not now."

Shuffling over to his Dark Arts bookshelf, he reorganised a few titles that had fallen out of alphabetical order. "I was under the impression that you liked Heather."

Eileen frowned. "Of course I do. Not as much as you do, clearly, but —"

"Mum."

Hermione returned in yesterday's robes, pausing to peck Severus on the lips before linking arms with Eileen. He did not blush at kissing her in front of his mother, no matter what Eileen's raised eyebrows had to say on the matter.

"Heather," Eileen said in a too-loud whisper as Hermione

ushered her towards the door, "you are being careful, aren't you? I'm not ready to be a grandmother just yet."

For fuck's sake. *That* sort of thing was why he had not told her.

The last time Hermione had seen a Boggart, it had taken the form of Horace Slughorn. He'd still been alive, then. The false Horace had told her that she would never, ever succeed in the field of potions. That moustache-topped mouth of his, which had previously always tilted into a smile at the sight of Hermione, had scowled through claims that she was a disappointment, that he never should have taken her on as an apprentice.

That he could recover from the lasting damage dealt by Dolohov's Curse if only she was cleverer.

Now, Hermione's throat went dry as she entered her classroom. When she'd requested the Boggart from Eileen, she hadn't fully thought it through. It had seemed like the easiest way to offer to dispose of it without insulting the other woman. She should have asked Severus to cast Riddikulus instead of bringing it here. Letting the children see whatever form her Boggart would take was *not* a good idea, given how easily it could say something that she wouldn't be able to explain away. Best to banish it before any of her classes arrived.

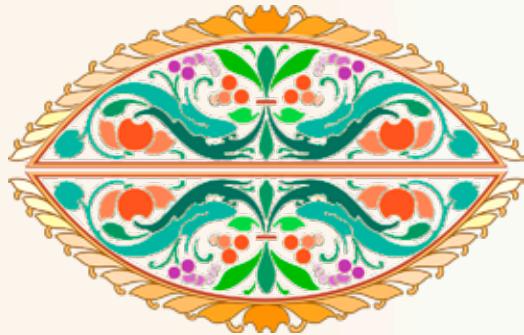
The bedside table-turned-prison was made from polished cherry wood. It didn't look like it could hold anyone's worst fear. Crossing towards it with long, sure strides, Hermione thought back on her own third year lesson about Boggarts. She'd felt uncomfortable, being encouraged to laugh at a professor. It was something she thought she would have discussed with Remus, had he survived. Maybe the Boggart would appear as Remus, listing all of the reasons she would return to the present without having prevented a single death, reciting her shortcomings, accusing her of not even trying to save him. Because she hadn't, had she?

As Hermione held her breath and opened the drawer, the

Boggart launched itself at her. It didn't need to pause to sift through several fears before landing on the worst one, as she'd seen Boggarts do to other people in the past. It knew. Seeing it, Hermione felt as if all of the air had left the room. She should have known, too.

Failure had a different face these days: not an image of a scolding Minerva or Horace. No, this vision had no need to speak.

It was Severus as she'd last seen him during the war: silent and drenched in his own blood, his dark eyes empty. Dead.



Rose Daphne

18 September 1987

Someone screamed. The sound barely registered over the roaring in Hermione's ears. Before she could force herself to breathe again, a bubblegum pink blur shot between her and the Boggart.

"Professor!" Tonks said, her voice pitched high in panic, her hands reaching towards the motionless vision of Severus.

Whatever lifesaving efforts Tonks had planned never materialised. The Boggart quivered and shifted into an image of Tonks herself, with mousy brown hair, dark eyes, and a smattering of teenage acne. Boggart-Tonks scrunches her eyes shut and stomped her feet. Her face turned red with effort, but her appearance remained the same. She'd lost her powers. Collapsing to the ground, Boggart-Tonks hugged her knees to her chest and sobbed.

"Oh," the real Tonks whispered. Her hair faded slightly, pink leaching from the roots like a grown-out dye job. Her wand was already drawn and pointing at the Boggart by the time Hermione moved to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with her.

"We can make it easier to defeat by confusing it," Hermione said.

As the two witches formed a single target, the Boggart flickered into an unsettling combination of Tonks and Severus:

his lank hair, her heart-shaped face. His dead eyes, her tears streaming down sallow cheeks that were flecked with spots.

"You know the incantation?" Hermione asked. No need to pass up the opportunity for a teaching moment.

Nodding, Tonks drew in a breath that brought the vibrant pink back to her hair. "Riddikulus!"

The whip-crack sound of the spell had the Snape-Tonks monstrosity growing a pig snout, like the real Tonks used to do when she wanted to make Hermione and Ginny laugh. Hermione's chuckle was more fond and nostalgic than amused, but combined with Tonks's uproarious laughter, it was enough. The Boggart vanished.

"Well done, Miss Tonks," Hermione said. "Five points to Hufflepuff."

Tonks beamed. "Thanks." Glancing at the spot where the Boggart had been, she wrinkled her acne-free nose. "Do you reckon Professor Snape would have given me House Points for saving his life if it had really been him, instead of a Boggart?"

The girl was nothing if not determined.

"Mm, I doubt it. He would have found a way to scold you for rushing in like some sort of Gryffindor when you came across your new Defence teacher seemingly standing there and watching him die."

"What should I have done instead? Disarmed you and cast Incarcerous before I tried to help him, just in case you were a murderer? That sounds like a good way to get detention if I'm wrong."

"*Going for help* would have been the safest option."

Tonks squinted at her. "So you could stay here and finish him off? I don't think so."

It was such a wonderfully *Tonks* thing to say that Hermione's heart clenched, even as she had to press her lips together to hide a grin. "Professor Snape would tell you the same thing," she said. "You're a student, Miss Tonks. It's not your job to put yourself in

danger to save anyone." That could be true for Tonks's generation, at least, while they were still children. Remembering how the girl had screamed, Hermione placed a hand on Tonks's shoulder. "Come on, we need chocolate after that ordeal."

"I thought chocolate was for Dementor attacks."

This time, Hermione's laugh was entirely amused. "I have so much to teach you. Chocolate is for *everything*."

To the tune of Tonks's giggle, Hermione rifled through her desk drawers until she found her emergency chocolate stash. For comfort eating, she preferred Muggle chocolate. The wizarding stuff was all well and good for recovering from the presence of a Dementor, but there was something about a bar of Cadbury's Dairy Milk or the dregs of that year's Celebrations tin that felt like home.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked as they settled down with their chocolate bars. "What you saw... Well, it was upsetting enough to give most people nightmares."

Goodness knew it had haunted Hermione's sleep often enough.

In spite of the fact that she was still a bit pale, Tonks said, "Yeah, of course. I've seen lots of Muggle horror films. My dad's Muggle-born... though he doesn't exactly know I've seen those films. Anyway, what the Boggart showed wasn't any more real than the films, even if it was someone I know. I'll be OK." Tonks bit off a big chunk of her chocolate. "Are you all right, Professor?"

"I am, thank you. And thank you for your help with the Boggart. You have quite a talent for Defence, you know."

Tonks brightened. "It's my favourite subject, even though every teacher but you has been rubbish. I'm going to be an Auror when I leave school."

Not *I hope to be an Auror*, but *I'm going to be an Auror*. Hermione's face creased into a smile.

"Oh, I almost forgot why I came here in the first place," Tonks said. "I wanted to talk to you about some stuff I'd like

to try in Defence Club. Do you think I'm too young to learn how to cast a Patronus?"

Percy stared at each pair of revealed cards as if winning the game would guarantee him a future as the Minister for Magic. He and Hermione had made these pre-Defence Club games of Exploding Snap something of a ritual.

"How are you doing now that you've been at school for a couple of weeks?" Hermione asked. Because she was concerned for his wellbeing and wanted to know, not because she wanted to distract him. Right.

"I'm OK, thank you. It's been much better than I thought it would be on... on that first day."

Percy was likely blushing at the reminder of Hermione catching him crying in an alcove. She couldn't say for certain. Confirming her suspicions would require looking away from the cards for too long.

"Glad to hear it," she said.

"What about you?"

"How am I doing?"

"Uh huh." His wand hand twitched with a false start when two similar — but not identical — cards slapped onto the table. "Defence professors tend to disappear, according to Bill and Charlie. Do you like teaching here?"

"I do," she said, surprised to find that it was true. Funny, since Defence had been her weakest subject when she'd been a student. "Unfortunately, I'll be leaving at the end of the school year. I have other commitments in America."

"Oh." Percy's shoulders drooped, his hopeful expression vanishing in a way that almost had Hermione spouting impossible promises of future postcards and letters. His reaction to her news didn't dampen his competitive streak; he celebrated his explosive victory seconds later.

How would the Percy of her time react when she told him

that she was Professor Hughes? Straining for the memory of the last time she'd seen that older Percy, Hermione smiled to herself. It had been a summer evening at the Burrow, when Percy had somehow been persuaded to drink Firewhisky with George. To George's massive disappointment, alcohol hadn't made his brother any more willing to engage in mischief. Instead, it had resulted in Percy chatting at length to Hermione about HOGWARTS, A HISTORY and mentioning, oh-so-casually, that the oldest student to ever sit his NEWTs had been forty. No pressure, of course. George could do whatever he liked with that information.

What George had liked had been spiking Percy's next drink with something that had rendered Percy unable to speak in anything but whale song for the next hour. Drunk Percy had, against all odds, found this hilarious. Laughter in whale song was just unsettling.

Eleven-year-old Percy packed up the cards as other students arrived, drawing Hermione out of her reminiscing. Tonks lingered near the door, waiting for something. Hermione wasn't sure what until Severus arrived, and Tonks pounced.

"Sir, did you know you're Professor Hughes's Boggart? I mean, not like you are now," Tonks waved a hand at his tall, glowering form, "but a dead you."

Several other students, including the Weasley boys, swivelled their heads to gape at Hermione upon overhearing this. Christ, Nymphadora.

"Is that so?" Severus turned his surprised stare from Tonks to Hermione and back again.

"Yeah. I didn't realise it was a Boggart at first, so I ran into the classroom and tried to save you."

"How heroic," Severus drawled. "Either my injuries were minor, or you greatly overestimated your own abilities. What did you see? A scraped knee requiring a plaster?"

The Vow remained quiet and cool around Hermione's wrist.

It had no jurisdiction over Tonks.

"Erm. Not... quite," Tonks said. "There was a lot of blood." Cringing, she gestured at the side of her own neck. "A lot. I would have tried to stop the bleeding, if it had really been you, but Professor Hughes said I should have gone for help."

"Then I thank her for sparing me from wasting my breath on a similar lecture."

Tonks groaned. "That's what she said you'd say."

Deciding Tonks would talk her way into losing House Points if allowed to continue, Hermione moved to the front of the classroom to start the meeting. As it was a club, rather than a class, she always offered the kids their choice of activities. They were split into two groups: years 1–3 and years 4–7. The older kids didn't take any persuading at all to agree with Tonks's suggestion that the Patronus Charm should be next on their agenda. The younger kids took a bit longer to settle on Expelliarmus.

"Which group would you like?" Severus asked. "I have no preference."

A lie, but a kind one. He was giving her an out, as she'd told him the Patronus Charm had never been her best. She chose the older kids. Of the two of them, she was probably more suited to helping students tap into their happiest memories.

"Right," she said once her group was assembled around her, deciding at the last second to partially borrow Professor Snape's advice from her sixth year. "Your success with casting a corporeal Patronus is dependent upon selecting a suitably strong memory. Something that never fails to make you smile. Hold the memory in your mind, and then..." With her eyes closed, she took herself back to the incandescent, pure joy of realising that Harry was still alive. "Expecto Patronum!"

Her otter appeared instantly, as bright as the happiness that powered it.

"Oh, it's so cute!" Tonks said, laughing in delight when

Hermione made the otter swim around her in a circle.

"All right," Hermione said as she dismissed her Patronus. "Your turn. Wands out, everyone."

She walked around the group for a while, offering advice on wand movement here, ordering someone to relax their posture there. Eventually, she ended up leaning against the wall next to Severus, watching both groups at once. Her robes flared out enough to conceal the way he slid his palm against hers.

"Are you well?" he asked, still staring straight ahead. His expression was as inscrutable as ever, but something a little bit like concern coloured his voice.

"Yeah." She squeezed his hand, her heart turning itself over. "I'm good."

19 September 1984

There was magic to it — the way they moved together. The way her body surrounded his. That familiar build of tension was like the focused energy of a spell, burning everything away until there was nothing but heat and friction and Hermione. As their pace grew fast and unsteady, she let out a series of gasping moans. He allowed himself to finally tip over the edge, falling with her.

Stretching out on the rumpled sheets, Severus held Hermione tight to keep her from rolling off of him — not that she seemed inclined to move. She was all boneless, sated languor. Maybe he could tie her to his bed, keep her safe from vanishing back to her own time. Defeat time magic with that magic of their own.

"Happy birthday," he said, snorting when the only reply from the woman on top of him was a dreamy sigh. "Would you like your present now?"

"I thought *that* was my present."

"Don't be absurd."

It was her turn to snort. "Aren't you supposed to be nice to me on my birthday?"

"I have it on good authority that it's not your actual birthday." He gave her arse a playful swat. "And I have been rather nice to you so far."

She apparently decided the best response to this was to chuckle and kiss a certain spot on his neck — that spot she always gravitated towards. The same spot Miss Tonks had pointed to on her own neck when describing the vision of his dead body. How was it possible that Hermione had seen Severus's death when confronted by the Boggart? Did he truly matter that much to her?

Severus rubbed his hand slowly up and down Hermione's spine. He was grateful for the information gleaned from the Boggart — relieved he wouldn't be taken out by a Killing Curse, instant and unstoppable — but something in his chest twisted unpleasantly to think of Hermione being forced to face it. He didn't care to imagine how he'd react if their positions were reversed.

Banishing such thoughts to the deepest recesses of his mind, he eased a protesting Hermione onto her side and reached across her to open the drawer of the bedside table. Only when his fingers closed around her gift did he realise she could interpret it in a way that was unintended and far too early and, frankly, fucking terrifying.

He'd only chosen a ring because she was required to wear her glamour-linked necklace at all times. A *bracelet*. Why had he not thought of a bloody bracelet?

"Before you overreact and run away in horror, this does not come with a question attached," he said stiffly, placing the box into her hand. "I will explain its purpose."

With a shake of her head and a smile he couldn't quite interpret, she opened it. The band was simple: plain silver that matched the book that would steal her away. Hermione traced a fingertip over the stone wasn't a stone at all, but a circle of glass with a tiny sprig of white heather trapped inside.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Thank you."

Severus plucked the ring from the box. "You are more than capable of learning how to fly. Your difficulties lie in the number of Dark spells you have cast; they are insufficient to power unsupported flight. You could, of course, go into the Forbidden Forest and use the Imperius Curse on all of the birds and deer and such until you gain the necessary experience, but as you somehow survived a war with so much lightness intact, I doubt you wish to pursue that option." Taking her right hand, he slid the ring into place on her finger. The metal shimmered as it sized itself to a perfect fit. "This will allow you to tap into the spells that *I* have cast, if you wish. There are... enough to share."

Severus had barely finished speaking before Hermione was out of bed, naked but for the ring on her finger.

"Come on," she said, grabbing his arm. "Let's go flying."



24



Angels' Trumpet

19 September 1987

The first time Hermione used her ring to fly, she ended up hugging a tree while Severus laughed at her from the ground.

Trusting his magic to keep her in the air was easier than trusting an enchanted stick of wood, but it still made her feel wobbly and out of control. It took several more goes before she could hover without scrambling for the nearest tree or bush or Potions Master to cling to, but she did get there, in the end. Just about. The effect wasn't like touching him when he cast the spell; it was muffled, like the warmth of a hand felt through thick clothing. Which, admittedly, made it far easier to focus.

Flying was never going to rank among her favourite activities. She'd known as much going into this experiment. Still, she loved her gift. She could use it to more effectively catch herself during a fall, and if it still worked when she returned to her own time...

She would have to struggle to keep her hopes firmly grounded if a touch of the ring and a whispered Volate sent her soaring in 2001. She wouldn't let herself believe it unless she saw his older self standing in front of her, real and solid and alive.

"Fair warning," Severus said as they approached the castle, "I told Mum it's your birthday."

"Why would I need to be warned about that?"

"So you can brace yourself if she decides to mark the occasion by giving you something. You can't blame me if she thinks a vat of Contraceptive Potion is an appropriate birthday gift. I have no control over her actions."

Hermione chuckled most of the way to the Great Hall. Upon approaching the staff table, they discovered that Eileen's birthday gift for Hermione was an ordinary bouquet of freesias.

"Thank you, Irma," Hermione said as she sank into her usual seat, sandwiched between Severus and his mum. "They're lovely." Even if they did provide zero ammunition for taking the piss out of Severus.

Silvanus Kettleburn, the current Care of Magical Creatures professor, gave Eileen a lopsided smile and waved his good hand as he passed by on his way out of the hall. Eileen narrowed her eyes.

"I spent ages helping Kettleburn find a book he needed the other day, and now he keeps talking to me," she said. "And smiling. What do you suppose he wants from me?"

"Friendship?" Hermione said, ignoring the murmur of Hufflepuff from her other side.

"Hmm. That might be acceptable. If he's looking for more, he's out of luck."

Severus shuddered.

"I've been thinking," Eileen said after a pause, pushing her beans around her plate with her fork, leaving a smear of red sauce behind. "I'm not sure I fancy men all that much."

Huh. Not even 8:00 AM, and already Hermione had experienced one of the most intense orgasms of her life, gone flying without a broom, and been the recipient of this rather unexpected confession. An eventful birthday.

"Oh?" Hermione said, glancing at Severus. His expression

was calm — completely neutral.

"I married the first one to show any interest, and that was... I couldn't even tell you why I did it," Eileen said. "He asked, and I just thought, *you'll do*." She studied Hermione's face for a beat, then added, "You like men." This was spoken in the same tone Ron had used in fourth year when he'd said, *Hermione, you're a girl*, as if it was brand new information. "What is it you like about them, exactly?"

"Good gods," Severus muttered.

Hermione took a gulp of pumpkin juice. "Erm. That's... a bit of a tricky question coming from you, given the identity of the man I like the most." She couldn't hold in a laugh when Eileen's face screwed up as if the toast tasted of gurdyroot. At her side, Severus was silent. "I'm not sure finding out which physical characteristics I find appealing would serve much purpose, anyway. If men do nothing for you, then hearing me go on about them would be like listening to someone describe why they love eating a food you can't stand. What about women, though? How do you feel about them?"

Eileen sniffed, but her eyes took on a faraway, dreamy sort of gleam. "I don't particularly like anyone. My son comes by his misanthropy naturally."

24 September 1984

It was a strange thing, half wishing away his own birth — particularly when he was arguably the closest he'd ever been to contentment. Severus didn't want to cease existing, but his mum's life would have been far better if she'd never met Tobias Snape — if she'd acknowledged her attraction to women (misanthropy, his arse) long before the age of forty-six.

That she had ended up with Tobias because marriage had been something on her to do list would have enraged Severus's fifteen-year-old self. The younger him would have demanded to know why, then, did she stay? Now... Well. Following the

Dark Lord wasn't the same as being trapped in a marriage, but Severus had also been taken in by someone who was an expert at wielding emotions like weapons. He knew what it was to feel adored and worthless and special and powerless — to have the sting of a punishment soothed by every promise he'd ever wanted to hear. To know that leaving could be far more dangerous than staying. And Severus, at least, had still had his wand. She wasn't to blame for Tobias's crimes.

Stretching his legs out under the table, Severus turned to watch Hermione and Charity approach with their next round. Hermione sat next to Charity, instead of next to him. *I don't know if we should be all couple-y in front of Charity*, Hermione had said before they'd arrived at the Three Broomsticks. *What do you think? It's such a difficult day for her, and she'll already be missing Gideon*.

The anniversary of the Prewetts' death was far from Severus's favourite day. Not that he'd told Hermione. When he brushed his foot over what he thought was Hermione's ankle, Charity snorted.

"Mate, that's my leg."

Severus jerked away. Charity's responding laugh died on her lips, a scowl swooping in to take its place.

"Don't look now," she whispered, "but Thea Mulciber just walked in." For Hermione's benefit, she added, "One of my dorm mates from Hogwarts. Her brother was one of the ones who was there when..." Charity cleared her throat. "Azkaban is too good for him."

Hermione leaned closer to Charity and wrapped an arm around her. It was a shame Hermione hadn't been present during their previous 24th of September outings. Severus had usually just bought Charity another round when she'd looked in need of comfort.

The last time he'd seen Thea Mulciber, she had caught him and Lily experimenting with kissing behind the greenhouses at age thirteen (*to see what it's like, Sev*). That kiss — sloppy

and wet and awkward — had left both him and his friend rolling with laughter once Thea had left them alone. It had felt... incestuous, almost.

Even so, Severus hadn't been surprised when his Patronus had taken the form of a hind, like Lily's. His love for her had been the first truly good, pure thing in his young life. That it was brotherly made it no less powerful. Something both her oaf of a boyfriend and the Dark Lord had been unable to grasp, though Severus had not been inclined to explain it to either of them.

Charity and Hermione would have understood.

In spite of Charity's warning, Severus looked. Thea had the same strawberry blond hair and bright blue eyes as her younger brother, Max — Severus's former dorm mate. The last time Severus had seen *that* Mulciber had been when Max had shouted Crucio again and again before firing a jet of hateful green light at Gideon's chest. He had to agree with Charity. Azkaban was too good for the bastard. Lily had been right about him, too.

If Thea noticed them, she didn't give any sign of it. Charity, Severus, and Hermione bought several more rounds, toasting Gideon and Fabian's memories each time, until Charity announced it was time for her to return to Cokeworth. Outside, she wrapped her arms around Severus and kissed his cheek, her breath warm and scented of sweet butterbeer.

"Thanks for keeping me company tonight, mate," she said, squeezing him tight. "You're the best."

He wasn't. Severus squeezed her back.

"Are you OK?" Hermione asked as she and Severus started down the road to Hogwarts, her question almost swallowed by the crack of Charity's Disapparition.

"I'm fine."

The nights were already drawing in; the sky had been dark for hours. White light from Hermione's wand illuminated their path, bobbing with each step. For a few minutes, nothing but the sound of shoes on cobblestones and the distant

hootings of owls disturbed the silence.

"Are you sure you're OK?" Hermione asked.

Severus clenched his jaw. "I'm fine."

She accompanied him back to his rooms with a few sidelong glances, but no further comments. When was the last time she'd gone to her own quarters for more than a change of clothing? The first of September, most likely. Even her dental hygiene paraphernalia had taken up permanent residence at his. She watched him in the mirror as they stood side-by-side, cleaning their teeth.

For the first time in their relationship, Severus said, "I'm tired," as they approached the bed.

"Oh." The necklace came off, her real face no more able to hide her concern than the glamoured one. "Yeah, it's been a long day."

Crossing to the chest of drawers, Hermione shrugged out of her clothes. Arousal stirred at the sight of her now familiar naked body, but Severus ignored it. Instead of her usual sleepwear of absolutely nothing, she pilfered a long, grey nightshirt of his that had been a gag gift from Charity.

"Night," she said, sliding into bed next to him.

"Nox. Good night."

Fingers fumbled for him in the dark, finding his chin and turning his face towards her for a quick, soft kiss. Hermione's hand rested on his chest as she burrowed further beneath the duvet. Her breaths tickled his shoulder, not growing any deeper or slower as minutes passed. She was as wide awake as he was. Unspoken words burned at the back of his throat, demanding a confession. To what end? To ease his conscience? Why on earth would he want Hermione to know this part of him?

"I was present when the Prewetts were killed," Severus said into the stillness, and there was no use thinking about his reasons once the words were out there, poisoning the air between them. "Charity doesn't know."

Her breaths stopped. "Before or after you switched sides?"

"After. I didn't participate, except to dodge attacks and

to accidentally hit Death Eaters with my hexes. I think Fabian noticed, but it's hard to say for certain. It was..." A long sigh left him feeling deflated. "I've never seen anything more brutal. I've often thought that I would have sought Dumbledore's assistance that day, if I hadn't already been his spy."

A kiss landed on his shoulder. He remembered thinking, when the sweat and smoke of battle had still clung to his too-young skin, that he'd wanted to go to Lily's parents' house. Mr and Mrs Evans had already been gone. He'd wanted... a parent, he supposed, though he'd never before acknowledged that fact to himself. Not one of his parents — not Eileen, and *certainly* not Tobias. Someone who was good at it. He'd made do with Dumbledore, who had held Severus's hair back and vanished the vomit and murmured soothing nonsense for a minute or two before asking for the rest of his report.

"Have you ever thought about telling Charity?" Hermione whispered.

"No." He wasn't about to have a repeat of the scene outside Gryffindor Tower, with Charity standing in for Lily. "She'd never forgive me."

"I think she would. Not right away, but eventually. She knows you were a spy, right? And better she hear it from you than from someone else —"

"No."

She was stubborn, his Granger. Even her silences could sound like an attempt to sway someone to her way of thinking.

"She loves you, Severus," she said, finally. "She has threatened on more than one occasion to bury me in the garden if I hurt you. If you don't want to tell her, that's your choice, but I really do think she'd forgive you."

She wouldn't. Hermione hadn't been there for the past six years; she didn't know how utterly devoted Charity remained to Gideon. And he'd kept it a secret from her for too long to blurt it out now. Hadn't he?



Laburnum

3 October 1987

Phrases which had often been repeated by his mother tended to pop into Albus's head when he was in Hermione's company. Not because both witches were both Muggle-born, but because they kept so many secrets. Today's offering: *if looks could kill*. Hermione sat in front of a pile of unfinished marking in the staff room, glaring at Quirrell, who, as far as Albus could tell, was doing nothing more malicious than leafing through a travel guide for Albania. Interesting.

"Good afternoon, Heather," Albus said, pulling out a chair at her table. "Mind if I join you?"

She startled. "Oh, hello, sir. No, of course not. Please, have a seat."

Casting one last scowl at Quirrell, she ripped open a chocolate frog packet and took out her frustration on the animated sweet. With her mouth full of chocolate, she held up the card with a slight smile. It was Albus.

"I've been hoping to find Ptolemy," she said. "A friend of mine has been looking for him for ages. It's the only one he doesn't have."

"Ah! I found Ptolemy once, but Fawkes decided it could be

put to better use as nesting material, alas."

She chuckled, then cast a surreptitious Muffliato around the two of them. "Ron would probably be fine with never finding Ptolemy, as long as he keeps finding himself. He considers it his greatest honour — far above the Order of Merlin."

"Sensible lad."

"Not in the slightest." Tapping the card on the table, she caught her lower lip between her teeth. With a jolt, Albus realised just how tired she looked. She had the fragile smile of someone who hadn't had a good night's rest in weeks. "Sir? I've been wondering something. About the Vow."

"Yes?"

"I can't be around people who have died in my time without thinking about telling them, though I don't want to break the Vow." Given the way she and Severus had looked at each other since returning to Hogwarts, Albus doubted the last part of that statement very much. "The Vow gives me a warning when I have those thoughts. Some of the people... I'm not sure whether they actually died. It's likely that they did, but not certain. The Vow works based on what I believe to be true, right?"

"Hmm. Yes, I think that is likely correct." Leaning forward, he patted her shoulder. "The Vow can't see into the future. You're the only one here who can do that."

"Tsk. Don't let Sybill hear you say such things."

2 November 1984

It was rolling over onto a wide stretch of empty bed that woke him. Severus had become accustomed to Hermione doing her best to take up most of the mattress. Rest didn't come without limbs clinging to him and curls tickling his nose, these days. Blinking the sleep from his eyes, he tugged on a dressing gown and braved the chilly air outside his sheets. He knew where he'd find her.

Like always, she'd cast a Muffliato over his private lab,

but the yellow crack of light beneath the door gave her away. Severus cancelled the buzzing static and stepped inside.

She was wearing the stupid grey nightshirt again. It seemed to be her favourite attire for these late night brewing sessions. A cauldron bubbled and smoked away on the worktable while she made notes and mumbled to herself, one of her sock-clad feet tapping on the cold flagstone floor. Holding one finger up, she finished scribbling out an arithmantic calculation before she greeted him.

"Did I wake you?" she asked. "I'm sorry."

Severus sighed. "Come back to bed."

"Not yet. I'm almost finished."

The last time she'd said that, he'd dozed fitfully for two hours before returning to find her still hard at work. When had she last slept through the night? The bags under her eyes hadn't vanished in weeks. Severus didn't need the occasional rub of her wrist to let him know what had her stretching herself so thin. It was him — her Boggart. And, judging by her reading material of late, his probable demise had something to do with a snake.

"Hermione," he said, more sharply than intended. What the fuck did she think she was she doing, treating herself so poorly for his sake? "Please."

Staring up at the ceiling, she swallowed hard. Her eyes were glassy and her voice thick when she said, "I can't fail at this."

"Then you won't. You are the most stubborn creature I've ever met — yes, I used the term *creature* deliberately. I include the likes of goblins in that assessment. Depriving yourself of rest will not help you succeed; you're more likely to make mistakes if you're exhausted."

"Hmm, I don't know. Aside from during the war, the last time I remember being this sleep deprived, I hit Draco Malfoy. That was certainly not a mistake."

It was as she half-smiled at the memory that something

clicked into place in Severus's chest and he realised, caught partway between alarm and wonder, that he loved her. That he was *in love* with her.

Gods, he was an idiot. She couldn't stay, and yet he'd somehow allowed her to become everything. Dunderhead. Even so, he wouldn't change it — wouldn't trade this warmth that glowed through him for something less complicated. He would keep her as long as he could, imbecile that he was.

"I have no doubt Draco deserved it," he said, inwardly congratulating himself for sounding calm in the wake of such a potent wave of affection, "but apart from the matter of your decision-making skills, I cannot sleep without you attempting to shove me out of bed, it seems, and I need every second of rest I can get if I'm to make it through the day without hexing a student."

"You can't sleep without me?" The half-smile brightened into a grin. "That's sweet." Rubbing her eyes, she hunched over her notes. "I really will... oh. Wait. Don't... don't say *anything*."

Her quill darted across the parchment, performing calculations faster than most people could read. He didn't realise she was holding her breath until she finally sat back and drew in a shaky gasp. With a surprisingly steady hand, she added the juice from thirteen sophophorous beans to her potion and gave it seven anti-clockwise stirs, followed by one clockwise stir. As the potion began to shift from lilac to clear, she cast a powerful cleaning charm over her knife and sliced open her palm. Seven drops of her blood made the potion turn a milky white. The final step was a wand movement Severus didn't recognise — some sort of hex, which settled into the potion with a gurgle.

"I'll have to run some tests in a month, when it matures, but I think... Severus, I think I might have done it."

"Of course you did. I repeat: stubborn." And brilliant. "Now, back to bed, yes?"

Hermione made a copy of her notes before she consented. She insisted on placing them beneath her pillow so she could

guard them as she slept, as if someone would creep in and steal her success away from her. Back between the sheets, she peeled the nightshirt from her body and pressed every inch of her dungeon-cold skin against his.

"The next time you decide to do some late night brewing," he said, "might I suggest you wear a parka? You're bloody freezing."

"Mm." Yawning, she pressed a few lazy kisses along his neck. "Severus?"

"That doesn't sound like sleeping to me, Granger."

She pinched his arse. "I don't know why I want you to, when you are so bossy," she laughed at his indignant huff, "but will you meet me at the third Solstice Ball at the Ministry? If you can. It'll be happening the day I go back." He didn't need to be able to feel her movements to know she was rubbing her wrist. "I just... need to know."

Severus tightened his hold on her at the mention of going back. He wasn't one for dancing — not in the best of circumstances, and especially not when surrounded by intolerable Ministry drones. If everyone but Harry Potter believed Severus to be dead, returning to the wizarding world in such a public way would draw far too much attention. In spite of all of this, he nodded and kissed her forehead.

"Yes. I wouldn't miss it."

21 November 1984

How they ended up walking around the corridors near Gryffindor Tower, cocooned in the bubble of Severus's Muffliato and discussing past relationships, Hermione couldn't say. It had to be some sort of trickery on his part. Particularly as she ended up going first.

"My first boyfriend was a Quidditch player from Bulgaria," she said. "He was far too old for me, really."

"Is that a habit of yours?" Severus asked. "Seducing older men?"

"Don't worry, you're by far the oldest." She poked him gently in the ribs. "Anyway, things with Viktor were never serious. It ended when he went back home, but we stayed friends. And then... Ron."

"Weasley?" Severus hadn't even *met* Ron yet, but the expected sneer was out in full force.

"Yeah. For a few months after the end of the war. We were a *disaster*. We only just managed to salvage our friendship after we broke up. Since then, err. Well." She rubbed the back of her neck.

"I must know him, if you're suddenly so nervous."

"Oh, you definitely do. He's currently one of your students." For Hermione's part, it had been remarkably easy to pretend that those two weeks in Cornwall had never happened. The Oliver who sat in the back row of her Defence class was not yet *that* Oliver. It helped that he was already so Quidditch obsessed that he'd barely spoken more than a few words to her. He didn't seem to take notice of anything that wasn't training for that happy day when he was finally allowed to tryout for the Gryffindor team, though Percy made a valiant effort to convince him of the merits of schoolwork. "It was Oliver Wood."

"Good gods." Severus laughed. "And how long did you put up with his incessant Quidditch chatter?"

"A couple of weeks was about my limit. It was just a fling. Neither of us wanted anything serious."

"Understandably. Who else is on your list of broken hearts?"

"No one. I've had a few first dates, but nothing to write home about. Meeting new people is somewhat complicated when you're one of Harry Potter's best friends. And speaking of Harry... There have also been abundant rumours about me being involved with him, but there isn't a grain of truth to any of it. He's like a brother to me. Always has been." She let Severus absorb this, taking in the way he looked a bit pleased, before she added, "All right, your turn."

"There have been... Muggle women. Holiday romances — flings, like you and Wood, I suppose." He hesitated. "I used to have an arrangement with a married woman. She came to me when she was bored and angry with her husband."

"What ended it?"

"I met you. Obviously. Though it had rather run its course before that."

Hermione held her breath before her next question, uncertain whether he would tell her what Charity had already let slip. "Do I know her?"

"I believe so, yes. It was Narcissa Malfoy." He said this as if it was no more scandalous than an announcement of the current weather.

Staring down at her hands, Hermione picked at a hangnail. "I always thought you and Lucius were friends."

Severus scoffed. "Hardly. It was as much my revenge as hers."

"Well, next time maybe just put Hair Vanishing Potion in his shampoo or something."

"You do enjoy Draco's relatives going bald, don't you?"

"It's one of my favourite things. All right, who else?"

As they rounded a corner that led into a narrower corridor, Severus looked anywhere but at her. "No one. That is the sum total of my experience."

"Oh."

Hermione did her best to conceal her shock. This was his first serious relationship? Was that by choice or by circumstance? Had he been pining for a dead woman this whole time? He still loved Lily, of course. *Always*. Hermione knew that. But she'd never believed the loss of one great love meant someone would never find another. Hearts had more room than that. He didn't have to stop loving Lily in order to love someone else.

Lacking the nerve to ask about Lily just yet, Hermione paused to study a sunlit portrait with rows of pomegranate trees and the dark mouth of a cave. The portrait's usual

occupant — a witch who had styled herself as Persephone — was absent, allowing them to see every painted branch that swayed in a light breeze.

"I should have planted some fruit trees at Spinner's End," she said in an attempt to change the topic. "Pomegranates, maybe. I have plenty of climate charms already in place."

Severus hummed. "And if I offered you six pomegranate seeds from my garden?"

He did look a bit like he belonged in the Underworld as he loomed over her, dressed in his customary black. Hermione licked her dry lips.

"Would it be my choice?" she asked. "Or would you trick me into eating them?"

"It would always be your choice." The deep rumble of his voice made her heart do marvellous, skipping around, fluttery sort of things.

"In that case, I'd like twelve, rather than six."

Casting a glance around them, Severus backed her up against the wall next to the portrait and brought his lips to hers in a rough kiss. She could have let it go on for far too long, losing herself in every brush of his tongue, every nip of his teeth, but a pair of young voices brought them to their senses.

Severus stepped back and put a respectable amount of distance between himself and Hermione right as the owners of the voices appeared at the other end of the corridor: Oliver and Percy. Oliver held a bloodied handkerchief to his nose while Percy fussed to rival his mother and delivered several rounds of *I told you so*.

"Ah," Severus said, laughter in his tone. "Your future paramour."

All things considered, amusement was a far better reaction than Ron's jealous rages. It just didn't feel like it at that precise moment. Dropping the Muffliato, Severus crossed his arms and glared at the two boys.

"Err, hi, Professor Snape, Professor Hughes," Oliver said. He

seemed to mull over his options for a second. Apparently deciding that he may as well face his punishment, he added, "Did you know that the Gryffindor Common Room is too small for practicing the sloth grip roll? You wouldn't think so, to look at it."

Oh, for the love of...

"Do you mean to tell me, Mr Wood, that you not only flew on a broom without supervision, but you did so *indoors*?" Hermione asked, mirroring Severus's stance.

Oliver huffed. "I know Madam Hooch said we aren't allowed to fly outside of class till we're in second year, but I'm *really* good, Professor." He gingerly pulled the handkerchief away, then shoved it back into place when it became clear his nosebleed was still gushing. "If it helps, Percy talked me out of using an actual bludger. He threw cushions at me, instead."

Percy groaned. If Hermione had to guess, she'd say he was imagining his future as Prefect and Head Boy being shot out of the air by a bludger. Or a cushion.

"It does not help, no," Severus said. "Mr Weasley, two points from Gryffindor and detention with me tomorrow evening. Mr Wood, ten points and detention with Madam Pomfrey for the rest of the week. She has some fascinating books about broom accidents. The illustrations and photographs are something to behold. I'm sure she'll appreciate your help organising them."

It wouldn't dissuade Oliver from performing all manner of idiotic stunts on a broom, Hermione knew, but it was a nice try.

26



Poinsettia

1 December 1987

Severus cast the charm without much thought. It was a reflex, performed so often that he could conjure up the requisite bubbling happiness simply by waving his wand in that familiar, wide arc. A Pavlovian tide of joy. He'd only cast it in order to send his hind off with a single word response to Albus's ridiculous request that he supervise two Hogsmeade visits in a row (*no, obviously*). He hadn't thought he'd end up with his heart in his throat as the proof of his love for Hermione flowed from his wand.

The new Patronus was both smaller and brighter than the hind. Still a deer, but now it took the shape of a doe. It was compact, like the roe deer that had watched him fly with Hermione in the Forbidden Forest. The doe blinked her long-lashed eyes at him as he stared, breathless, at her glowing form. He would have expected an otter, but this seemed more fitting. He could see both Lily and Hermione in the doe. First friend, first love. Years ago, he would have mourned the loss of the hind — of that link to Lily — but not now.

Fuck. He had to explain this to Albus, didn't he? Once they returned to war, Albus would need to be certain that

messages sent to him in this way truly came from his spy. He needed to be notified of the change. If the meddling old arse even *hinted* to Hermione about how deep Severus's feelings ran, Severus would likely change the course of the war by killing him.

25 December 1987

Hermione snuggled closer to the warm body at her side. Why Severus always ended up practically hanging off of the edge of the bed as he slept, she would never know. Taking advantage of the fact that he was not yet awake, she studied his face. More and more, she wished she could tie herself to his time. She would live through the entire war all over again if it meant she didn't have to leave him here, alone, come summer.

For about the thousandth time since her conversation with Dumbledore in the staff room, she strained and reached to make herself believe Harry's version of events. Severus lived through Nagini's attack. They'd found no body in the Shrieking Shack because the older Severus was off on his own somewhere avoiding the lot of them. If she could make herself think Harry was right, the Vow wouldn't prevent her from telling Severus about the attack. Inside her head, she chanted: *I believe, I believe, I believe.*

Like always, it didn't work. The band of flame around her wrist was still there when she thought about saying the words, the same as before. How could she *make* herself believe something? Ugh, maybe she should go to Ottery St Catchpole to ask Xenophilius Lovegood's advice on the subject.

"How long do you intend to carry on staring at me?" Severus asked without opening his eyes.

"As long as you'll let me."

His eyes opened then, just so he could roll them at her.

"Happy Christmas," she said.

"Mm."

Hermione glanced at the foot of the bed, where their pres-

ents waited to be opened. Her gifts to Severus were tucked into gift bags, rather than contained in wrapping paper and tape. She hadn't wanted to risk damaging the first one: a hybrid of foxglove and aconite that she'd asked Algie to create. Unless her calculations were incorrect, it would make brewing Wolfsbane slightly less tedious for him. Not that Severus knew, yet, that he would eventually need to brew Wolfsbane for the better part of a year. The second gift had been an impulse purchase. Standing in the queue at Scrivenshaft's, she'd noticed a familiar blotter with pots for red and black ink and a stand for three quills. It had sat on his desk every day that she'd been his student, as far as she could remember. She hadn't realised it was missing from his current desk until she'd seen it in the shop.

She'd wanted her gift of potions to be ready by Christmas, but the antivenin and the Felix Felicis both needed a little bit longer. Thanks to Charity, she knew that his birthday wasn't far away. Everything would be in place by then.

Severus was the one who ventured out from beneath the cosy shelter of the duvet to retrieve their presents. Well, his wand arm ventured out, summoning both piles.

Hermione started with a gift which was wrapped in a giant umbrella flower leaf. It was from Algie, to her surprise: a book on magical hybrid plants with a note commanding her to read it before the following summer. He'd also included a drawing from Neville that featured an abundance of multicoloured Christmas trees. Hermione smiled.

Her gift from Charity was a dress: deep green and, thankfully, a classic A-line rather than some puffy-sleeved '80s monstrosity. That was less surprising; Hermione had moaned in her last letter about her lack of anything to wear to Charity's New Year's Eve party. She'd been intending to pick something up the day before the party, when she went down to Cokeworth to check on her Felix Felicis. After the dress, there were the expected chocolates and scarves and imper-

sonal things from colleagues. She saved Severus's gifts for last.

The first of his neatly wrapped parcels contained a book: one on experimental potions which had been out of print for years in her time. She'd been looking for a copy in the used section of Flourish and Blotts for ages. Inside the second box, she discovered a stack of papers which were filled with his familiar, spiky handwriting.

It was an endorsement of her skills, addressed to the Guild of Potioneers. With it, the Guild would consider her for Mastery.

"I got the impression," he said, glancing up from his admiration of the plant she'd given him, "that your apprenticeship with Slughorn ended prematurely. I thought that might be of use, in the future."

Hermione's inner eleven-year-old wanted to do a victory lap at the sight of pages and pages of praise from Professor Snape, but she settled for clapping a hand over her mouth.

Severus shifted and smoothed the duvet out over his legs. "It's not much of a gift, I'll admit. You are the one who did the work. You have created potions in this time which are worthy of submission to the Guild. I wasn't certain how to date it; I've left that part blank. Fill it in as you like."

Launching herself across the bed, Hermione landed in his lap and pressed her mouth to his. "It's perfect," she said. "Thank you. I'd want no other Master writing my endorsement."

The way he smiled, then — warm and pleased and just for her — almost brought a confession of love spilling from Hermione's lips. She didn't think he was quite ready to hear it, so she tucked it safely away for another time, leaned forward, and drew him into another kiss.

30 December 1987

Charity sat down on the floor of her shed and cradled the bottle of liquid luck in both of her hands. Her legs trembled too much to support her weight. Heather had stayed with her

in the kitchen drinking tea and chatting for ages before popping into her old room to separate the matured Felix Felicis into two vials: one for herself, one for Charity.

This was *everything*. It had to work. She couldn't fail at this. Raising the bottle to her lips, Charity gulped down the golden potion.

It tasted rich and decadent, like thick hot chocolate sprinkled with cinnamon. Almost immediately, Charity felt as if she'd taken flight. The world spread out before her, full of endless possibilities. Huh. Odd, then, that her first impulse was to write to her Squib cousin, Mercy Burbage, and invite her along to tomorrow's New Year's Eve party.

Charity had never been close to Mercy, in spite of them both being shunned by their family. They were on Christmas card terms. Well, the potion knew best. At the very least, if both Arthur and Mercy came along, Arthur could quiz Mercy about the Muggle world instead of pestering Heather the whole time, since Mercy mostly lived like a Muggle.

That task completed, Charity wrote a second letter: this time to Severus, telling him to bring his mum along to the party if she was visiting from New Zealand for the holidays. Charity hadn't a clue what any of this had to do with completing her alteration of the charms on Gideon's old time travelling book, but Eileen was welcome.

Right. As Dionysus flew off with the letters, Charity dashed into the kitchen and snatched up the mug Heather had used for her tea. She *needed* it. Something about it was very important. Tucking a loaf of bread under one arm and grabbing a jar of raspberry jam out of the fridge, she returned to her shed.

It took *hours*. Charity kept herself going with slices of bread that she toasted by magic and slathered with jam. She went into a sort of trance, during which her arithmantic calculations seemed to solve themselves and her wand hand moved as if it knew something she did not. She'd been going about it

all wrong, trying to add more charms to the pages. All she'd ever needed to do was expand the ones Gideon and Fabian had crafted — to bind them and give them a target.

Charity let the potion use her, allowed it to make all of the decisions that would lead to success. The final alteration used the faint imprint of Heather's lips from the mug, just seconds before the twenty-four hours of luck ran out. Charity pressed it to the catch on the book as she cast, as if stealing a kiss from Heather for extra luck.

And then it happened: her final push from Felix. Charity clasped the completed book to her chest and *knew*. She needed to give it to Severus. Luck fled, leaving her gasping for air.

Charity had heard, both back in Slughorn's Potions class and several times after, that the come-down from Felix Felicis could leave one feeling desperate and sad and as if all good fortune in the world had dried up. This went so far past despair that she couldn't even manage the catharsis of tears. Opening the book, she stared at the dates within. 20 June 1987 to 21 June 1988. Well after Gideon's death. It was for Heather.

A trapped sob rattled in her chest. *This wasn't what she'd wanted*. Yes, she wanted Severus to be happy — of course she did — but not at the cost of losing Gideon — *really* losing him — forever. She was supposed to succeed in *her* every endeavour, not *Severus's*.

A snippet from one of Slughorn's lessons floated back to her: *liquid luck has its limits. You will succeed only when success is actually possible. It makes you luckier, not omnipotent*. The fact that she'd failed meant there was no path back to Gideon, didn't it? No path that ended happily. Her throat was almost too dry to cast Geminio, but she still tried, even though she knew what the result would be. The dim copy of the book was just a book. No magic. No charms. She Vanished it.

The real book slipped from her numb fingers. It was over.



31 December 1987

There was something different about Arthur. Yes, he was younger, but there was more to it than fewer grey hairs and laugh lines. It wasn't the absence of his scar from Nagini's attack, either. Whatever the change was, it had hit Hermione as soon as Arthur had arrived at Charity's party with Molly, Bill, Charlie, and Percy in tow. The younger kids had been shipped off to Aunt Muriel's for the evening, poor things.

Arthur's voice sounded the same — still those kind, fatherly tones that had once promised her he would do everything in his power to help find her parents and restore their memories. And he had. He'd worked at it tirelessly, even when floored by grief over his son's death. No one else had been so determined to put her family back together. She'd had far more patience for his endless questions about Muggles after that.

Inching closer to where Arthur and Eileen stood with Charity's cousin, Mercy, Hermione fought to work out how this younger Arthur differed from the older version. It was as if there had been a buzzing in her ears for years, there for so long that she'd forgotten about it until its sudden

absence. Briefly, she considered the possibility of Polyjuice, but there was nothing in his behaviour to suggest he wasn't the real Arthur. Maybe it was something to do with Nagini — a shadow left by her poison.

"So you're a sort of healer for the mind?" Arthur asked Mercy.

"You could say that. I take both Muggle and magical clients. Mostly the former. Magical people are extremely reluctant to chat about their problems and fears with a stranger. Well, so are most Muggles, to be fair."

"Oh, you treat fears? How fascinating. Would a client of yours see nothing when they looked at a Boggart?"

Mercy chuckled. "No, they'd still see their greatest fear. They'd just be better equipped to banish it."

Eileen suddenly seemed to find her glass of dandelion and burdock fascinating. After months of viewing her as Madam Pince, it was strange to see her out of her disguise. She was far younger than Madam Pince's steel grey hair and papery skin made her seem. How old had she been when she'd had Severus? Nineteen?

"You live among the Muggles full-time, then?" Arthur asked Mercy, his blue eyes bright. "Do you get to use electricity?"

"Erm, yes, a bit," Mercy said. "Just lights and kettles and such. Nothing all that interesting."

"I lived without magic for years," Eileen said softly, frowning into her glass. "It's not as glamourous as you seem to think."

Arthur shrugged. "It's just so *different*, and we're hardly taught anything at all about their ways."

"That's true," Mercy said. "Which isn't great for Squibs, believe me. I was not at all prepared when my family shipped me off to a Muggle school. I learnt very quickly to watch other people in order to learn how to do basic things. When a teenager asks how to use a biro, people tend to give her funny looks."

Eileen snorted. "Mrs Cooper down the road brought me casseroles for years after I ran over to her house in a panic

because I'd tried to use a plastic container as a baking dish. She probably still thinks I can't be trusted to cook for myself."

Arthur looked as if he wanted to ask what was wrong with using plastic for baking. Leaving the mystery of Arthur's change behind, Hermione went to find Severus. He'd vanished about the time Percy had come up to Hermione to show off the old camera he'd received for Christmas. Now and then, a bright flash of light revealed Percy's position in the crowd (and likely left his victims seeing spots). He'd caught Severus and Hermione with it before the former had taken his leave. Who knew Percy and Colin Creevey had hobbies in common?

Hermione's search didn't take long. As she'd expected, she discovered Severus standing on his own out in the chilly moonlight of the garden. He held out an arm to tuck her into his side as she approached. His body was so solid and warm and *real*, she could almost forget that her time with him was half over. Almost.

True to her word, Charity had done the job of putting the garden to sleep at the end of summer. There were still pockets of life to be found here and there — winter blossoms and evergreens — but for the most part everything had been pruned back to wait for spring. The close of the year seemed a good time for putting a few other things to bed, too.

"Severus?" Hermione said. "Will you tell me about Lily?"

Severus supposed he should have expected the question sooner or later. Staring straight ahead at the starthistle, he chewed on the inside of his cheek.

"What would you like to know?" he asked.

"Anything you're willing to tell me, I suppose." Hermione fiddled with a loose thread on the sleeve of the arm he'd draped over her shoulders. "What was she like?"

"Stubborn. Clever. Funny. Not as kind as she wanted to be, I think, but far kinder than anyone else I met as a child. She would have liked you."

"Really?"

"Very much so."

For a moment, there was no noise but the muffled, festive hum of the party and the usual sounds of Cokeworth at night: a backfiring car, voices raised in an argument, the high-pitched bark of a fox. Severus breathed in the light scent of winter-blooming flowers.

"Were you in love with her?" Hermione asked in a way that made it sound as if she knew the answer — or thought she did.

Severus laughed. "Not in the slightest. The worst kiss of both of our lives proved that quite conclusively. The worst kiss of my life, at any rate. Given her abysmal taste in husbands, Lily was likely not so fortunate. No, we... We were like Lily's son and you, I suppose. Closer than friends, but in a familial way."

Until they hadn't been. But their parting of ways hadn't meant they'd ever stopped caring for one another. They had simply been on different paths, opposite sides of a war. The wrong side, in his case.

"And yet your Patronus matches hers?" Hermione asked.

Not anymore. Severus opted to leave that detail out of his response.

"There are many types of love, so I'm told. Do you think only romantic love can have such a profound effect on someone?"

"No, I suppose not." Turning towards him, she raised her forever ink-stained hand to cup his cheek. "Though it is certainly powerful."

It was not a declaration, as such, but Severus's breath stuttered all the same. Daring to believe she might actually return his foolish feelings, he lowered his mouth to hers. No sooner had he slipped his tongue past her parted lips than an all-too familiar voice rang out behind them.

"Get a room!"

Severus groaned. Pulling back only slightly from the kiss, he said, "I have one — quite nearby, too. Come on, Hughes.

We are apparently offending Charity's delicate sensibilities."

Instead of allowing him to lead her over to his house, Hermione laughed and stayed put. Traitor.

"Sorry for interrupting," Charity said. "Heather, could I please talk to Severus alone for a minute? It won't take long, I promise."

Something in Charity's tone halted the automatic refusal that rose up Severus's throat. She'd looked tired and drawn all day, but he'd put that down to stress from organising the party. Maybe it was something more than that. Was she ill? In trouble of some sort?

"Of course," Hermione said. "I'll go talk books with Eileen for a while." She squeezed Severus's arm. "Save me a kiss for midnight."

Charity winked. "I will."

This earned Charity another laugh and an exaggerated *mwah* of a kiss on her cheek as Hermione made her way out of the garden and back to the party.

"Well?" Severus said after several moments passed without Charity saying a thing other than Muffliato. "What is it?"

"Are you in love with Heather?"

He froze. Had all of the women in his life chosen New Year's Eve as the official night of intensely personal questions? Would his mother soon descend upon the garden for an inquisition of her own? And *why* was Charity asking him this? Did it have to do with the strange looks she'd sometimes cast his way over the summer, or the —

"Calm down," Charity said with a roll of her eyes. "I'm not working up to some awkward romantic confession. I'm not in love with you, you idiot."

Thank Merlin.

He didn't reply to her question (he had not, after all, even told Hermione yet), but Charity didn't seem to need verbal confirmation.

"Mm. Thought so." Her next words came out in a breathless rush, like a first year trying to explain why he'd caught her

in the corridor after curfew. "Heather is from the future and I really don't think she means any harm but I don't want you to get hurt so I thought you should know and I should have told you sooner and please don't go getting yourself arrested by using dark magic to extract information from her."

Severus's own breaths came faster and shallower. One of the clauses of Hermione's Unbreakable Vow had been to not willingly reveal to anyone that she was from another time. He'd seen her not two minutes before, alive and well. As the Bonder, he would *know* if the Vow had been broken. He would have felt his magic stop her heart, somehow. The wrongness of it would have clawed its way up his wand arm and shredded his soul. There had been no opportunity for Hermione to go announcing her status as a time traveller to Charity before she'd left them alone. She was fine. She had to be fine.

"How did you come to this conclusion?" he asked, digging his fingernails into his palms as he fought the urge to run into the house and check Hermione's pulse.

Charity's lower lip trembled. "I saw a book in her room, months ago. It used to be Gideon's. Gideon and Fabian's. I've been trying to modify it since their death. I... Well. I succeeded, with some help from Heather's liquid luck, but it won't take me back to Gideon, which was my original plan." Not willingly revealed, then. Hermione was fine. And Charity, of all people, was apparently responsible for her time travelling. Christ. "That's why I've had you teach me to duel, actually. I suppose it always was a long shot. Me versus a whole group of Death Eaters."

One of whom had been Severus, though he would sooner turn his wand on himself than use it against her. Even back then, back before they'd been friends, he couldn't have hurt her.

Reaching into her pocket, she produced a less tarnished version of Hermione's silver phoenix book and thrust it at Severus. "Here. I'm supposed to give this to you, according to that potion. I'm guessing you'll eventually figure out how

to get it to Heather and bring her here to you." She let out a mirthless laugh. "I just realised that I don't even know if Heather is her real name."

"It's not."

Charity gasped. "You already knew? For how long? I've been tying myself in knots about this, you arse."

"I've known since the beginning. Dumbledore knows as well. It's a secret from everyone else." As far as attempts at consolation went, it wasn't much, but he knew the story of his first meeting with Hermione would make her laugh. "When she arrived in our time, she landed in my bathroom at Hogwarts. While I was there. It could have been far more embarrassing if she'd landed just a few minutes before. As it was, she caught me in a towel."

It worked. Throwing her head back, Charity cackled.

"That's brilliant," she said. "My own disappointment aside, I am happy for you. I hope you know that."

Dumbledore had voiced a similar sentiment. Coming from Charity, it was far easier to believe.

"Thank you," he said, clutching the book he didn't deserve. Gods, he could never, ever tell her. Never.

She bumped her shoulder against his as a countdown from ten boomed from inside the house. When raucous cheers welcomed 1988, Charity pecked Severus on the cheek.

"Happy New Year, mate."

"Happy New Year."

28



Red Chrysanthemum

4 January 1988

Honestly, the fact that Eileen had been sorted into Slytherin was nothing short of astonishing. When she tried to sneak anywhere, she blundered around like a nervous Hufflepuff. Severus kept to the shadows as the Three Broomsticks came into view and Eileen ducked inside. He wasn't sure why he'd followed her, exactly, only that she'd practically broadcasted *I AM UP TO SOMETHING* as she'd slipped out of the castle. Finding out what that something was had seemed the thing to do.

Leaving his Disillusionment Charm in place, Severus waited for a group of patrons to open the door and crept in behind them. He was just in time to hear Eileen shout her destination into the fireplace before she whirled away in the green flames.

To her credit, Rosmerta hardly blinked as Severus tapped his wand to the top of his head and made himself fully visible once more. She simply raised an eyebrow, poured out a measure of firewhisky, and set the glass on the bar in front of him without a word. If only all pubs had such stellar service.

Sipping the drink gave him something to do while he let a few minutes pass before he followed Eileen. The fireplace

on the other end spat him out into what looked like a cleaning supply cupboard. A sign on the door read: "Reminder: Muggles frequent this office. No magic beyond this point, please."

What on earth could Eileen be doing in the Muggle world? Going there had never served her well. After a quick transfiguration of his robes, Severus walked into the corridor. A few steps after turning left at a T-junction, he found a waiting room.

There was rather more wicker than he thought should ever be present in one place, and everything in the room was decorated in pastels. Even the fish in the giant tank had scales in shades of soft pink, white, and peach. A young receptionist smiled at Severus in greeting.

"Can I help you?" the receptionist asked.

"No, thank you," he said. "I'm just waiting for my mother."

Severus chose the seafoam coloured chair that was closest to a door with a brass nameplate. Mercy Burbage? Charity's Squib cousin? Wasn't she a therapist or something of that sort?

Oh.

Even though it was none of his business — even though he should have walked straight out of there and floo'd back to the Three Broomsticks — he silently cast an eavesdropping charm.

"My biggest regret in all of it is my son," Eileen's voice murmured into his ear, and something in Severus went brittle and frozen. "He started taking care of me when he grew up, but I should have been the one taking care of him. I should have been able to protect him. I'm a *witch*. I should have been able to stand up to one worthless Muggle. I failed as a mother. We both know it, and I can never make it up to him."

Severus gritted his teeth. How did Eileen not know that he only hated one of his parents for the mess that had been his childhood? Why else would he have spent years answering her calls, promising protection and telling her to come stay with him?

"How do you know that your son shares your view of things?" a second, less familiar voice asked. "Can you read his mind?"

Eileen huffed out a weak laugh. "I couldn't even tell when he was lying about sneaking a biscuit from the kitchen when he was a child. No, I definitely can't read his mind. Gods, if I could, I'd need even more therapy. He has a serious girlfriend now, and there are some thoughts a mother just does not want to know about."

There were some thoughts a son did not want to know about, either. And some he had no right to. Cancelling the spell, Severus returned to the room with the fireplace and left Eileen alone.

9 January 1988

Charity had known almost the whole time. Hermione still couldn't get over it.

In hindsight, the signs were easier to spot. All of those questions at the pub in Cokeworth, all of Charity's talk of how she wished she could go back in time and save Gideon. And Hermione had stolen that chance from her. It had been unintentional, yes, but she couldn't help the twinge of guilt that shot through her.

The fact that Severus was in charge of getting the book to her past self led to all sorts of half-hopeful, half-desperate speculation. Had he used Polyjuice to don a Draco disguise, sneaking the book into her pocket himself? Why else would Draco Malfoy, no matter how reformed, place flowers next to the name of his blood traitor relative? And if Severus had pretended to be Draco that day at the memorial, had that been the only time he'd done so? Hermione tried to remember dancing with Draco: the feeling of his hand on her waist, his warm fingers clasped around hers. Had there been anything of Severus in that touch? Was that why Draco smirked like he knew all of her secrets?

Or maybe Severus had simply left the book in Eileen's care, along with instructions for its delivery. If Severus was alive in her time, why had he never sought her out? It had been three years since the end of the war.

Letting her eyes go unfocused, Hermione pictured her eighteen-year-old self: nursing too-recent war wounds, dating Ron, grieving her dead, trying to fill up the hollow spaces by revising for NEWTs. How would that Hermione have reacted if Professor Snape had risen from the dead and declared that she would one day go back in time and fall in love with him? She winced.

Perhaps Severus had stayed hidden in order to avoid doing anything that would prevent her from going back in time. Or maybe, after six years of teaching a hand-waving, insufferable know-it-all, he no longer wanted anything to do with her. Time would dull the memories of the year and a day they'd spent together. He had so many miles to go until the end of the war.

But he'd still given her the book. Somehow.

Trying (and failing) to swallow the lump in her throat, Hermione nestled her gifts for Severus into a fake, hollowed-out book: a couple of bezoars, a more recent blend of her Warming Vapour, Summoning Potions for Eileen and Fawkes, Pepper-Up, several vials of her antivenin, Blood Replenishing Potion, Felix Felicis, Wiggenweld Potion, Hiccoughing Solution, Wit-Sharpening Potion, and Murtlap Essence. A very thorough first aid kit. Flames had licked at her wrist when she'd thought of putting anything more than the most basic labels on each potion. If she'd had her way, she would have drawn giant red arrows pointing towards the anti-venin, but it was not to be. That the Vow had permitted her to brew it and give it to Severus would have to be enough. She could only hope he'd drink the Felix Felicis when the time came, letting it direct his actions.

Binding one of Severus's hairs into the book, Hermione shut the cover and cast the locking charm she'd selected. There. Perfect. After hiding the book away in her desk, she toyed with the other vials of Warming Vapour. Declaring her love for him through a potion seemed fitting for the two of them — better than words.

"Hi, Professor," Percy said as he bounded into the classroom, a deck of cards already in his hand.

"Hello, Mr Weasley. Are you ready for me to reclaim my title?"

Around the end of November, they'd transfigured a Knut into a miniature trophy for their Exploding Snap games. Percy had remained undefeated since before Christmas, keeping the trophy in his possession.

Percy turned his nose up in the smug expression Hermione had come to think of as his Prefect look. "I'm ready for you to try."

The Prefect look upgraded to Head Boy when Percy was once again victorious. Hermione did not pout. Much.

It was funny, getting to know this younger version of Percy — the one who earned detentions by helping Oliver with ridiculous indoor Quidditch stunts. She never would have imagined the ever-cautious Percy of her school days doing such a thing.

When Defence Club started, the older kids decided they wanted to give the Patronus Charm another go. Only a few had managed it the previous time: Bill had produced a quetzal which had circled his grinning head several times, its wings spread wide. A seventh year Ravenclaw couple had cast matching red squirrels, prompting a chorus of awws from the more romantic students and retching noises from the class clowns.

Streams of white vapour poured from wands as young faces screwed up in concentration. Bill and the Ravenclaws helped out, advising the other students on how to choose their happy memory. Bright smiles heralded the appearance of several ghostly shapes: a swan, a pine marten, a wildcat. No one seemed more surprised than Tonks when a chameleon erupted from her wand. She was the youngest one in the group to successfully cast the spell.

"Wow," Hestia said. "That was brilliant, Tonks!"

"It certainly was," Hermione said. "Three points to Hufflepuff."

Tonks's cheeks turned almost as pink as her hair. "Thanks."

"How is everyone doing that?" Charlie asked. "I can't get more

than a tiny light. Professor, can I watch you cast the spell again?"

With narrowed eyes, Charlie scrutinised every movement of Hermione's wand. He gasped along with Hermione when, instead of an otter, a large bat materialised.

Hermione did not look in Severus's direction, but she felt his gaze on her all the same. It brought a hot, prickling sensation to the back of her neck and a flutter rippling through her belly. Not exactly how she'd intended to reveal her feelings, but she should have anticipated it before she cast the charm.

"I think you were better off with the old one," Tonks said with a frown. "Err, sorry, Professor. No offence. I just really liked the otter, that's all."

A bat. Her Patronus was a bloody *bat*. Well, there was no mistaking the source of that change. Severus had almost laughed at the sight of it. Had they not been surrounded by irksome students, he likely would have. Just as well it had happened during Defence Club; Hermione might have thought he was laughing at her, rather than at the form her subconscious had chosen. A bat. Merlin.

Once the children left them alone with the echo of those silvery wings, Severus approached Hermione, his pulse thudding in his ears. She *loved* him. How the hell had that happened?

"That bat stole my thunder," she said with a rueful smile. "Here. Happy birthday."

Even for such a thick book, the leather-bound tome she placed in his hands was heavy. Under his touch, an embossed drawing of a sprig of heather appeared on the cover. It opened with a click to reveal a cache of potions.

"It can only be opened by you or someone who means you no harm," Hermione said. She moved as if straightening the already tidy contents, touching first the golden Felix Felicis, then one of the milky bottles of her antivenin before cringing away and rubbing her wrist. Hmm.

There were names on the bottles of Summoning Potion: Eileen and Fawkes. Ah, so that was why she'd needed one of the turkey's feathers. Severus was still engrossed in examining each potion when Hermione produced a box full of glowing vials from her desk.

"I decided that as long as I was making an updated version of my Warming Vapour for your little first aid kit there, I may as well create enough to see you through the next dozen or so winters," she said. "I never told you exactly how it works, did I? It's created with a specific person in mind; when they inhale the vapour, they experience whatever emotions the brewer feels towards them."

Uncorking one of the vials, Severus breathed in. It was still like bottled sunshine, wrapping him in her conjured warmth. Regret and respect were still present, but overshadowing both was the unmistakable, deep glow of love. A breath snagged in his throat.

"See?" Hermione said, shrugging one shoulder. "Like I said, the bat stole my thunder."

Severus drew his lips between his teeth, willing his voice to remain steady when he spoke. "You know what form my Patronus took, correct?"

"Yeah, and honestly, Severus, it's fine. I mean that. I'm not telling you how I feel in order to hear it back. I just wanted you to know. Plus, she was your best friend, and if I lost my —"

"Hermione. Pay attention. I said *took*. Past tense. It *used* to be a hind."

She took a step back, as if his words had frightened her — as if a shift in his Patronus was horrible, devastating news. "What is it now?" she whispered.

He raised his wand. "Expecto Patronum."

At the sight of the doe, Hermione clapped trembling fingers over her mouth. "Oh my god," she breathed, tears welling up in her eyes. "A doe? That's... It's for me?"

"Who else? I believe it was inspired by the herd of deer that

watched our first flying lesson. It's far more flattering than a bat, you have to admit."

She let out a choked laugh. "Does Dumbledore know?"

"He does."

For some reason, this made the tears spill over. Severus thought he'd done something wrong until she threw herself into his arms, murmuring between salt-soaked kisses that she loved him.

"Oh!" a small voice said, making them jerk apart right as Severus reached for the clasp of her glamour-linked necklace. Percy Weasley stood in the doorway of the classroom, his eyes wide behind his horn-rimmed glasses. "I'm sorry!"

"No, no, I'm sorry, Mr Weasley," Hermione said before Severus could decide how many points to deduct for his failure to knock. "We shouldn't have behaved so inappropriately in a classroom. What do you need?"

"Err, I just forgot my trophy, that's all." He scooped up a little bronze cup from the edge of Hermione's desk, then tilted his head to one side. "Oh. *That's* why your Patronus is..." Apparently thinking better of voicing that particular thought, he clamped his lips shut, gave them a parting wave, and scurried away.



29



Ivy

30 April 1988

The days warmed into a bright, sunny spring, but the nights remained bitterly cold, especially in the dungeons. They lit a fire that evening, curling up together on the sofa with twin stacks of books. As he read, Severus traced his free hand along Hermione's arm, her collarbone, her shoulders, her hair. Gentle, soothing touches that made her eyelids droop and transformed the words on the page into a blur.

Around the time she was almost lulled to sleep, his wandering fingers landed on her ring, twisting it back and forth. "Hermione?" he whispered, almost too low to hear.

"Mm?"

"What if this *did* come with a question attached?"

It took a few bleary seconds for the meaning of his words to register. When he'd given her the ring, he'd been very clear that it was not *that* sort of ring. Once her sleepy brain caught up with what he'd just said, her book slipped out of her grasp and landed on the floor with a thunk. She stared at his serious expression, scarcely able to breathe.

And here she'd thought he couldn't shock her any more than when she'd discovered that his declaration of *always* had

been meant for her.

"I'd say yes," she said.

His lips twitched as if fighting the smile she could see in his eyes. "Would you indeed?"

"Are you asking?"

Cradling her face between his palms, he kissed her, slow and soft, before resting his forehead against hers. "What do you think?"

She laughed. "If you aren't asking, then I am. Will you marry me?"

With those words, his smile broke free. It was a moment she wanted to press between the pages of a book to preserve forever.

"Yes," he said. "Obviously."

"Good. But... When? How? Heather Hughes doesn't exist, and Hermione Granger is not anywhere near a marriageable age in this time, as far as the Ministry and Muggle government are concerned."

The answer, of course, was in a book — the one Severus had been reading.

"It's an old fashioned binding," he said. "They had quite a revival in the '60s, apparently. All we need is the two of us and a Bonder. Notifying the Ministry of the union comes with some legal benefits, but it's not strictly necessary. We can cross that bridge later, when it won't cause... complications."

Depending on the wording they chose, they would be bound for either a year and a day or as long as love lasted. According to the book, the binding spell would create a cord that would fray and unravel if their bond was dissolved.

"We'll go with as long as love lasts, of course," Hermione said, "but what will happen when I go back to my own time?"

"The same thing that happens when one spouse dies, I imagine." He said the words with no hint of emotion, but his arm tightened around her. "In that case, the bond doesn't vanish until the surviving spouse is ready to move on — if they ever are. I'll still be here." Snapping the book shut, he frowned at her right hand. "I should get you another ring."

"No. I like this one, thank you very much. Who will be our Bonder?"

"Charity," he said without hesitation. "We can go to Coke-worth tonight, if you wish."

Charity was already in her pyjamas when they arrived. She answered the door with a cup of tea in one hand and a triangle of Marmite-painted toast in the other.

"Blimey," she said when they told her of their intentions, her face brightening with the widest grin. "That's brilliant. Of course I'll be your Bonder. I'd be honoured. One sec, though. I should probably at least put on a bra for this."

"Good gods," Severus muttered.

While Charity got dressed, Hermione scattered jars of bluebell flames around the garden to provide light, chuckling to herself. The only thing Hermione had to do to get herself ready was to remove her necklace and reveal her true face. Charity had already seen it at New Year's; the three of them had sneaked off to Severus's shed, hiding from the rest of the party guests as if sharing the location of hidden treasure instead of lighter eyes, the different slope of her nose, and her riot of curly hair.

"You know," Charity said, now clad in diaphanous, dark blue formal robes, "it's weird, since I'm so used to seeing your other face, but... You look more like you this way." Turning to Severus, she clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Let's see that book, then."

Charity reviewed the wand movements of the spell several times, mouthing the words to herself. The clouds blotting out the stars overhead let loose a sudden deluge, the rain freshening the air and making the grass sparkle in the blue light. Charity, Hermione, and Severus stood in the centre of a ring of budding flowers, shielded from the weather by the invisible dome of a charm that Severus cast.

"Ready?" Charity whispered.

There was no mention of remaining together until parted by death, nor of sickness and health, and for that, Hermione

was grateful. She refused to allow the spectre of the future to intrude on this moment. Both of their hands trembled as Severus moved her ring from right to left, nearly resulting in the ring falling to the ground. As they spoke vows of love, fidelity, and honesty, Charity's wand swirled and dipped, tying their joined hands together with a conjured golden cord. The cord glowed with the conclusion of the spell, warmth sinking into their skin like sunlight.

Their audience of one applauded and cheered loud enough for twenty when the ceremony ended with a kiss.

"Congratulations," Charity said, hugging them both in that tight, close way of hers. "Come on, let's go in. I'll host your reception."

For their first meal as a married couple, they ate toast. In Charity's narrow galley kitchen, they talked and laughed and wiped crumbs from their fingers. Somehow, the subject turned to Hermione's Hogwarts House.

"You really haven't told him?" Charity asked.

"Nope," Hermione said. "That would take all the fun out of making him guess."

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it?" Charity smirked. "Gryffindor."

It was a good thing that the older Tonks had been such a brilliant Occlumency teacher, or Hermione would have ended up collapsing in giggles at Charity guessing correctly on her first try. As it was, keeping her expression neutral was a *struggle*.

Severus gave Charity a nonplussed look. "How dare you say such things about my wife?"

"She has to be, mate. She was brave enough to marry your snarky arse, wasn't she? Spine of steel, that one."

His wife. No amount of Occlumency training could have contained Hermione's smile upon hearing him say that.

In spite of her determination to focus on this day, this moment, Hermione's mind drifted to their promises to remain faithful. After she returned to her time, thirteen years would pass until he — *hopefully* — saw her again at the Ministry.

How could she possibly ask him to wait for her all that time? It wasn't realistic. Was it?

Back in his quarters — their quarters, really — Hermione started talking before Severus could begin the very important business of getting her naked.

"I've been thinking," she said. "I don't quite know how to put this." The heartbroken, determined frown she cast his way made shards of ice lance through Severus's chest. "I only know a fraction of what you're going to go through in the years to come. There are things I..." She rubbed her wrist. "It's going to be difficult and horrible and it kills me that I can't be there beside you."

Severus knew all of this already. He waited, knowing that if he remained quiet, she would hurry on to the gut punch of whatever she'd decided.

"I'm selfish," she said. "I want what we vowed in the garden. I want you faithful only to me, but... Thirteen years is such a long time to be alone, and I don't want to be yet another thing adding to your mountains of guilt. I'm not going to pretend it won't hurt, but I'll understand if it happens. If you find someone else while I'm gone."

Someone else. His stomach plummeted. Even considering the possibility felt traitorous. He knew he wouldn't understand if their positions were reversed and she sought comfort in another's touch after promising herself to him. He would turn defensive and cold, shutting her out.

"Should I owl potential mistresses now to prepare for your departure, or would you rather I wait till you're gone?" he asked in a dry voice.

"Severus."

"It's our wedding day, so kindly shut up about the possibility that I will be unfaithful to you. I won't. Not in thirteen days, thirteen months, or thirteen years. I would not have said the

vows if I did not mean them."

A tiny smile stole onto her lips. "All right," she said.
"All right?"

"I believe you. I just wanted to tell you that no matter what happens during the war, I'll still love you. And now you know." She winced. "Have I spoilt everything?"

Sniffing, he glanced at his watch. "Not everything, no, but I had rather intended to have my face between your legs by this point."

The comment made her laugh, as he'd intended. And then she let him peel her rain-splattered dress from her body, and he set about driving all thoughts of *someone else* from her mind.

1 May 1988

Hermione stood in front of Dumbledore's Pensieve, watching the silver cloud of her memory whirl around the smooth bowl. That morning, Severus had transfigured their marriage cord into a black button that retained a subtle twist of rope in its design. He'd used it to replace one of the buttons on the cuff of his teaching robes, holding it in place with thread and a strong Sticking Charm.

Leaning forward, Hermione dipped into the memory of the last time she'd seen Professor Snape before the Battle of Hogwarts. He burst into the corridor outside his classroom, older and more worn than her Severus. His voice held no tenderness as he barked out an order for Luna and Hermione to tend to an unconscious Flitwick, but as he moved to leave them, he hesitated — just for a fraction of a second.

It wasn't the first time she'd examined this memory. In the wake of the final battle, she'd watched it over and over, trying in vain to read the emotions on her former professor's face. Back then, she'd decided that the barely-there pause was linked to his reluctance to kill Dumbledore. She'd interpreted the brush of his thumb over a button on his cuff as a nervous habit.

She couldn't see the details of the button — hadn't paid

enough attention at the time to recall anything but the colour — but she knew. It was still the coiling rope pattern of their transfigured marriage cord. A year before the end of the war, their bond had remained intact.

Dragging herself out of the memory, Hermione plucked it up with her wand and returned the wisps to her temple. Fawkes alighted on the edge of the Pensieve, cooing like the overgrown pigeon Severus accused him of being. She indulged him with a few strokes of his feathers.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Dumbledore asked.

Hermione nodded. "I did, thank you."

"I'm glad to hear it. Now, I think we should probably discuss your final few days with us..."



30



Cyclamen

21 June 1988

Severus and Hermione had barely ventured out of bed for most of the day. While they clung together in his quarters, Albus covered Hermione's classes. Slughorn had been coaxed into taking over for Severus (all the while going on and on about how this was a one-time thing, and he was never coming out of retirement). Severus didn't know what explanation had been given for the sudden disappearance of the Potions and DADA professors, and he didn't care. He was sore and tired and sated and it was their final few hours.

"It's past midnight," Hermione whispered.

"I know."

The silver phoenix book sat on the bedside table, gleaming in the dim light. Charity had said it would take Hermione automatically when she reached the end of her year and a day. Severus wanted to destroy it with Fiendfyre, but Charity had warned him against it. The book was what anchored Hermione to 1988. Removing that anchor was inadvisable.

"I don't want to go." Hermione's voice wavered and cracked. She took a few rapid breaths, as if fighting off tears, then let out a choked laugh. "God, this room *smells*."

It did. Like sex and sweat and the slightly musty scent that always lingered in the dungeons.

"Perhaps we should have gone to Cokeworth instead of staying here," he said. "At least my bedroom at Spinner's End has windows to be opened. And we could have also made use of the sofa, the garden —"

"The garden?" Yawning, she nestled closer into his side. "As much as I'd like more time with Charity, I really don't think she'd appreciate that."

"Knowing her, she'd likely tell us to wait so she could get popcorn."

"True." In a far-too familiar gesture, she rubbed her wrist. "You remember, right? About Charity? When?"

Severus nodded. He had a rough idea of when Charity's time was scheduled to be up, even if Hermione couldn't state it plainly. After Hermione's sixth year.

"If you decide that the Ministry Ball is too public for a reunion," she said, "I'll be in my quarters — these quarters — later on. The password is Boomslang Skin. You can meet me here, if you'd rather. Don't stay away because you think I might not want you. I will. I don't care how old you are or what happened in the war or what impression you might get from my younger self. Just... Send me an owl or something to let me know you're OK, at the very least. Please."

"I will."

"Harry will be at the ball, and I'll understand if you don't want to see him right away. He very much wants to see you, though. Oh! Remember that, OK? Remember I told you that *Harry wants to see you in my time*. Especially when Dumbledore tells you something that might make you furious with me for not warning you. Do what Dumbledore says when that happens. You must. It won't end like you think. And during the final battle of the war... I wish I could tell you exactly how... I'm so sorry, Severus. I'm sorry for everything

that's going to happen. You — ”

“Stop apologising for things that are in no way your fault. Hufflepuff.”

Her giggle was subdued and sniffly. “Is that what you’ve decided? Hufflepuff? It’s probably your last chance to guess my House before you find out for sure at my Sorting.”

“Hmm. Ravenclaw. Definitely Ravenclaw.”

Hermione grinned. “I love you.”

He’d never actually said the words, letting his altered Patronus do the talking for him, but this did seem the time for it. “I love you, too.”

He hadn’t thought he possessed the energy, but when she kissed him and straddled his hips, it didn’t take long until he was once again aching for her. They’d mostly been frantic and rough of late, like both of them wanted to leave an indelible impression. This time, Severus kept their movements slow, memorising stretches of skin, coaxing out sighs and moans that he wouldn’t hear again for years. If ever.

Later, *truly* exhausted, he curled his body around hers, her back to his front, and murmured into her hair that he was going to follow through on his promise to bend her over her desk in 2001.

She laughed. “Or maybe we won’t even make it out of the Ministry, and we’ll have to find an empty office, like you said.”

“We could do both. As well as taking you back to my old quarters and telling you to take off your clothes.”

“All in the same night? At *your* age? Hmm. Maybe I should take some Strengthening Solution along in my handbag.”

“It might be a plan. I’m not even thirty yet and right now I am bloody knackered.”

“Me too. We can’t fall asleep, though.”

“No, definitely not.” Severus’s eyelids were heavy, and Hermione was soft and warm in his arms. “We must stay awake.”

There were a few murmured words of affection after that, and Severus recalled saying they should call an elf for coffee,

but at some point they must have closed their eyes and drifted off. When he came to, the charmed ceiling overhead was the pale grey of early morning, and the space next to him was so empty that he felt hollowed out inside. The book had vanished, along with Hermione.

She was gone.

22 June 1988

Severus gaped at his employer. Dead. The Headmaster had told the students and faculty that Hermione had died, taken out by an anti-Muggle-born fanatic (unnamed and now “missing”). According to Albus’s story, Severus’s recent absence had been spent brewing potions and trying to help the Healers save Professor Hughes. Albus had called in favours from Order Members at the PROPHET and in the Aurorystyle to make it seem real, telling them the bare bones of the truth without revealing Hermione’s actual name.

“Hermione is beloved by many students, as I’m sure you’re aware,” Albus said. “Even among some of your Slytherins, she has earned trust and affection. Professor Hughes’s death will help to inspire this generation to fight for our cause; I’m certain of it. I hope that her memory may also persuade some of her former students to remain neutral instead of rallying behind Tom. The more of them we can save from repeating the mistakes of previous generations, the better, as I’m sure you’ll agree.”

It was as if the flames of Hermione’s Vow had broken free from her wrist and coiled around Severus’s neck like a noose. Angry heat crept up his face.

“Did she know this was what you’d planned?” Severus asked. She couldn’t have. Hermione would have forbidden Albus from using her as a weapon to hurt children. Irritating, infuriating, often moronic children, yes, but she was fond of them for some unfathomable reason.

“No, but I think she would agree with my logic.”

"I very much doubt it."

Severus should have known that Albus's gift of time alone with Hermione hadn't come without strings. And, yes, Severus more often than not snapped at and harangued his students, but *this*. Hermione would be beyond enraged when she found out. Unable to look at Albus a second longer, Severus turned and stormed towards the spiral stairs, black robes in full, furious billow.

The corridors were full of somber whispers and hideous sniffling. Minerva had the temerity to hug him when he encountered her on his descent to the dungeons, her accent growing stronger as she whispered how very sorry she was. Severus didn't know how to respond. He opted for silence.

Less than a minute after reaching the sanctuary of his office, a fist rapped on the door. Severus groaned.

"Enter."

Percy Weasley was a tiny portrait of grief, his blue eyes red-rimmed from recent tears. His too-big school robes (cast-offs from William or Charles, most likely) were rumpled and creased instead of their usual starched perfection.

"Hello, sir," he said as he approached Severus's desk.

"What is it, Weasley?"

"I, err, I thought you might want this."

This was a magical photograph of Severus and Hermione, taken by Percy at Charity's New Year's Eve party. Hermione was wearing her glamour, but that didn't matter. Severus did, in fact, very much want the picture. Beaming up at him, Photo Hermione dragged her snowdrop pendant back and forth along its chain, as if preparing to remove it at any second.

Severus gave a sharp nod. Apparently deciding that was enough of a reply, Percy turned and walked towards the door. Severus waited until it was safely shut behind him before glancing back at the photograph. That glamoured smile of hers urged him on. Telling himself that she would get a laugh

out of it (in thirteen fucking years), he opened his mouth and mumbled the words he never, ever thought he would say.

"One point to Gryffindor."

"You need to eat," Eileen said as she barged into Severus's quarters, a covered tray floating at her side. Removing her necklace, she shook off her Madam Pince disguise and transformed back into Mum — all the better to glare at him when she added, "You haven't shown up for a single meal all day."

"I'm not hungry."

Ignoring his protests, she lowered the tray onto a side table and removed the lid, releasing the sharp scent of vinegar. She'd brought him a polystyrene container full of his favourite childhood dinner: fish and chips. A warming charm hugged the container, making steam curl into the chilly dungeon air. To the side of it was a plate with a few Tunnock's teacakes: a treat that a much younger Severus had always tried to sneak into Eileen's shopping trolley when she'd been foolish enough to take him along to the supermarket.

The elves hadn't produced this. The teacakes were from a factory, and the rest had to have been made by the chip shop a few streets over from Spinner's End. They'd been serving up the same oddly thin mushy peas for decades, and he'd once told Eileen that all others just didn't taste right to him.

Severus hadn't cried in front of his mum since before his age had hit double digits. He hadn't cried in front of *anyone* since just after Lily's death. He didn't know why the sight of fried food and marshmallowy biscuits should bring him to tears, but his eyes stung and his throat went tight and Hermione was gone and suddenly, he couldn't hold it in.

"Oh, love," Eileen whispered. With uncertain movements, as if she thought she'd be shoved away at any second, she drew him into an embrace.

Tobias had never allowed such affection and attention

to be aimed at Severus. *I don't know why I put up with you ignoring me like this, Eileen. Leave the boy alone. You'll make him soft.* Like any love she'd given to Severus had been love that'd been stolen from Tobias. Like any hint of motherly devotion had meant Severus and Eileen had deserved some sort of punishment. Only when Tobias had been away had she dared. Even that had only lasted until Severus had become a sneering, sarcastic teenager. He'd done a fair job of scaring off attempts at affection on his own at that point.

Now, Severus hugged her back.

"Come on," Eileen said once he'd dampened the shoulder of her robes with his tears. "I had a long, hungry journey to get those chips, and if you don't eat them, I will."

She wasn't lying. While he picked at his dinner, she sat next to him and stole bite after bite. Even though he hadn't wanted any of it, the rumble of his stomach demanded more, and he found himself trying to beat her to the best, least soggy chips. When she dared to snatch one of his teacakes, he glowered.

Eileen let out a sad chuckle. "*There he is.*" Drawing her eyebrows together, she wiped her fingers on a napkin. "Do you need anything else? I can stay, or I could go get Charity, if you'd like."

He shook his head. "I'd rather be alone. Thanks for dinner, Mum."

"You're welcome. I'll see you at breakfast tomorrow." It was not a question.

After Eileen left, Severus dragged his feet towards his empty bed. Scolding himself for being so sentimental didn't stop him from unearthing the stupid grey nightshirt Hermione had favoured. He wore it to sleep every night that first month.

And when he went home for the summer, he planted a pomegranate tree in his garden.

+ September 1991

Severus's life became a series of countdowns. Only this many days until the new year, which was only this many years

from the end of the war, and so on. At the end of one such countdown, Hermione's younger self came to Hogwarts.

He noticed Potter first. How could Severus miss him, when the child was the spitting image of James? Well, almost. Seeing Lily's eyes in that loathed face was like beholding a walking, talking version of the Cruciatus. Likely the boy was his father in every way apart from that familiar shade of green; none of Lily's kindness could have won out over James's arsehole DNA.

And then, there she was: all bushy hair and surprisingly large teeth. She must have either grown into them or had them altered. Looking at young Miss Granger, Severus felt an odd disconnect. It was as if he'd gone round to her parents' house to watch old Muggle home videos of his wife as a child. He wanted to be able to turn to the grown version of her and make teasing comments about this girl who was not yet Hermione. Holding his breath, he stifled a laugh as Miss Granger enthusiastically jammed the Sorting Hat onto her head.

The hat paused, debating where to place her, as he'd known it would. Then, finally, the answer.

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Oh, for fuck's sake. Ignoring Albus's predictable twinkle, Severus scowled. Charity was going to be intolerably smug.

As Miss Granger took a seat next to Percy Weasley at the Gryffindor table, Severus watched the pair of them. If anyone would recognise her manner of speech, her gestures and habits, it would be him, but no. Nothing. They chatted away to each other, easy and friendly, and Percy appeared untroubled.

Severus hadn't seen Draco in some time. There appeared to be little remaining of the giggly boy who had once removed Bella's hair. This eleven-year-old Draco was all swaggering, unearned confidence. After the hat placed him predictably in Slytherin, he shot his new Head of House a miniature version of Lucius's smirk.

It was going to be a long seven years.



Rhododendron

8 December 1983

Why are you so mean to Mini Hermione?"

Severus set aside the tiresome essay he'd been marking — Miss Granger's, as it happened. Several inches more than requested, every unimaginative sentence parroting back the ideas of others. With her talent for rote memorisation of line after line, the girl should have considered a career in acting.

"I can hardly be kind to her," he said. "She's a Muggle-born and Potter's best friend. It would be as good as declaring my true loyalties and painting a target on her back."

Charity sniffed. "I suppose, though I don't think anyone would be suspicious if you treated her like, I don't know, Padma Patil or Michael Corner or any other clever student."

"No other clever student is as infuriating as her." Reaching across the table, Severus slapped the essay down in front of Charity. "Just look at this. I struggle to believe that this exasperating child will grow up to be Hermione. Miss Granger has none of Hermione's creativity."

"What, you expect a third year to perform dangerous experiments and write articles for Potions journals?"

Without waiting for a response, Charity went back to her own pile of marking. The truth was, Severus *had* expected something more than perfect marks and by-the-book potions from Miss Granger. No matter how much Hermione had warned him that he'd found her younger self insufferable, he'd thought Miss Granger would be the sort of mythical student who was a joy to teach — the sort he'd heard mentioned, but had never seen for himself. He was due at least one. Instead, she was the female version of William Weasley.

It did, he had to admit, make his act somewhat easier. From the outside, frustration could masquerade as hatred.

If there was no war on the horizon, he would be gentler, he thought. He'd still keep his distance, but he'd advise her to question the things she read, to try modifying her potions. Well, no, that wasn't entirely true. If the Dark Lord was gone forever, Severus would likely not see Miss Granger outside of chance encounters in Diagon Alley, because he would finally be free to quit his job.

"Is Eileen coming home for Christmas, by the way?" Charity asked after a time, rubbing at a kink in her neck.

"No. I decided it would be best if she appeared to distance herself from me. I can't be responsible for her being used by either side in the coming war." So much so that he hadn't even told Charity that Eileen was actually posing as Madam Pince instead of playing Gobstones in New Zealand. Charity sat in Hermione's old chair and made small talk with Madam Pince during every meal in the Great Hall, none the wiser. "I don't want anyone to get hurt due to their association with me. You should —"

"Not going to happen, my friend, so save your breath. I'm not running away."

Yes, she was, even if he had to resort to the Imperius Curse. He was going to save her stubborn arse whether she liked it or not.

25 December 1994

They shouldn't have left Dionysus in Charity's quarters. If they had brought him along, the ridiculous creature would have dive-bombed Lucius and chased him away. Dionysus would have made a nuisance of himself during the rest of the evening, but it would have been worth it. If only Severus had known what was coming.

"Severus," Lucius drawled, and Severus regretted ever convincing the other man to join the Board of Governors. That was the only reason Lucius had been invited to the Yule Ball, Severus was certain. Where had Lucius been hiding all evening? As a sneering afterthought, Lucius added, "Burbage."

Charity knew better than to grab Severus's elbow and ask him to dance when Lucius was standing right there, but she did so anyway. How many times had he warned her that they couldn't display any familiarity with each other in public as the war approached? Severus flinched away from her touch, but it was too late. Lucius's face twisted into a feral grin.

"My," Lucius said, "I hadn't realised you were so forgiving, Burbage. Unless my wife was mistaken? She told me you were engaged to one of the Prewetts."

Severus didn't hear Charity's reply over the sudden roaring in his ears. He knew what was coming. He couldn't stop it, no matter how the hammering of his heart protested. Lucius could never, ever know that Severus gave a damn about anyone other than himself.

"Oh, I see." Lucius chuckled. "You don't know, do you? Severus never told you."

"Never told me what? If you're going to make a point, would you get to it already?"

"Severus was *there*. He watched them die: your fiance and his brother."

She didn't believe it at first. Of course she didn't. Charity scoffed and rolled her eyes, but then she looked up at Severus,

and he played his role. He had to.

"It hardly seemed worth mentioning," Severus said in a bored tone.

He saw the very moment that something inside her shattered. It was like splinching, watching his best friend back away from him. A sharp, breath-stealing squeeze that carved away a part of him. Severus kept his face blank, shields up.

Lucius's grey eyes shone with cold triumph. His face was entirely open, revealing every thought as clearly as if Severus had dipped into his mind. Every word from Lucius's lips had been spoken with one purpose in mind: revenge.

How long had Lucius known that Severus used to fuck Narcissa? She wouldn't have confessed, but there were plenty of other ways they could have been found out. And perhaps she had made an offhand comment at some point about Severus being friendly with her disinherited cousin.

Lucius smirked like he'd just won every game of chess that Severus had ever played with Narcissa. Checkmate.

He'd been here before.

Severus knocked on the door to Charity's quarters. He was far too old for teenage histrionics and vows to wait all night in the corridor if she refused to hear his apology, but still, he was tempted.

Like Lily, Charity was wrapped up in a fluffy dressing gown and a scowl when she appeared. Sighing, she turned her back on him and motioned for him to follow her inside.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"To apologise. I am more sorry than you can know."

Another sigh. "And what are you sorry for, exactly, Severus? That you were there? That I found out? Or are you sorry that you have lied to me every single day for years? Because *that's* the part I'm not sure I can forgive." Her voice broke, but her eyes remained dry. "You looked me in the face

again and again — you went out drinking with me on the anniversary of his death every bloody year, and you said nothing. You let me hear it from *Lucius*. Lying by omission is still lying. I know sometimes you have to — it comes with the territory of being a spy — but this has nothing to do with your work for the Order. This is about you and me. You *knew* I would want to know, but you just kept lying.”

“I’m sorry.” It sounded as weak as it had in 1975. “For all of it. For keeping it from you. For not saving them — believe me, I did try. For what I said tonight. I didn’t mean it; the words were entirely for Lucius’s benefit. I never wanted to hurt —”

“I don’t doubt that you’re sorry. What I don’t know is whether you’ll do something like it again, and that kills me. I trusted you more than I’ve trusted anyone in a long time.” Raking both hands through her hair, she closed her eyes. “I just need some space, OK?”

Severus left, granting her space. He should have listened to Hermione.

26 December 1995

As Severus returned to the castle, his thoughts were full of the intricacies of Life Debts. Would Arthur feel bound by a Life Debt to Miss Granger, or would it remain dormant until Hermione returned from her journey the past?

It was her antivenin that had saved him. Arthur’s injuries had been rather more severe than he’d let on to Molly and the children. Without Hermione’s potion, the bleeding would have grown worse and worse, until no amount of Blood Replenishing Potions could have helped.

Severus still had plenty of antivenin left for his own use, and now he knew for certain that it would work against the snake most likely to attack him. Handy, that.

Near the entrance hall, he ran into Charity. She gave him a thin smile and said hello. Civil, like she would be with any

other colleague. Like he hadn’t once made her laugh so hard that she’d sprayed cider out of her nose.

Since their falling out, they’d both tended their own sides of the garden, keeping their interactions to a minimum. He’d given her miles and miles of space, but it was now Miss Granger’s fifth year. He had to convince Charity to leave soon. Arrangements would need to be made, and Severus couldn’t wait for things to be right between them again. He could only hope that her anger had cooled enough for her to listen.

“Charity?” He cast a whispered Muffliato. “When Hermione was with us, she managed to hint rather strongly that you should leave the country before the end of her sixth year.”

Her civil smile evaporated. “We’ve been over this. I can’t leave. I gave away my only chance to save Gideon. The least I can do is stay and fight for the cause he gave his life for.”

“And get yourself killed in the process?”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do. Hermione was as clear as she could be with her instructions. In her time, you are dead. I don’t know what will happen if you leave, but it’s blatantly obvious what will happen if you stay, so stop being so foolishly stubborn. You —”

“What’s one more soul on your conscience?”

Charity looked stricken the instant the words sliced through the air between them. She covered her mouth with one hand, as if she could retroactively silence herself.

“I didn’t mean that,” she said. “I really didn’t. I’m sorry, Severus.”

He walked away. Imperius Curse it would be, then.

28 April 1997

Lily’s son could not die. Severus refused to allow it.

Logic hadn’t entered his thoughts back in the suffocating confines of Dumbledore’s office. All he’d been able to think about was how much Potter’s death would hurt Hermione, how it’d be like when Severus had lost Lily. But now, storm-

ing through the corridors and taking points from anything vaguely student-shaped, he recalled how Hermione had always spoken about Potter in the present tense, like the boy had lived to become a man.

Remember I told you that Harry wants to see you in my time. Especially when Dumbledore tells you something that might make you furious with me for not warning you. Do what Dumbledore says when that happens. You must. It won't end like you think.

So, Potter only needed to *think* he had to die? The wave of relief that crashed over Severus and weakened his knees was almost enough to conjure another Patronus.

He rubbed a thumb over the twisted rope button on his cuff, wishing he could talk to Hermione about all of this. Most of the time, missing her was like an ache he'd grown used to carrying, but now and then it welled up as fresh and all-consuming as if she'd only left the day before.

Four more years. Almost there.

Somehow, his wanderings took him to Charity's quarters. It shouldn't have surprised him. It was well past time he made the final arrangements to save her life. He knocked.

"Severus," she said, frowning at him. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

He followed her in. Dionysus hooted in delight and perched on Severus's shoulder, nuzzling his face into Severus's hair.

"Nothing has happened yet," Severus said, "but something will. Soon. I promise you that no matter how it may seem, my allegiances have not changed. You know who I fight for."

He didn't know why he felt the need to tell her he wasn't a traitor. Even if he didn't cast the Imperius Curse and send her off to Canada, she likely wouldn't believe him once she heard he'd killed Dumbledore. That chilly distance still yawned between them. Why would she believe a word he said? Why was he even risking it, filling her mind with the memory of him saying such things? Best to just Oblivate her and get started on saving her life.

Charity nodded. "Of course I know which side you're on. I wouldn't... No matter what, I'd never believe that you'd fight against Hermione."

"You might be surprised, given what's going to happen."

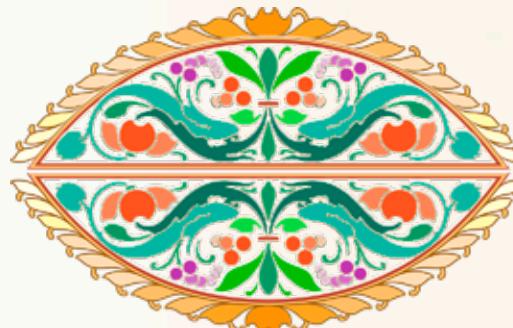
"Is it that bad?"

"Worse."

And how was he supposed to cast an Unforgivable on her when she placed a hand on his arm and looked at him like they were still friends? The stupid owl nipped at his ear.

Instead of once again going over his plan to get Charity to safety, Severus thought about the most recent Death Eater meeting. He'd sat next to Mulciber, who was rail-thin and weakened from years in Azkaban, but still as evil as Lily had once accused him of being. Mulciber, who had been the one to end Gideon's life. He thought about Dumbledore asking how many men and women he'd watched die. He thought about the contents of the pewter cauldron in his lab.

"Charity? I have an idea."





Astromeria

30 June 1997

The Unbreakable Vow tightened around Severus's wrist, searing a warning into his skin. This was it. Time to find out whether casting the Killing Curse in order to prevent suffering could split a soul.

Hoping to keep Miss Granger and Miss Lovegood out of harm's way, Severus ordered them to tend to Filius. What he wanted to do was command Miss Granger to stop putting herself in danger all the bloody time and send her somewhere safe until the end of the war. Miss Lovegood and the rest could go with her, while he was at it. They were too young to risk their lives more often than they took exams.

Miss Granger looked up at him, for once not asking any questions, and he had a flash of seeing her in the Hospital Wing after the fiasco at the Department of Mysteries: frail and terrifyingly quiet. Greyback was inside Hogwarts now, thanks to Draco. If that monster found Miss Granger or Miss Lovegood or any of these *children* who should not be fighting a war, Greyback could do far more damage than Dolohov's Curse.

Dolohov would soon be freed from Azkaban. When that happened, Severus would find some way to make him suffer. And if Greyback so much as breathed in her direction...

Turning away from his students, Severus concentrated on summoning up the necessary hatred to cast the spell. He had to focus on every manipulation, every harsh word. He absolutely could not think of good natured verbal sparring over cups of tea or rare moments of shared laughter. He could do this. He had to do this.

His fingers brushed over the button on his sleeve. Everything Severus had done for years and years had been for Lily and Hermione, but both his friend and his wife had never felt further away.

10 July 1997

Mulciber squirmed against his restraints, his shouted expletives muffled by the gag in his mouth. It had been Charity who had captured him. Her duelling lessons had certainly paid off. She'd gone after Mulciber wearing her own face, not telling Severus until the job was complete and she had Mulciber all trussed up and waiting. If she had even hinted at her plans, Severus would have objected and tried to convince her to use the Polyjuice they'd prepared with one of Pettigrew's hairs.

It was just as well that he hadn't known. Charity would not have been swayed, so it would have only led to an argument. After summoning a Polyjuiced Severus to her side, she'd told him that she wanted Mulciber to know that it was her — to know exactly why she was doing this.

Severus supposed he could understand that desire, even if Mulciber wouldn't remember any of it for long. Part of him wanted Mulciber to see which side Severus was truly on, but he couldn't take any chances. The risk was too great that the memory charm could be broken before the end.

Lowering himself into a chair in front of Mulciber, Severus drew his wand and pushed his way into Mulciber's mind. He took *everything*: every memory, every thought, every flaw that made Mulciber who he was. All of it crumbled to

dust beneath Severus's magic. Then Severus started building the skeleton of a new life. That first spark of accidental magic. Walking arm-in-arm with Narcissa through the halls of Hogwarts. Falling in love with Gideon. Attending Gideon and Fabian's funerals. Moving in next door to Severus. Teaching Muggle Studies at Hogwarts.

As he finished up, Severus layered an Imperius Curse over the top to guide Mulciber's actions from that point forward. Tipping a sky blue tinted Polyjuice into Mulciber's mouth, Severus watched the other man's features bubble and twist until a copy of Charity sat before him.

"There," Severus said, standing up and guiding Charity into the next room. "Muffliato. I'll see to it that Pettigrew finds Professor Burbage wandering around Hogsmeade within the next hour. It should all happen fairly quickly after that. The Dark Lord ordered us to bring you to him, did I tell you? He went on a long-winded rant about making an example of what happens to Slytherins who ally themselves with the Order."

Charity grinned. "Not a fan of my article, then?"

The article in question had appeared in that morning's DAILY PROPHET. In it, Charity had passionately defended Muggles and Muggle-borns, practically spitting in the Dark Lord's face via print. It was, Severus thought, nothing short of spectacular.

"Definitely not," he said. "I was, though. Now, you are going to go straight home and take your Polyjuice, correct?"

"Yes, yes, I know, Dad. No pudding till I drink my potion."

"Good. I'll be there when I can. Make sure you verify my identity when I arrive, and don't leave your house or the garden until I tell you it's safe."

Charity had made Severus her Secret Keeper and cast a Fidelius over her home and both halves of the garden years before, prior to the start of the second war — back when they'd still been best friends. It had been her idea; she'd wanted him to have a safe place to hide, if necessary. At the time, he hadn't

known he'd need to use it to hide from the Order.

That she had sheltered him after he'd killed Albus still astonished him. When he'd shown up there, Charity had sat him down in her kitchen, made him a pile of toast, and listened to his explanation before she'd said, "Well, you were right. This is pretty bloody bad. I believe you when you say you arranged it with Dumbledore — I saw his cursed hand — but I'm warning you now that if you ever leave the toilet seat up while you're staying here, I'll hand you straight over to the Aurors."

He had almost, *almost* laughed.

"I hope this works," Charity said.

"It will."

A meeting was scheduled for that afternoon. Severus wiped his sweaty palms on his robes. It *had* to work.

"Severus, please. We're friends."

Mulciber whimpered in Charity's voice as the wrecked, Polyjuiced body rotated in the air above the polished table. Severus remained impassive. The other occupants of the room laughed and jeered. *Most* of the others.

Narcissa was an excellent actress. Only a tiny, momentary wobble in her lower lip revealed that she was at all affected by watching the torture of someone she believed to be her cousin and erstwhile friend. Like Severus, she managed to appear bored, but he knew her better than that. Inside, she was screaming.

Mulciber collapsed to the table in Charity's bones, limp and lifeless, and Nagini slithered forward at the Dark Lord's command. Narcissa's hands clenched into white-knuckled fists as the body disappeared into the snake's mouth.

They'd done it. They'd faked Charity's death. And with so many witnesses, no one would suspect the truth. Had Severus been standing, his knees likely would have buckled with relief. Gods, he wanted to tell Hermione that they'd succeeded.

After the meeting drew to a close, Narcissa pulled Severus

into the draughty library and clasped one of his hands in both of hers. Something metallic dug into his palm, the prongs of a gemstone setting scraping against his skin. It was the copy he and Charity had made of her engagement ring: the one that had been on Mulciber's finger when he'd been brought in by Pettigrew.

There was a quiet desperation in Narcissa's blue eyes — a plea to help her forget. She moved closer. Close enough for Severus to notice that she still wore the same perfume.

More than a few times, he had been tempted to seek out a willing Muggle woman, keep his eyes shut tight, and pretend he was with his wife. But he'd always looked down at the button on his sleeve and resolved to carry on ignoring how much he missed being touched, how his skin felt starved for another's warmth.

He would never be able to imagine that Narcissa was Hermione. Not for a second. It would be ugly and fuelled by grief and not what he truly wanted. He wanted Hermione, but, oh, it had been so long, and what Narcissa was offering would be familiar. Hermione had said she would understand.

She wouldn't, though. Perhaps if he found solace within the arms of some Muggle stranger, but not if the someone else was Narcissa.

Severus let out a jagged sigh. He was so close to the end now. Too close to fail her. He returned the ring to Narcissa with a gentle squeeze of her hand.

"You should keep it," he said.

Narcissa made a noise that was somewhere between a sob and a bitter laugh. "She wouldn't have wanted me to have it."

"No, probably not." He stepped back. "I need to go, I'm afraid. I'll speak to you later."

Instead of seeking empty comfort that wouldn't last, he would continue to weave his lies and wait for his wife's return, like Penelope pulling the threads loose every night.

On his way out, he finally got his chance to cast the curse

he'd invented for Dolohov. Purple strands of magic climbed up Dolohov's back and seeped into his skin, unnoticed by him. From that point onward, any time Dolohov cast his trademark curse, he would feel what his victim felt. Not immediately — it wouldn't do to allow him to make the obvious connection right away and simply stop casting it. The slashing pain would come upon him later, when he believed himself to be safe.

Somehow, Severus ended up at Grimmauld Place, ransacking the creaky old house for any piece of Hermione. There was nothing of the grown woman — only a few trinkets that reminded him of young Miss Granger — so he settled for a photo and a letter from Lily.

1 September 1994

Most of the faculty refused to look at him as they filed out of the first staff meeting of the year. Minerva *glared*, all puffed up with righteous indignation and defiance. Severus almost groaned. She was going to be a problem. He could only hope she wouldn't get herself killed by the Carrows.

The Carrows, for their part, shot him conspiratorial grins, so certain they were on the same side. Dunderheads. Alecto wasn't fit to lick Charity's boots, much less take over her classes.

Charity leaned against the wall, cradling her transfigured familiar to her chest. She hadn't quite got the facial expressions down yet, but she was improving. No one would guess she wasn't Argus Filch.

With the help of a forged letter from Dumbledore, Severus had sent Argus fleeing to a safe house in Canada. The caretaker didn't know that some of his wiry grey hair had stayed behind in Scotland to allow Charity to slip into his role. As a Squib, Argus couldn't have defended himself against the Carrows, but Charity certainly could. Severus would have preferred to ship her off to Canada as well, but this way, Charity could stay and fight, as she was irritatingly determined to do.

Mrs Norris had gone with Argus into hiding, so they'd transfigured Dionysus to look like her. Luckily, even first years knew to avoid Mrs Norris, so students weren't likely to notice that the cat had grown considerably more affectionate and stupid.

As the others filed out of the staff room, Eileen lingered at Severus's side. She waited until no one was in earshot before she spoke.

"You can't fool me, love," she whispered. "I know who you really are. But don't worry; I won't let on."

It was the first time his mum had spoken to him since he'd killed Dumbledore. Thinking her incapable of keeping secrets, Severus hadn't told her of his true loyalties. The only secret he'd shared with her was one she couldn't spill: the words concealing Charity's house under a Fidelius Charm. When no owls had turned up there, he'd assumed, with a crushing wave of disappointment, that Eileen had believed his act.

But she hadn't. *I know who you really are.* Severus tried to swallow the sudden lump in his throat.

Once he was alone with Charity in the staff room, Severus closed the door with a wave of his wand and threw up a Muffliato.

"I've been thinking," he said. "You should stay hidden for the first three years after the war. The Hermione we met believed you to be dead. I know very little about time magic and paradoxes, but I don't want to take any chances."

"Hmm. OK. Are you going to stay hidden as well? You said she hadn't seen you since the end of the war, right?"

"If I survive —"

"Severus Herbert Snape, there is no *if* when it comes to your survival." Seeing Charity imitate Hermione's bossiest hands-on-hips pose while she walked around in Argus's skin was just unsettling. "You are going to bloody well live."

"Herbert?"

"I couldn't remember your real middle name."

"Tobias. Herbert would be preferable, to be honest."

"Excellent. I'll witness the deed poll if you ever want to

make it official." Charity's familiar, mischievous grin spread across Argus's face, but only for a heartbeat. As the grin fell away, she yanked Severus into a hug. "Mate, you can't die, OK? I mean it. You just can't."

He'd wondered a few times over the summer, when they'd been working on her wandless magic in the garden or downing cups of tea in her kitchen, whether they were back to what they used to be. Now, locked in Argus's bony embrace, he supposed they were.

"I missed you," Charity said, her hold on him tightening. "The whole time after we fought, I missed you."

"And I... Likewise."

"I do forgive you, you know. I did a while ago." Stubble scratched against Severus's cheek as she released him. "But I swear I'll kick your arse if you die."

He chuckled. "Noted."

2 May 1998

Severus slumped to the floor of the Shrieking Shack, one hand pressed over his wounded neck. He'd taken the Felix Felicis after his impromptu flight from the castle, and for some fucking reason, the liquid luck had led him to Nagini's fangs. How was *this* the best possible outcome?

He hadn't even had a chance to pass Dumbledore's instructions to Potter. He'd failed. The giddy confidence still fizzing in his veins from the potion was no match for his self-flagellation.

The antivenin was already in his system — taken as a chaser with the Felix Felicis — but, gods, there was so much blood. Too much. Because Hermione had added a delay, the antivenin hadn't been activated until the venom had entered his bloodstream. He didn't have much time until the Living Death portion of it rendered him still and silent. A minute, maybe two. Over the panic that tried to swell within him, Felix whispered to use the Summoning Potions for Fawkes

and Eileen, followed by the very last of Hermione's Warming Vapour. His numb fingers barely obeyed the order.

As the echo of Hermione's love wrapped around him, Severus made a desperate wish for Fawkes to reach him first — for the bird to spirit him off somewhere before Eileen arrived. His mum shouldn't have to see this.

A crate shifted. Potter, Miss Granger, and Weasley appeared, as if the potions had summoned them. Severus reached out as Potter drew closer. All he could see of Miss Granger was a bit of curly hair in his peripheral vision as he clutched at Potter's robes and spilled out memory after memory of Lily, of Dumbledore, telling the boy to take it, take it. When Miss Granger conjured a jar to hold the silvery clouds, Severus tried to turn his head towards her — to see Hermione's eyes — but he couldn't. The Living Death crept through him, freezing his muscles inch by inch.

"Look at me," he rasped.

He'd meant the words for Miss Granger, but it was Potter who complied. As Severus stared into the boy's Lily-green eyes, the Felix Felicis urged him to relax into the phantom emotions of Hermione's Warming Vapour.

Severus's last thought, as his grip on Potter's robes slackened and everything went black, was that Charity was going to kick his arse.



Mistletoe

21 December 2001

Hermione woke to the sound of running water. Grumbling, she reached out for Severus, only to find a smaller, furrier body in his place.

"Meow?" her companion said.

A few blinks of Hermione's sleep-fogged eyes brought Crookshanks's squashed face into focus. She shot out of bed with a gasp. The quarters were hers: her quilt on the bed, her books stacked next to the chair, her pile of unmarked Potions essays languishing in a corner. The bath was still running. From her perspective, she'd turned that tap on a year and a day ago.

"No," she said, running towards the wardrobe.

None of Severus's robes shared space with hers — and none of her clothing from the 1980s, either. Only the robes she'd been wearing when she'd travelled back in time had been brought forward by the book; they'd landed on the floor of the wardrobe in a heap, their hanger having remained in 1988.

Other things that had been on her person for the outward journey had been brought back to 2001 by the book as well. Her wand was tucked under her pillow. Her knickers

lay crumpled on the floor, where Severus's laundry basket had been. One souvenir had come with her from the '80s: the only thing she'd been wearing. Hermione brushed a thumb over the ring circling her finger. She could test it. A murmur of Volate, and she'd know if his magic was still somewhere in the world.

Tomorrow. If Severus didn't show up at the ball or in her quarters, she would test it tomorrow. For now, she wanted to carry on clinging to hope.

Hermione had just managed to turn off the tap and shrug into some clothes (not helped by Crooks twining his body around her legs) when someone knocked on the door. She opened it to discover Minerva standing there with a weathered cardboard box in her arms.

"Hello, Heather," Minerva said, her smile so sympathetic that Hermione nearly forgot her resolution to keep hoping.

"Hi." Fidgeting with her ring, Hermione stepped back to allow the Headmistress inside. "How long have you known?"

Minerva's lips pressed into a stern line. "Not long. Albus's portrait didn't deign to inform me until about an hour ago."

Well, that was bloody typical. Hermione hardly knew where to start with her questions. She wanted to know about every name on the memorial, every death she could have tried to prevent if only she'd found more ways around the Vow.

"What happened to Charity Burbage?" she asked.

"She was killed by Voldemort at Malfoy Manor. He fed her to Nagini." Minerva paused to set the box next to the sofa, taking the time to clear her throat twice, but her voice still sounded thickened by tears when she added, "Severus was there."

The pain was too sharp to register at first; there was only the absence of air in Hermione's lungs and a horrible numbness in her chest. Now she remembered hearing Draco tell that same story at his trial — now that the knowledge was useless to Charity. Useless to Severus.

"And Tonks?" Hermione asked. She'd tried to hint to

Severus that Bellatrix would kill Tonks during the Battle of Hogwarts. He'd had his hands full to overflowing during that fight, but maybe...

Minerva shook her head. No. Of course not. Every name Hermione threw at her was met with the same response. Fred, Colin, Lavender, Remus — some of whom she'd never even mentioned to Severus. Nothing had changed except her.

Tears that had been brewing since Hermione had opened her eyes to a bed without Severus finally broke free. She couldn't ask about her husband. It would be as good as testing her ring and giving up. If Minerva knew anything, she would have led with that information. She would have said, "*Hello, Heather. Severus is alive.*" Minerva wasn't one for meandering around before getting to an important point.

Drawing the younger woman into an embrace, Minerva sniffled. "You made Severus so happy, Hermione. I saw that, even before I knew who Heather Hughes really was. Everyone saw it. And... Harry still believes he's alive, as you know. He could be right."

Hermione didn't trust herself to say anything without sobbing, so she settled for nodding. Minerva smoothed a motherly hand over the crown of Hermione's head.

"Here," Minerva said, removing her glasses to wipe her eyes before she motioned to the box. "I have some things for you."

The first thing Hermione unearthed from the box was the multicoloured Christmas tree drawing that Neville had drawn for her, now yellowed with age. Folding it back up, she carefully tucked it into her handbag to show to Neville later. There was her modest 1980s selection of books, her dress from Charity's party, her snowdrop pendant, her endorsement from Severus. Tucked to the side of all of those memories was an Order of Merlin, First Class for Severus Snape.

"I don't know if you remember," Minerva said, "but I accepted it on his behalf, as we couldn't locate his mother."

Hermione let out a choked laugh. "I know exactly where his mum is." She waved the Order of Merlin in the vague direction of the Headmistress's office. "Dumbledore's portrait could have told you, though it's not our secret to tell."

"Oh? Well, I didn't feel right accepting it, given how antagonistic I was towards him that last year."

"I don't think he'd mind all that much. Better you than Harry."

"Mm, you're probably right about that. I didn't know you well when you were Heather — a move I'm sure was deliberate on your part — but I have to say I was glad to hear that Heather Hughes was still alive."

"Why would you think she — I — wasn't?"

Minerva frowned. "When you left, Albus told everyone you were killed. You didn't know?"

Something that felt cold enough to power the darkest spells swooped through Hermione. "He did *what?*"

Faces Hermione had half forgotten offered cautious greetings as she stomped through the corridors. Her head was still full of the names of different students. She wasn't sure where she intended to go. Another walk around the lake, perhaps, to burn off some steam. Or she could ask Filius for a duel. Or she could go to the library and find Eileen. Or maybe she could sneak into the Headmistress's office and shred a certain portrait to ribbons.

She couldn't stop imagining her students getting the news of Professor Hughes's death. Mischievous, ever-laughing Tonks. The excitable, eager first years. Percy, who was less uptight and guarded than the Percy she'd known when she'd been a student.

"Hermione?" Parvati said, her hand soft on Hermione's arm. "What's the matter? Have you been crying?"

Hermione hadn't noticed the other witch's approach. She'd forgotten Parvati had already put on her formal robes, charming them to repel everything she might encounter in the Hospital Wing.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Parvati went on without waiting for an answer. "I have loads of chocolate in my quarters. Some of it is meant to be part of Padma's Christmas present, but she'll never know the difference." She tilted her head to one side. "Also, am I imagining things, or is your hair longer than it was this morning?"

Stepping into Parvati's quarters was almost like stepping back into their sixth year dorms. There was only the one bed, and the permanent cloud of perfume had a more sophisticated scent, but Parvati's clothes were still scattered like confetti over every available surface. Shifting various bottles and tubes of makeup aside, Parvati opened a chest and retrieved a big box of chocolate from Honeyduke's.

Hermione didn't actually eat any of the chocolate. It reminded her too much of sharing chocolate with Tonks after the Boggart incident. Parvati nearly choked on a truffle when Hermione revealed that a towel-clad Severus had been her introduction to the past. By the time Hermione reached her wedding day, Parvati had been holding the same piece of dark chocolate for several minutes, her mouth hanging open.

"And then I woke up back here," Hermione said finally.

"Wow. I just... Wow. And his Patronus was still for you, after all those years apart?" Parvati let out a dreamy sigh that was reminiscent of the pre-war girl who used to giggle with Lavender. "I'm with Harry. I think Snape is still alive. Especially now that I know you were able to give him an advantage. He's going to be there. Speaking of which, you'd better get ready. You definitely can't be late to this ball."

Parvati was a marvel at charms to reduce the evidence of tears. By the time she'd finished, Hermione's eyes didn't have the slightest hint of puffiness about them. Instead of the robes she'd bought for the occasion, Hermione changed into the dark green dress from Charity — the one she'd worn to her wedding and to Charity's party. Half an hour later, she

and Parvati walked arm-in-arm into a ballroom that glittered with floating lights.

"Are you going to tell everyone?" Parvati asked.

Hermione nodded. "Yeah." She rubbed a thumb over her ring again, like it had become a worry stone. "Hopefully Harry and Ron won't..."

"React like Harry and Ron?"

"Pretty much. I know Harry has had a change of heart when it comes to Severus, but old habits and all that. Who knows? Maybe they won't even believe me. They could decide I'm delusional and try to take me to St Mungo's."

"I believe you."

"You also believe in Divination," Hermione said, far more fondly than she would have years before.

"I take it back. I don't believe a word you say." Parvati snorted. Squinting, she scanned the ballroom. Her shoulders sagged when she didn't spot any Potions Masters waiting to sweep Hermione off of her feet, but she covered her disappointment admirably by adding, "Is it just me, or is Percy Weasley looking kind of fit?"

Hermione sputtered out a laugh. "I'm honestly not the best person to ask. He was one of my students just this morning."

"Well, he's definitely all grown up now," Parvati said.

Percy stood talking to one of his Ministry colleagues near the edge of the dance floor. Had he been so *tall* before Hermione had fallen into the past? It didn't seem possible.

"You should ask him to dance," Hermione said. "Or challenge him to a game of Exploding Snap. Excuse me for a minute."

As Hermione crossed the room towards Percy, he gave her the same smile as always: friendly in that stiff, Percy-ish way. His eyebrows drew together at her request to speak to him alone, but he followed her without asking any questions.

"Muffliato," Hermione said once they were safely concealed behind a pillar. "God, I don't even know where to start."

Do you remember how Professor Hughes told you she'd be returning to America at the end of your first year?"

Percy blinked. "Yes. I do."

"The truth is she's never even been to America. She told you that because she knew she couldn't remain in 1988."

Percy's gaze snagged on the ring on her left hand. He looked back and forth between the ring and her dress, as if adding the two together would help him solve some complex Arithmantic equation.

"Couldn't remain in 1988?" he said. "What are you trying to say? Time-Turners don't work like —"

"I didn't use a Time-Turner. It's a long story, but when I arrived, Dumbledore made me take an Unbreakable Vow, so I couldn't tell anyone who I really was. I couldn't warn anyone about the deaths that took place due to the war. I wanted to — so, so much. Dumbledore refused to risk changing our Voldemort-free future." Raising her wand, Hermione wrapped herself in her glamour for a few seconds before removing it again. "Do you still have our trophy?"

One of Percy's hands clapped over his mouth, his eyes going wide behind his glasses.

"If this is a joke, Hermione —"

"It's not. I promise it's not. You know not even George would find it funny."

He seemed to struggle with forming words for a few seconds before finally settling on, "When did you get back?"

"Just a few hours ago."

"Gods. You're really her?"

"I am. You can ask me anything about that year if you need me to prove it. Our games of Exploding Snap, how you got detention for helping Oliver try out Quidditch manoeuvres in the Gryffindor Common Room, how I found you in the corridor after curfew on your first day at Hogwarts."

Percy adjusted his glasses, staring at the floor. "They told

us you died. I mourned you."

"I'm so sorry. Dumbledore didn't tell me that was part of his plan. After hearing what he did, I'm tempted to turn into the next Dark Lord just to spite him. Dark Lady. Whatever. Apparently he thought it would motivate my students to join his cause. I would have tried to stop him, if I'd known."

"Well, I'd be the first to sign up as one of your followers," Percy said, giving a dazed shake of his head. "I do still have the trophy, by the way. It's in my old Hogwarts trunk. And I still have a picture that I took of you; you're wearing that dress in it, I think. It was definitely green. Or maybe blue? The ring, though — I'm sure I remember that. Merlin. I can't believe the teacher who was my first crush was also my little brother's best friend."

"You had a crush on me?"

Percy's lips quirked up in a smile that almost looked borrowed from George. "Very much so, but don't worry. I've long since moved on. I started to get over it when I saw you with Professor Sn..." The smile vanished, chased away by a frown that held far too much pity. "Oh, Hermione. I'm sorry."

As his arms wrapped around her in a strangely formal hug, Percy let out a breath that ruffled her hair.

"No wonder you hated Scabbers so much."

Parvati was leading a bemused Percy around the dance floor for a second time when Hermione finally spotted Harry and Ron. Her boys. Her year in the past had been the longest stretch of time she'd been apart from them since they'd met. Before she could cross the room and hug her friends tight enough to steal their breath, someone sidled up next to her and spoke in a drawling voice.

"Madam Snape," Draco said. "How are you this evening?"

Hermione whirled towards him. "Malfoy, did you —"

"Not Draco," he said. "We have about, hmm." He checked his

watch; a rope patterned button stood out on the cuff of his sleeve, making Hermione's heart give a hopeful lurch. "Seven minutes until the Polyjuice wears off. We can come back for all of the tedious announcements about me being alive, but I have been waiting a very long time to see you again, wife. I would rather that reunion didn't take place in front of these dunderheads."

"Severus?" Hermione breathed, almost reaching out for him even though he wore another man's face.

"Who else would it be? Your other husband? Follow me."

With that, he strode towards the exit. Alive. He was alive. Her feet moved without a thought, trembling legs carrying her after him.

They made it to a deserted corridor on the other side of the lifts before his platinum hair started shifting to black. His nose grew as he shot up a few inches in height, jagged red scars popping out on his neck. A few new lines creased the skin around his mouth and his darkening eyes, and then Severus was *there*, standing right in front of her.

"Better," Hermione said.

She wanted to fall seamlessly into an embrace as soon as Severus looked like Severus again, but she felt like if she tried, she would unravel into uncontrolled magic. It was too much. She didn't have words for this level of relief and joy and love, much less the ability to contain it all.

Holding her breath, she placed a hand on his chest. His heart raced beneath her fingers, just as it had when he'd been thirteen years younger.

"Is this really happening?" she whispered. She'd said the same thing to him once before, hadn't she? When she'd been sheltered beneath his sheets, discovering his body, learning what he liked.

Severus's mouth twitched up ever-so-slightly at one corner. "It had bloody well better be."

She leapt at him, threats of accidental magic be damned.

Severus caught her around the waist, holding her so her feet dangled in the air. Nothing exploded or caught fire, but she felt her magic reach out to greet his, quiet and sparkling. She buried her face in his neck, right over the new scar tissue. He was *alive*.

Movement at the end of the hall drew their attention: Harry and Ron, followed closely by Ginny and Neville. Hermione groaned. Of course her friends had trailed after her when she'd seemingly left the ballroom with Draco Malfoy. All of them wore identical, slack-jawed expressions of disbelief.

"Erm, sir?" Harry said. "Is —"

"Not now, Potter," Severus said.

Hermione waved a hand at her friend. "Give us a minute, please, Harry."

Returning Hermione to the ground, Severus traced his fingertips along her jaw and finally brushed his lips against hers. He kept the kiss gentle and chaste, like he wasn't sure of his welcome. Like he wasn't sure she wouldn't vanish. Hermione was having none of that. Pressing herself closer to him, she deepened the kiss, not caring that they had an audience. As far as she was concerned, everyone else had vanished.

Severus pulled away far too soon, smiling down at her — that warm, pleased smile of his that was just for her. The first thing to penetrate her happy fog was Ron's voice.

"Riddikulus! Nope, not a Boggart. Huh. Am I having a stroke? You all saw it too, right?"

Severus let out a long suffering sigh. "If only I could still deduct points from Gryffindor," he said. "Which reminds me: Gryffindor, Hermione? Honestly."



Zephyranthes

21 December 2001

A

s Hermione explained everything to her friends, she kept Severus's hand clasped in hers. She only let go for as long as it took to embrace each of them in turn, sliding her palm against Severus's the instant she released Longbottom.

Like Miss Weasley — no, she was Mrs Potter now — Longbottom's eyes remained wide, but he leaned forward as if curious to hear more. Potter, on the other hand, had an obvious aura of smugness layered over his shock. He had been insisting for the past three years that the evidence pointed to Severus being alive, after all.

Potter would finally start using his brain when Severus was no longer saddled with the task of attempting to teach him.

Weasley was the sole member of the group to frown and recoil. Apart from the strength of Hermione's grip, the scowl on that freckled face was the only thing to convince Severus that he wasn't dreaming, that Hermione was finally *Hermione*, finally by his side. Everyone else had obviously forgotten their lines. Potter even grinned at Severus when Hermione revealed the truth about his Patronus. It was deeply, deeply wrong.

"Married?" Weasley asked. "Come on, Hermione. Did

George put you up to this?"

"Of course not," Hermione said. "If he had, there would have been more explosions involved."

"I think I remember you," Longbottom said, smiling down at the childish scribble Hermione produced from her handbag. "You told me I wasn't a Squib, didn't you?"

"I did. I also tried to convince Algie to treat you kindly, for all the good it did. Do you remember chasing toads with Charity?"

Severus gave Hermione's hand a squeeze when he heard the tremor in her voice at the mention of their friend. "There is someone else who has been waiting rather impatiently to see you," he said. "Someone fond of chasing toads." Drawing his wand, he conjured his doe Patronus and sent it off to the trio who were undoubtedly pacing back and forth in the Atrium. "Charity and I faked her death. The person killed at Malfoy Manor was actually Mulciber."

It took a moment for Hermione's open mouth to tilt up into a smile. Once again, she launched herself at him. Ignoring the pesky onlookers, Severus held her tight. He wished he had managed to erase more names from her list.

One of the lifts around the corner dinged. Draco appeared first, all smirks, followed by Charity and Eileen. Fawkes sat on Eileen's shoulder, his scarlet and gold tail feathers draped around her neck like a particularly obnoxious boa.

Hermione's friends murmured about the appearance of Fawkes, but Severus didn't pay them any mind. A strangled noise erupted from Hermione's throat as she dashed forward and threw her arms around Charity.

"Oof," Charity said, almost losing her balance. "Hello, love. Oh, I've *missed* you."

Hermione's response was muffled against Charity's shoulder. She kept Charity's arm looped through hers as she returned to Severus's side and leaned against him, like she wanted to keep touching both of them to make sure they

were real. Severus couldn't blame her.

"Merlin, they were telling the truth?" Draco asked with a loud, genuine laugh. "I've been wondering this whole time. You dark horse, Granger. I didn't think you had it in you."

"What are you doing here, Malfoy?" Weasley asked. "This doesn't involve you."

"I helped save Severus's arse," Draco said, "and he and Charity have been taking turns borrowing my face for the past few years, so it does, in fact, involve me."

"Hello, Eileen," Hermione cut in, speaking over whatever Weasley's reply would have been. "It's good to see you wearing your own face."

"Likewise," Eileen said. "And welcome to the family, dear. Apologies for not saying so thirteen years ago; I would have, had I been invited to the wedding."

"Mum," Severus said. She was never going to let that go, was she?

"Erm, I'm sorry," Hermione said. "We would have invited you if we could have revealed my real identity to you. I... Oh! Is that why you were so cranky with me during my final year at Hogwarts? Because that was when you found out?"

Eileen sniffed. "Perhaps."

Potter raised his hand like he never had in class. "Is anyone else lost?"

By way of an explanation, Eileen cast her glamour. She chuckled at the chorus of gasps this elicited from Potter and company, but answered their questions with more patience than they were likely used to seeing from Madam Pince. Fawkes chose that moment to give up his career as a fashion accessory, soaring across the corridor to alight on Severus's shoulder. A warm, feathered head rubbed against Severus's temple.

"Dionysus is a bad influence on you," Severus muttered to the phoenix. "You're turning into a dreadful cuddler."

"Dionysus is still around?" Hermione asked. Fawkes barely had to blink imploringly at her before she stroked him. Clearly

another bad influence.

"Oh, yes," Charity said. "He has a few more years left in him. He'll be thrilled to see you."

"Your potion worked too well, Hermione," Severus said. "Not only did it summon Fawkes, but I haven't been able to get rid of him since."

Fawkes made a chirping noise that sounded suspiciously like laughter. In truth, Severus was glad of the overgrown pigeon's presence. The identity of Severus's familiar would, he hoped, reduce the amount of vitriol directed towards Hermione when their marriage became public knowledge. Having Potter on their side wouldn't hurt, either.

"I don't get it," Mrs Potter said. "Why stay hidden for three years?"

"Hermione's time travel was a closed loop," Charity said. "There are all sorts of things that can go wrong with time magic. Paradoxes, split time lines... The Hermione we knew believed we both died in the war, so we thought it best to hide out and play dead till she came back to us."

"It also had the added benefit of not once being pestered by the idiots who write for the *Prophet*," Severus said.

Potter nodded. "Maybe I should have tried that."

Smoothing his hands over his robes, Severus made eye contact with Charity over the top of Hermione's head. "Shall we announce our return to the rest of the wizarding world? I'd prefer to get it over with as quickly as possible."

"Sure, but does this mean they're going to remove us from the memorial? It really is a stunning replica of your nose, mate."

"One can only hope," Severus said.

"There's nothing wrong with your nose," Hermione said in the same affronted tone she'd used at the memorial that morning, back when she still hadn't been his wife.

Severus smirked. "If you say so."

Longbottom took Weasley's hand and whispered something that made the redhead wizard smile. As they set off in the

direction of the ballroom, a deep, indecipherable murmur drifted around the corner next to the lifts, followed by a feminine giggle. Weasley and Longbottom reached the corner first, the former paling at what they discovered there. One of the Patil twins (Parvati, Severus thought, based on the giggling) had Percy Weasley pinned up against the wall, her lips locked with his.

Ronald grimaced. "Again, I say, Riddikulus."

The pair jerked apart. To Severus's astonishment, both of their faces broke into grins upon noticing his presence. Had they been dosed with something?

"I told you he'd be here, Hermione," Miss Patil said. "Oh, but I can't believe I missed it. I wanted to see you run across the ballroom towards him like something out of a Muggle film."

Severus quite agreed with the laughing snort that came from Mrs Potter. Good gods.

"It didn't exactly happen that way," Hermione said with a chuckle. To Percy, she added, "You weren't kidding about having moved on."

Percy blushed. "Yes, well. Err. I'm glad you're alive, sir. It's good to see you."

"I doubt he can say the same right now," Ronald said, shuddering even as he leaned into the arm that a chuckling Longbottom wrapped around him. "Right. Anyone else want to traumatiser me, or are we finished?"

"Give me ten minutes, Weasel," Draco said. "I'm sure I can think of something."

As soon as Severus entered the ballroom with Fawkes on his shoulder and Hermione on his arm, the hum of conversation took on a hushed, whispering quality. Severus couldn't see much of the crowd — not with the spots dancing in his vision from a camera flash. He told every blasted reporter who approached that he would not grant an interview to any publication but THE QUIBBLER.

He had enjoyed THE QUIBBLER's more ludicrous stories about him in recent years. One had theorised that he'd been turned into a vampire and had retired to an island cloaked in eternal darkness, where he moonbathed and drank blood cocktails that were mixed by something called a Dabberblimp. Absurd nonsense, all of it, but nonsense that was peppered with surprisingly fair words about his actions during the war.

Plus, Xenophilius's rag was the only one in wizarding Britain that didn't find it necessary to report on Hermione's love life. And Severus had promised Miss Lovegood.

Charity garnered less attention from the crowd, apart from the older Weasleys (Molly was quick to appear with a teary hug for each of them), her former colleagues (Minerva's hugs involved less weeping), and her former students (only Charity was offered embraces from that lot, mercifully).

"Do you want to dance?" Hermione asked Severus once they had a bit of breathing room.

What he wanted to do was leave — with her — but this was part of the fantasy she'd once dreamed up on a walk around the Black Lake: asking his older self to dance, definitely not calling him sir. So, he nodded.

Fawkes, having done his bit, was sent back to Spinner's End. Severus wasn't a great dancer at the best of times; he didn't fancy his chances of not looking ridiculous with the turkey joining in on his shoulder. Following Hermione to a relatively empty area of the dance floor, he cast a Muffliato, took her into his arms, and began to sway.

"I have a feeling our getting reacquainted chat is going to be pretty one-sided," she said. "Since I last saw you, I've talked to Minerva, Parvati, and Percy about my trip to the past. That's about it. Oh, and I contemplated becoming the next Dark Lady just to spite Dumbledore for telling everyone that Heather Hughes died."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Did you? Am I to stand with

you as you rule? I have no desire to spy on the other side again. I will be entirely, devotedly yours."

Hermione shifted a little closer. "Excellent. I already have you and Percy signed up, then." She toyed with the hair at the nape of his neck. "What about you? Been up to much?"

"Hmm, let's see. Apart from the bits you know — spying on the Dark Lord, teaching an insufferable know-it-all, and so on — I spent far too long convalescing at Charity's house. When Mum and Charity decided my injuries were beyond their healing skills, Mum put on her Madam Pince glamour, found Draco, and dragged him by his ear to Spinner's End to cash in his Life Debt to me. He used what connections his family still has to help us obtain the assistance of a discreet Healer."

"So that's what Draco meant, earlier."

"Indeed. Mum made him take an Unbreakable Vow to keep our secrets before she let him see me. She said it would do him good to know how I'd felt when I'd taken one for his sake. You should ask her to join your band of followers; she's far from Dumbledore's biggest fan, and she does know how to hold a grudge."

"Mm, you must come by your talent for grudges naturally."

Severus glowered, but there wasn't enough force in it to make her do anything but laugh. He'd worried that this part wouldn't fall back into place — that their conversation would be painfully formal and full of long stretches of silence — but so far it felt exactly as he remembered it. Like no time at all had passed for either of them.

"What else?" she asked.

He traced his fingertips back and forth over the soft skin revealed by the low back of her dress. "I kept my vows to you. All of them."

Her answering smile was bright enough to draw even more stares from the crowd. "Of course you did. Was it you at the memorial this morning, disguised as Draco?"

"Obviously. I thought placing flowers next to Charity's

name was a fairly large hint. It was my mum who slipped you the book, though. She was thrilled to sneak around and pretend to be a spy for an afternoon."

"Seriously? Aw, I'm gutted that I didn't notice. I bet Eileen as a spy is a sight to behold. Don't tell her I said that. She's already cross enough with me about the wedding. Hmm, maybe we should have a reception for everyone in this time."

"Do you think so?"

Trying not to sneer, Severus shoved away the mental image of what would happen if Molly Weasley and Eileen joined forces to take over the planning. A likely outcome, as neither he nor Hermione would want the job of organising all of the little details.

"We'll see." Hermione shrugged. "It would probably make my parents happy. I haven't even had a chance to tell them about you yet. What about when Draco asked me to dance? Was that you?"

"Ah, no. I wasn't strong enough for dancing by that point. Your dance partner was Charity. She spent days beforehand dancing around her sitting room with my mother, learning how to lead. It was incredibly tiresome. Oh, I also spent much of the first two years after the war attempting to convince Draco of the irrelevance of blood status."

"Really? Did it work?"

"I believe so. His experiences during the war had him half-way there, as did the fact that you nearly always earned the top marks in your year."

Severus didn't know whether all of their talks would be undone if Draco discovered that Severus had played a part in Lucius's Azkaban sentence. Head Auror Robards likely knew it had been Severus. Perhaps Robards had even encouraged Potter's belief that Severus lived. Yes, Severus had used a charm to disguise his handwriting, but who else would have sent Robards a letter detailing the likely locations of the Death Eaters who had managed to avoid capture? Who else would have pointed him towards evidence against every Death Eater,

save Severus and Draco? After that letter, a plea bargain in exchange for information had been out of reach for Lucius.

"Are those the only people who knew about you being alive?" Hermione asked. "Just those three and the Healer?"

Severus chuckled. "No. Luna Lovegood was also in on the secret."

"What? Why?"

"She saw me Polyjuiced as Draco in Diagon Alley a few weeks ago and greeted me by name. She claimed to recognise my expression."

Laughing, Hermione shook her head. "I should have guessed."

They lapsed into silence, but it was the sort of silence they used to share when reading by the fire. Hermione touched the scar on the side of his neck. He couldn't feel much in that area, but he shivered all the same. They were going to end up on the front page of the PROPHET, and none of the coverage was going to be favourable, because Hermione took his shiver as encouragement to feather a kiss over Nagini's bite. Not that Severus attempted to stop her. Rather, he held her there, almost as close as they'd been in the corridor.

She worried her lower lip between her teeth as the song transitioned into something with a faster pace. Together, they drifted to the side of the dance floor. Hermione's fingers trailed down his arm to toy with the rope patterned button on his cuff. The quickness of her breath and the way she stared at his mouth reminded him of standing in his old quarters with her, wondering if she'd left her bravado in the forest.

"Do you remember," she whispered, "what you said would happen after I asked your older self to dance at this ball? You said we might not make it out of the Ministry before we had to find an abandoned office where you could touch me and taste me and fuck me."

Swallowing a groan, Severus nodded. What was it she'd said all those years ago?

"Yes. Yes to all of that."

They did make it out of the Ministry, but only because the lift scolded them for snogging and groping each other. Neither Severus nor Hermione had been aware of that particular feature. The prudish lift refused to deliver them anywhere but the Atrium. Worse than a moving staircase. From the Atrium, they hurried outside.

"Spinner's End?" she asked. "Less distance to cover after we Apparate. You can bend me over my desk some other time."

"Promise?"

Before she could reply, he seized her arm and transported her Side-Along to an alley that hadn't changed a bit in thirteen years. There was something seriously wrong with her that she felt a swell of almost unbearable fondness at the crunch of broken glass under her shoes. Alternating between bruising kisses and sprinting, they made their way to his house.

Hermione didn't take in her surroundings once they were inside. There was only the long line of buttons on his robes, the familiar hardness against her belly, a bookshelf digging into her back when he pressed her against it. Shoving him down onto the sofa, Hermione shimmied out of her knickers, unfastened his trousers, climbed onto his lap and sank down on him. Severus gasped.

"Gods, I've missed you so much," he whispered.

Wrapping her arms around him, Hermione kissed his temple. It was odd, still being a bit sore from her day in bed with the younger Severus as she moved over the older one. His fingers fought with the zip on the side of her dress, only tugging it down far enough to bare her chest to him.

"Wait, wait," he said, squeezing her hips.

Hermione froze. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong. Quite the opposite." His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Everything is, in fact, far too good. It may end rather prematurely unless you give me a minute."

Oh. Over a decade of celibacy would do that, she supposed. Hermione opened her mouth to tell him it was OK, but one of his hands slipped between them and chased the words off of her tongue. He remembered exactly how to touch her, how to make her whimper and cry out. It didn't take long before she begged him to let her move again. A few blissful movements of her hips were all she needed to make the tension within her explode. A relieved sigh gusted over her collarbone seconds before Severus followed her, quieter than he used to be, but murmuring into her hair that he loved her.

"I love you too, by the way," Hermione said once she got her breath back.

Severus hummed. "I should think so. You didn't even have to wait thirteen hours."

Huffing out a laugh, she rested her forehead on his shoulder. "I would have taken your place, if I could have."

"I know." He patted her thigh. "Let's go upstairs."

In the low light, Hermione got a vague impression of changes that had been made since she'd set wards on the house with Harry after the war. The floorboards under her feet were smoother, polished. The stairwell held the scent of recently applied paint. And when Severus led her into the bathroom, she found that grey and white had replaced the avocado coloured tribute to 1973 that had previously been in residence. Leaning into the new, larger shower, Severus turned on the water.

They hadn't fully undressed downstairs, and now, Severus's hands paused in midair as he reached for the few buttons holding his shirt closed. That he would feel at all insecure about being naked in front of her made her heart hurt. She was used to seeing him without clothes every day, easy and uninhibited. But perhaps her familiarity with his body was the problem. He was older — probably more scarred.

"If you want to put on a towel for old times' sake, go ahead,"

she said, sliding her dress off and moving under the spray of hot water. "But I'd much rather see you without it."

Hermione turned around to give him a bit of privacy. There was a bar of the honey scented soap she'd used in the '80s, so she picked it up and worked it into a lather. She could hear the whispery sound of clothing hitting the tiles, and then she felt the warmth of his body along her back.

"Hi," she said, giving him a lascivious grin as she turned to look her fill.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Hello."

There were, indeed, more scars. Far too many. Starting with the one on his neck, Hermione washed and kissed each and every new mark. By the time she reached the last one, he didn't seem to mind being naked.



Agapanthes

22 December 2001

Hermione woke to the sound of running water. Grumbling, she reached out for Severus, only to find cool, empty sheets in his place. She sat up with a gasp.

The sound changed as her heartbeat slowed back down, distant footfalls replacing the rush of water. She was in Severus's room, in his bed. At the foot of the bed, folded on top of the thick white duvet, was a stack of Muggle clothing. Hermione laughed when she recognised the jumper and jeans as things she'd purchased in the '80s.

As she dressed, she looked around at the details she'd missed the night before: dark blue walls, a row of half-full bookcases, a framed magical photograph of her glamourised self and Severus on one of the bedside tables.

After ducking into the bathroom to rinse her face and use the arsenal of dental hygiene supplies he'd had ready for her, she wandered down to the kitchen. Like the rest of the house, it was completely different. New cupboards and worktops, tile underfoot instead of worn linoleum, no more peeling mustard yellow wallpaper. Severus, also in Muggle clothes, was examining the contents of the fridge.

"Good morning," he said, bending to press a sweet, slow kiss to her lips. "I was just about to go out to pick something up for breakfast. Apparently I need to purchase milk as well, because Charity takes the view that my refrigerator is an extension of her own, there to be raided."

Hermione wrapped her arms around him and warmed her chilly hands by sneaking them under his jumper and resting them on the small of his back. He only grumbled a little.

"Your fridge actually has stuff in it?" she asked. "Stuff that isn't expired condiments? Things really *have* changed around here. It looks like a whole new house."

"Mm. It is, in many ways. You should look around while I'm out." Glancing at the window, which showed only the neighbouring garage to Hermione's eyes, he added, "Charity Burbage kicks arse at number nineteen Spinner's End."

The view beyond the glass shifted, grew leafy and wild, like her garden was waking up to welcome her home.

Hermione grinned. "I'm guessing Charity chose the phrasing for the Fidelius?"

"Obviously. It is a small mercy that I've had little need to say it."

Once Severus left, Hermione decided to examine the garden first. She stepped into a pair of his dragonhide boots and clomped her way outside. A thick layer of frost outlined taller branches and larger shrubs than the ones she'd tended. Severus and Charity had done a good job of keeping it up over the years. Hermione only *tsked* once, stopping to deadhead a few forgotten, shrivelled blossoms. Everything in the garden had been planted by her hands, save a tree that was heavy with pomegranates. Fawkes perched high in its branches, trilling out a gentle hello. A grizzled Dionysus let out a creaky hoot and hopped down from a lower limb to nuzzle Hermione's cheek. She smiled. Stepping into the warm climate charm that surrounded the tree, she plucked one of the fruits.

Back inside, she found multiple plates, bowls, and mugs in

the cupboards. Enough for guests. He used to only have two of everything. There wasn't much left to explore upstairs — only what had once been his childhood bedroom. Hermione found it completely empty, the walls bland magnolia. A blank slate.

She hadn't noticed the sofa when she'd straddled him on it the night before, having been understandably distracted, but that, too, was different — not the dark brown thing that had already been threadbare in 1987. The bookshelves that lined the walls of the sitting room were no longer crammed full. There were gaps here and there, like he'd been making space to add her collection to his. Nowhere near *enough* space, but still. The gesture made her feel warmed from within.

Spotting a volume on healing potions that she hadn't yet read, Hermione grabbed the book and curled up on the sofa.

On his way back from the shop, milk and a bag of pastries in hand, Severus spotted Charity and Eileen walking in the opposite direction, towards the river. Laughing at something Eileen had said, Charity gave the other witch a playful shove.

Hmm. These walks of theirs were clearly no longer about a temporary escape from the "worst patient in the world," as Charity had claimed during Severus's recovery.

A photographer lurked in Mrs Cooper's hedge, not concealed well enough to fool any of the Muggle neighbours, much less Severus — as Mrs Cooper herself proved when she whacked the trespasser with her cane and screeched threats about calling the police. For a woman in her nineties, she was surprisingly spry.

With a wave at his still-ranting neighbour, Severus let himself into his house. He found Hermione deep in a Potions text, a fresh pomegranate on the cushion next to her. Being Hermione, she finished the paragraph and conjured a bookmark before standing up to greet him.

How long would it take before something as simple as

seeing his wife felt normal? In the middle of the night, he'd kissed her neck to drag her from sleep, needing her again, needing to remind himself that the wait was over. Not that she'd seemed to mind, given the way she'd raked her nails down his back and wrapped her legs around his hips. He had not gone off like a schoolboy that second time, thank Merlin, but nor had he banished the nagging feeling that he had somehow imagined the past twenty-four hours.

Simon would spout an appropriate metaphor and give Severus yet another homework assignment when they discussed it, no doubt.

Simon. Right. He needed to tell Hermione about that. As they moved into the kitchen, Hermione chatted happily about how the book she'd been reading made her want to get back to her cauldron.

"I think I might want to carry on teaching Potions," she said.

"Do you?" Setting the kettle going with a few waves of his wand, Severus scooped coffee into the cafetière. "I had it on good authority that if you were forced to endure another term of trying to prevent students from causing fatal explosions, you would end up murdering the lot of them."

Hermione frowned and tilted her head to one side, as if trying to work out why the words were familiar. "Oh," she said after a moment. "You read the letter I left at the memorial?"

"It was addressed to me, was it not?"

"I suppose it was." Bumping her shoulder against his, she opened the fridge and found some yogurt that Charity hadn't yet pilfered. "I enjoyed teaching Defence, though, and that has just as much potential for accidents. My frustrations with Potions stemmed from my failure to obtain my Mastery. That's no longer an issue."

"No. It's not. You have come a long way from the textbook regurgitation of your youth."

Narrowing her eyes, Hermione pointed a spoon at him as

if intending to use it as a weapon if he dared to disagree with her. "I was a good student, and you know it."

"With the right teacher, you likely would have discovered your flair for Potions much sooner," Severus said carefully. "That teacher was never going to be me. I had to pretend to loathe you, for a start. I apologise for being far too convincing at times."

She nodded. "I wonder how I would deal with teaching your younger self."

"With far more patience and copious detentions, most likely."

While Severus dished out the pastries, Hermione split open her pomegranate and removed the seeds to add to the yogurt. Ruby red juice dripped down her fingers. Severus tapped his thumbs against the worktop.

"One more person knew I was alive before last night," he said, tiring of waiting for a good segue. "Charity pestered me into getting therapy. It was regrettably necessary to inform the therapist that I hadn't died."

In actuality, the suggestion to go to therapy had been an aside in one conversation, not a drawn-out campaign to convince him.

"Mate," Charity had said, "you know I love Hermione. I think you two are wonderful together, and the fact that you've waited so many years for her is absolutely beautiful. But she's a person, not a panacea. She won't fix everything that's wrong once she comes back. Yeah, she'll fix the whole missing her thing, but everything else? All of the stuff you're holding onto from the wars? It will still be there, just with her company. Now that the fighting is over, maybe you should, I don't know, get some hobbies other than snarling at children. Go to therapy and try to sort out all of the shit that's happened to you. Don't pin all of your happiness on one person, OK? Take it from someone who made that mistake."

"Oh?" Hermione said, dragging Severus out of his thoughts. "Has it been helpful?"

"Apart from Simon's absurd attachment to metaphors, it

has been... tolerable." Nightmares and dark days still cropped up, but he had different ways to cope. "He's a Squib, so I'm able to discuss the war and your time travel without censoring myself. You met his colleague, I believe: Charity's cousin Mercy." Severus paused to pour the coffee, preparing hers with a splash of milk and no sugar, the way she'd taken it in the '80s. "Part of my therapy has been to develop *hobbies*."

He said the word *hobbies* like he once (well, perhaps still) would have said *Gryffindors*, likely due to the suggestions Charity and Eileen had made. Charity had done an interpretive dance to accompany her suggestion of *learn interpretive dance*.

Hermione swallowed a bite of pain au chocolat. "Like what?" "I attend a monthly book club in Birmingham." He sipped his coffee. "Cokeworth has a book club as well, but I was barred after two meetings due to their allergy to sarcasm." At Hermione's loud bark of laughter, he allowed his mouth to curve into a slight smile. "And I have devoted rather a lot of time to Muggle DIY."

At first, transforming Spinner's End had been for Hermione's benefit. He hadn't wanted her to return to the worn out, crumbling place it had been at the end of the war. Moving elsewhere hadn't been an option — not with her garden there. As the work had progressed, Severus had started to appreciate the meditative quality of rolling fresh paint onto a wall or laying tiles in a perfectly symmetrical pattern. There was also something to be said for erasing all signs of the house in which he'd spent his childhood.

"I am trying and failing to picture you wandering the aisles of B&Q," she said. "You did all of this redecorating on your own? Without magic?"

"With minimal magic. I refuse to deal with any aspect of plumbing without the aid of a wand. I've also been working on potions for Simon and Mercy to prescribe to their wizarding patients. Antidepressants, an improvement upon the Draught of Peace..."

"Oh! That sounds fascinating. Could I — "

"Yes, you may see my notes."

Hermione beamed. After a few moments of silently picking at her pastry, she said, "When you mentioned that one other person knew you were alive, I thought you were going to say it was Narcissa."

Severus scowled. "Why the devil would it be Narcissa?"

"Draco was in on the secret. She's Draco's mother — Charity's cousin."

"That has little to do with me. Narcissa did know about Charity being alive; Draco annoyed Charity into allowing him to tell her. I was not so easily swayed. I do not think I could say a civil word to Narcissa after discovering what she allowed her sister to do to you at Malfoy Manor. I didn't hear about it until after the war. If I had, Bellatrix would not have lived long enough to duel Molly, I assure you."

The previous Christmas, Severus had sent Molly an anonymous gift of Celestina Warbeck tickets, signed only, *With my deepest gratitude*. He hoped Arthur's ears hadn't taken too long to recover from accompanying his wife to the concert.

Hermione reached up to brush a strand of hair out of Severus's face. "I have no doubt."

Catching her hand in his, he laced their fingers together. "Given how eager the *Prophet* has been to report on your social life in the past, I can't imagine speculation about our dance at the Ministry Ball won't appear in the paper this morning."

"Good. I want everyone to know that I'm with you. I want to file the paperwork with the Ministry and finally call you my husband out in the open." She rocked forward to kiss his cheek. "But I'm sorry you had to read about my... social life."

"I am hardly in a position to begrudge you a past. It was, for the most part, nothing I didn't already know, and you weren't *you* yet. Draco was the only one who was angered by it. He seemed to believe you should have somehow known

that you were meant to marry me. You didn't tell me about McLaggen, though."

"I didn't welcome his attentions."

"Yes, I did get that impression. The oaf owes Draco a Life Debt, as Draco distracted me."

She smiled. "Did you spend all of the years we were apart plotting revenge on people who wronged me?"

"No. I spent some of it actually getting revenge."

A frazzled owl that looked even older than Dionysus collided with the window, cutting off Hermione's laughter. Fawkes followed the owl inside, taking up his favourite perch on Severus's shoulder. Severus gave the phoenix an absentminded stroke.

Soothing the owl with a bit of croissant, Hermione called it by name: Errol. The rumpled scrap of parchment in its claw was from Molly, inviting Hermione, Severus, Charity, and Eileen to the Burrow for lunch.



Bluebell

22 December 2001

Grimacing, Severus swiped at the orange cat hair clinging to his robes. He and Hermione had stopped at Hogwarts to feed her familiar and check her schedule. She had rounds that evening, apparently. Her beast of a cat had sniffed Severus and regarded him with a baleful yellow stare for a full minute before purring like a jet engine and transferring an obscene amount of fur to Severus's clothing.

"I think that means Crooks approves of you," Hermione had said.

Now, Arthur welcomed them into the cosy, Christmas-scented warmth of the Burrow. At first, Hermione only had eyes for the fireplace. Having come from the relative warmth of midsummer, the cold affected her more. Severus would have to brew some Warming Vapour for her.

"Everyone else is in the kitchen," Arthur said with a jovial smile. "They've been, ah, assessing the damage in the morning paper."

"Entertaining reading, I'm sure," Severus said.

Turning away from the fireplace, Hermione squinted at their host. "Arthur, what on earth is different about you? Something was missing in the '80s, and now it's back. I can't work it out. It's like one of those spot the difference puzzles,

only I can't look at both parts at once."

Arthur rubbed a hand over his head. "Err, less hair, maybe?" He let out a soft laugh. "That has definitely changed."

"No, it's nothing about your appearance. It's just..." She waved her hands at him. "You. I didn't notice it was there till it was suddenly gone."

"Interesting," Severus said. "Arthur, have you ever felt compelled to do things for Hermione? Starting in her fifth year, perhaps?"

Scratching his chin, Arthur took a moment to contemplate the question. "I suppose I felt quite strongly about helping her find her parents, but I wouldn't call it a compulsion. I wanted to help. We all did."

"My only experience of owing a Life Debt was with an enemy," Severus said. "I imagine the nudges it gives you are more difficult to detect when you care about the person in question. During her time in the past, Hermione created and brewed the antivenin that cured you after Nagini's attack. I wondered at the time whether it would create a Life Debt between you and her younger self."

"Really?" Arthur brightened. "That's incredible, Hermione. Thank you."

"You're more than welcome," Hermione said, shaking her head as if to clear it. "I brewed it for Severus, but if I'd known it would be needed to cure you... I wonder if that's why it formed a Life Debt. Healing potions brewed for general use don't, of course, or hundreds of people would be indebted to a few Potioneers. Maybe it was the fact that the potion contained my blood? Severus, you don't owe me a Life Debt, right? I don't think they can be created between spouses. The magic surrounding Life Debts is so fascinating. I didn't know both people could feel it. I wonder if I would have ever noticed if I hadn't seen Arthur in the '80s. Severus, do you have any books on—"

"There you are," Molly said, wiping her hands on a tea towel

as she bustled into the room. "Come on through; lunch is ready."

Far too many ginger heads crowded around the large table. Familiar splashes of blond and black broke up the sea of red hair: Longbottom, Potter, Charity, Eileen. Percy greeted Hermione by calling her "Professor" instead of by her name, which made her smile. Urging Severus and Hermione into two chairs next to her own, Molly proceeded to load too much roast dinner onto a plate. She set the gravy-topped mountain in front of Severus, as if trying to cram enough food into one meal to make up for the past few years.

"Thank you, Molly," he said.

Across the table, Longbottom (whose plate had also been piled high by Molly's generosity) sneaked a bit of his food onto Ronald's plate. Hmm. Severus likely couldn't get away with using the same approach with Hermione, but it was tempting to try. Ronald, noticing the extra roast potatoes, grinned and gave Longbottom's leg a squeeze under the table.

"Harry told us your news," Molly said. "It was a surprise, I have to say, hearing that you two were married. He said you both seemed happy, so I'll be happy for you, but my goodness, Severus. Marrying without inviting your mother? I hope you'll at least tell her when she's expecting a grandchild instead of springing a five-year-old on her one day."

Hermione coughed. "Well, the last time I spoke to Eileen on the subject, she told me she wasn't ready to be a grandmother."

"Did I?" Eileen asked. "When?"

"The morning you found that Boggart," Severus said. He had not managed to block out the memory of his mum asking Hermione whether they were being careful about contraception.

It took Eileen a moment before a laugh spilled from her lips. "I forgot all about that."

"If only we could all be so fortunate," Severus said.

To his relief, Eileen didn't announce that she was now more than prepared for grandchildren. Severus thought of the empty

room at Spinner's End, a lead weight settling in his stomach.

He let the conversation ebb and flow around him as he ate, not paying much attention to any of it until he heard Longbottom bring up the possibility of Hermione taking up her old role of Defence professor.

"Bill is leaving at the end of the year," Longbottom said. "He only ever agreed to teach on a temporary basis, as a favour to Minerva. She told me that you were one of the best Defence teachers Hogwarts has had in recent memory. I reckon the position is yours if you want it."

"I had hoped to carry on teaching Potions, actually," Hermione said. "I rediscovered my love for it and completed my Mastery while I was in the past. Well, I have the necessary potions and an endorsement from a Master. I still need to submit it to the guild."

"Really?" Molly asked. "Did Severus take you on as an apprentice?"

"No, I did it all on my own, but he did kind of... annoy me into it."

"They had a Potions battle," Charity said. "They kept inventing new potions to insult each other. Weirdest foreplay I've ever seen."

Ronald set down his knife and fork. "I can only cast Ridikulus so many times before I start to look silly."

"Well, then," Longbottom said, not bothering to conceal his amusement at Ronald's discomfort. "Minerva said something about asking Snape to teach Potions, but I'm sure she wouldn't object to you teaching Potions and him teaching Defence, Hermione."

"She wants *me* to teach?" Severus sputtered. "It has only been three years. Has her mind gone already?"

Longbottom laughed.

"Are you sure you don't want the job, Severus?" Hermione asked.

"Very. You, of all people, must remember how much I hated

teaching. I'm quite happy with my Potions work. My solitary, student-free Potions work. I am available to you, should you require assistance with scathing comments when you mark essays, but apart from that, no. You should be happy to have me no longer on staff. Gryffindor's House Points total can only benefit from my absence."

The smile that spread across Longbottom's face made Severus think of Minerva's Animagus form; it reeked of the proverbial cat that got the cream. "Funny you should mention that," he said. "When I started working as Pomona's apprentice, I made an interesting discovery about you. According to the records I found, the only House Point you ever awarded was to Gryffindor."

Damn. Severus hadn't intended to share that information with anyone but his wife — and perhaps not even her. Hermione's posture stiffened in exactly the same way it used to a millisecond before her hand shot up into the air with a question.

"You awarded a House Point?" she asked. "To whom?"

"It was me, wasn't it?" George asked, completely straight-faced.

"Don't be ridiculous, George," Potter said. "It was obviously me. Everyone knows I was his favourite student."

Severus found himself in the surreal position of nearly laughing at a comment that came from Potter. Giving up on redirecting the conversation, he nodded at Percy.

"Me?" Percy asked.

"Yes. The point was awarded the day of the announcement about Professor Hughes."

Percy puffed out his chest as if he'd just been named Head Boy for a second time.

"You should apply to teach Defence, Charity," Severus said. "You have devoted years to perfecting your duelling technique, and for some unfathomable reason you actually seem to enjoy teaching."

"Oh, yes," Eileen said. "That's perfect. She was Polyjuiced

as Argus Filch during the Battle of Hogwarts. While I was shouting at her to run and hide, she was sneakily using magic, taking out Death Eaters and casting protective spells on students without anyone realising. Then, when we got backed into a dead end by the Carrows, she shocked me half to death by openly drawing her wand and defeating both of them without breaking a sweat. She was magnificent."

Severus had never before seen such a bright shade of pink on Charity's face. Hmm.

After lunch, as everyone lounged around in a food coma, an owl with pink painted talons arrived with a letter for Percy. Even without the polished claws, Severus could have guessed the identity of the owl's owner by the way Percy blushed at the contents of the letter.

"I wonder if he'll tell Parvati about his victory with the House Point in his return letter," Hermione said.

"Most likely," Severus said.

"I can't believe you awarded him a House Point." Her tone made it sound as if she'd said, "*I can't believe you didn't award me a House Point.*"

"He gave me a photograph of you."

Hermione's expression softened. Shifting around on the small sofa they shared, she draped her legs over his. A few of the Weasleys stared as if still trying to wrap their minds around Hermione and Severus being together. Severus couldn't blame them. If Charity came to him and told him she had married someone equally unlikely, he would check her for signs of love potions and the Imperius Curse.

"The picture on the bedside table?" Hermione asked. "I was wondering how you got that." Stretching her arms overhead, she yawned. "Have you looked at the *Prophet* yet?"

"No. I'm not in the mood to read fiction at the moment."

"Well, I read it, and misery loves company. Rita Skeeter

thinks I've probably known all along that you were alive, and I only kept it from Harry because he left me for Ginny." The way she wrinkled her nose at the idea of being romantically involved with Potter was gratifying. "I have, according to her, likely seduced you over the past three years, as is my habit with famous wizards. She expects Fawkes — who seems to have tipped quite a few opinions in your favour, by the way — to see my true colours and guide you towards a more suitable witch."

"Would you like me to wait until Skeeter is in her Animagus form and turn her into Potions ingredients?"

"Tempting, but no. She'd ruin any potion. I was thinking we could tell a story that's sort of similar to hers, actually. Not the seducing thing. We can say that I knew you were alive, but you swore me to secrecy. We fell in love and got married during the past three years, and that's why you returned to wizarding society. It's less complicated than telling everyone outside of my circle of friends about my time travel."

"True," Severus said. "I will bring it up when I speak to Xenophilius."

"Good." Glancing at her watch, Hermione groaned. "I should get back to Hogwarts. Duty calls. You'll come to our quarters later? After my rounds?"

"I will."

She kissed him goodbye right there, in front of everyone. Irrational fear clawed at Severus as he watched her go. Logically, he knew she wouldn't vanish again. She was only going to do her job, and she needed to be able to perform her duties without him clinging to her side. It would simply take time before his knee-jerk reactions caught up with what logic told him. A lot of time, most likely. Until that happened, he could fill in that worry journal that Simon was so fond of and find something to keep his mind occupied.

As Severus stood to make his excuses and retreat to his shed at Spinner's End, Ronald disentangled himself from a

dozing Longbottom and motioned to Severus that he wanted to speak to him outside. Oh, rapturous joy.

Neither wizard bothered to wrap up against the cold, settling for insufficient warming charms as their feet crunched over frosty gravel. Severus kept his hands in his pockets, concealing the way he held his wand ready for a duel.

"I know you probably find threats from me about as intimidating as a Pygmy Puff," Ronald said, "but if you ever, ever treat Neville badly or try to make him feel inferior again, I promise I will find a way to make you regret it."

Longbottom? All of this hostility from Ronald wasn't due to some urge to protect Hermione? It was about Severus's behaviour towards Ronald's boyfriend?

"I don't intend to do anything of the sort," Severus said. "It's my understanding that Longbottom killed Nagini. I had rather hoped to obtain a Pensieve memory of the event."

Ronald's mouth quirked up into a reluctant half-smile. "Yeah, he did. It was brilliant. I'll give you my memory of it, if you want. I had a good view."

"I would appreciate that."

They stood without speaking, breath forming clouds of steam, both pretending they weren't halfway frozen.

"Look," Ronald said eventually. "Hermione can make her own decisions. I might think it's a completely *mental* decision, but I've learned it's safer to my health when I don't interfere. You aren't messing her around, though, are you? You really still want to be married to her? After all this time?"

Severus cleared his throat. He didn't think Ronald had echoed Albus's question on purpose, but the answer was the same.

"Always." Severus paused. "Only a dunderhead wouldn't."

Ronald snorted. "Couldn't resist, could you?"

"No. I could not." Casting another warming charm, Severus mulled over his next words. "Draco told me that you offered yourself in Hermione's place when she was tortured by Bellatrix."

"Yeah." With an uncertain frown, Ronald shrugged one shoulder. "I'd do it again, in a heartbeat."

"I wonder if you might like a Pensieve memory of mine in exchange for yours. It involves Bellatrix's hair and some accidental magic when Draco was a child..."

24 December 2001

Hermione was still a bed hog.

Severus woke up on the edge of the mattress, half of her body draped over his. She had, as usual, caused his left arm to go numb by using it as her pillow. Opening his eyes to the familiar Potions Master's ceiling had a way of catapulting his thoughts back to the long years of the war. Maybe Minerva would allow them to move into different quarters — something above ground. Not even Fawkes's presence could warm this place.

It took a few wriggles and repetitions of her name before Hermione sighed that familiar sigh and blinked up at him. Rather than lounging in bed as the blood returned to his arm, as he'd hoped, she announced her intention to restart their morning tradition of a walk around the lake.

Fifteen minutes later found them winding through the corridors, climbing up from the dungeons. The few students who had remained in the castle over the holidays still stared upon catching sight of Severus. It was a pity Minerva would not permit him to deduct House Points or assign detentions. He'd asked.

Perhaps he could convince Charity to dole out punishments on his behalf when she took over the Defence position. He already knew that asking Hermione would be a pointless effort.

Out on the grounds, Hermione wrapped her cloak more tightly around herself and aimed her steps towards the memorial.

"I need to visit, I think," she said, keeping a firm hold on his arm. Apparently she had decided that he needed to accompany her. "I already said goodbye a long time ago, but that was before..."

Well. That was understandable. Severus let her lead him

through the frigid wind to the grey stone.

It was exactly as it had been on the day of Hermione's return — though there were, perhaps, slightly fewer bloodied lilies. As of yet, no decision had been made regarding Severus and Charity's names. He grimaced at his carved likeness, but Hermione didn't notice. Stepping forward, she conjured a delicate purple hyacinth to rest beneath Nymphadora's name.

When Severus had masqueraded as Draco, he'd considered leaving flowers for Nymphadora. He'd only chosen Charity as a hint to Hermione. By describing Hermione's Boggart, Nymphadora had helped to save Severus's life. She had attempted to rescue him when she'd mistaken the Boggart for a real vision of his death. If she hadn't tutored Hermione in Occlumency, Severus likely would have spoilt everything before it had even started by pushing too far with Legilimency and turning Hermione against him. True, Nymphadora's taste in men had been abysmal, and the day she'd left school, Severus had celebrated the fact that he would never again be forced to supervise her clumsy brewing, but nobody was perfect.

Drawing his wand, he silently cast *Orchideous* and placed the resulting bluebells next to Hermione's bouquet.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I did try to find a way with the *Felix Felicis*, but —"

Hermione shook her head. "It's not your fault. I knew it was extremely unlikely that you'd be able to save her." Sniffling, she dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief he produced from his pocket. "I feel almost like I'm mourning a different Tonks this time — the one who was my student. I'm ashamed it took me this long to come here. I've been all swept up in being relieved about you and Charity. Tonks deserved so much more than being an afterthought."

Severus didn't know what to say. Eventually, he settled on remaining silent and wrapping an arm around her.

"I was talking to your mum about her last night," Hermione

said. "She suggested we honour Tonks's memory by naming a child after her. I think Eileen might be the only person aside from Andromeda who actually likes the name Nymphadora."

For fuck's sake.

"I doubt Nymphadora would have appreciated that particular gesture," Severus said, his words fighting against the way his breath wanted to speed up to match his pulse.

Hermione let out a weak laugh. "Definitely not. During our Occlumency lessons, she told me that she used to threaten to change her name to something really ordinary, like Elizabeth, whenever her mum got on her nerves." Reaching out, she traced a finger over the capital N of Nymphadora. "Do you want children, Severus?"

This definitely fell under the category of *things they should have discussed before getting married*. His stomach gave a nervous lurch.

"Do you?" he asked.

"Only if you do. I can be happy either way, I think. I would say that I can be the childless aunt figure who helps all of my friends' kids get into mischief, because that would be an excellent way to honour the memories of both Tonks and Fred, but let's be honest: I'll probably buy the poor things homework planners as soon as they can walk."

"As soon as they can walk? That's leaving it a bit late, isn't it?"

Her laugh this time was less thready and sad. With one final touch of the memorial, she turned back towards the castle. "Come on. I have some last minute Christmas shopping to do after breakfast. It's well past time I bought a homework planner for Teddy."



Epilogue

Mugwort

12 June 2004

Fevery time Charity had tea at Cissy's house, she wondered if the bone china was made from the skeletons of Muggles. Turning the near-empty teacup around in her hand, she studied the golden rim as if it would give her the answer.

These afternoon teas with Andromeda and Cissy had become a monthly event — Cissy's idea. Severus had given Charity a book on detecting common poisons when she'd told him about it. Smart arse.

In addition to puzzling over the provenance of the china, Charity's more cynical side wondered whether Cissy was simply using the two of them to claw her way back up the social ladder. Then again, Charity had always been able to read her cousin, and Cissy's apology, while stilted, had felt genuine. Plus, Cissy already had Harry and his Life Debt for all of her social climbing needs, which had to be more effective than two Slytherins who had fought on the periphery of the war.

Today, sparkling flutes of champagne accompanied the finger sandwiches, scones, delicate cakes, and piping hot tea.

"What are we celebrating?" Andromeda asked with a

quirk of one eyebrow. "Do you want to toast Ron and Neville's wedding?"

"Is that today?" Cissy asked. "No, something quite the opposite — though I wish them all the best, of course." The way Cissy straightened her posture and looked down at her fingernails was an obvious tell. She had told Charity of her desire to get with the times and move away from the beliefs they'd both been raised with, but she hadn't progressed so far that she would go around thinking kindly of Weasleys. "My divorce was finalised yesterday."

Andromeda and Charity shared a look. Neither had known that Cissy hadn't planned to live out the rest of her days tied to Lucius.

"Well," Andromeda said, raising her glass of champagne, "I'll drink to that."

Sometimes Charity asked herself why she kept returning to Malfoy Manor. Cissy wasn't owed space in Charity's life; she had done nothing to deserve it apart from offering up a very belated apology, and had in fact done plenty to warrant being frozen out forever. Would Cissy have even extended that first invitation if she hadn't witnessed Charity's fake death?

Maybe it was that fake death that kept bringing Charity back. If she had been forced to watch Cissy be tortured and killed, it would have broken something inside her, no matter how much bad blood existed between them.

Life would have been simpler if Charity could have hated her cousin. True forgiveness might never arrive, but some small scrap of love still persisted in spite of everything, though Charity couldn't say why. Families were always complicated, she supposed.

Charity looked down at her ring, recently moved to her right hand, where it was just a ring, not a promise of a marriage that would never be. The love she had for Gideon was still there as well — would always be there — but she no

longer believed it would be her only love. Gideon wouldn't have wanted that for her.

"What are you going to do now?" Charity asked.

Cissy took a sip of champagne. "Continue my work with the War Orphans Trust. Travel. Enjoy not answering to anyone but myself. Spoil any grandchildren when they arrive, though I can hardly believe I'm that old."

"Oi," Andromeda said. "I'm a grandmother, and I'm not old."

"You're older than me."

Cissy and Andromeda laughed together more easily than they had when these teas had first started. Thinking of another not-old grandmother she knew, Charity dusted the crumbs from her fingers and said her goodbyes. Her stomach flipped over and over all the way to the apparition point.

Upon landing in Algie's garden, Charity had to blink several times to make sense of the bright burst of orange filling her vision. Hermione stood before her in a bridesmaid's dress that was covered in aggressively orange satin roses. Every single centimetre of the skirt was twisted into a fake blossom.

"Wow," Charity said. "I'm surprised they're having the ceremony in a garden. With that thing, there are already quite enough flowers in this wedding to be getting on with."

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "I know. Ron decided to combine his love of the Chudley Cannons with Neville's love of Herbology and force me to wear it. And here I thought we were friends. How was Wiltshire?"

Charity shrugged. "Not terrible. Cissy is now divorced, apparently."

"Really? Huh. Good for her."

Charity loved Hermione even more for sounding as if she genuinely meant that statement. Resting her chin on Hermione's orange shoulder, Charity gave her friend a quick hug.

Severus, who must have already seen the dress, didn't

manage to resist laughing at his wife's expense when he rounded a tree and saw her in all of her orange glory.

Barely restraining her own amusement, Hermione crossed her arms. "Honestly, Severus. It's not *that* funny."

Still chuckling, Severus leaned in closer to whisper something that made Hermione bite her lower lip and smile.

Leaving them to it, Charity moved farther into the garden and scanned the crowd for two familiar heads of black hair: one salt and pepper, one baby-fine and curly. She found them in the back row of chairs, little Elizabeth bouncing happily on Eileen's knee. Charity's belly did another somersault. As Charity slid into the seat next to them, she leaned over to kiss her goddaughter's cheek. Elizabeth responded with a babble that Charity tried to believe was an attempt to say her name.

"You look nice," Charity said, straightening the collar of Eileen's dark blue dress robes. Her fingertips brushed the bare skin of Eileen's neck.

"Thank you. So do you."

Eileen smiled in that barely detectable way of hers. Wide, bright grins only ever seemed to show up on Eileen's face during their walks or when playing with her granddaughter at Spinner's End.

Severus sat on Charity's other side during the ceremony, resulting in Elizabeth climbing over her to reach his lap. Eileen's leg pressing against Charity's from knee to hip proved to be a distraction. Familiar vows floated in one ear and out the other. She didn't realise Ron and Neville had been pronounced bonded for life until the thunder of applause roared all around her.

Later, when many of the other guests were merry from elf-made wine, Charity asked Eileen to dance. It had been years since Eileen had helped Charity prepare for her dance as Draco, but they fell seamlessly back into the familiar steps.

"I like that you stopped disguising yourself as Madam Pince,"

Charity said. "I don't think I ever told you that."

"I no longer felt the need to hide, I suppose." Another almost-smile appeared. "I am beyond relieved that you have never again dressed up as Argus."

"No? Harry thought you and Argus were an item when he was a student."

Eileen moved in so they were cheek-to-cheek. "Believe me, *he* is not my type."

Charity's face warmed. She had no clue what she was doing. Eileen was her best friend's *mother*. Granted, there was a smaller age gap between Charity and Eileen than there was between Severus and Hermione, but still. It had to be breaking some sort of friend code, even if it did open up delightful possibilities for all manner of "your mother" jokes.

It was difficult to say when this thing between them had started. In the aftermath of the battle, when they'd held each other as they'd wished and wished for Severus to recover? When their walks had become something to look forward to, rather than an escape? When they'd danced for hours in Charity's sitting room?

Felix Felicis had once commanded Charity to invite Eileen to her party. Maybe not everything that potion had done had been for Severus's benefit.

"I'm rubbish at this," Eileen whispered.

"Dancing? Hardly."

"That's not what I meant. It's... Gods, I can't believe I'm going to take Hermione's advice. She told me to just tell you plainly that I'm... interested. In you. Romantically."

Charity couldn't help but grin. "You asked Hermione for advice?"

"Well, I certainly wasn't going to ask Severus. He can be such a prude."

With laughter bubbling through her, it didn't seem like such a difficult step for Charity to cradle Eileen's face between her hands and kiss her.

"I am not going to call her Stepmother," Severus said.

Hermione waved away a floating tray of wine. "You're getting a bit ahead of yourself. And besides, I doubt she'll want you to."

"No, she'll come up with something even worse."

"Oh, she definitely will." Snuggling closer, Hermione muffled her laugh against his shoulder. "You're really fine with them being together?"

"Of course I am. I've had more than enough time to become accustomed to the idea. The pair of them move slower than two drugged Flobberworms."

As he rubbed his hands up and down Hermione's arms, Severus watched their daughter playing on a blanket with Luna and young James Potter. Both of the children were engaged in one of their favourite games: attempting to grab Luna's hair.

Fawkes had given Ollivander another tail feather on the evening of Elizabeth's birth. Given the way the turkey watched over her like she was his own hatchling, Severus could guess which wand would choose Elizabeth when she turned 11.

Some days, Severus still worried about emulating Tobias in any way. He'd done so with words in his classroom plenty of times, hadn't he? On top of not being renowned for his patience, he'd had precious few examples of good fathers in his life. Mr Evans, Arthur, and various fictional characters in novels stood alone. And, well, he supposed Potter wasn't entirely horrible at parenting.

Having a child had been Severus's idea — an impulsive, love-drunk request on the evening of their second wedding reception — but panic had set in the instant the pregnancy detection charm had yielded a positive result. Even though Severus hadn't breathed a word of his doubts to anyone but Simon, he suspected Hermione had guessed. His mum had definitely seen right through him.

"I told you once before," Eileen had said, patting his cheek,

"I know who you really are, love. You aren't your father's son. Well, biologically, yes, you're his. Being with one man was enough of a hassle. I would never have sought out — "

"Mum," he'd said. "What, exactly, are you trying to say?"

"That you'll be a better father than the one you had. Obviously."

So far, he didn't think he had scarred Elizabeth for life. While Hermione taught, Elizabeth spent most of the day with Severus, only being sent off to the Grangers or the Burrow when he needed to brew. When he carried her through the halls of Hogwarts, he tolerated students cooing and fussing over her — up to a point. He took her to tedious Muggle baby groups with Ginevra and James, where Severus and Ginevra tended to wrap themselves in a Muffliato in order to talk about a few of the more irritating parents. He still didn't feel as if he had the slightest clue what he was doing, but Molly had assured him that was normal.

"Ron and Neville asked me to be their surrogate," Hermione said, instantly drawing his attention away from Elizabeth.

Not knowing what to think, Severus gaped at her for a moment. "I'm amazed they had the nerve, after making you wear that," he finally said.

"Weddings are for making your friends wear something you love that they hate. Charity wore a bra to ours, remember?"

"I do not have any opinions one way or the other about Charity's undergarments, thank you."

"I'm sure your mum will be relieved to hear it." She only seemed encouraged by his glower. "Anyway, Ron and Neville asked Luna first. Probably because she's not married to you."

He nodded. "Sensible."

"Luna said it would be too risky for her to carry the pregnancy because of all of the dangerous beasts she encounters in her work, but she already has some eggs picked out for them. Whatever *that* means. So if I wanted to, I could just, you know, be the one to carry and deliver the baby, rather

than contributing any genetic material. I think I'd prefer that. I don't want any child of mine to not be yours."

Just carry and deliver the baby. Good gods.

"You also deal with dangerous beasts on a daily basis during term time," Severus said.

She nudged him in the ribs with her elbow. "Most people call them students."

"Most people are imbeciles."

For some bizarre reason, this made Hermione smile, shake her head, and say, "I love you."

Severus kissed her forehead. "You're considering it, aren't you? Carrying their child?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I realise I said I would never again put myself through giving birth, but they want to be fathers so badly. I'd love to help give that to them. You and I don't want any more kids, so it's not like I'd be putting off plans of my own. What do you think?"

It was far from his favourite idea, but it was, after all, her body. Severus thought back to Draco's account of Ronald screaming and begging to be tortured in Hermione's place — of the silvery Pensieve vision of Neville killing that snake.

"I think," he said, pausing to brush his lips over hers, "that I can very easily picture you braving the excruciating pain of childbirth for your friends. Gryffindor."

Finis

Notes

Chapter 11

I can't remember who wrote the post I saw on tumblr about does vs hinds in the UK, or I'd give them credit here. I thought I had it bookmarked, but apparently not. The male counterpart of a hind is a stag (red deer or sika deer), while the male counterpart of a doe is a buck (muntjac deer, roe deer, fallow deer, or Chinese water deer). I had no idea about any of this before I saw the post on tumblr. I got all of the information about different UK deer species on the British Deer Society's website.

EDIT: A "Thank you" to duj, who pointed me in the direction of Whitehound's post about the doe vs hind question (which is, I think, what I saw quoted on tumblr).

Chapter 15

I've no idea who originally came up with the I'm a Prince/ Irma Prince theory for Irma Prince really being Eileen Prince Snape, or I'd credit them here. I found it on the HP Wiki page for Madam Pince, and they just said it was a popular fan theory.

Chapter 18

According to an infographic on Pottermore, Snape deducted 287 points and awarded 0 throughout the series.

Chapter 22

Thanks to Flyology for pointing out that Charity would

have seen Hermione and Severus's first real kiss through the transparent wall of her shed.

Chapter 28

Credit for Tonks's Patronus being a chameleon goes to Vitellia. The wiki says that Tonks's pre-Remus Patronus was a jackrabbit, but I didn't think it fit her, so I decided to change it. The line "I think you were better off with the old one" is from HBP.

Chapter 34

Re: Dionysus: the lifespan of a little owl is 16 years, so let's all just assume he was very young in 1987-88.



Photo Credits

DESIGNER'S NOTE: Obviously the images of flowering plants which have been used for the chapter head illustrations were found on the internet.

I did not attempt to seek out backtrails all the way to the original sources, but I did make a note of who, what company, or which organization had uploaded the image which was ultimately used. Or, upon which stock image site the image can be found. Several of these images have been modified for use in this publication.

I avoided using images found on the sites of fine art galleries or professional photographers to which I do not already subscribe, but in a couple of cases, due to a language barrier, it was not clear whether the product being sold was the plants, or the pictures of the plants. If I guessed wrong, and the actual product is the images, these companies have my sincere apologies.

In alphabetical order:

ACONITE: Wikipedia

AGAPANTHUS: Gardenia website

<https://www.gardenia.net>

ALSTROMERIA: Sarah Raven website

<https://www.sarahraven.com>

ANGELS' TRUMPET (DATURA): GreenLife by Shamus O'Leary website <https://www.greenlifebyshamusoleary.com>

ARBORVITAE: Purdue University website
[https://www.pfw.edu/microsites/
native-trees/eastern-arborvitae](https://www.pfw.edu/microsites/native-trees/eastern-arborvitae)

ARUM: Wildflower Finder website
<https://wildflowerfinder.org.uk>

BEGONIA: Getty Images

BELLADONNA: Pinterest

BITTERSWEET: Pinterest

BLUEBELL: Reader's Digest Canada website
<https://www.readersdigest.ca>

CHRYSANTHEMUM (RED): Sarah Raven website
(see: Alstromeria)

CYCLAMEN: Gardening Know how website
<https://www.gardeningknowhow.com>

HEATHER (WHITE): The Heather Garden website
<http://www.theheathergarden.co.uk>

HELIOTROPE: Old Fashioned Living website
<http://oldfashionedliving.com>

HEMLOCK: Springfield News-Leader website
<https://www.news-leader.com>

HENBANE: Amazon.com

HYACINTH (YELLOW): Pixabay

IRIS: [https://www.michwildflowers.com/
iridaceae/dwarflakeiris.html](https://www.michwildflowers.com/iridaceae/dwarflakeiris.html)

IVY: HGIC Clemson Home and Garden Information Center
<https://hgic.clemson.edu>

JONQUIL: The Wildlife Trusts website
<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org>

LABURNUM: The Incredible Seed website
<https://www.incredibleseeds.ca>

- LADY'S SLIPPER:** Minnesota Wildflowers website
Photographer: Peter M. Dzuik,
<https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info>
- LOVE-IN-A-MIST:** Gardinia website (see: Agapanthus)
- MISTLETOE:** The Holiday Spot website
<https://www.theholidayspot.com>
- MUGWORT:** Lilith's Garden Herbals, Etsy
<https://www.etsy.com/listing/531216970/mugwort-flower-essence>
- OLEANDER:** Getty Images
- PENNYROYAL:** AmkhaSeed website
<https://www.amkhaseed.com>
- PERIWINKLE (BLUE):** Paws Dog Day Care website
<http://www.pawsdogdaycare.com>
- POINSETTIA:** ASPCA website <https://www.aspca.org>
- RANUNCULUS:** KSL News Radio website
<https://kslnewsradio.com>
- RHODODENDRON:** Home Depot website
<https://www.homedepot.com>
- ROSE DAPHNE:** Native Plant Trust website
<https://gobotany.nativeplanttrust.org>
- RUE:** Milagro Herbs website
<https://www.milagroherbs.com>
- SNOWDROP:** Pixabay
- WISTERIA:** Allegro website
<https://allegro.pl/oferta/przepiekna-pachnaca-niebieska-glicynia-blue-dream-7759947443>
- WORMWOOD:** North Carolina State Extension website
<https://www.ces.ncsu.edu>
- ZEPHYRANTHES:** High Country Gardens website
<https://www.highcountrygardens.com>

Colophon

The layout and formatting of this document was done in Adobe InDesign, utilizing commercial clip art from the incomparable Marwan Aridi of Aridi Computer Graphics, modified in Adobe Photoshop. Cover was created in Adobe Photoshop, Forntspiece was created in the DAZ Studio.

Fonts used in this publication: for body text, the Cantoria Family from Monotype, with additional cuttings created in Fontographer. Drop Caps and intro lines are set in University Roman and University Roman Bold. Titles are set in Three Island Press's Botanical Script. Also Used in the project are P22's Monet, Studipos's Cenizas, and Fontcraft's Malagua.

Special mention should also be extended to Jack Davis and Linea Dayton for their efforts in producing The Photoshop 7 One-Click WOW Book. More than a decade later, their layer styles still constitute one of my first go-tos.

Graphics design by J. Odell (J0del@aol.com)