A Study of the Woman in Scarlet and Green

by peskipiksi

Sequel to 'A Scandal in Bulgaria'. When the infamous photographs of her and Krum go missing, Hermione herself must turn to Snape for help.

The Master Blackmailer

Chapter 1 of 4

Sequel to 'A Scandal in Bulgaria'. When the infamous photographs of her and Krum go missing, Hermione herself must turn to Snape for help.

Society Marriage Called Off

Oliver Wood, Keeper for the English National Quidditch side, has broken off his engagement to Parvati Patil, winner of last year's Golden Quill Award. The couple met when up-and-coming young journalist, Miss Patil, interviewed Mr Wood on his selection to the team, the article which won her the Golden Quill.

Now, it appears, compromising correspondence between Miss Patil and French Seeker, Pierre D'Or, has come to light, which has made the nation's favourite Keeper rethink the wisdom of his choice. 'I was sent my ex-fiancée's letters anonymously,' says a heartbroken Wood. 'I have no idea where they came from, but they are distressingly explicit. Apparently they met at the Yule Ball, the year after I graduated. She swore it was all over, but she was extremely keen to accompany me to France last month for our last away game. We saw very little of each other, and she had been distant with me since.'

Following the Bulgarian squad's lead, the English team has taken a zero-tolerance policy on scandal, and Mr Wood clearly feels that to continue his engagement would not in be his own, or the public's, interest.

Miss Patil has since ceased employment with this paper, and is now, the Prophet understands, writing for*The Quibbler*.

I am sure Mr Wood's legions of fans wish him well.

Rita Skeeter

Special Correspondent

So, thought Severus Snape sourly, closing *The Evening Prophet*, Rita Skeeter was still peddling scandal and destroying young lives, was she? He tapped his pipe out into the ashtray and refilled it, thinking hard. Mind you, it didn't seem to be Rita's doing this time, so much as the anonymous man trying to blackmail Miss Patil, doubtless for a sizable share of her now ex-fiancé's earnings.

Severus disliked blackmail intensely. *Nasty, cowardly thing to do.* If he got hold of the perpetrator… He thought back to that week last year when Sybill Trelawney had hexed him to behave like the great literary detective Sherlock Holmes. Now there was a man who'd be able to deal with this outrage. Perhaps he should go to Sybill and ask her to…

He was jolted out of his musings by a knock on his study door. Who in Merlin's name was calling at so late an hour? Irritated, he got up and went to the door, and was stunned to discover, on the threshold, a young woman, heavily veiled, and clearly in an advanced state of distress. Wordlessly, he stepped aside to allow her to enter.

Once inside the room, and seated in an armchair beside the fire, the young woman removed her veil, and Severus's amazement increased tenfold. Opposite him sat the woman he had, for six months, referred to only as *the* woman: Miss Hermione Granger, the only person ever to outwit him, and the only woman to interest him in a very long time. So she was back from Australia.

On the pretence of offering her a drink, Severus moved to the sideboard and surreptitiously turned the silver-framed photograph which rested there face-down.

'Miss… Mrs Weasley,' he corrected himself smoothly. 'To what do I owe this most unexpected pleasure?'

Having taken a few heartening sips of Firewhisky, Hermione seemed to gather her nerve. 'Professor Snape, I… I am afraid to say I need your help.' She swallowed and took another gulp of her drink. 'I know I little deserve it after the way I way I behaved last year, but it is because of what happened then that I come to you now.'

Snape said nothing, merely regarding her with expressionless eyes. Hermione's eyes fell on *The Evening Prophet*.

'You will know of the tragedy which has befallen my friend Parvati,' she continued in a whisper. 'I am now very much afraid something of the same is about to happen to me.'

Severus sat up straighter in his chair. However much she had hurt his pride last year, Miss Granger could not be allowed to fall victim to this master blackmailer. It seemed he would have to act. 'Tell me everything,' he commanded.

'The photographs have gone missing,' Hermione said, her eyes on her lap. 'I can only think it was my house-elf. Merlin knows I have treated her well,' she burst out suddenly in impassioned tones, 'but Ron…' and here her voice broke, 'Ron always said she didn't like being paid and given holidays. Perhaps she turned against me for it.'

Severus handed her his handkerchief, and she dabbed at her eyes with the fine linen. 'Do you have any clue as to the identity of the scoundrel?' he asked softly.

Hermione handed him back his handkerchief, her eyes quite dry now. 'Parvati came to interview a new member of staff at the Ministry a few months ago,' she said hesitantly. 'He is an Unspeakable, so I know very little about him, but he has always been more secretive even than the others, and when I pass him in the corridors there is something in his eyes that unsettles me. More than that I cannot tell you – it would break the code of confidentiality by which I am employed. I am sorry I cannot give you more,' she finished, looking directly into his eyes.

So, thought Severus, finishing his own drink in silence, there is a code of confidentiality at the Ministry. Evidently the only way to find out more would be to infiltrate the place. How fortunate he had refused to give up his office in the dungeons: Slughorn had a vat of Polyjuice Potion simmering away, to which Severus had direct access. Last year, under Sybill's hex, he had been reckless with his disguise to the point of stupidity. This would require much more finesse than a scarf and hat. And a lot of research. Fortunate too that it was half-term, and he had no lessons to distract him.

He stood abruptly. 'I will contact you as soon as the photographs are in my possession. Goodbye, Mrs Weasley.'

Hermione rose and placed her empty glass on the sideboard. Catching sight of the laid-down photograph frame, she picked it up, and a look of recognition came into her eyes.

'I wondered where that one had gone,' she said lightly.

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A/N: I have had several requests for a sequel to 'Scandal' which ties in with the Holmes/Adler fandom. This is a combination of Doyle's 'Charles Augustus Milverton', and the Granada TV film based on it: 'The Master Blackmailer'. And reviewer Sara Blade got her wish to 'see Snape smoking by his fire while a lady in a veil begs for his help...'

The title is, of course, a blend of 'A Study in Scarlet' and the Basil Rathbone film, 'The Woman in Green'.

The Game Is Afoot

Chapter 2 of 4

Sequel to 'A Scandal in Bulgaria'. When the infamous photographs of her and Krum go missing, Hermione herself must turn to Snape for help.

The next day, Severus was to be found lurking outside the tradesmen's entrance to the Ministry, spying on the Magical Maintenance staff. Workmen went everywhere and talked to everyone, and so it was a member of this Department who would have to sacrifice a chunk of his hair to Snape's Polyjuice Potion, and suffer a few Stunning Spells.

After a tense few minutes of waiting, two men in navy blue overalls came into view, the younger one, whose name badge read 'Escott', complaining vociferously.

'In for a week an' 'alf, I am. It's raining in Mrs Weasley's office. Says she's tried *Finite* – doesn't work.'

His colleague laughed. 'Taken over Yaxley's office, hasn't she? They never did get that sorted. Cheer up, mate, at least she won't turn you into a toad like he used to old Cattermole! Blimey, you were lucky you weren't with us then, Brett, mate. Hated Muggle-borns, old Yaxley did.'

'Aye, but t'lass isn't herself, anyone can see that. Weasley's going round t'Auror Office with a face like thunder, an' all. Probably thump me if 'e finds me in 'er office! An' no one else has been able to fix it, 'ave they? Goin' to take me all week, I reckon.'

Severus breathed a sigh of relief. There was his man. Brett Escott was about Hermione's age, so she'd be more likely to talk to him, he was new, so no one would be surprised if he was curious about his new place of work, and, most usefully of all, he was a Yorkshireman. Polyjuice Potion would give Severus his subject's vocal chords and voice, but wouldn't change his own cultured tones. Severus would have to do that himself, and, thanks to his otherwise useless father, a Yorkshire accent was something he could imitate.

Poor Escott was going to have a hell of a headache from all the Stunning Spells he would have to undergo this week.

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‘Mrs Weasley. Still raining in ‘ere, is it?’

‘Oh, thank Merlin, at last. Come in Mr…’ she glanced at his name badge, ‘Escott.’

Severus stepped into the office, hauling the ladder behind him. ‘Nay, lass; call me Brett. Mr Escott makes me sound like my old dad. ‘e’d laugh if ‘e could see me now, I tell you. ‘e were a plumber, an’ all. *“We Plumb the Depths”* – that were ‘is firm’s motto. Reckon ‘e thought it sounded clever.’

Despite her constant worry, Hermione laughed and perched on the edge of her desk. ‘Well, I’m very glad you’re here, Brett. It’s been a nightmare in here.’

Severus smiled to himself. He’d made her laugh. If ‘Escott’ could make a friend of Hermione, his, Snape’s, task would be a lot easier. ‘Tried *Finite* then?’

‘Yes, but it only works for about half an hour at a time. I have to keep using *Impervius* on all my reports. It’s like trying to use Mum and Dad’s old computer – you have to keep saving stuff before it crashes!’

Severus laughed shortly. ‘Computers! Magic for Muggles. I’m glad they don’t work ‘ere – more trouble than they’re worth, they are.’

Hermione looked at him quizzically for a second, then laughed too. ‘I think my mum would agree with you, Brett!’

Snape set the stepladder in the middle of the room. ‘Righty-o then, lass; let’s see what we can do.’

He had been wondering why Miss Granger, one of the cleverest witches he had ever taught, had been unable to deal with the problem herself, but after two hours he was all but ready to admit defeat. (Two hours with a trip to the loo for a swig of Polyjuice – fortunately, the incessant rain meant frequent bathroom trips were not questioned.) Escott was right: it was going to take all week. It looked like a complex bit of magic he was going to have to diagnose and unravel a bit at a time. Which was good, of course. It would have been no use to his investigation if he’d been able to fix the problem within twenty minutes.

He’d tried every charm he knew;*Finite, Impervius, Protego,* even *Impedimenta* and *Arresto Momentum* in the vain hope they might slow the ferocity of the downpour. Eventually, a combination of the Imperturbable Charm and the Room Sealing Spell Severus used on his own office at Hogwarts created a barrier around the room which, while not stopping the rain, would at least keep Hermione from drowning while he attended to more urgent matters.

‘Right you are, lass; I think that’s about all I can do for t’moment,’ he informed her, climbing down from the stepladder a little stiffly. ‘Onwards and upwards; well, downwards – got to go and deal with a problem in t’Department of Mysteries.’

Hermione started slightly.

‘You all right, lass?’ Severus asked, knowing full well she wasn’t.

She recovered herself and went to help him fold up the ladder. ‘Oh… yes. It’s just…’ She laid a hand on his arm, and Severus felt the heat of her touch through his overalls. ‘Be careful of the new Unspeakable, won’t you? Malvetis. I… well, there’s something about him.’ Hermione looked up into his eyes and gave a small smile. ‘Just be careful.’

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The only other person in the lift was a small, stout man in expensive black robes that looked to be cashmere and probably cost more than Escott’s entire salary. He had *a perpetual frozen smile, and keen grey eyes, which gleamed brightly from behind broad, golden-rimmed glasses. There was something of* Horace Slughorn’s *benevolence in his appearance*, but the hard glitter in those grey eyes was disconcerting, and*a more calculatingly insincere smile* Severus *hoped never to see.*

The small, stout man got out on the ninth floor, and as he realised Severus was following him, turned to stare at him. ‘Can I help you, young man?’ he enquired. *His voice was as smooth and suave as his countenance.*

‘I was told you had a problem with your windows, Mr, er…’ Snape shuffled his feet, suddenly feeling Escott’s nineteen years. He was out of practice when it came to spying.

‘Malvetis. No, as far as I’m aware, our windows are fine. Thank you and goodbye…’ he peered at Severus’s name-badge through his gold-rimmed specs, ‘… Escott.’

So this was Hermione’s Nemesis. Severus could see why she had confessed to being ‘unsettled’ by Malvetis’s gaze. Well, having struck lucky first time, he wasn’t about to leave without information. ‘Um… should I maybe just come in an’ check ‘em for you?’

‘Oh, no.’ Malvetis’s smile was still fixed firmly in place, but the glitter in those penetrating eyes intensified. ‘No, this Department has the highest levels of security, you see, and I couldn’t give you all the passwords and counter-spells just so you can ‘check’ whether I’m telling the truth.’ *His insufferable smile was more complacent than ever.* ‘Besides,’ *he purred,* ‘I should hate to put you to any trouble.’ Malvetis waved his hand imperiously at Snape, dismissing him.

As he turned to go, resolved to come back another time, Snape felt Malvetis whisper in his ear: ‘And tell them to send a real wizard next time there’s a problem. I don’t want a Mudblood contaminating my office.’

Severus spun round, shock and anger robbing him of the power of speech.

Malvetis sneered. *’Tell anyone,’* he hissed, *’and there will be retribution.’*

He stalked away, leaving Snape rooted to the spot with shock. His every instinct was telling him to go straight to Kingsley Shacklebolt with the news there was a budding Death Eater in the ranks, but he would have to keep quiet. Whatever Malvetis had, or would manage to dig up, on Escott, Snape was sure the boy wouldn’t be able to pay the terms. But he’d come face to face with the enemy. He knew, at last, who he was dealing with.

‘The game is afoot, Malvetis,’ he said softly. *‘The game is afoot.’*

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A/N: The blackmailer’s name comes from ‘Mammon’, the demon of avarice, ‘mal’: bad, and ‘Vetis’, the demon of corruption. And, of course, the fact that it sounds like Milverton doesn’t hurt either!

Many thanks to bleddyn for advice on Yorkshire accents.

We Plumb the Depths

Chapter 3 of 4

Sequel to 'A Scandal in Bulgaria'. When the infamous photographs of her and Krum go missing, Hermione herself must turn to Snape for help.

The next day, at nine o'clock sharp, Hermione was waiting for him with a mug of coffee.

Snape smiled broadly at her. Being Escott for a week was turning out to be much more enjoyable than being Severus Snape. 'I thought we workmen were supposed to drink builders' tea. "Four sugars, love, an' don't stir it!"'

Hermione laughed again, and Severus thought how her smile lit up even this gloomy, rainy office. Then her expression turned serious again. 'How did you get on at the Department of Mysteries? Did you meet that new one, the one I warned you about?'

Snape grimaced. 'Yeah, creepy, isn't 'e?'

'I don't like him, Brett; he freaks me out. I know he hates Muggle-borns, but he looks at me like he...' She broke off, clearly unsure whether to take him into her confidence.

'What? Like 'e wants to... you know?' Even though he knew it wasn't the case, and he was only acting a part, Snape felt his blood boil at the thought.

Hermione looked even more horrified. 'No! Just like he... knows something about me.' She swallowed and took a great gulp of air. 'I'm scared of him, Brett!' When she looked up at him, there were tears in her eyes. 'Can you keep a secret?'

''Course I can, lass.' He led her to the desk and sat her down on it. 'Come an' tell me what's bothering you. I could see something weren't right t'first time I came in 'ere.'

And she repeated unwittingly the story she had told him in his study two days ago.

'I can't pay him,' Hermione finished desperately. 'He wants half a million! I suppose he thinks I'll go to Viktor, but I can't! How can I ask for that much? His wife would find out and it would ruin his marriage!' The tears spilled from her eyes down her cheeks.

Snape felt sick and livid at the same time. He had had no idea of the scale of Malvetis's operation. No wonder Parvatil Patil hadn't been able to pay. And no wonder Hermione was near-hysterical with worry.

He moved up the desk, close enough to put an arm round her. He longed to reassure her, to tell her he would make it all right, but didn't want to put her in the awkward position of having to explain that she'd already asked someone for help even though that person was himself. Merlin, he thought he'd given up these mental gymnastics when Voldemort died!

At a total loss for what to do, he took out his handkerchief and gently wiped her eyes. As Severus Snape he would never have the courage, but as Brett Escott he did. He leaned closer to blot the tears from her cheeks.

Hermione took the cloth out of his hand and leaned in too. *'Give me a kiss,'* she whispered.

Snape's brain froze. *'I... I don't know 'ow,'* he stammered. That fitted with gawky young Escott's character, but it was also the truth: Severus had never got anywhere near kissing Lily, and he'd never wanted to try it with anyone else. Until now.

Hermione gently touched his lip. *'Poor boy,'* she whispered, leaning closer.

Severus jerked upright and forced a laugh. 'Steady, lass; your 'usband'll 'ave my guts for garters!'

'I don't care if I do make him jealous,' Hermione said defiantly, *'it might buck his ideas up.'* And she burst into tears again.

'There now, don't go upsetting yourself. Do you want to talk about it?'

Hermione sniffed and blew her nose. 'It was Australia that did it. We were fine before then. Well not quite fine; I had problem, a secret I had to take care of.'

Snape's gaze drifted down to her belly. He knew what the "problem" had been, of course, but Escott didn't, and this was the most obvious thing for him to think.

Hermione gave a wry chuckle. 'No, not that. Anyway it necessitated going to Australia for a while my parents live there but Ron kept saying we couldn't afford it, couldn't afford to be away from work all that time. And now, whenever a bill comes in and we can't pay it, he makes it quite clear it's my fault. I'm sick of it all, but I don't know what to do!'

Severus pulled her down so her head was nestled on his shoulder, and slipped an arm about her.

And that was when all the protective spells on the ceiling gave way at once.

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Thawing out in a hot bath half an hour later, Severus reviewed the information he had acquired over the past few days. Malvetis couldn't be a surviving Death Eater Severus had been one of the "privileged" few who had known the names of all his fellows but he clearly had the same unpleasant ideology. Severus groaned aloud. Would he never be free of You Know Who?

And Hermione. He felt light-headed when he thought of the little scene in her office today. She had asked him to kiss her, and he had wanted to God knew he wanted to, but she was married. The marriage was obviously on the rocks, but still, she was married and therefore just as unattainable as Lily had been. Why did he always have to fall for other men's wives?

He was also uncomfortably aware that he was practising on her ignorance. She supposed him to be Escott, thought she was confiding in a young, good-looking colleague, not her irascible former teacher who was no oil painting and had nothing to offer her. And there was no denying he had placed Escott in a most difficult position when the boy returned next week.

'It was a most necessary step,' said a small, treacherous voice in Severus's brain. *'I wanted information.'* Hermione had not even offered him Malvetis's name when she had come to beg his help, let alone told him told him how much money was involved. Nor about Malvetis's Death Eater propensities, although she had probably been insulted by him herself. And he needed to discover the passwords and counter-spells Malvetis had alluded to.

Still, he had the nagging feeling he had gone too far. He was living up to his motto, plumbing the depths indeed. Severus splashed his overheated face in frustration.

'Merlin's balls!' he roared.

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The next day, Hermione made her way reluctantly back to her flooded office. They had put back the Room Sealing Spell yesterday, but both being soaked and freezing had left everything else as it was, and Hermione didn't relish the idea of going back this morning to a floor like a paddling pool and ruined paperwork.

She perked up on finding Escott waiting for her, though.

He was attempting to siphon the water from the floor, but it was slow going. Much as she knew she ought to help him, Hermione felt her priority was her waterlogged paperwork, and set about drying it all off and attempting to restore the smudged writing to legibility. After twenty minutes, feeling cold and distinctly damp around the edges, she decided they needed coffee.

Why she hadn't just levitated the cup over to Escott, Hermione would never know. Perhaps she just wanted an excuse to be near him again. She got her wish. Just as she was about to hand him the drink, she slipped on the wet floor. The mug shot out of her hand (fortunately flinging the hot liquid away from them both), she grabbed Escott around the waist to save herself, and they ended up on the floor, him on his back, her on top of him with his arms still protectively around her.

Once he had got over the shock, Severus began to laugh. He had fantasised about having Hermione in his arms many times over the last six months, but this was not exactly what he'd had in mind.

'I'm so sorry!' Hermione gasped, mortified. 'I'm so clumsy! Hang on; I'll get up.'

Severus tightened his grip. He wasn't letting her go that easily. Now that he had her here and vulnerable, he was going to take advantage. If he didn't have the courage to kiss her, he could still wheedle information out of her.

'What's the password to the Department of Mysteries?' he asked, so intent on getting an answer that he was unaware he had dropped his accent.

Hermione was smiling. 'Why? Have they got trouble with their windows again? Or is it raining in You Know Who's office too?'

'You Know Who?'

She lowered her voice to a whisper. 'Malvetis.'

Snape looked grim. 'Not yet. I could always arrange it for you.'

She giggled. Her face was very close to his. He damped down his feelings and concentrated on questioning her. 'What about the counter-charms, then?'

'I don't know,' she insisted. 'No-one outside the Department is allowed them.'

'Oh, come on, Hermione; you Magical Law Enforcers know everything about everyone!'

She raised herself up on her elbows, looking down at him suspiciously. *'What do you want to know for?'*she demanded.

'I want to get into Malvetis's office and put a permanent thunderstorm outside his window!'

She was instantly mollified. 'My knight in dusty overalls,' she whispered, leaning close again.

And she kissed him. No, not him. Escott. Severus felt a crushing pain, deep in his chest, as he remembered his deception. It was Escott she had fallen for, Escott whom she believed she was kissing.

And yet, that very fact made this moment all the more precious. He knew he would never kiss her again, and so he seized the opportunity, even though it broke his heart to do it.

'Oh, Hermione,' he whispered, and there were tears in his eyes and in his voice. *'You've touched my heart.'*

As she looked down at him, there were tears in her eyes too.

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The Butterfly Freed

Chapter 4 of 4

Sequel to 'A Scandal in Bulgaria'. When the infamous photographs of her and Krum go missing, Hermione herself must turn to Snape for help.

EXTRACT FROM THE DIARY OF LUCIUS MALFOY

It was *on a wild, tempestuous evening, when the wind screamed and rattled against the windows,*that my old friend Severus Snape, to my amazement, knocked at the door of the Manor, threw himself down into my best armchair *before the fire and laughed heartily.*

*'What a splendid night it is!'*he exclaimed.

I stared at him in bewilderment. *'You like this weather?'*

'It suits my purpose, Lucius. I mean to break into the Ministry tonight.'

'For Heaven's sake!' I expostulated. 'Whatever for?'

He stretched his long legs out in front of the fire, and clasped his hands behind his head. 'You remember the Daily Prophet article a few days ago about the termination of

Oliver Wood's engagement? He stated he had been sent his fiancée's letters anonymously. I have every reason to believe the blackmailer works at the Ministry and is hiding more such correspondence from unfortunate women in his office.'

It was my turn to laugh heartily now. 'Think, Severus! How could he possibly keep that hidden?'

My friend was unperturbed by my mockery. 'He is an Unspeakable, Lucius, and as such virtually untouchable. *The worst man in London.* He works in the most secretive department of the Ministry. It is the perfect place to hide the tools of his vile trade; it has the highest security. I have tried all other avenues of admission without success. That is why I shall require your help tonight: you got into the Department of Mysteries five years ago; you can gain me access tonight.'

'Think what you are doing,' I cried.

'You will admit that the cause is morally justifiable?'

'Yes. Technically criminal.'

'No more than casting the Dark Mark, *an action in which you were prepared to aid me.'*

'I didn't actually cast the Mark!' I protested. 'I only spoke the words.'

Snape merely regarded me with his fathomless black eyes.

'Think!' I said desperately. *'If you're caught an honoured career ending in failure and public disgrace.'*

He waved a hand dismissively. 'What are failure and disgrace against the peace of mind of a young woman? THE woman, Lucius!'

I sighed. Hermione Granger-Weasley was back in the country, then.

Snape regarded me sternly. 'Miss Parvati Patil was *The Prophet's* star reporter, engaged to one of the Wizarding world's premier sportsmen. She is now ruined, disgraced, writing for *The Quibbler.* I don't know what *The Quibbler* pays, Lucius, but it will not be enough for her to survive. *In a year's time, she will be on the streets.* I will not allow him to ruin anyone else!'

I turned it over in my mind. 'Well, I don't like it; but I suppose it must be,' said I. 'When do we start?'

*

The passwords and counter charms had changed, of course, from my last break-in five years ago, but I am still a frequent visitor to the Ministry, (*very old family, donations to excellent causes*) and hear things others do not. It took a little time, but soon there was that shimmer in the air which occurs when wards are breached, I *closed the door behind us, and we had become felons in the eyes of the law.* In the black-silk face masks Severus had insisted we wear, I was uncomfortably reminded of my Death Eater days a thing which seems to occur regularly when assisting my old friend in one of these escapades. At least all Death Eaters *had remarkable powers, carefully cultivated, of seeing in the dark.*

We met no one in the corridors, and I supposed that the wards were considered enough, and watch wizards not necessary here. *To my amazement,* however, Malvetis's door *was neither locked nor bolted! I touched Snape on the arm and he turned his masked face in that direction.*

'I don't like it,' he whispered. 'Anyhow, we have no time to lose.'

Malvetis's private safe was in a small ante-room to his office, little more than a cupboard. We stole in and shut the thankfully windowless door behind us. I lit my wand to give our night-vision a rest.

Snape darted to the safe and, under his breath, muttered *'Alohamora!'* At the lack of answering click from the lock, I became alarmed, but Severus re-aimed his wand *with the calm, scientific accuracy of a surgeon who performs a delicate operation. For half an hour he worked with concentrated energy,* murmuring ever more complex spells, and sighing with satisfaction when they yielded the desired results. *Finally I heard a click, the door swung open, and inside I had a glimpse of a number of paper packets, each tied, sealed and inscribed.*

I picked up the nearest letter, glanced at it, then turned to Snape in amazement. 'Look at this, Severus!' I exclaimed. 'We thought he wanted Krum to pay his terms, but it appears there is more to this than money.' I handed him a sheet of parchment addressed to Rodulphus Lestrange, and beginning "My dearest cousin". 'It seems our master blackmailer was a cousin of Bellatrix Lestrange, and his true motive was to revenge himself for Bellatrix's death by publicly humiliating the Weasley family.'

My friend's face had turned stark white. 'And if it ruined the Ministry's new prodigy, that was all to the good,' he growled. 'He knew Hermione would never be able to pay.'

My first feeling of fear had passed away, and I thrilled now with a keener zest than I had ever enjoyed as a Death Eater. *The high object of our mission, the consciousness that it was unselfish and chivalrous, the villainous character of our opponent, all added to the sporting interest of our adventure. Far from feeling guilty, I rejoiced and exulted in our dangers.*

Until, that is, I heard movement in the outer office. *It was evident we had entirely miscalculated.* Malvetis had been working in some farther wing of the Department. I pressed my eye to the keyhole of our little sanctuary. *He was leaning far back in the red leather chair, his legs outstretched. There was no promise of a speedy departure in his comfortable attitude.*

Several times I observed that Malvetis *looked at his watch. The idea, however, that he might have an appointment at so strange an hour never occurred to me until there came a gentle tap at the door.* Malvetis *rose and opened it.*

'Well,' said he, curtly, 'you are nearly half an hour late.'

So this was the explanation of the unlocked door and of the nocturnal vigil of Malvetis. *In front of him there stood a tall, slim, dark woman, a veil over her face.*

'Well,' said Malvetis, *'you've made me lose a good night's rest, my dear. You couldn't come at any other time eh?'*

The woman shook her head.

'Well, if you couldn't you couldn't. You say you have letters which compromise Rita Skeeter. Well, my dear, I should be interested to see those, most interested Merlin's beard, *is it you?'*

The woman without a word had raised her veil but as she had her back to us, all I could make out was a sheet of shining dark hair falling down her back like silk.

'It is I,' she said the woman whose life you have ruined. Well, Claude Malvetis, *what do you have to say?'*

It was clear to me that Malvetis would try to brazen the encounter out. After his initial astonishment, he hitched his frozen smile back into place, only he was a coward, and he could not keep his lips from twitching. *He laughed, but fear vibrated in his voice.*

'You were so very obstinate,' said he. 'Every man has his business, and what was I to do? I put the price well within your means well, your fiancé's means. *You would not pay.'*

From the woman's movements, I surmised she had drawn her wand.

'You will ruin no more lives as you have ruined mine. You will wring no more hearts as you have wrung mine,' she said.

There was no more warning than that.

'Avada Kedavra!' the woman cried.

Malvetis *fell forward upon the table, then rolled upon the floor.*

The woman looked at him intently and left the office, crushing his spectacles underfoot as she did so.

I turned to Snape, horrified by what I had just witnessed, but his whole attention was focused on the contents of the safe. At first, he examined each bundle before Vanishing it, but the longer he worked, the more his agitation increased. It was clear he was searching for something very particular, something which was not forthcoming. My friend was now glancing cursorily at each packet before flinging it aside in irritation. I endeavoured to assist him by using *Evanesco* on the discarded papers.

At last he had emptied the safe of incriminating material, but it was evident he had not found that for which he had come here tonight, and he turned on me such a look of despair as I have never before seen on my friend's face. I believe he would have proceeded to turn Malvetis's entire office upside-down, but I was anxious to be gone and took his hand, fairly pulling him out of the room.

In the corridor outside, however, Snape stooped and plucked from the floor a woman's trinket: a hair-clip in the shape of a butterfly. 'Miss Patil,' he said softly, *'you are free.'*

Then we slipped out of the Ministry *and were safe.*

He has since told me he remembered her being reprimanded by Minerva McGonagall for wearing it during the Triwizard Tournament, and that that was how he identified her. Apart from that one mistake, she had done well. She had Vanished her footprints, worn gloves, and even managed to eliminate any traces of magic in the air which could have identified her wand. No-one will ever be able to link her to Malvetis's death. Even so, I will encrypt this diary with spells of my own devising to protect the identity of one whose courage *freed the world from a poisonous thing.*

****

The next morning, Snape woke with a pounding head, as though he'd drunk a bottle of Firewhisky in one sitting. Fragments of the night before floated into his mind he and Lucius breaking into the Ministry, Parvati Patil, Malvetis dead. Severus was surprised to find that he didn't care. All those times when he had been a party to murder in the name of Voldemort, he had had to pretend not to care, whilst all the time feeling sick to his stomach. This time, however, *justice had overtaken a villain.*

But Hermione. How was he going to face her? He'd failed her. Everything that happened last night had been about retrieving the photographs, and he did not have them.

And if he were honest, it wasn't just about the photographs. It was about that kiss. He was going to have to go to her today and admit his failure, and he didn't know how he was going to face her knowing he had kissed her on her office floor yesterday. Even though she had no idea it was he who had done it.

Severus was in love he had never admitted it, but that was why he had kept her photograph, why he had never able to refer to her by name at least to Lucius Malfoy. He was afraid that if he said her name, his feelings would show in his voice. Occlumency wouldn't have been the least help he couldn't stop thinking about her. She had proved herself his intellectual equal last year, and during the past few days... well, he meant what he had said: she'd touched his heart.

His eye fell on the novel he had been attempting to read last night: *The Sign of Four.* Sherlock Holmes was of the opinion that *'It is of the first importance not to allow your judgement to be biased by personal qualities. A client is to me a mere unit, a factor in a problem. Love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true cold reason which I place above all things.'*

In that case, Severus was glad had failed if the alternative was never to love. Even if it was selfish of him. Even if she could never be his. Even if she hated him for failing her.

There was a knock on the door. As if his thoughts had conjured her up, Hermione stood on the threshold, veiled as she had been that first evening, but considerably calmer.

Before he could frame an apology, she brushed past him, sat on the edge of an armchair, lifted her veil and picked up his copy of *The Daily Prophet* from the side table. The front page was dominated by a photograph of Malvetis wearing his usual fixed smile, and the headline 'Murder at the Ministry'.

'The whole place is in uproar, you know,' she told him. 'They can't work out who did it no traces at all, apparently.' She shot a significant look at Snape, which he returned impassively.

She held his gaze. 'You didn't find the photographs, did you?'

Mutely, he shook his head, still unable to speak.

Hermione looked down at her hands, then said in a steady voice, 'He'd already sent them. They arrived this morning. Ron's divorcing me.'

Snape took a breath. This was the moment to apologise: he had to say something, even if whatever he said was inadequate. But before he could get a word out, she spoke again.

'I wanted to thank you for everything you've done for me.'

Snape looked up at her incredulously. How could she be taking this so calmly? 'Everything I've done?' he cried. 'I did nothing! I failed you!'

'No. You made everything much easier to bear.' Suddenly, astonishingly, Hermione collapsed back into the chair, giggling helplessly. '*We Plumb the Depths*. Honestly!'

Snape sprang to his feet. 'You knew?'

She sat up straight again and, with an effort, stopped laughing. 'Brett Escott would never have said computers are more trouble than they're worth! He's a bit of a techno geek on the side, apparently. Always trying to get magic and machinery to work together. Plus, you left my office once an hour as regular as clockwork. I knew you were taking Polyjuice Potion. And your accent slipped. At certain times.' She sounded almost arch.

He couldn't take it in. 'You knew all the time, and yet you... all those times in your office... ' He flushed. 'Yesterday...'

'Oh, Severus.' Hermione rose from her chair and placed her hand on his chest. *'You've touched my heart.'*

Looking down at her small, white hand, then up at her hopeful face, Severus made his decision. Dr Watson had described his friend and colleague as *'a mind without a heart'*. Sherlock Holmes seemed quite happy to sacrifice love for the sake of his career, but Severus was not, nor did he have any desire to be, a consulting detective. He had taken this case on for the woman he loved, and now, however inexplicable he found it, she was offering her love in return.

Pulling her into his arms, Severus smiled at hearing his own words quoted back at him. Two could play at that game. *'Give me a kiss,'* he demanded. 'Now that I know how.'

THE END