

The Varlet

by Doomspark

Hermione feels trapped in her life until she gets a letter from an old acquaintance.

Opportunity Knocks

Chapter 1 of 7

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Chapter One Opportunity Knocks

There are many worse jobs, Hermione Granger mused to herself, than working as a shop assistant in a second-hand bookstore. Maggilesh Books was a good place to work; the easy-going owner had no objection to her taking home a book or two to read every night, as long as she brought them back promptly. She was careful not to abuse the privilege. Her hours were reasonable, and she had two days off every week and her boss proved flexible about emergencies, often allowing her to change her schedule on the fly.

Her end-of-the-day task, and incidentally her least favorite, was to collect the books that patrons had left lying around and put them back in their proper places. The store was a sprawling building that had once been a warehouse. Zack Maggilesh had taken all that empty space and broken it up into nooks and alcoves by carefully placed shelves. Every nook had at least one comfortable chair and a good reading light. This was great for customers, but some days it seemed to take forever to go through the store properly and make sure all books were back where they belonged.

She pushed the shop ladder into the last nook the one that held mostly science texts - and looked around. This was one of the least used parts of the store, and it was rare to find more than one or two books out of place. Tonight, though, there were a dozen or so botany books neatly stacked on the floor next to the chair. Corresponding gaps decorated the shelves. She sighed and clambered up the ladder, returning the books to their proper places, and then headed to the front counter to say goodnight to her boss.

"So, what are you taking home tonight?" Zack asked, flipping his graying ponytail back over his shoulder as he tallied the day's receipts. "No gushy romances, I hope."

Even though she was tired, this still provoked a grin. "Not likely! Shakespeare for me and Dr. Seuss for the boys. And you know that would go faster if you'd get a computer."

"I should trust my livelihood to blobs of silicon and plastic? No, thank you. I'll do just fine with my slipstick." He brandished the slide-rule at her playfully and exaggerated his Welsh accent into the realm of the absurd. "Get along wi' yeh now."

She "got," taking the Underground across London and over to the small flat she rented. It wasn't the best neighborhood, and she kept to the puddles of light from the streetlamps as much as possible. Then up three flights of creaky iron stairs, and finally she was home. She unlocked her door and let herself in. "Ellie? I'm home."

"Hi, Hermione!" Fourteen-year-old Ellie Whitting came into the living room. "Art had a little nightmare earlier. I was just checking on him. Tom is out like a light."

Hermione set her books on the table and opened her purse. "Ten Euros, right?"

"Yep." Ellie stuffed the money into her jeans and shuffled her feet. "Mum says that I can't watch Art and Tom anymore once school starts in the fall. She doesn't want me

out this late maybe on weekends, but not during the week."

Great. Just great. "That's rotten luck. You're not going to be easy to replace." *Never knew how hard it is to find a good babysitter. I went through what, five, before I found Ellie.* "Maybe I can talk to your mum and work something out."

"I'd like that the boys aren't any trouble, and I like having the pocket money." She looked at her watch. "Gotta go; I'll be here tomorrow same as usual."

When Ellie had gone, Hermione poked her nose into the smaller of the two bedrooms and checked on her sons. Satisfied that all was well with them, she returned to the living room and collapsed on the sofa. Like everything else in the flat, it was secondhand, but it was what she could afford.

She was tired. Bone tired. Playing single parent to a pair of bright and mischievous four-year olds was wearying. If only... if they'd inherited a lick of magic, she wouldn't be here now.

In her seventh year, she and Ron had helped Harry defeat Voldemort. It took another two years to round up and convict the remaining Death Eaters. For the first time in years, the wizarding world was actually safe, and everyone got caught up in the giddiness despite the losses incurred during the war. Her own parents had been among the early casualties. She and Ron had married in a glorious double wedding with Harry and Ginny. Charlie was the only other Weasley to survive the war, and he'd stood as joint best man.

She'd been happy with Ron. He was kind and loving and attentive all she could ever ask for in a marriage. True, he wasn't her intellectual equal, but he loved her. He was the darling of the media, the star Keeper of the Chudley Cannons, making plenty of money for the first time in his life.

When the twins were born, they'd both been ecstatic. The boys took after her side of the family, with brownish-blond hair and dark brown eyes, and fair skin that could've come from either of their parents. Harry and Ginny were chosen as godparents, and Uncle Charlie was an immediate favorite, willing to spend as much time as he could with his nephews.

Six months later, the world came crashing down on them in the form of a visit from Remus Lupin. The years had not been kind to the werewolf; he looked frail as if a good wind would blow him away into dust. He hobbled stiffly into their house and admired the twins. Then he turned to Ron and Hermione. "I don't know how to say this," he began. "Minerva and I thought you should hear it from friends." He rubbed his face wearily. "We've been checking the Book every day since the boys were born, and they're not listed."

Hermione paled. Ron looked puzzled. "Book? What book? What's that got to do with Art and Tom?"

"It's the book that lists magical children, so the staff at Hogwarts knows who to send letters to," Hermione answered before Remus could. "Remus, are you sure? Absolutely sure?"

He nodded. "I'm really sorry to have to tell you."

"Wait! I don't understand! You mean Minerva isn't going to let my sons go to Hogwarts? And how would a book know about them anyway?"

"The Book and Quill are spelled, Ron." Hermione said quietly. "They're never wrong. If the boys aren't listed, it's because they're ... Squibs."

"What! That's ridiculous! They're only babies!" He rounded on Remus. "You've got some nerve, coming in here and telling us our kids are Squibs. Get out!" He made as if to physically throw the older wizard out, only to find himself facing the business end of Lupin's wand.

"Ron, I'm sorry. You can't know how sorry I am. But I'm not going to let you rough me up because of it." He nodded to Hermione and hobbled out the door. Ron slammed it after him with such force that it bounced open again.

"I like that! Of all the bally nerve! It's a mistake, that's all it is, Hermione." Ron put his arms around her fiercely. "We'll show them!"

But the seeds of doubt had been sown, and when the boys showed no traces of magic in the next two years, Ron became fretful and worried. Charlie's death only fueled Ron's frustration. "Charlie didn't have any kids, Hermione. We've got to make sure the Weasley name doesn't die out." When Hermione refused to have another child on the grounds that the twins were enough for her to handle, he grew angry. "Mum didn't have any trouble with all of us!" he'd shout. It was a time of quarrels that were never quite resolved, as he would stomp off and take out his anger on a helpless Bludger in an extra practice session.

It was during this year that he cheated on her. The girl, Maureen Ryan, was one of his everlasting fans, who was so enthralled to be noticed by the "great Ron Weasley" that she neglected to take any basic precautions. Ron wasn't thrilled with this result of his fling until he learned that his daughter's name had been recorded in the Hogwarts Book shortly after she was born. That was enough for him! Obviously the fact that the twins were Squibs was Hermione's fault. He paid a discreet visit to the Ministry of Magic.

Maxwell Sebastian was used to handling prominent clients with a minimum of fuss or publicity. He knew the ins and outs of wizard divorce law better than anyone else. For three hundred Galleons, he told Ron, he could have Hermione out of his life in three months. Quietly. Wizard Law allowed a wizard to divorce a witch with whom he could not produce viable offspring. Squibs were not viable. Further, she could not contest the divorce, nor would he have to pay her anything. In fact, Maxwell informed Ron, she might well have to pay him for the time and money he'd spent on her during their marriage.

Hermione was furious when Maxwell's owl brought her the decree. From the moment Ron had signed the paperwork, Hermione had lost all access to their joint Gringotts account. Once the divorce was finalized, she would have to leave the house. She sent a series of Howlers to Ron, then a frantic owl to Harry. When the dust settled, though, she'd learned that Maxwell was right. She had no recourse under the laws of the wizarding world.

Harry and Ginny, busy with two children of their own plus another on the way, offered sympathy for her predicament but little else. Angry and a little frightened, Hermione fled back into the world she'd grown up in. It hadn't taken her long to learn that a young woman without any advanced education was doomed to a miserable existence, especially with two young children to look after. She persevered, eventually finding a job that paid just a little more than the bills and trying to study in the evenings.

Memories aren't getting me anywhere. She opened the Shakespeare and began reading Romeo and Juliet. "Two households, both alike in dignity..."

Halfway through Act I, there was a noise at the window. She put the book down and looked out expecting to see Hedwig. She kept up an extremely erratic correspondence with Harry and Ginny. A strange dappled owl perched on the sill, tapping the glass with his beak. "What the hell?" She opened the window and let the owl inside, then brought him a dish of water. "Sorry, my budget doesn't run to feeding owls. I guess you want to wait for a reply?"

It was a very familiar looking envelope. She turned it over, not surprised to see the Hogwarts seal. She opened it slowly and withdrew the single sheet of parchment.

Miss Granger,

I don't suppose you remember me kindly after my admittedly harsh treatment of you while you were a student here. Be that as it may, I am now Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts. As you might guess, this cuts into my time considerably, and I find that I require an assistant.

If you are interested in the position, please so indicate and return. My owl will wait for a response either way.

Sincerely,

Severus Snape

Deputy Headmaster

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

P.S. Minerva sends her regards. She is impatiently waiting for me to finish this letter so she can place yet another task upon my shoulders.

Well. She picked up a pen and bit the end of it thoughtfully. How to respond?

Professor Snape,

I am not altogether sure of my welcome in the wizarding world; I left under less than pleasant circumstances it is far too much to go into in this note. Even assuming that I could return, I would need to know what my duties would be and so on before I would venture to accept.

I am, however, interested in discussing this further. My days off are Sunday and Tuesday. I can meet you at the Leaky Cauldron for lunch either of those days next week.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

P.S. Please give my regards to Headmistress McGonagall in return and tell her not to overload you.

It wasn't until after the owl had gone that she realized what the wizarding world would mean for her sons... Being Squibs, they would always be second-class citizens, unable to hold anything but the most menial of positions. She shook her head, remembering Argus Filch and the outright disdain with which some of the other faculty regarded him. She resolved to hear what Snape had to say and then politely decline the offer. The decision made, she read for another hour, and then went to bed.

Decision or not, the thought of returning to the wizarding world kept threading its way through her mind the following day, distracting her no end. Zack finally pulled her into his office in exasperation.

"Sit down, Hermione." He kept a kettle on the boil during the day, and now he began making tea. "You've been wool-gatherin' all day today. That's not like you." He handed her a mug and sat down across from her. "What's the matter?"

"I got a letter last night... from a former acquaintance. It just brought back some bad memories." She took a large gulp of tea, feeling it send a soothing heat down her throat and into her stomach. "I'm sorry, Zack. I'll do better."

He studied her for a moment. "Right then. Take ten minutes and finish your tea, then get back to it. And if you need some time off, let me know." He pushed back his chair and left the office, leaving her in peace.

God, an extra day off would be glorious. But I'm just barely scraping by now, and I've got to pay for lunch in the Cauldron next week. Can't expect Snape to spring for it.

By fiercely concentrating, she was able to keep her mind on what she was doing for the rest of the day. She went home, paid Ellie, and got out her Shakespeare again. A routine that was grinding her into the dust, slowly but surely. The tap on the window was not unexpected; Snape was not one to shilly-shally. Again, the letter was on Hogwarts letterhead.

Miss Granger,

I am pleased to see that you have not acquired the annoying habit of procrastination. This bodes well for your future.

I am free for lunch this Sunday (tomorrow) and will meet you in the Leaky Cauldron promptly at noon.

Sincerely,

Severus Snape

Deputy Headmaster

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

She read and reread the note with a mixture of amusement and annoyance. The amusement was for the backhanded compliment, the annoyance for the assumption that she would accept the position.

Hermione entered the Leaky Cauldron at five minutes till noon the next day with an uneasy feeling in her stomach. The pub hadn't changed much since the last time she'd been in it. Tom showed her to a table with his usual courtesy, and if his gap-toothed smile was a little forced, at least he tried to be civil. Most of the other patrons ignored her, but one man pointedly slammed his glass onto the table and walked out the back door, obviously heading for Diagon Alley.

She'd gone back and forth over what to wear for most of the morning, finally settling on Muggle clothes. The only robes she had were the ones she'd worn the day she'd turned her back on the wizarding world. They hung in the very back of her closet, more grey with dust than black not quite the proper thing to wear to a business lunch. Also, she didn't want to explain her attire to Ellie. She did, though, retrieve her wand from the old trunk that held her few mementos of her former life. It was currently up the left sleeve of her dark blue blouse.

The twins were at safely at home. She had thought briefly about bringing them with her, but decided against it. It was cheaper to hire Ellie for a few hours than pay for lunch for three. As it was, she'd have to skimp on her lunches for a week to make up the cost.

This is a mistake. Everyone will hate me... I'm not planning to take the job anyway. She scabbled in her purse for a pen, intending to leave a note for Professor Snape explaining that something had come up at the last minute.

"Miss Granger."

She jumped, startled. "Professor Snape. I didn't hear you arrive."

The left corner of his mouth twitched just slightly. "I've had much practice in sneaking up on students who are where they're not supposed to be. I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"Only a few minutes. Please, sir, sit down." *You make me nervous looming over me.*

He eased himself into the chair across from her. "Thank you. Your time away has not blunted your sense of courtesy."

Tom came bustling over as soon as he noticed Snape's arrival. "G'day Professor! What can I get you?"

"Tea, please. Darjeeling."

"And you, Miss?"

She stammered a little and looked at the table. "I'm not particularly hungry. Just some Darjeeling, please." Tom nodded and left them, and she looked up to meet the dark eyes of her former instructor.

"You dissemble poorly, Miss Granger." His expression dared her to contradict him.

"Let's not fence, Professor Snape. I didn't come here for the food. I came here to find out about the job you offered me."

"As you will." He steepled his fingers in front of him a gesture she'd seen a thousand times before. "I am offering you the position of Potions Assistant. Initially you would be marking essays and assisting with my research and laboratory work. You would have freedom to do your own research and experimentation in your free time, of course. I would occasionally send you into London to purchase books and supplies. In time, you would begin teaching classes as well, starting with the first year students."

"It's a tempting offer." She shut up as Tom came back with their tea, then continued after he'd left. "But I'm afraid I can't accept it."

"Minerva predicted you would refuse. Will you do me the courtesy of explaining?"

She sighed. "It's a long story."

"No doubt based on your divorce from Mr. Weasley." He leaned forward a little. "Being an outcast is a difficult thing; however, there is more to the wizarding world than Quidditch. You are certainly bright enough to realize that."

"Do you know why Ron divorced me?"

He nodded slowly. "Your sons are thought to be Squibs."

"That's why I can't take this job. The boys would always be pariahs. Second-class citizens. I can't do that to them." She stopped as his words sunk in. "Wait a minute. You said 'thought to be' are you telling me...?"

The left corner of his mouth twitched again. "I see you don't know everything yet, Miss Granger. Children of Muggle-born wizards and wizards often develop their magical abilities later in childhood usually around the age of five or six. At that point, their names are scribed in the Book."

"But..."

"The Book can only detect children with a developed magical ability. But there are spells that can detect it while it is latent sleeping, if you will."

"But Remus said..."

He snorted. "Miss Granger, if you prefer to believe that miserable bag of fleas, you are welcome to do so. I, on the other hand, am telling you that there is a chance that your children may have the kind of life you would like for them to have. And," he continued, "should they prove to be magical, Mr. Weasley will owe you a considerable amount of recompense once their names appear in the Book."

"How do you know all this? Why didn't that Ministry ass that Ron hired say anything about it?"

An elegant black eyebrow lifted. "Really, Miss Granger. Mr. Weasley hired that 'ass.' Why should he tell you about your options? You would've done better to hire your own minion."

"How could I? The minute Ron signed the decree, I was locked out of our Gringotts vault!" Her eyes brightened with remembered fury. "That was supposed to be our vault; it didn't make sense to keep separate accounts, so I closed mine and transferred everything to his. He kept it all! Bastard."

"I daresay that Mr. Weasley's stock would fall considerably in some circles were that to become common knowledge. You left rather precipitously, leaving him a clear field to explain things to his best advantage."

"I didn't know what else to do," she sighed. "I was too worried about finding a place to live and food to eat. He took literally everything I had except the clothes on my back." She looked up at him. "So how do you know about wizard divorce law? And why don't more people know about the way the Book works?"

"The Book is not the business of the general public. It is part of the Hogwarts admission process. Lupin and Minerva consider it infallible. And so it is except when a child has one or more Muggleborn parents. Salazar Slytherin had a hand in its creation, and he never even considered the possibility that such a child would ever be accepted at Hogwarts. Albus, of course, knew of this foible. He probably assumed that Minerva and Lupin did also."

"How did you find out?"

Something indefinable shuttled across his face leaving it a closed mask. "Personal experience." His expression warned her to leave it at that.

She leaned forward, chewing on her lower lip. "Do you know any of those spells to detect latent abilities?"

He nodded. "I know two of them. I know there are others, and I could probably unearth them with sufficient research. However, Charms are not my preferred course of study."

"I wonder if the Book and Quill could be respelled to take latent abilities into account," she said thoughtfully. "That would make people much happier." She looked at him directly for the first time. "I will not bring my sons into a world where they are second-class citizens. But if they are magical, they will need to be taught."

"A bargain then. I will use the spells I know to see if their abilities are sleeping. It will not hurt them. Should they be magical, you accept my offer of employment."

"And if not?"

He looked down at his hands where they rested on the table. "I will find someone else for the position of Potions Assistant and wish you the best in the Muggle world."

It was fair, she acknowledged. She hadn't given him any other alternative to offer. "A bargain then. Accepted."

~*~

"*Lledrydd cysegluro*," Severus said quietly, pointing his wand at Art.

They'd returned to her flat. Snape had showed no surprise at the neighborhood. Once at the building, he'd stayed outside until she'd paid Ellie and the girl had gone. Then he'd come up the stairs and she'd let him in. As the twins were in the middle of their afternoon naps, Hermione had decided that it was as good a time as any to try the spell, provided it didn't wake them up.

As Hermione watched carefully, a brilliant scarlet light formed around the boy's head. Snape nodded to himself and repeated the spell on Tom. This time the light was the blue-white of the brightest stars. He dismissed the spell and turned to her.

She gestured for them to step out into the living room so the boys would not be woken up. "Well? I saw the lights, but I don't know what they mean."

"They will both be powerful wizards. Had they no magic, the light would not have appeared."

"What's the significance of the colors?"

"Nothing that anyone has determined. It seems to be personal to the individual. What's important is the intensity. Let me show you." He turned his wand on himself. "*Lledrydd elgur.*" Instantly his head was surrounded by a corona of sun-bright yellow light. Then he pointed his wand at her and repeated the spell again. She found her face and hair suffused with the violet of a clear sunset.

"That's not the same spell," she objected.

"That's because our abilities have manifested already."

"You're positive about this?"

"If you doubt my abilities, you are more than welcome to cast the spell yourself."

She shook her head. "It's just... I never thought it would be an option." She sat down on the couch. "Remus sounded so sure of what he was saying." She looked around the flat. "I won't be sorry to leave this place. I'll need some time to tie up loose ends here before I relocate. Two weeks."

"That is acceptable. I assume you will want to give notice to your employer."

"Yes, and my landlord, and make arrangements for deposits for the utilities to be returned."

"I suggest you have such monies sent to the Leaky Cauldron. Tom often acts as intermediary between the Muggle and wizarding worlds. He will either hold letters for you or send them on via owl at your option."

"That's a good thing to know." She rose and ushered him out. "Thank you, sir. It's been a pleasure."

As soon as he Disapparated, she turned around and regarded her apartment with a good bit of loathing. It would be wonderful to have a virtually unlimited supply of hot water again and decent food. She was no kind of cook and had struggled to master what she knew in order to stretch her salary as far as possible. And clean clothes without having to spend carefully hoarded coins in the laundry. And books! She allowed a smile to blossom on her face as she remembered the Hogwarts library.

She sat down on the lumpy sofa, still smiling. Her sons would be wizards. Powerful wizards, Snape had said. She resolved to keep Ron away from them if at all possible; she didn't want them deciding that professional Quidditch was the height of their ambitions. Once their names appeared in the Hogwarts book, she would hire her own Ministry ass and investigate the wizard equivalent of a restraining order.

Eventually she would run into Ron. That was a given, and she wasn't looking forward to it at all. But perhaps she could orchestrate the meeting to her advantage. Merlin knew he'd done the same to her!

She settled down on the sofa, too keyed up to read any more Shakespeare. Instead, she dozed off while thinking about how to explain the wizarding world to the boys.

Changing Times

Chapter 2 of 7

Hermione feels trapped in her life until she gets a letter from an old acquaintance.

Chapter Two Changing Times

A few days later, Hermione found herself back in the Leaky Cauldron. Tom's smile seemed less forced this time, and he professed himself more than willing to hold her mail for her. She'd given notice to her landlord and the utilities, and had most of her belongings packed up. So much was easy.

It had been hard to tell Zack that she'd taken another job. She'd really enjoyed working for him. He'd grinned, waved his ubiquitous slide-rule, and wished her the best of luck. "If your new boss needs a reference, Hermione, you send him to me. I'll be sure to set him straight." He'd also given her three days off with pay.

After settling her business with Tom, a thought struck her, and she made her way to Gringotts. The goblins there were more than happy to change some money into a small pile of Sickles and Knuts. She grimaced; the exchange rate was not the best. As he pushed the coins across the counter, the goblin said, "Does Miss Hermione Granger wish to inspect her vault?"

She stared. "I don't have a vault here anymore."

"Wishing to differ, Miss. It was opened two days ago for you." He held out a small key to her. Not knowing what else to do, she took it. It was gold, like most Gringotts keys, and a tiny red ruby was set into it.

"Who opened it?"

The goblin shuffled through the drawers of his desk, extracting a roll of parchment with the Hogwarts seal. "The vault was opened in your name by the Exchequer of Hogwarts. The sum of one hundred Galleons was deposited." He showed her the parchment. There was a further notation that this was her wages for the summer. Her next payday would be the first of September.

"I'd like to see it, please." Hermione hated riding down to the vaults. They always made her a little queasy and made her wish for Dramamine. She swallowed hard as the cart lurched to a halt in front of an intricate door carved with a crouching lioness. She handed the key to the goblin, who touched it to the big cat's nose. The lioness turned and looked directly at Hermione and gave a deep rumbling purr of approval as the door slid open.

The money was there in ten neat stacks. She picked up fifteen Galleons and closed the door. The lioness purred once more and returned to her former crouch. "I've never seen a vault like that one," she said, not really expecting an answer. "Harry doesn't have a fancy door like that."

"Reserved for Hogwarts staff, Miss." They rode back up to the main bank level in silence.

Five Galleons went for new wizard clothes. Teachers could wear whatever they wanted, but she wasn't exactly a teacher. Thus: two sets of sober black robes, just like she'd worn as a student only slightly higher quality. She spent another two Galleons at the bookstore, picking up a secondhand copy of Aston Medgewick's Potions From Down Under. Early summer was always a slow time in Diagon Alley, and the shopkeepers were glad to have her custom. Most didn't seem to recognize her. She made a neat bundle of her purchases and left them with Tom at the Leaky Cauldron, being sure to leave him a respectable tip. Then she threw a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace. "Hogsmeade!" A minute later, she was walking up the path that led to her old school. She could've Apparated, but it had been a fair number of years. She felt out of practice.

As she'd expected, the school was nearly deserted. As she approached, she noticed the signs of rebuilding and repairs still new stone mingled with the old, healing damage done during the war. Ravenclaw Tower had been restored to its former glory. And, yes, the doors leading to the Great Hall had been rehung. It had been sad to see them hanging crazily from their bronze hinges.

"Miss Granger, is it?"

She turned at the familiar voice. "Mr. Filch, sir."

The caretaker was slightly more stooped and gnarled these days. But what was shocking was the relatively friendly expression he wore. She couldn't help her stare of confusion. "Glad to see yer, Miss. Professor Snape said yer might come by."

"Errm, yes. Did he tell you that he's offered me a job?"

"Yes'm. He's told me to let yer pick out rooms and set 'em up for yer."

"Did Professor Snape suggest anything in particular?"

Filch nodded. "He said yer'd want someplace quiet, but not in th' dungeons. There's a set of room in th' back corridor he thought would suit." The old man grinned. "Can show 'em to yer, if yer like."

"I'd love to see them."

It was a magnificent set of rooms, she had to admit. The door to the corridor opened into a large central room. Off that central room were four other doors, two on each side. One led to a small half-bath, one to a kitchenette, one to the master bedroom suite, and the last to a short hallway with three other rooms and a full bath tailor-made for bedrooms and a playroom for the boys. The master bedroom was shaped like an L with the entry on the short leg. That would make a marvelous workspace, and her actual sleeping area could be set up around the corner. She did some more poking around and found that the master bedroom had its own full bath attached. All the bedrooms had windows overlooking the lake.

"This is lovely," she told Filch, who'd watched her explore the place. "All it needs is some furnishings. Are all the staff rooms this nice?"

"Some are. Professor Snape, his rooms're just as big, but in the dungeons, so they're darker. Professor McGonagall her suite's over her office, same as when Albus was here. An' so on. Me, I've got rooms like this, an' I rattle around in 'em all by m'self. Ain't the same since Mrs. Norris died."

Hermione filed that away for future reference. Argus had truly loved his mangy old furball. Maybe she should get him a kitten. "I'll be moving in over the next two or three days," she said. "I'll keep the boys on as tight a leash as I can."

"Pssh. They're half Weasley. They're going to be trouble. I've still got those manacles in my office if yer want to borrow 'em." But it was said with a smile.

She smiled back. "Are any of the other faculty and staff here?"

Filch pulled his beard in thought. "Lessee... Professor McGonagall's over at her family's place near Aberdeen. Professor Snape's knockin' about somewhere. Like as not, in his lab. Madam Pomfrey's up in the infirmary, cleanin' up and restockin' for the next term. Oh, an' Professor Sprout's reseedin' the Quidditch pitch with new grass. That's about it they'll start tricklin' in closer to term."

"I think I'll find Professor Snape and get a better idea of what he expects. Thank you again for showing me the rooms." She gave once last look around the rooms, still smiling. They were gorgeous.

"What about furniture? Yer got everything yer need?"

"I thought I'd see what I needed after I got what I have moved in." But now she was thinking about it. "I'll need a desk at least. Rugs in the smaller rooms. I'll let you know more tomorrow."

He nodded. "If yer comin' back tomorrow, I can take yer around the storerooms. Yer shouldn't wait till the last minute. Got two other new teachers movin' in next week. Why should they get the pretties, eh?"

That made her laugh aloud. "So you think I should get first pick?"

He gave her a lopsided shrug. "Yer were kind to me never made fun of me fer bein' a Squib. Rather see the nice stuff go to yer and yers."

"I'll come back tomorrow then and look over things. If you don't mind, I'd like to bring the boys along." She felt constrained to explain. "They'll be easier to handle if they're at least a little familiar with the school."

"Sure, sure. We'll herd 'em along." He gave her a sketchy wave and shuffled off down the hall.

Hermione shut the door to her new rooms quietly and went off in search of her new boss. She found him 'knockin' about' in his lab, as Filch had suggested. He was obviously intent on the potion he was brewing, his concentration entirely focused on the mortar and pestle held in his long elegant hands. The sleeves of his robe were rolled up above his elbows to keep them out of the way. She waited until he added the precisely measured contents of the mortar to the cauldron set up near his desk and gave it a careful stirring before tapping diffidently on the doorframe.

His head whipped around, his scowl easing as he recognized her. "Miss Granger. Good."

"I came here to discuss my work in a little more detail. If you're busy, I can come back."

"I've just finished everything for today but the simmering." He adjusted the heat under his cauldron and sat down, gesturing for her to sit also. "I usually spend part of the summer brewing various things for the infirmary Skele-gro, Bruise-begone, and the like. As they keep well, it's a good time to stock up for the coming term. We'll be doing that once you start here."

It was scut-work of a sort, Hermione noted, but then she hadn't been near a cauldron in several years. She sat down across from him. "You're easing me back into brewing potions refreshing my memories while having me do something useful at the same time."

"Exactly. Your techniques may have suffered during your absence. We will start with potions where absolute precision is not mandatory. When I am satisfied that you remember and can apply what you were taught, we will move on."

She nodded. "That makes a lot of sense. And so does stocking up on the potions that keep well. I'm planning to move in over the next two days." A beat. "Mr. Filch showed me the rooms you'd suggested. They're exactly what I needed. Thank you."

He shrugged. "They've been standing vacant for years ever since the Veridians moved to Germany." He noticed her perplexed look. "Pindar Veridian was a former groundskeeper. He and his family occupied those rooms. He was Hagrid's direct predecessor, if memory serves me."

She regarded her new boss for a moment. Snape was still razor thin, but now it was the look of whipcord over steel, rather than the half-starved appearance he'd worn when she'd first met him. In fact, given that his jet-black hair showed no signs of silvering, he actually looked younger now than he had during the fighting with Voldemort. "You've changed, sir."

He snorted inelegantly. "I see no need to treat you like a student."

"I was more thinking that peace agrees with you."

"It does." Snape leaned back against his desk. "Teaching is considerably less stressful than spying." The half-light from the torches threw his features into sharp relief, emphasizing his strong resemblance to a raptor.

And to someone else, Hermione realized. "You're related to Argus Filch, aren't you?"

That brought him back on his feet. "Yes. He is my cousin." He gave her his most forbidding look. "Minerva knows, but no one else. Argus and I prefer it that way."

She took the hint and changed the subject, her mind busy making various connections with this new information. "The boys will like it here, I think."

"I think," he said slowly, "that there are worse places to raise a child than this school." He was going to say more, but was interrupted by a barn owl that flew through the door hooting madly. "Pardon me a moment." He deftly caught the owl and retrieved the note tied to its leg. "Miss Granger, there are owl treats in that box, yes, there. Thank you." The owl transferred itself to his desk and began eating.

Hermione watched his expression darken as he read the note. Anger. Something more. She'd recognized Minerva's seal. Still, he hadn't asked her to leave.

"You should read this." He thrust the parchment at her, his scowl now firmly in place. It was a short note from Minerva, as she'd expected.

Severus,

Remus Lupin died this morning in Aberdeen. According to his mediwitch, it was chronic argent poisoning. He wanted to be buried at Hogwarts, so I'm bringing him home. We'll be there tomorrow. The wake will be held on the 15th.

Please make sure that all the staff know and handle the arrangements.

M.

"Chronic argent poisoning?" she asked. "Remus was careful to stay away from anything silver."

Snape looked like he'd bitten into a particularly sour lemon. "Trust the werewolf to make trouble for me even after he's dead. The only one of those four who didn't do that to me was Pettigrew, and he caused me plenty of trouble while he was alive." He looked up at her. "So, my assistant, do you know anything about wizard wakes?"

Hermione swallowed her inclination to jump to Remus' defense. "A little. I've attended several. What do you need me to do?"

"You write a fair hand as I recall. Please send owls to those of the staff who aren't here that's everyone but myself, Pomona, Minerva of course, Poppy, and Argus. Let them know about Lupin, and ask that they return to Hogwarts by tomorrow evening. Hogwarts letterhead for those owls." He opened a drawer in his desk and handed her several sheets of parchment with the familiar shield at the top. "Then please inform Poppy, Argus, and Pomona. Any questions?"

"Do you have a current roster of the Hogwarts staff?" She reddened. "I've been out of touch and don't know who's teaching what anymore."

He had the grace to look embarrassed. "Apologies, Miss Granger. I should've remembered. You don't have an office yet either."

"I can work here."

"As you will." He fished around in his desk and extracted a small book. "Here is the Hogwarts Roster. It's spelled to keep current. I'm sure Minerva will get you a copy when she returns."

"Thank you, sir." She set up her supplies on the lab counter and began writing. "How do you want these signed?"

"Sign them with your name, for S. Snape, Deputy Headmaster, etcetera." He went back to covering a parchment with his spidery script.

The faculty had changed considerably since she'd been a student, she noted as she flipped through the roster book curiously. This was a good way to get to know her coworkers, though not the way she would've chosen. She was almost startled to find her own name leaping out at her.

Hermione Granger

Potions Assistant

Currently at: Hogwarts

Office: None

Quarters: Back corridor, first floor.

She turned back to the first page and began writing out a formal salutation to Professor Morgan Athelstan, the Charms teacher, taking more than her usual care with her penmanship. That letter was relatively easy to write, as was the one to the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Carson Bourke. It was harder to write to Lavender Brown her former classmate was now interning with Professor Trelawney. It also felt quite odd to write to Rolanda Hooch; she'd never known the Quidditch coach's first name.

An hour later, the letters were written. She looked up at her boss who was still bent over his desk, his quill scratching across yet another parchment. He wasn't using the Hogwarts letterhead, she noticed. Instead, his personal sigil graced each page. As she watched, he set the quill down and leaned back with a sigh. "Finished, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, sir." She handed him the letters she'd written.

He nodded in approval as he rose. "Thank you. I'll take these to the Owlery and get them sent off. I'd like you to select an office as soon as possible." He gave her a brief nod and strode off.

She took a long breath and went off in search of her coworkers to give them the news. She found Madam Pomfrey in the infirmary as she'd expected. The mediwitch had never been one of her favorite people while at school; she had always seemed overly fussy. Now, as a parent, Hermione understood why she double-checked and triple-checked medications and why she was so particular about recording everything.

Poppy was almost devastated when Hermione told her of Remus' death. She sank into a chair, tears tracking down her cheeks. "That poor man. He was so kind, so gentle. Wouldn't hurt anyone." She blew her nose inelegantly, which somehow made Hermione warm to her even more. "And poisoning! Who'd want to poison Remus?"

A good question, Hermione thought to herself. "I don't know, Poppy, but I'm willing to bet that Minerva is going to do her best to find out."

That evening at dinner, Hermione broached the subject of moving to her sons. She still wasn't sure how she'd explain the wizarding world to them, but had decided to deal with one thing at a time.

"Art, Tom, I have some news for you. We're going to be moving."

The twins looked at each other with big eyes, then back at her. "Moving?" Art asked.

"Where?" Tom pushed away his plate. "Don't wanna move."

She firmly returned Tom's plate to its proper place in front of him. "We're moving to a castle called Hogwarts. You'll like it there."

"Castle?" they both asked. Then Tom continued, "Does it have a drawbridge?"

That took her a moment to parse. "No, it doesn't have a drawbridge. It's got big towers, and a lake. Want to see?"

Tom nodded energetically, and Art banged his spoon enthusiastically on the table. Hermione got up and brought over an envelope full of pictures; she'd unearthed them during the packing. She opened it slowly and pulled out the one she was looking for. It showed Hogwarts Castle towering above the lake on one of those bright evenings where everything is silvered by the moonlight and looks magical. She'd chosen that one to start with as it was a Muggle photograph that Colin had taken for her.

"That's pretty!" Art said, reaching for it with fingers liberally coated with his dinner.

"Not till you've washed your hands, young man." Hermione put the picture away and pulled out some more.

A picture of Hogsmeade on a winter night, taken from up on the hill by the Shrieking Shack. Snow frosted the street and rooftops, and lamps glowed in the windows of the houses.

"That's not a castle!" Tom objected.

"I know. This is Hogsmeade. This is a town near the castle."

The Great Hall, caught in a rare moment when no one else was there. Colin had captured the sheer magnificence of the room without emphasizing the ceiling and floating candles, though the latter were clearly visible in the picture.

Hagrid's hut, a picture taken in the autumn and featuring two of his enormous pumpkins.

"Mum! The candles!" Art pointed to the picture of the Great Hall.

"They're floating," Tom gasped.

"Yes, they're floating," she said in a matter of fact tone. "It's magic."

"Like in Peter Pan?"

"And Narnia?"

"Yes, like that. But... magic isn't just in books." Hermione privately was very thankful that she'd never tried to tell them otherwise. "Not everyone can do magic. It's a very special gift."

"Can you do magic, Mum?"

"Can we?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "Yes. When you're older, you will be able to do magic."

"I'm old enough," Tom asserted.

"Me too!"

Now she grinned and ruffled their hair. "Not yet. Soon." And I'll bloody kill Snape if he's wrong about them being wizards. Slowly and painfully.

"Mum, can you do magic?" Art asked.

"Yes. But not here. Not now." She gave them the look that meant this was non-negotiable. "We're going visit the castle. If you're good, I'll show you some magic while we're there."

"When do we move?"

"Soon. Possibly tomorrow evening. Otherwise, the day after."

It wasn't until the boys were settled into their beds for the night a task made harder by their anticipation of the visit to Hogwarts that she let herself grieve for Remus. She hadn't wanted to break down in front of Professor Snape. Now she buried her face in her hands and wept quietly. The werewolf had never been anything but kind to her. She couldn't blame him for an honest mistake.

For the first time, she realized that she'd almost certainly see Ron at Remus' wake. The thought made her stomach churn. The boys didn't remember him at all, and she'd told them that she had no idea where their father was. Now things would be more complicated.

For a moment, she thought about contacting Professor Snape and saying that she'd changed her mind. Zack would probably hire her back. If he hadn't replaced her already. Then she scrubbed fiercely at the tear streaks on her face. That bastard she'd married was not going to keep ruining her life.

And he wouldn't keep her from attending Remus' wake either. He'd either ignore her or cause a scene probably the latter, if he thought he could get away with it. She chewed thoughtfully on a hangnail and decided to see if Ellie would watch the boys during the ceremony. As for Ron, she'd ignore him. Satisfied, she turned out the lights and went to bed.

The next morning, the twins were up far earlier than normal. Ignoring their breakfasts, they kept up a non-stop stream of chatter about the castle. Hermione finally plunked them down in their chairs and told them if they didn't eat, they would never get to see Hogwarts. Suitably chastened, the boys made respectable inroads on their cereal and milk while their mother ate her own breakfast.

Neatly dressed, and with faces and hands free of any traces of their breakfasts, Art and Tom presented themselves to Hermione promptly. After twitching a comb through

their hair an art they still hadn't mastered she pronounced them all ready and they set off.

The Underground was still an adventure for the twins. They enjoyed the roaring of the engines and the clatter as the train rumbled along the tracks, and Hermione wondered what they'd think of the Gringotts carts. They got off the train at Charing Cross Road, and Hermione led them up the street toward the Leaky Cauldron. She was raising her hand when the door opened and a vaguely familiar figure stepped out.

"Harry?"

He turned, and a smile broke over his face as he recognized her. "Hermione! What brings you this way?" He looked down at the boys. "They've grown since the last time I saw them."

"It's been a while," she answered quietly without censure. "I'm fine. We're on our way to Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts?" A number of expressions flitted over his face. "So you're coming back?"

"Yes, and I'd rather not talk about it in the middle of the street," she said pointedly.

"Errm, yes." Another glance at the twins. "Ginny will be glad to hear it. She's missed you."

"Give me a week to get settled in at Hogwarts, then come by."

"Hogwarts?" he queried again.

"We're going to live at Hogwarts," Art declared.

"It's a castle," Tom added helpfully.

She began chivvying the boys through the door. "I've accepted a job there," she called over her shoulder. "I'll talk to you next week!"

Tom gave her a smile as they passed by, but said nothing. She led the boys out into the alley and pulled out her wand. Like it was yesterday, the pattern of opening the secret door came back to her. The boys gasped in amazement, and only a quick grab at their respective collars kept them from hurtling willy-nilly down Diagon Alley.

"Hold on now!" she exclaimed. "You remember the rules when we go places. Stay close and hold on to me."

"Aww, Mum!" But they settled into walking beside her, and she led them down the street. Their progress was somewhat hampered by the barrage of questions and the almost continual rubbernecking. Hermione stood it with good grace; they'd get used to it. She gave them a longish tour of the street and shops, and finally decided they were ready to handle the Floo network.

As they were retracing their steps back toward the Leaky Cauldron, a faded voice called, "Miss Granger!"

She turned to see Mr. Ollivander standing in front of his shop waving at her. She'd pointed it out to the boys when they went by the first time, but hadn't gone in. She crossed the street again, so they wouldn't have to shout. "Mr. Ollivander, sir."

"I am pleased to see you again," he said. "All three of you." He gave the boys a wintry smile. "I will be making new wands soon and will keep your needs in mind."

She stared. "They won't be starting school for some years, Mr. Ollivander."

"True, true. And so they should not have normal wands. But I do make wands for young wizards as well, wands that will help them learn to focus their magic."

"A wand?" Art interjected. "How do you make a wand?"

"I'm a wizard!" Tom crowed. "I'm a wizard!"

"Enough!" Hermione said a bit sharply. "Art, Tom, this is Mr. Ollivander. Sir, this is Art, and this is Tom."

The wandmaker shook hands solemnly with the twins. "You will be strong wizards, and you will need strong wands to match yourselves. I look forward to seeing you again." He nodded to Hermione and returned to his shop.

"He's nice," Tom opined.

"And he said we'll be strong wizards!"

"Yes, he did." Hermione felt intensely relieved by this independent verification of Snape's spell. "Come on, now. We've more to do."

She led them back into the Leaky Cauldron and waved to Tom as she chivvied the boys over toward the fireplace. Fortunately, it was just... barely... big enough for three. "Now listen carefully," she said. "This fireplace is sort of like the wardrobe in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. It connects to more of the wizarding world."

"How's it work?" Tom asked. "The wardrobe only works if you're hiding from someone."

"That would be very inconvenient, wouldn't it?" At their nods, she grinned. "We wizards and witches have a better way." She took a pinch of Floo powder from the box on the mantle and showed it to them. "We toss this into the fireplace, and it turns on. Now it's kind of scary looking, but it doesn't hurt."

The boys exchanged wary glances. "Then what happens?"

"We step into the fireplace, and I will say the name of the place we want to go. We don't want to confuse the magic, so only one of us should do the talking. And we'll all need to hold onto each other. Ready?"

They nodded, and she exchanged her pinch of powder for a handful and threw it into the fireplace. Art yelped and Tom covered his eyes as the green flames roared up the chimney.

"Come on now." She took their hands. "Remember, hold tight and let me do the talking." She half-tugged them into the fireplace. "Hogsmeade!"

They all emerged in the Three Broomsticks, coughing a bit, and Hermione sneezed twice. "Well? We're here."

Tom opened his eyes and looked around. "That was fun!"

"Mum, can we do it again? Please?"

Well, why not. They weren't in that much of a hurry. She let Art take them back to Diagon Alley, and Tom brought them back to Hogsmeade. They were all liberally covered with soot and cinders by the time they left the Three Broomsticks and headed up the path toward the school.

The boys were suitably impressed with their first view of the castle, stopping dead in their tracks and gasping. From a distance, the mostly-repaired damage was invisible.

"Is that it?" Tom asked.

"Wow!" Art contributed.

"That's Hogwarts," Hermione confirmed. "That's where we'll be living."

As they approached the school, Sybil Trelawney looked down at them from her tower. Hermione Granger wasn't her favorite person the audacity of walking out of class still rankled the Divination teacher. She stared off into nothingness for a moment, then came to herself and stood up. "So much to do! Must make ready for the wake!" Behind her a scrap of parchment covered with her graceful script fell to the floor.

King and Knight, forever twined,

King and Knight, by fate unkind,

Birth denied by blood and bone,

Now they come to claim their throne.

Settling In

Chapter 3 of 7

Hermione and the boys begin settling in at Hogwarts.

Chapter Three Settling In

Art and Tom weren't exactly keen on the idea of spending time looking at furniture. There were so many other incredible things to see! It was Filch who suggested that they could use the opportunity to pick out items for their rooms. This was an agreeable idea, and they fell right into line, leaving Hermione a bit bemused. Of course the shackles he'd dangled in front of them might have had something to do with it.

"I don't hate child'n, Miss Granger. Jus' hate for 'em to make my job harder than it is." He unlocked the first storeroom. "Desks, beds, tables, chairs an' other heavy furniture in here. We got all day so don't be takin' the firs' thing yer see."

Good advice, and the Grangers followed it. As they picked out each item, Filch marked it with a piece of chalk. Hermione chose a large, cherry rolltop desk and a matching chair and side table for her office, and a smaller desk and chair for her workspace in her rooms. A bed, bureau, and wardrobe completed her choices.

The boys inspected virtually everything before deciding what they wanted. Art picked out a handsome bedroom set in golden walnut while Tom opted for a solidly built set of black oak. Their playroom they furnished with three bookcases and several large cedar chests for toy-storage.

"That's got the furniture," Hermione said with satisfaction. "What else is there?"

"Rugs an' curtains an' lamps," Filch replied promptly. "An' linens an' such." He led them down another corridor and unlocked another door. "In 'ere."

By the time they'd finished going through the storerooms, it was lunchtime. The caretaker shuffled off and left them to their own devices. By habit, Hermione turned toward the Great Hall with the twins in tow. The boys stopped and gaped at the floating candles. They'd seen the pictures, but the reality was an entirely different thing.

"Excuse me..." The voice came from behind her. Hermione turned and found herself face to face with Rolanda Hooch.

"Sorry." She nudged the boys. "Let's go sit down." She chivvied them into the room. The Quidditch Coach looked after them with her sharp yellow eyes, but said nothing, taking her seat at the High Table. Hermione chose to sit at the other end of the table where she could keep the boys under some semblance of control.

Snape and Minerva arrived together, the Headmistress sitting in the same seat Dumbledore had held for so long. She gave everyone a wintry smile and turned her attention to her plate. Snape sat next to her. The other faculty and staff came in by ones and twos; even Professor Trelawney and Lavender Brown joined them. Poppy seated herself next to Hermione and smiled at the twins.

"Hello, boys," she said, "I hear you're going to be living here now."

"That's right!" Art replied.

"And we're going to be strong wizards," Tom added.

"Really? That's excellent news!" She leaned across Hermione and whispered conspiratorially, "How'd you find out?"

"Mr. Vander told us," Tom answered through a mouthful of lunch.

"Who is Mr. Vander?"

"He makes wands."

"And he's got silver eyes."

"Oh, Mr. Ollivander!" Poppy gave Hermione a raised eyebrow. She nodded back slightly. "Well, if he said it, it must be true. I've never known him to be wrong."

Any further comments were lost as Minerva signaled for everyone's attention. "I appreciate everyone returning so quickly. Remus was part of our family. He didn't deserve this." She looked down at the table. "I want to know what happened to him."

"Who's Remus?" Art tugged at his mother's sleeve to get her attention.

"He was a dear friend of mine," she answered quietly. "He just died recently."

"Who was his mediwitch?" Poppy asked Minerva.

"Agnes MacDonald. She works at the Aberdeen Wizards Clinic."

"I know her. She's a good healer, but she didn't have any experience with werewolves. At least, not until Remus started going to her."

"She took care of him for the last year," Minerva said. "Surely she knew what she was doing." The Headmistress glanced down the table toward the two boys. "I'd like to see all staff in my office after lunch for a brief meeting."

Hermione hadn't missed the glance. Obviously she was going to need to make some sort of arrangements for the boys' care while she was working, and sooner rather than later. And, she reminded herself, she needed to see about their pre-Hogwarts education as well. She and Ron had planned on home-schooling them, but that wasn't an option any more. A quick question to Poppy told her that there was a primary school in Hogsmeade. Satisfied with that, she returned her attention to her lunch, chatting easily with the mediwitch as she ate. The presence of many adults they didn't know served to keep the twins on their best behavior.

Once the meal ended, Hermione excused herself and the boys and began retracing the path back to their rooms. She planned to settle the boys in the playroom for a few minutes while she spoke to the Deputy Headmaster about a brief sojourn to Hogsmeade to arrange for day-care. There was a patter of light footsteps behind them, and an all-too-familiar voice called, "Hermione! Wait!"

With an inward sigh, Hermione turned around. She'd never cared much for Lavender Brown in school; the girl seemed to have no common sense whatsoever. "Hello Lavender."

Lavender smiled. "I'm sorry I didn't have a chance to talk to you earlier. I wanted to know if you'd made any arrangements for taking care of the boys while you were at work."

"Uh, no it's something I'd planned to take care of today. Why?"

"I was going to suggest that you ask Liana Athelstan. She has a daughter that's about the same age as your boys, and a son that's a year or so younger. I know she doesn't plan to go back to work until her youngest starts at Hogwarts, so that would work out well for you."

"That does sound convenient," Hermione was forced to admit. "How well do you know her? Where does she live?"

Now the other witch's smile morphed into a grin. "She lives right here at Hogwarts she's Professor Althelstan's wife. She went to Hogwarts also a Ravenclaw, I believe."

"Thanks, Lavender. That would be so much easier than going to Hogsmeade every day. And with the boys here, I can see them during free periods."

"If you're not busy right now, I can introduce you," Lavender offered.

Well, Lavender has certainly grown up in the last few years, Hermione thought to herself. *I never would've expected her to be any help.* She covertly studied the other witch for a moment. Lavender's blonde hair was still frizzy, and she still smiled a great deal, but there was a seriousness in her eyes that hadn't been there five years earlier. *I could get to like her now, I think. It would be good to have friends my own age here.* "You don't think she'll mind?"

"Not likely. And if she does, she'll say so. She's very direct."

The Athelstans' rooms were two hallways over from hers. Lavender knocked on the door and it swung open revealing a spacious well-furnished living room. Sunlight streamed in through the windows giving the room a very welcoming aura. "Come on in," a voice called. "I'm just putting Bran down for his nap."

Hermione sat down on the sofa, noticing the cleverly woven in warming spell. Lavender took a chair nearby, and the boys made themselves comfortable on the floor, casting covetous eyes on the toys scattered about. A moment later, Liana came in and greeted them all with a smile. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. You're Miss Granger, I believe? Morgan mentioned you when he got your owl."

"Hermione," she answered. "This is Art, and this is Tom."

Liana Athelstan was tall and slender with thin long-fingered hands that were never quite still. Her dark brown hair was braided into a neat coil at the nape of her neck. Hermione guessed that when it was loosed, Liana's hair would brush the floor.

"I'm very pleased to meet you." Liana perched on the edge of the large desk in the corner. "What can I do for you?"

A little self-consciously, Hermione explained what she needed.

"It's no trouble," Liana replied after a moment's thought. "It will be good for Rhea my daughter to have other children to play with too. Do they have any allergies? Any particular likes or dislikes?"

"No allergies that I know of. Tom won't eat spinach and Art won't eat cabbage. Other than that, they'll eat anything."

"That's certainly open-minded of them." She grinned at Tom. "I won't eat spinach either." Back to Hermione. "Let's try it for this afternoon and see how we get along."

A few minutes later, they had settled the matter and Hermione excused herself to go to the staff meeting.

~*~

It felt a bit funny to walk up the stairs to the Headmaster's office knowing that Professor Dumbledore would not be there. But no one could deny that after his many years of service, the old wizard was due a quiet retirement. The door to Minerva's office swung open at her touch, and she took that as an invitation to enter.

"She's a perfectly able caretaker," Poppy was saying as Hermione came in quietly, "but she wouldn't be my first choice for determining a cause of death." She looked down at her hands for a moment. "You're asking for an autopsy. A private one."

"Yes." Minerva's voice was firm.

"You'll need help if you want to complete an autopsy in any sort of reasonable time," Snape interjected, sparing his assistant a quick nod of greeting. "It's a huge undertaking, especially without a real forensics laboratory."

"It's an ugly job, Severus. I can't just ask anyone. They'd need a modicum of training at a minimum. And a strong stomach."

"I know, Poppy. I'm volunteering."

The mediwitch's eyebrows disappeared under her hat. "You, Severus? You never liked Remus. Why would you want to help?"

Snape steepled his fingers in front of him. "I'm not doing it for Lupin. It's a puzzle, and I don't like unsolved puzzles."

"The wake is planned for the day after tomorrow," Pomona Sprout said. "Will that be enough time?"

Poppy twisted one hand in her apron as she thought. "I believe so, especially with Severus' assistance."

"Now that's settled," Minerva said, glancing at a scrawl-covered parchment, "we need to discuss a few other things. Normally I'd call another staff meeting closer to the beginning of the fall term, but as everyone is here now I think we should go over them now."

"Heads of House, suggestions for Prefects, Head boy and Head Girl, and the budget," Snape muttered so quietly that only Hermione could hear him.

"We need to determine our Heads of House for the next year, select Prefects and Head Girl and Head Boy, and then discuss the budget briefly," Minerva announced. "Now..."

"Minerva," Snape interrupted gently, "I'm perfectly willing to continue as Head of Slytherin, and I have no opinions on any of the other subjects you've mentioned. Poppy and I are going to be pressed for time as it is, and I think we should begin immediately."

The mediwitch nodded and rose. "I agree with Severus. We need to start now."

"If it makes you feel better, Minerva," the Deputy Headmaster said, "my assistant will stay here in my stead. I trust this meets with your approval?" He received her nod of acquiescence and left with the mediwitch.

The rest of the meeting seemed to drag interminably. Finally Minerva dismissed them with thanks for cutting their holidays short. Hermione lingered behind after the others had left. "I'm sorry I didn't have any more input for you, Headmistress," she began.

"Pssh." The old witch smiled. "You've been here less than a day. I wouldn't expect you to know everyone yet. I know you have rooms by now. Have you picked an office yet?"

"No, that's something Professor Snape asked me to do today. I thought that an office near the Potions classroom would be convenient." She smiled up at her old teacher. "It's so good to be back."

"I wish I wish you hadn't had to leave in the first place," Minerva said softly. "I had no idea that the Book was so fallible. I would never have sent Remus to you. I'm truly sorry for all the trouble I caused." She glared at the heavy leather-bound tome that occupied a table in the corner. "I felt so foolish after Severus told me about how it actually worked. I'm sure Remus did as well; I owed him immediately."

"Perhaps someday we can look into having the Book respelled," Hermione suggested. "And, in a way you did me a favor. I'm not sure Ron and I were meant to be together. We want different things out of life." *The understatement of the year, she thought privately.* "Do you have any recommendations for an office?"

Minerva took the hint and let the subject drop. "I believe there's a vacant room three doors down from the Potions Classroom. Argus would be the best person to ask." She resumed her seat at her desk. "I'm being terribly rude, I know, but I really must get back to work on the budget."

Hermione nodded and went off to retrieve the boys from the Althelstan's, not wanting them to overstay their welcome on their first day. She found them happily engrossed in learning how to play the wizard's version of Go Fish with Bran and Rhea.

"They're good boys," Liana said, watching the game wind up. "I'll be happy to watch them for you."

A few minutes later, they'd agreed on the finer details of the arrangement, and Hermione left them to go pick out her office. As she'd hoped, there was a vacant room just down the hall from the Potions Classroom. It was dusty, but that could be easily remedied. A quick word to Argus reassured her that it would be cleaned and her furniture installed by the next day. Feeling as though she had accomplished a great deal, she went off in search of Snape.

Secrets from the Past

Chapter 4 of 7

Hermione feels trapped in her life until she gets a letter from an old acquaintance.

Chapter Four Secrets from the Past

Neither Severus nor Poppy was in the Infirmary, Hermione discovered. It made sense when she thought about it it was hardly the place to perform an autopsy. In fact, as she thought about it, there really didn't seem to be a logical place for such an operation at Hogwarts they obviously didn't maintain a morgue. Her next best guess was Snape's private lab.

As she headed to the dungeons, she met the mediwitch coming down the corridor. "Ah, Hermione, I was wondering if you'd know where to find us. We're using the Potions classroom. It's got a Distraction Charm on it, with a password of 'moonstruck'" At Hermione's puzzled look she added, "Severus wanted more room to work than was in his lab. I'm going up to the Infirmary to get some of my reference books." She made a face. "His books are more about how to destroy werewolves than about how they're put together."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Somehow that doesn't surprise me." With a nod, she continued down the stairs, recognizing the effects of the Distraction Charm as she neared the room where she'd learned so much. "Moonstruck," she murmured, and felt the charm fade. Voices coming from within made her pause just outside the door.

"Severus, are you ever going to let it go?" It took her a moment to recognize Argus Filch's voice, completely unaccented in marked contrast to his normal speech, and raw with pain. She couldn't hear any response, but the caretaker continued. "It's been decades, and it wasn't Remus' idea. You know that!"

"I know nothing of the sort!" Snape's voice.

"Why didn't you give him a chance to explain? We grew up together, the three of us. We were friends! Didn't that count for anything?"

"Why are you still taking his part? He tried to kill me, Argus!"

"It. Was. Not. His. Idea," Filch repeated slowly. "Read this, Severus. For the sake of our shared blood and bone, read it." There was a crackle of parchment, and Hermione could imagine a scroll being shoved into Snape's hands. "Remus would have stood with you against Black and Potter if you had given him half a chance."

A long silence broken only by the rustle of paper. Then: "I didn't realize. I thought he was in on their prank." Sarcasm dripped off the last word. "But why did he go back to them afterward? After what they did to me?"

"You were the only other friend he had at school, Severus. When you cut him off without a word, what was he supposed to do? Become a hermit? They didn't care that he was a werewolf!" More softly. "Is that why you turned to Voldemort, cousin? Because of what Black and Potter did?"

"Yes." The single word was long and drawn out. Almost a hiss. "I was angry! I had been betrayed by one of my best friends! Lucius and his friends welcomed me into their circle, and I saw too late what they stood for."

"And once you knew, you chose to blame Remus for driving you to join them."

"Enough, Argus!"

"Enough? I don't think so. You did your best to make his life miserable. When Dumbledore invited him back to teach, he was so happy. He was hoping for a chance to see you, to explain. But your stiff-necked pride just couldn't admit that you might have made a mistake. So you leaked his secret and drove him away from here, nearly drove him out of the wizarding world - not that you would have cared." The caretaker's voice was bitter.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Would you have listened? Listened to the Squib?"

A moment of silence, and Hermione could imagine Snape seriously considering the question. "Probably not. At best, I would've assumed that he put you under a spell." A pause. "I'm sorry, Argus."

"Make your apologies to Remus, cousin. Find out who murdered him and why." A pause broken only by the crackle of parchment. "Your assistant'll be here any minute. I'll be getting back to work now, Professor." As his footsteps shuffled closer, Hermione realized that she'd better not be caught listening to such an intensely private conversation. Quickly she backed away, around a bend in the corridor, her mind spinning as she processed what she'd just learned.

A moment later, the caretaker passed her. He didn't speak, but gave her a wave as he went by. Taking a deep breath, she composed her features as best she could and entered the classroom, not knowing what she'd find there.

Snape was leaning against his desk, his attention riveted on the book in his hands. More books were stacked behind him. Several clean glass jars sat on a table next to the desk, next to a neat row of unlabeled bottles containing a yellow liquid. He looked up at the sound of her footsteps, but didn't smile. Instead, he gestured her toward a seat and put his book down. "This is going to be ugly work, Miss Granger. Are you sure you're up to it?"

Instead of blurting out an immediate answer, she took the time to consider what he'd said. "I think so, sir. I want to find the truth." *And I'd love to know more about that conversation with Filch, too!*

"Truth can be ugly if it's not what you're expecting."

"It's better than not knowing at all. Remus was my friend and I want to know who or what killed him."

"As do I. I would strongly prefer for his to be a natural death."

"Do you think someone murdered him? He looked sick the last time I saw him. That was three years ago, when he came to tell us about the Book. I thought it was just because of the bad news he was delivering."

"He'd been living rough ever since the end of the fighting. Minerva wanted to offer him his old position here, but the governors over-ruled her." He grimaced. "They got deluged with owls from angry parents threatening to remove their children from the school. Minerva was furious but there wasn't a lot she could do. She sent him a little money every month, and he worked a few menial jobs but most of what he had went to pay for his Wolfsbane potion. I suspect Minerva hired him whenever she could."

"Why didn't he go to Harry?" she wondered out loud. "He would've helped him out."

"Perhaps. But as I recall, Mr. Potter was less than helpful when you fell on hard times."

"I think I'll manage to forgive him for that one day. I should've known better than to go to him; he's married to Ron's sister." It was her turn to grimace. "I'm getting sidetracked. What else do you know about Remus?"

"You'd do better to ask Argus. They were friends and I know they corresponded occasionally." He paused. "It is nearly dinner time. Poppy and I will start on the autopsy this evening."

"I'll join you as soon as I can. I'll need to get someone to stay with the boys."

"Are you not part of the Hogwarts staff now?"

"Yes..."

"Then one of the house elves will have been assigned to manage your living quarters and your office. I suggest you ask the elf to watch your children also. They are quite adequate caretakers."

Hermione nodded and went to pick up her sons.

~*~

The boys were, unsurprisingly, bubbling over with the fun they'd had. They chattered back and forth to each other about the moving pictures on the cards, the various magical toys, and the books that talked to them.

"And Bran said I was going to be king when I grow up," Art announced gleefully as they made their way down the halls to their rooms.

"And I'm going to be a knight!" Tom added. "Mizz Liana showed us some pictures of kings and knights. And she showed us a game too."

"A game with kings and knights?" Hermione asked curiously. "That sounds fun."

"She said it was a stategy game, and only two people can play it at a time." Tom amplified. "It's got a board with lots of squares on it."

"It's not just kings and knights," Art reminded his brother. "There's bishops and pawns."

"And queens."

Wizard chess, Hermione thought. She'd always envied Ron's talent for the game, though she disliked the way the pieces destroyed each other. "Perhaps Ms. Liana will teach you to play it when you're a bit older. What else did you do today?"

"I told Rhea about Dr. Seuss," Tom replied. "Big A, little a, what begins with a?"

"Aunt Annie's alligator!" Art said instantly.

"A, A, A!" The two chorused.

"And what did Ms. Liana say?"

"She liked it and asked if there was more. There is, but I don't know it."

"Rhea thought it was funny. She made an A in the air and it danced around the room."

"And then Mizz Liana said she'll teach us to make letters dance."

"Mum, can you make letters dance?"

"Yes," Hermione answered, amused by the conversation. "I'll show you later. Now let's get washed up and go to the Great Hall for dinner."

The Hogwarts elves had been busy, she discovered, as she opened the door to their rooms. The place was spotless, and all their chosen furniture had been set up exactly as she'd wished. She sent the boys to wash up and wondered how to summon one of the elves without knowing their name. As if the thought were enough, an elf popped into existence.

"I is to be taking care of Miss Granger's rooms," he announced. "Does Miss Granger have any special instructions?"

"What's your name?" she asked.

"I is Skelly."

Long past her SPEW days, she thought about it for a minute. "For right now, just keep the place picked up and cleaned. We'll generally take our meals in the Great Hall. And could you watch the boys tonight when we get back here from dinner? I have some work to do."

"Skelly will keep Mist'ers Tom and Art out of trouble," Skelly promised.

~*~

Dinner was a much less subdued affair than lunch, as the Athelstans appeared with their children in tow. "Since we're living here," Morgan pointed out, "our children can begin to grow accustomed to our ways."

"True," Hermione agreed. She was sitting between Art and Tom. Across from her, the senior Althestans flanked Bran and Rhea.

"Will this seating arrangement continue when classes begin?" Madame Hooch inquired. "While I've no personal objections to young children at the High Table, it will make it difficult to monitor the Great Hall during meals."

"I like having the children here. We've always said that Hogwarts is a family," Poppy declared.

The Headmistress studied the table thoughtfully. "Rise, please." As soon as everyone had moved out of the way, a few well-placed transfigurations reshaped the table into a wide arc with the arms curved just slightly toward the students' tables. "There. Now there's room for everyone to sit on one side."

"Perhaps the table can be spelled to adjust automatically for the number of diners," suggested Professor Athelstan. And with that, the discussion turned to Charms versus Transfigurations and Hermione was able to finish her dinner in relative peace.

Back in her suite, she introduced the twins to Skelly. They took it in stride, having met the Athelstans' elf earlier in the day. After a few last-minute instructions about bedtimes and baths, she headed back to the Potions classroom.

Snape was already there, again leaning against his desk. He looked up as she came in and almost smiled. "You may want to drink this before we begin." He handed her one of the unlabeled bottles of yellowish liquid that she'd noticed earlier in the day. "It's Heli'ax."

"Heli'ax? A calming draught?"

"Essentially. I know that he Remus..." Snape pointed toward the back of the classroom "...was your friend. It will be easier for you to work if your feelings are not in the way."

Hermione couldn't dispute the truth of what he said. In fact, she'd been avoiding looking at the white-swathed form that lay on a table at the other end of the room. She took the vial and drained it with a grimace for the taste. The empty bottle she put in the sink to be washed later. There was an identical bottle there already, and she suspected Snape had taken his own advice. "What do you need me to do, sir?"

"The official cause of death is listed as chronic arg'ent poisoning. I believe we should start by confirming or denying that. Once we know why the subject died, we can look into the how and why."

"If it's chronic," Hermione answered, thinking aloud as the potion took effect, "there should be traces of silver in the subject's hair and nails. Possibly in the skin as well, but that's more fragile." It was much easier to think of an anonymous 'subject', than to think of Remus.

"You're following my line of thinking," Snape said approvingly. "I suggest you start with that. I will begin an examination of the subject's blood." He gathered up one of the glass jars and a knife and walked toward the back of the room. Hermione bit her lip, and joined him at their work.

"The subject's hair and nails show long-term exposure to silver," she said after an hour. "His hair is about six inches long, and there are traces throughout the length. The concentration at the root is slightly higher, as is expected."

"There's silver in his blood, and his bones are riddled with it as well."

"Ditto for his internal organs," Poppy added. The mediwitch had joined them. "So it's definitely chronic arg'ent poisoning. But how and why?"

"What's the condition of the throat and stomach?" Snape asked.

"Nothing obvious," the mediwitch answered. "They show traces of silver, but no concentrations of it. If he was eating or drinking it, we'd see burn scores in the esophagus and digestive tract. There's no sign of that."

"Did anyone go through his personal effects?" Snape asked suddenly. "There might be something there to give us a clue."

"Minerva had everything he owned packed up and shipped here. Argus stored it somewhere; we'd have to ask him about it." Poppy caught the quick glance Hermione threw at Snape. "I'll do that, shall I?" Without waiting for an answer, she set down the jar she'd been holding and left the room.

The Potions Master exhaled once and then began gathering up the tools and equipment they'd used. "Put a stasis spell over the subject while I clean up, please." He took everything over to the sink and turned on the water. "He wasn't ingesting it, yet it's everywhere. That makes no sense." His frustration was palpable.

"Something environmental, then?" Hermione offered, thinking of how her father's cigar smoke had permeated the entire house. "Could he have been breathing silver dust

or something like that?"

"Perhaps. If so, his clothes and such might well show traces of silver."

"Are you considering his death an accident, Professor?"

"Again, perhaps. Once we know where the silver came from, we can turn our attention to how and who, if necessary."

Poppy came in then followed by a dozen floating crates. "This is everything that Minerva sent. Argus says that he told the house elves to keep out of it but you know what they can be like."

Snape grimaced. "If they've been cleaning whatever's in those crates, we won't find anything."

Hermione opened the nearest crate and picked up the rumpled cloak inside. "I think we're in luck." She displayed an unmended tear in the collar. "Surely the elves would have repaired this."

They methodically sorted through the crates, stacking up clothes, shoes, book and other items while they looked for traces of silver. A box of medicines drew Poppy's attention, and she set it aside to examine in more detail.

"Every piece of clothing he had is contaminated," Hermione said finally. "I don't understand how this could have happened."

Poppy had a thoughtful look on her face. "Silver in his clothing, silver all through his system... I would bet that it was his water supply that was contaminated."

That was enough to set off a teasing memory in Hermione's head. "I remember reading... in less affluent areas, the government puts silver nitrate in the water supply to kill bacteria."

"Let us not mince words, Miss Granger," Snape replied a bit sharply. "By less affluent, you mean poverty-stricken. Much like the neighborhood Lupin was living in."

"Well..." Hermione started to equivocate and then stopped. There wasn't any point in trying to phrase things politely. "Yes. It would explain his slow decline constant exposure to extremely low levels of silver is consistent with what we've found. It wouldn't hurt a normal human, but it would eventually kill a werewolf."

"And silver in his local water supply explains how his clothing became contaminated. Every time he washed anything, it would pick up traces. It should be easy enough to check to see if that's the cause," Poppy said, picking up a clean vial. "I'll Apparate there and collect a sample."

The mediwitch returned shortly with a serious expression and a wooden box. "There was silver in his water, but it wasn't the government that put it there." She opened the box and took out a small jar and a thin rubber hose attached to a tiny valve. "This was connected to his water supply. The jar contains silver nitrate. When he turned on the water, the pressure would open the valve and the silver would flow down the hose and into his house. Remus was murdered."

Clues in the Present

Chapter 5 of 7

Hermione feels trapped in her life until she gets a letter from an old acquaintance.

Maxwell Sebastian smiled slightly to himself as he Apparated to The Burrow. After successfully disentangling Mr. Weasley from the clutches of that Muggle-born witch, the young man had been so impressed that he'd offered him the position of family solicitor. Maxwell was pleased to accept; most newly rich families didn't think to take the long view and protect their assets. In the last three years, careful management had almost trebled the galleons in the Weasley family vault.

The first thing he'd managed was the situation with the Ryans. Installing Miss Maureen Ryan as Mrs. Weasley had defused the anger of that wealthy and powerful clan. In fact, they'd been so pleased that they'd paid the traditional dowry. And they'd made no trouble about the marriage contract either. Mr. Weasley, for his part, was simply relieved to have to problem so simply settled.

Then there was that debacle with the *Daily Prophet*. Maxwell still shook his head over that one. He'd tried to warn his client. That dreadful Skeeter witch had interviewed Mr. Weasley, and the resulting article had been full of insinuations about corrupt Quidditch team owners and managers lining their pockets while the real heroes, the players, lived in hovels. Pictures of The Burrow had lent credence to the story. The Cannons had been furious at this tarnishing of their image, threatening to bench Mr. Weasley for the rest of the season. Maxwell had acted swiftly.

The Ryan clan, outraged at something touching their family honour, brought him a rumor. An hour of research proved it. Within three days, Miss Skeeter was in Azkaban for failing to register as an Animagus. The *Prophet* was forced to print a retraction and a handsome apology. As a side benefit, the Quick Quotes Quill company was forced to pay damages to anyone adversely affected by anything written with one of its products. More galleons flowed into the Weasley family vault.

To prevent any further unpleasantness of that nature, Maxwell had suggested that Mr. Weasley might wish to remodel his home. This brought squeals of delight from Mrs. Weasley, and Mr. Weasley had finally agreed. Now The Burrow – for Mr. Weasley insisted on keeping the name – was a proper manor house designed and built by the noted architect firm of Tesser & Ract. Every possible comfort and convenience spell was woven into its fabric, from self-sweeping floors to adjustable temperature charms in each room. It was a marvel of modern construction techniques.

It hadn't taken Maxwell long to realize that Mr. Weasley was lacking in many of the more refined social graces. The young man had simply not been brought up in affluence, and was prone to committing one solecism after another, without realizing it – much to the embarrassment of his wife and her family. Mrs. Weasley was distraught. The solicitor had finally resolved the problem by suggesting that Mrs. Weasley host her parties while Mr. Weasley was away at Quidditch matches. This had pleased them both.

Mrs. Weasley's owl asking him to stop by this evening had been an unexpected pleasure. A deferential house-elf waited to take his cloak and another showed him into the parlour. His hostess was sitting on a small settee. Beside her was a roll of parchment.

"Maxwell, my dear. Thank you for coming to see me. Please, sit down." She indicated the chair next to her.

"A pleasure as always, Mrs. Weasley. How are the children?"

"They're all in bed, and should be asleep shortly. How have you been?"

"Well enough. Now what may I do for you this evening?"

Maureen set down her teacup. "I've received an owl from Tesser & Ract. They wish to use photographs of The Burrow in their advertisements. They also want to do interviews with us – how do we like the house, what features we find most useful, that sort of thing." She handed him the roll of parchment. "Here's what they sent."

He scanned it quickly. "They're offering a handsome sum, I see. Yes, photographs would not be a problem. The interviews though..."

"Exactly. They want to talk to all of us." She sighed. "Ronnie... he's great when he's talking about Quidditch, but if they ask him about anything else, it'll be a disaster."

Maxwell considered the problem absently nodding a thanks at the house-elf who brought him a cup of tea. "So we can't simply set this up while he's out of the country."

"And if he gets the idea that we're trying to hush him up, he'll get all indignant, and it'll be twice as bad."

"Yes, I remember." He paused as a thought struck him. "Didn't Mr. Weasley mention a few weeks ago that it would be convenient if there was a nearby Quidditch pitch that he could use for practice during the off season?"

"Yes. He's been on about that for a while now."

"Then he should have one built for him." The solicitor leaned forward. "There's quite a bit of undeveloped property that adjoins yours. Buy it, and hire Tesser & Ract to put in a pitch – but have them work solely with Mr. Weasley on the specifications. They'll jump at it."

Maureen mulled the idea over and smiled. "Yes, having Ronnie fussing about every detail of his own personal pitch will delight them. Pardon me a moment." She turned to accept the roll of parchment that one of the elves held out to her. It was from the Potters, addressed to Ronnie. She opened it, and read the scribbled lines then dropped it in horror. "Maxwell!" she wailed, "that horrible woman has come back!"

~*~

"This could not have been attached to Lupin's water-supply by accident," Snape said slowly, looking at the contraption of jar, hose, and valve. "I have to agree with you, Poppy. This was murder."

Hermione picked it up and examined it for herself. "It looks Muggle," she began, "but there's a spell on the valve to keep it from jamming. And another to retard corrosion."

"And one on the jar to prevent breakage," Poppy pointed out.

"It's not a very big jar, is it?" Hermione asked, looking at the item in question.

"A few ounces," Snape replied. "What are you thinking?"

"It would take a long time to kill a werewolf this way. Whoever did this would have to keep coming back to keep the jar filled with silver nitrate. They wouldn't be able to *Accio* it without risking breaking the jar. I think we should go back to Remus' house during daylight hours and see if we can find any more clues."

"Us? Once this is declared a murder, it will be up to the Aurors to investigate."

Poppy nodded. "And they won't thank us for meddling in their business. Think how annoyed you'd be if an Auror tried to tell you how to brew Skele-gro."

Hermione bit her lip. "I don't believe that the authorities will have much interest in determining who offed an impoverished wizard – especially a werewolf."

Snape sighed. "You're probably right. But we can't assume that. And as Poppy says, they won't want our assistance."

"Once Harry finds out Remus was murdered, he'll stop at nothing to find out who and why."

"Why would Mr. Potter do that?" Poppy asked a bit waspishly. "He certainly did nothing to assist Remus for the last several years."

"Guilt," Hermione answered succinctly. "Harry will think that if he'd helped Remus out, he would not have been murdered – which is almost certainly nonsense, but that's what he'll believe."

Snape nodded slowly. "Guilt is a great motivator, true. I could almost wish that Mr. Potter had fulfilled his desire to become an Auror. It would have been useful."

"Harry isn't an Auror? He didn't tell me that!"

"He dropped out of the program some time ago, from what I gather. While his wand work was impressive, he lacked the temperament for the job. He was too hot-headed."

"Impulsive, you mean." She sighed. "Yes, Harry – and Ron – are both prone to go haring off without thinking. That would be a liability for an Auror."

"We need to report this to Minerva," the mediwitch reminded them. "But once we do, the Aurors will take that contraption with them. If there's any more investigating to be done, we'd best do it now."

"The components are all of Muggle origin," Snape said slowly, examining the jar carefully. "So whoever did this is comfortable in the Muggle world or has a confederate who is. The spells are very basic Charms – Unbreakable Glass is in the third-year curriculum as I recall. The others are of similar level. They're not taught here at Hogwarts, but could easily be found in any of a dozen books." He set it back down. "That doesn't tell us much."

"What about someone who sympathized with the Death Eaters, but only covertly? If they identified Remus as part of the opposition..." Poppy shook her head at herself. "It's been a long time for that sort of revenge though. Four, almost five years."

"Revenge is best served cold," Snape quoted. "We have to consider it. He pointed to the device on his desk. "What can this tell us about our murderer?"

"How did you put it?" Poppy asked. "Comfortable in the Muggle world, or with friends who are."

"He's cruel," Hermione added. "He wanted to make sure Remus took a long time to die. And despite the low-level Charms he used on that thing, he paid attention in Charms class during his seventh year, assuming he went to Hogwarts."

"Why do you say that?" Snape asked curiously.

"The Charms aren't intertangled. Each one only affects one component of this device. I'd say that the Charms were cast before it was assembled. Spell interactions and intertangling are, or were, a fairly significant part of the seventh year Charms curriculum."

"Interesting. I hadn't noticed that. To continue, though, our murderer is also rather clever to have come up with this method. Clever and subtle – the most dangerous kind of foe. A Slytherin or Ravenclaw would be my guess. I can't see a Hufflepuff resorting to poison, and subtle Gryffindor is quite the oxymoron."

"Don't be so quick to discount my House," Poppy protested. "We Hufflepuffs don't go bad often, but when we do we abandon almost all our usual traits. All that loyalty and hard-work ethic gets redirected. An angry Hufflepuff can be a dangerous foe."

"I take your point," Snape replied. "Can we tell when this device was put together? Or installed? A time-frame would help in eliminating any possible suspects."

"Our murderer had to keep coming back to refill the jar. I'd estimate at least twice a week, maybe more often. Why wouldn't the murderer use a larger jar to reduce the risk to himself?"

"Poisoners are usually planners. They don't like variables." The Mediwitch thought about it. "If the jar were too large, it might be difficult to conceal."

"He's cruel," Snape reminded them. "Perhaps he enjoyed checking on Remus and watching him die a little each day."

The mediwitch flipped through one of her books, landing at last on a particular page. "If we could identify the concentration of silver to water, we could possibly calculate the minimum amount of time it would have to have been in place in order to kill a werewolf. Of course, Remus wasn't in the best of health, so that may have hastened things. But at any rate, it would have taken a long time. Months, if not years."

"Remus looked like he was sick the day he told me that the boys were Squibs," Hermione mused. "I put it down to him being a werewolf – all the stress of changing every month, plus having to deliver bad news."

"The last time I saw him was as a patient," Poppy contributed. "That was, oh let me think. Just after the war, while the Order and Auror Corps were working together to track down the remaining Death Eaters. He was in excellent health at that time."

There was a long silence. Snape finally broke it. "I think we need to speak with Minerva now."

~*~

It was fairly late when Hermione finally made her way back to her rooms. The meeting with the Headmistress had been emotionally draining, and she wanted nothing more than to fall into bed and cry herself to sleep. But she had responsibilities. Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door and tried to put on a pleasant expression. "I'm back, Skelly," she called softly.

The house-elf dashed around the corner. "Misters Tom and Art are asleep now," he reported solemnly. "They has learned how to play Gobstones and is wanting to learn chess. They has each read a story to Skelly and had bath before bed." He nodded happily. "They is good wizards." Then, "Is Miss all right?"

She nodded wearily. "I'm just tired." She walked slowly down the hall, not forgetting to crack the doors to her sons' rooms and check on them. Both were, as faithfully reported, sound asleep. By the time she got to her room, she found her blankets turned down with a warming Charm on them. On the bedside table was a vial containing a yellowish potion and a note.

Ms. Granger,

This evening's events were quite distressing, and you may find another dose of Heliix beneficial in allowing you to sleep through the night. I recommend half of this vial before retiring, and the remainder in the morning. I will be indulging myself in this manner as well.

S.S.

"That was thoughtful," Hermione muttered to herself, picking up the vial and draining half of it in one gulp. "I wonder if this is how Snape managed to succeed as a spy for all those years." She began to feel better as the potion took effect. "I need to get some sort of calendar to keep track of everything. I could Charm a journal to write down everything, but those are hard to change if something gets rescheduled."

I wonder if they sell anything at Flourish & Blott's. I'll ask Minerva tomorrow. No, not tomorrow. She'll be busy with the Aurors." She thought about it. "I'll see the Athelstans at breakfast. I can ask them if they know any better Charms. If they don't, I can ask them about how they keep schedules. They've got to have some way to remember who is supposed to do what."

Now her brain was too active to sleep. Summoning a quill and parchment, she began making a list of things she wanted to do. "Calendar – ask Athelstans. Make sure office is ready. Snape: what does he need me to do. Aurors? Oh damn. I'm sure they'll want to talk to me sometime but that will be on their schedule, not mine." She remembered a fragment of conversation from earlier in the day. "Ask Argus about Remus – old enemies, etc." Then a completely Muggle memory from one of the old murder mysteries she used to read jumped into her head. "Oh, no! We've been making a terrible assumption!"

Cherchez la Femme

Chapter 6 of 7

Hermione feels trapped in her life until she gets a letter from an old acquaintance.

Maxwell picked the parchment up off the floor, carefully smoothed it, and read it.

Ron,

Thanks for letting me know that Bingins is planning on retiring soon. It would be great to be on the same team again. But I'm not sure I want a job that would take me away from home so much. I'll talk with Gin and let you know.

I saw Hermione the other day, outside the Cauldron. She's got a new job at Hogwarts, she said. She had the boys with her too. And before you ask, I don't know any more than that. Neither does Gin, but I thought you should know.

Hope you manage to get some time off for Remus' wake.

Harry

The solicitor considered the matter while he patted her shoulder and summoned a house-elf to bring them more tea. "It's nothing to worry about, Mrs. Weasley. Those children are Squibs."

"My brother says she wouldn't come back unless she had a good reason," Maureen pointed out. "What if those boys aren't Squibs? What if someone made a mistake?"

"If they prove to be wizards, then they would be entitled to half of everything Mr. Weasley owns." Maxwell admitted. "He disavowed Miss... Grange was it?"

"Granger."

"Granger. That's right. He signed an Order of Renunciation and Repudiation for her, but did nothing about the boys. He didn't think it was necessary since they are Squibs and have no legal claim on him. It would have only cost him another fifty galleons." He leaned back and sipped his tea. "If they are wizards, they'd still have to file a claim and present a case before the Wizengamot."

"I knew I should've come with Ronnie to see you. But he said he would take care of everything!"

"I did suggest he disavow the children. After all, it's best to make sure of these things. It's not too late, though. As long as he signs an ORR before they file a claim, everything will be fine."

"He's not due back in England for weeks. And it's like pulling teeth to get him to do anything that he finds inconvenient. Can't I do anything to protect myself and my children?"

"Well..."

"What? Tell me!"

"According to your marriage contract, you are empowered to make catastrophic decisions for Mr. Weasley when he is not available. You could sign the ORR yourself. Mr. Weasley need never know."

Maureen's eyes lit up. "Draw up the Order, please, Maxwell. I'll sign it immediately." She paused for a moment. "But I want Ronnie to know what I did. Once it's signed, I want you to deliver it to him. This isn't something I want to risk getting lost. Or intercepted by the Prophet."

"Are you sure that's wise? Wouldn't it be best to wait until Mr. Weasley returns to tell him?"

She shook her head decisively. "No, I want this dealt with. If I wait, he'll fuss that I didn't tell him immediately."

"Very well then. I'll come by tomorrow morning with the Order, if that's convenient. Once it's signed, I'll file it. It shouldn't take more than a week to get it approved. Then I'll deliver a copy to Mr. Weasley."

"A week? I don't think I can wait that long!"

He sighed. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, Maxwell. You're always such a help."

Now the solicitor set down his teacup and rose. "I must go. But I'll see you tomorrow."

She nodded, and a house-elf appeared to show him out.

Rather than going back to his office immediately, he Apparated to Diagon Alley and sat in the Leaky Cauldron for a while nursing a drink. "Maxwell, my boy," he said to himself, "you know what's going to happen. The only question is what's the best thing to do." He was joined shortly by another wizard, this one much older, with bone-white hair.

"Max."

"It's good to see you again, Mr. Ryan." In truth, any meeting with the patriarch of the Ryan clan was fraught with peril.

"Spare the small-talk. Maureen's unhappy. I've had another owl from her. I want to know what you plan to do about it."

"I know she's unhappy with Mr. Weasley. He's embarrassing her. It's very common when one of the newly rich marries into an established family. But he doesn't seem to want to even try to learn new ways." Max shuddered. "He talks with his mouth full, for instance. And he doesn't see anything wrong with encouraging the children to play with the house-elves."

"I'm aware of this. What else do you know?"

"He's neglecting her rather shamefully. I know the Quidditch season is in full swing right now, but a lot of the other players still find ways to come home. All these functions that she'd like to attend, but she can't because she has no escort." He paused delicately. "She's lonely."

"And you'd love to comfort her, no doubt, all the while getting your hands on Weasley's money."

"Me? I'm her solicitor. It wouldn't be proper."

Ryan laughed coarsely. "Since when has proper ever worried you? You know what the Ministry would do to you if they found out you'd rigged a marriage contract? For that matter, forget the Ministry the Parkinsons and the Malfoys would not be amused at all." The old wizard leaned forward. "I'm not having my granddaughter unhappy, Max. So here's what's going to happen. First, you're going to find some way to dissolve the marriage that puts all the blame on Weasley. You did that once before, to that Muggle girl. Then you're going to marry Maureen, and make her happy. And Max, rest assured that you won't be the one writing the marriage contract." His drink finished, he rose and strode off toward Diagon Alley.

Damn him, Max thought furiously, though he kept his feelings off his face. How did he find out about the Malfoys and Parkinsons? He can't be guessing there's no way he could pull those two names out randomly. What else does he know? Who else is working for him?

He Apparated back to his office. "No matter what, I've got to get Mrs. Weasley's ORR written. The last thing I need is to have more hands stirring this pot." He took out parchment and quill, but laid them down on the desk as he considered the ultimatum Pat had given him. "If I can find a compelling reason for her to file for divorce, then she will be entitled to half of everything they have, and an additional fourth if she retains sole custody of the children." His lips curled in something that looked like a smile but wasn't.

Max wrote out the ORR and a quick draft for its filing fee while he considered the Weasley Problem. Could he paint Mr. Weasley as abusive? That would be hard to prove without involving Maureen. And any barrister worth the title would insist on using Veritaserum to substantiate such a claim. Grumbling to himself, he picked up the ORR and draft, and Apparated to the Ministry to file it. He'd think of something.

The Department of Records was one of the few that operated around the clock. Max opened the door and looked around hoping that she was working tonight yes, there she was. He planted a smile on his face and strolled over to her desk. "Mrs. Leech. A pleasure to see you again." He handed her the parchments.

The sharp-eyed old witch looked up at him for a moment and then turned her attention to the papers. "Max, this draft is wrong. The fee for an ORR is fifty galleons, but the draft says a hundred."

"Really? I'm terribly sorry. I could've sworn I read that Records fees had been raised."

"That's on the agenda for next year," Mrs. Leech informed him. "And you know that as well as I do." She tapped the draft with her wand and it vanished into one of the several slots in the wall behind her. A few moments later, a Records Owl fluttered over and dropped a pouch on her desk. This she handed to Max. "Here's your change. I'll get your ORR stamped and sealed sometime this week."

"My client would be appreciative if this could be expedited." Max murmured quietly as he opened the bag of galleons and stacked ten on the desk. "Most appreciative." Another ten galleons.

The witch swept the galleons off her desk into one of her capacious pockets. "All right then." She stamped the ORR parchment and dripped purple sealing wax onto the bottom. A tap from her wand transformed the blob into the Ministry Seal. Another tap, and the ORR flew off her desk into another slot in the wall. "That's done. Copies will be delivered with the morning post. What else?"

"That's all for this evening, Mrs. Leech. A pleasure, as always." He bowed and left the office. As he made his way back to the Apparition point, he stuffed the pouch carelessly into one of his pockets.

~*~

Hermione reluctantly decided to wait until morning to pursue her thoughts. "It's late, and neither Snape nor Poppy will be happy if I come barging in on them at this hour. It'll keep." She made several more notations on her Things To Do list, stopping only when every sentence was being punctuated by yawns.

She woke up the next morning to find Skelly frantically wringing his hands. "Miss is awake. Good. Miss can help Skelly."

"You need my help? What's wrong?"

"Skelly is asked Misters Tom and Art what they would like for breakfast. But Skelly has never heard of it."

Hermione rubbed her eyes for a moment, trying to convince her brain to wake up all the way. "What was it they asked for?"

The elf took a deep breath and enunciated carefully, "Scrambled Eggs Super Dee Dooper Dee Booper. We is knowing what scrambled eggs are, but we is not hearing of this variety of scrambled eggs before."

Hermione bit her tongue trying not to laugh at him. "It's from a story, Skelly. It's just a fancy name for scrambled eggs on toast, with ketchup."

"Mister Tom is saying it takes special eggs."

"That's true in the story. But I always used regular eggs when I made it." At the elf's look of relief, she grinned. "It'll be all right. Really."

Her amusement lasted until she entered the Great Hall with Tom and Art and caught sight of Minerva's drawn face. The Headmistress looked like she hadn't slept at all, but she still summoned up a smile.

"Hello, boys." The old witch studied them for a moment and then pointed at each in turn. "You're Art, and you're Tom, right?"

"Yes ma'am!" Tom answered, "And you're Perfessor Manogal? Mum told us."

"Makgonal," Art corrected.

"McGonagall," Hermione stage-whispered. "Come on, boys. Let's sit down and get some breakfast." As none of the other staff had arrived yet, she claimed three chairs a few seats down, feeling that Minerva would not want to be distracted with childish babbling. Her sons, alas, had other ideas.

"Can you do magic, Perfessor?" Art asked the Headmistress. "Mizz Liana can. And so can Mum. Skelly says he can do magic too, but he wouldn't show us any."

"Almost everyone here can do magic, Art." In the blink of an eye, she assumed her feline form. The twins' mouths fell open. A moment later she was human again, smiling at them.

"Wow."

"Can we do that? Mum?"

"That's a very advanced magic," Hermione replied, "but you may be able to learn how to do it some day." And then as plates started appearing on the table, "Here's breakfast. Let's see you do some magic by making it disappear gracefully." She picked up her fork and began on her scrambled eggs, relishing the change from the oatmeal that had been their staple for so long. Her sons followed her example.

"Good morning, Hermione, Art, Tom." The Athelstans sat down next to them, and Liana continued, "We're planning to take Bran and Rhea for an outing today after breakfast. I was wondering if Tom and Art wanted to come along. We'll be walking around the lake, and we'd be back for lunch."

"Mum, can we?"

That would be convenient, Hermione acknowledged to herself. *I need to talk with Snape and Poppy.* "Certainly. And thank you, Liana."

The other witch nodded. "I thought you might need to take care of things without distractions." She raised a gentle eyebrow at the twins.

"Yes, that's true." She nudged Tom. "Mouth closed while eating. Gracefully, remember?" And then to Art. "Small bites. Your breakfast isn't going to run away before you finish it." Her voice was low enough that no one else could hear it; she didn't want the boys to feel embarrassed in front of their friends.

The lesson on manners was interrupted by the arrival of the mail. Both boys gaped, their breakfasts forgotten, as a stream of owls flew into the room and began distributing letters and packages. Hermione's quick grab saved a letter from dropping into her half-eaten eggs. She had just enough time to see that it was from the Ministry, when an ancient horned owl dropped two parcels in front of the twins.

"Mum?" Tom put down his fork and reached for the nearest one. "This one has my name on it."

"And this one has mine. See?"

It was Hermione's turn to gape. Six months ago, the boys had started insisting that they could read bed-time stories to her. She'd assumed that they'd memorized the simple children's books; she knew they had good memories. Now, she realized, they could actually read at least well enough to recognize their own names.

"Who are they from? Let me see." They surrendered the packages reluctantly. The boxes were about eight inches long, and about an inch in each of the other dimensions. Hermione picked one up, slightly displeased to see that it bore no sender's name. Except for the twins' names written in blocky lopsided letters, they were identical.

The action caught the attention of Lavender Brown who'd taken one of the seats between Minerva and the boys. "Oh, how wonderful, Hermione!"

Still holding the little parcel, Hermione turned to look at her former House-mate. "What is it?"

"That's Mr. Ollivander's writing. I'd wager fifty galleons that he's sent Child Wands to the boys."

The brief chat with the wand-maker flashed back into her mind, and she handed the packages back to her sons. "Go ahead and open them."

Art was marginally faster than Tom, and quickly displayed a short and stubby wand of some dark wood. "Now I'm a wizard!"

Tom's wand was of lighter wood, but the same size. "Can we do magic with these?" he asked.

"There should be a note with them," Lavender said, rustling through the discarded wrappings. "Yes, here." She handed the parchment to Hermione.

Miss Granger,

Here are the wands I spoke of, suitable for young wizards. They should last for five years, at which time your sons will be ready for their permanent wands. Morgan Athelstan should be able to advise you on how they are used.

Aurelius Ollivander

"I believe so," Hermione answered. "Now finish your breakfasts."

"Child Wands already?" Liana smiled at the twins, having followed the exchange. "That's excellent news."

"How are they used?" Hermione asked. "I never had one."

"There's no swish and flick with them just point, concentrate, and say what you want to do. Like 'door, open' or 'book, come here'. They're limited, of course; they won't respond to angry thoughts or words and they'll only work on things within a foot or so."

"That's good to know. I was envisioning the boys wreaking havoc all over the school purely by accident."

"They can practice using them on our walk," Liana offered. "I have four younger siblings, so I've had some experience getting youngsters used to wands."

"I say, Hermione, would you mind if we had lunch in Hogsmeade and came back to Hogwarts after that?" Morgan asked, setting down the parchment he'd been reading. "My cousin and his family will be there today. His kids would love to have some new playmates."

"I don't see a problem with that. Just let me know if you're going to be any later."

"Surely!"

That settled, Hermione turned her attention to the letter from the Ministry. Her stomach did a flip-flop when she noticed that it was from the Department of Records. She bit her lip and withdrew the single sheet of parchment with its gaudy stamp and seal. This was not likely to be good news. She scanned it once, and then read it again more carefully. Then she returned it to the envelope and carefully put it away in a pocket. This was like a gift from the gods.

Breakfast over, Hermione turned her sons over to the Athelstans and went off in search of Snape. To the best of her memory, he wasn't a social man, so it didn't surprise her that he hadn't made an appearance in the Great Hall that morning. She found him warding the Potions classroom.

"Until the Aurors arrive," he said in answer to her unasked question. "They may want to see what we've done, and it wouldn't do to have anyone wandering in there. Did Minerva say anything this morning?"

"No, but I had the boys with me." She bit her lip. "That's going to cause problems, isn't it? Minerva usually makes announcements over meals, and she'll feel constrained if there are children present."

"Minerva mentioned it to me last night," Snape admitted. "I believe she's planning to call a staff meeting this evening after dinner to discuss it. Remember, you're not the only one with children here."

"True." Suddenly she needed to show someone else what the Ministry had sent her. "I got an owl from the Department of Records this morning. I'd like to know what you think of it." She took out the envelope and handed it to him.

He read it quickly. "An Order of Renunciation and Repudiation, from Mr. Weasley, for your sons. I take it this is not a problem?"

"Not at all. It's irrevocable unless all concerned parties agree paragraph three. So now, when Ron finds out that Art and Tom are wizards, he won't have any claim on them."

"They will have no claim on him either, you realize."

She snorted. "I'm not worried about that. I was worried about Ron trying to take them away from me. Now he can't do that."

The conversation was interrupted by the appearance of a house-elf. "Headmistress asks that you both come to her office."

"The Aurors must have arrived," Snape grumbled. "We'll be there directly." He took off at a pace that Hermione could keep up with comfortably.

"I thought of something last night," she said as they made their way down the corridor. "We've been assuming that the murderer was a he. Why couldn't it have been a she?"

The Auror Cometh

Chapter 7 of 7

Hermione feels trapped in her life until she gets a letter from an old acquaintance.

There were two Aurors waiting for them in Minerva's office. Hermione almost choked when she recognized them. From the way Snape stiffened, he was having much the same reaction.

"Deputy Headmaster Snape, Miss Granger, these are the Aurors who are investigating Remus' death," the Headmistress said formally. "Auror Bulstrode, and Auror Trainee Creevey."

"Hello, Professor... err, Deputy Headmaster, Miss Granger." Millicent Bulstrode held out her hand to each of them in turn and each of them took it automatically. "I believe you know my new trainee as well: Dennis Creevey. The Headmistress has told me what you've found, and we wanted to talk to you, of course."

Snape nodded. "Please forgive my surprise. I knew you'd become an Auror, but I was expecting a more senior agent would be assigned to investigate a presumed murder."

"The Auror Corps isn't as popular as it once was," the Slytherin answered without rancor. "I'm one of the more senior field agents now."

"If Harry..." Dennis began, only to be shushed by his superior.

"That's not the business of the public, Trainee." Millicent gestured at the chairs. "With your permission, Headmistress, let's sit down and talk about Mr. Lupin. His mediwitch says he died of silver poisoning, and your own autopsy confirms this. Correct?"

Minerva inclined her head in assent. "Yes, I asked Madame Pomfrey and Deputy Headmaster Snape to perform some tests to see what they could find out about Mr. Lupin's death. And yes, they found silver poisoning."

"And you believe it was murder because of this gadget you found connected to his water supply?" She pointed to the contraption sitting on Minerva's desk.

"That's right."

"Who do you think would want to murder Mr. Lupin? Please, any of you feel free to answer. This isn't a formal interrogation. Professor? Miss Granger? Any thoughts?"

"I really don't know," Snape replied thoughtfully. "I haven't had any contact with him for the last few years. He'd found another source for his Wolfsbane potion."

"Miss Granger, any ideas?"

"My first thought was that it was someone with a grudge against him due to his war work." She took a long breath and continued, "The war has been over for years, and it doesn't seem likely that the murderer would wait that long. The same reasoning applies to anyone Remus might have offended while he was at Hogwarts either as a student, or the one year he taught. It's been too long."

"Makes sense. Anything else? Headmistress?"

"It's extremely unlikely to be suicide," Minerva replied. "From what we can tell, it would take months for him to die using this means. Most suicides are a bit more..."

"Immediate?" Millicent offered. "Yes, I agree. This doesn't smell like a suicide." She drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair. "Dennis, take a long walk, would you?" The younger Auror's eyebrows rose, but he said nothing, only got to his feet and left the room. "He's a good kid," she continued, lowering her voice, "but he hasn't really learned the corollary of keeping one's ears open."

"Keeping one's mouth shut?" Hermione asked. "That's a bit of a liability in an Auror."

"I know. But as I said, we're so short-staffed that he'll be made a full Auror in the next month unless he does something phenomenally stupid. But that's not why I sent him out of earshot." She paused a moment until Dennis' footsteps faded. "Let me say everything I've got to say before you start interrupting."

The other three all nodded in agreement.

Millicent nodded. "Good. This is the fourth of these gadgets I've seen in the past year. There are probably others that I don't know about. My conclusion, to state the obvious, is that someone is trying to kill off werewolves. My boss doesn't see this as a problem, though, and we have standing orders to bury any reports involving werewolves as soon as practicable and not discuss it with anyone, especially not the press." She grimaced. "Scrimgeour would at least listen to his people. Dawlish and Shackbolt got sacked for comparing notes on two possible werewolf murders, and Tonks got reassigned to a desk job for asking too many questions."

"Who's the head of the Auror Corps now?" Snape asked. "I didn't realize Scrimgeour had stepped down."

"Mundungus Fletcher. He took over about four years ago. There were never any announcements made, so it's not surprising that you hadn't heard. And Scrim didn't step down; he was asked to resign. I don't have many details on why; the standard Auror Confidentiality charms make it difficult to ask questions without attracting the wrong kind of attention. It was all done very quietly. I do know that the request came from high up in the Ministry and there aren't that many people with that kind of pull."

"The Minister himself, obviously," the Headmistress said, thinking aloud. "Perhaps some of the Department Heads."

"No more than half a dozen people," Hermione agreed. "But before we take this any further, I've got a question." She looked directly at Millicent. "Why are you telling us this? It could get you sacked."

"Because my job no matter what Dung Fletcher thinks includes investigating murders!" The Auror's pent-up frustration burst out. "It's all too tidy; Scrim resigns and all of a sudden, we're supposed to forget about part of our duties, and actively hinder any investigation. We didn't start turning up these gadgets until after Dung took over. And," she continued, "I respected Mr. Lupin the year he was here. I believe he was murdered, and I want to see his killer brought to justice."

"I suppose it would not do to go back to Lupin's place and look for more information," Snape commented. "I can see that course of action causing all sorts of trouble."

"I have reason to go there," the Headmistress pointed out. "As Executrix of his will, I can say I'm making sure that nothing of his was left behind."

"Better do that today," the Auror said. "Once I make my report and Dung sees this gadget, the place will be cleaned up by one of his special salvage teams and there won't be any evidence left to find. For the sake of any future actions, please, if you find anything suspicious, photograph it before moving it." She raised an eloquent eyebrow. "If this was an ordinary case, Madame Pomfrey would find herself in a certain amount of hot water for taking it upon herself to remove that device."

Minerva nodded sharply in understanding and rose to her feet. "Professor Snape, I have some errands to run in Aberdeen today, and it's best I get started on them right away. I should be back by dinnertime. Please remind the house-elves that the wake is set for tomorrow afternoon." She jammed her pointed hat on her head and swept out of the room in a flurry of green tartan.

"Dennis will be back soon," Millicent said into the brief silence that followed the Headmistress' exit. "If there's anything else you want to ask, better do it now."

"Is anyone else working with you, or are you trying to figure this out on your own?"

"There are others," the Auror replied carefully, "all very faithful." The last word was stressed just slightly. "I can tell you that if you were to go to that new pet shop in Hogsmeade and ask Mr. Sharples about the care and feeding of opossums, you might find his reply instructive."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "And Mr. Sharples is one of the faithful?"

"Yes." She rose. "I'll be going now. I'll send the Headmistress an official copy of my report. I expect she'll have it in the next few days."

"One more question before you leave, Auror Bulstrode," Snape said. "Who appointed Fletcher?"

"It came down from the Minister's office." She began rummaging in one of her pockets. "I've got a copy of the order here. We have to carry them to prove chain of command at all times." She handed a rather tattered parchment to Hermione who was closer to her.

She spread it out on Minerva's desk so that she and Snape could both look at it. "It just looks like a standard promotion... Oh no!"

"What?"

Hermione pointed at the signature at the bottom. Though slightly obscured by war, it was clear enough. Dolores Umbridge for Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic.

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The first thing Max did the next morning was Apparate to the Burrow and hand a copy of the filed ORR to the sleepy-eyed house-elf who answered his knock. He still intended to come 'round for tea that afternoon, but he wanted to make sure Maureen realized that he was dependable and true to his word. That done, he returned to his office. Before he'd finished his breakfast, he had a reply in hand, delivered by owl, reminding him gently that he needed to take a copy to Mr. Weasley. "As if I'd forget," the solicitor muttered. He finished his meal and Apparated over to Chudley-on-the-Rye, making a note to himself to be sure to keep a closer eye on Mr. Weasley's comings and goings. It would not do for him to catch even a breath of impropriety. The Cannons were on a good-will tour of Europe, but their Pitch Manager was more than happy to give Maxwell a detailed copy of their itinerary. The team was currently in Rome, with a match scheduled for the next day. It took only a short time to arrange for an International Portkey, and Max found himself standing in front of their hotel, the Flying Sorcerer, shortly thereafter. A sign in the front window proclaimed it to be the most modern wizarding hotel in all Italy.

Max pushed the door open and went inside. The lavishly furnished lobby was virtually empty, save for a house-elf sweeping the floor, and a bored-looking clerk leaning on the polished marble counter. He approached the clerk, who put on a welcoming expression that showed far too many teeth.

"Good day, sir! Welcome to the Flying Sorcerer! How may I be of assistance?" His English was almost completely unaccented and the solicitor suspected the subtle use of a translation spell.

"I understand that the Chudley Cannons are staying here. I'm here to see Mr. Weasley."

The clerk nodded. "Yes, they are here. They have a big match scheduled tomorrow against the Custodes the Guardians, you would say. Everyone is very excited, and people from all over Italy are here. We even have some guests from America!" He blinked rapidly. "We have only a few rooms left, sir, but I'm sure we can accommodate you."

Max produced one of his business cards. "I'm not here for the game, I'm afraid. As I said, I need to see Mr. Weasley."

The clerk peered at the card nearsightedly, mumbling under his breath as he examined it. Finally he looked up. "A solicitor? I hope there is no trouble? Should the manager be informed?"

"That won't be necessary," Max answered reassuringly. "It's just a small matter, but I'm sure Mr. Weasley would like to have it settled before the game tomorrow. If he's distracted, it might affect how he plays."

The clerk blanched. "That will not do at all!" He pointed off to the right. "Use the left-most lift. The password for the Penthouse is Bricklebrit. Mr. Weasley said no visitors, but as you're their solicitor, I'm sure it will be fine."

"The Penthouse?" Max asked. "Are all the Cannon players staying there?"

"Of course not, sir!" the clerk answered in an offended tone. "We're not one of those dreadful American hotels. This is the Flying Sorcerer! Mr. Weasley asked to change his room to the Penthouse. As it was available, we accommodated him."

Max smiled tightly, nodded, and strode off in the indicated direction to the lifts. The left-most one was labeled "Staff Only". The others were labeled with level ranges, which Maxwell assumed referred to the different floors of the hotel. It seemed to be a very efficient way of shuttling guests around. He pulled his robes straight and entered the lift. A few moments later, he emerged into a small room. Directly opposite was an ornate door with a sign that said "Welcome to the Penthouse." The door swung open at his touch revealing a lavishly decorated sitting room. A doorway on one side led out to a balcony that appeared to encircle the entire building. Another led to a fancy kitchenette. A third door was closed, but the noises coming from the other side of it left him no doubt as to what was going on.

This was an interesting development, and Max wasted no time in taking advantage of it. He quickly transfigured a convenient vase into a camera and cast a Disillusionment charm on himself. This was followed by a Sound Muffling charm. A moment later, he stepped out onto the balcony and made his way around to where the noises were coming from. As he'd hoped, the door on this side was wide open and the occupants were completely intent on what they were doing. He grinned and began taking pictures, being sure to get clear shots of Mr. Weasley and both the girls he was with. Life was just about to get very good.

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"Miss Granger, may I ask something that's very much none of my business?" By mutual consent, Snape and Hermione had decided not to discuss anything Millicent had told them until the Headmistress returned.

She looked up at Snape where he was leaning against his desk in the Potions classroom. The Aurors had gone, taking Remus, the gadget, and several rolls of parchments filled with their notes. She and Snape had thus spent the last hour cleaning up all traces of what had happened there, setting the room to rights for the classes that would begin in the fall. "I reserve the right to refuse to answer, of course."

"Why didn't Mr. Weasley sign an ORR for your sons at the same time he renounced you?"

"I don't know. I'd never heard of such an Order before Ron repudiated me. Maybe he decided it wasn't necessary because he thought they were Squibs. Or maybe he didn't want to spend the extra money it would've cost him. Or, knowing Ron, it might have just been an oversight. Why do you ask?"

"I find it very odd that this document was signed just as your sons' magic begins to manifest. And if you'll note, that doesn't appear to be Mr. Weasley's signature at the bottom." He straightened. "Come with me, please."

She put down the jar she was holding, making sure to return it to its proper place. "Where are we going?"

"The Headmistress' office." And not another word would he say until they got there. Hermione was almost dancing with curiosity as they went up the staircase and he murmured the password to cause the gargoyle to step aside.

Snape strode across the room, not heading for Minerva's desk, but for the table on the far side of the room where The Book and Quill were displayed in pride of place. Carefully, reverently, he opened The Book and turned to the last page. A slow smile spread over his face.

"Richard Arthur Granger. Robert Thomas Granger." He raised an eyebrow. "A family tradition?"

Hermione's answering smile lit the room. This was it the absolute proof she'd wanted. "Yes, in my family, all males are known by their middle names. My father was Jennison Thomas Granger, but went by Tom. Ron insisted that they have names that start with R, but after he threw us out, I started calling the boys by their middle names. It was a small revenge."

Snape's mouth quirked upwards in what was almost a smile. "I believe, Miss Granger, that the best revenge is living well."

She turned to face him, still glowing with sheer happiness. "I have more than I'd ever hoped for now, Professor! I have a job at a place I love. My sons are going to be powerful wizards! Oh, Professor, I am definitely living well!"

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With Snape's consent, Hermione decided to spend the remainder of the morning in the library looking for something, anything, she could springboard into a research project. She wanted to choose something meaningful, like the potion he was working on. She'd skimmed the Restricted Section briefly, as well as the latest issues of all the Potions, Charms, and Transfiguration periodicals she'd found. Nothing came to mind however, and she was idly flipping through the last few weeks of the Daily Prophet while letting her mind wander, hoping her subconscious would come up with something inspiring. She would've preferred the Quibbler, but Madame Pince had commandeered the latest several issues in order to do the crossword puzzles.

Apparently the Prophet had not yet managed to replace Rita Skeeter, for these issues contained items that were blessedly free of the dreck produced by Quick-quotes Quills. The one she was currently looking at contained an editorial about the current Ministry Budget, and the latest in what was apparently a series of articles on Finances for the Single Parent Household, written by a Gnorpfang Grizzleknut. She glanced briefly at the advertisements, and skipped over the personals pages. With a sort of twisted pleasure, she noted that the obituaries took up only half a page instead of the three to four pages that had been common during the War.

Her hand stalled and she turned the page back and began reading carefully. She put that issue aside and began leafing through others. Twice she rose and pulled older issues from the library archives. Most she returned to their proper place, but several more joined the first one. Once they were neatly sorted, a muttered Accio brought her parchment and quill, and she began reading again, taking careful notes. Half an hour later, she put down her quill and studied the figures with a sinking feeling somewhere in the region of her stomach. She needed more data to be absolutely positive, but the trend here was clear: the wizarding population was dying out.