

In Annulo

by ladyofthemasque

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (**HBP SPOILERS**)

Chapter 01

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Author's Notes: The phrase "in annulo" is an heraldic term, referring to an object or group of objects 'lying on a ring'--literally, to form a circle. Figuratively...well, we'll see if it's the truth or not, won't we? ~Lotm

I.

Hermione had never been so glad to see the almost banal normality of her home. She'd just spent a very uncomfortable day at the Dursleys', Harry's relatives in Little Whinging, Surrey, and was very grateful to be able to Apparate to her parents' back yard. It was twilight, and she could smell the scent of something delicious wafting through the open kitchen window. Mounting the steps, she tapped the doorknob with her wand to make sure it was unlocked, and stepped inside the enclosed porch, levitating her trunk in her wake.

The mud porch wasn't much, but it did let into the laundry room via a rather squeaky door her dad had never gotten around to fixing. The laundry room led to the kitchen, and when she deposited her trunk so that her laundry could go straight into the machine, released Crookshanks from his cage, and opened that door, her parents had set down the supper dishes they'd been washing at the sink, since her mother said it seemed foolish to load up a dishwasher for just a few cups and plates when there was only the two of them.

Seeing her mother, with that riot of chestnut curls, an apron tied around her blouse and slacks, Hermione felt a wave of homesickness rising inside of her, and made a beeline straight for those welcoming arms. She said nothing, just wrapped her arms around her mum, letting the tears squeeze out of her eyes. The young witch would've given anything to be able to believe that, with a hug and a pat and a comforting word, her mum could make it alright again. But she couldn't. Releasing her mother, she hugged her father equally fiercely, wishing he could fix all the things that had been broken. But he couldn't repair her shattered innocence, and he couldn't mend her broken dreams. All he could do was hug her and stroke her wayward hair.

Their loving embrace was enough to heal some of the pain. Not all, but some. She hadn't told them much in her letters home, but that didn't matter; their daughter had come home hurting, and Hermione's mother and father just let her take what comfort and solace she could find in their arms. Finally, though, she stepped back, sniffing and wiping as discreetly as she could at her eyes.

"How are you, dear?" Daphne, her mother, asked her gently.

"I've been better," Hermione muttered. "I need to sleep, then gather my stuff. I'm going to be very busy, very soon."

"Trying to cram in a whole summer full of activities with your friends, before you go back to school for one last year?" Jeffrey, her father, enquired lightly.

"--Oh! The letter!" Daphne interjected while Hermione was still trying to find a tactful way to tell her parents she wasn't going back. That she was going to follow Harry Potter and Ron Weasley through to the undoubtedly bitter end of the wizarding war boiling around them. "Jeffrey, dear, fetch the letter from the study! It came by owl-post just a little while ago. One of those strange wizarding things, I suppose."

"A letter?" Hermione repeated, curiosity drawing her out of her grief. "From whom?"

"We're not quite sure," her father stated, coming back through the hallway, a folded scrap of parchment in his hand. "The outer letter was addressed to us. It said that we were to keep this for you, and to hand it to you directly, and not forward it on or anything."

"Though we're not sure why we couldn't," Daphne added dryly, lightly. "If we didn't know where that cross-post station was, downtown, making it easy to send things between regular and wizarding mail, we'd never know how to call down one of your wizarding owls. Still, it's rather nice to be able to do that."

Taking the somewhat lumpy letter, Hermione turned it over in her hands, examining it. The handwriting was textbook-quality, suggesting some sort of copying spell. Someone didn't want their handwriting recognized, perhaps? This one simply had her name scrawled across the front surface. No return address or anything. Wary, Hermione crossed to the breakfast nook, set the letter on the surface of the table, and prodded it with a couple of revelatory charms, delivered at wand-point. Nothing happened.

Still cautious, she popped open the unstamped seal, and unfolded the parchment, which had been turned into its own envelope. The inside of the letter was relatively short, rather shocking, and came with a smallish, golden circle. A ring, chased in a subtle, sinuous pattern of scales.

Returning her attention to the letter, she read the oddly addressed note, since it used her middle name, not her given one.

'Jane;

Keep this ring with you at all times, but do NOT don it past the second knuckle. When you feel it growing warm, it will hold one of two forms of message for you. The first will be short, simple, and etched on the ring itself, a name, a location, and a time; the message will form out of the patterning on the ring. The second format will be when the ring turns smooth after it warms; touch it to a blank piece of parchment, and a lengthier missive will be seen written upon the sheet. At that time, you may write questions and answers upon the page, and communicate with me. Be also mindful that one or both sides of this method of communication may be observed, and be as discreet and clever as you can.

Do pay attention to what you read; the words will not linger for long. With a certain someone's demise, and that unforgivable piece of treachery, I am unable to trust anyone in any other form of communication, and am now completely alone, cut off and surrounded by the enemy. This is the best I could come up with, as I am watched almost all the time.

...I repeat, do NOT don this ring past the second knuckle, if you can avoid it. If you do so, it will trigger an unbreakable betrothal between us, and I do not think you want to find yourself wed to someone you do not know. That is the primary purpose of the ring, with communication being a lesser side-effect. However...if you are captured, and are still chaste at the time, don the ring as a last resort and you will be given a powerful form of protection, which should save you from death or worse, even if you are deprived of your wand. If you are not chaste...the protection will be greatly reduced in strength, but some of it might still be available to you. I am not certain how much protection, though; it is better if you can keep the more powerful option open, for the time being. Obviously, this is a last-resort solution; try to avoid getting caught, first.

I will do what I can to pass on whatever I may learn to you...but I will be watched all the more closely after what has happened. Unfortunately, I will not be able to pass on everything I learn to you--nor should you react to everything I write, as that might tip them off to a spy still in their midst, terrible though it may be to not react--but I will do what I can. I have chosen you to report to because the ring is a very discreet form of communication, because it will respond to you as an unmarried female, because you are intelligent enough to know what to do with the information I will send you, and because some of the information I was ordered to seek in recent months will pertain directly to your and your friends' quest. I am still seeking that information, though I must be even more careful than before.

Remember to be vigilant and cautious, and very selective in whom you tell about the ring. I realize you will be skeptical; this is a very strange form of communication with someone you do not know. However, I will try to send what I can, as soon as I can, as proof I am unbreakably one of Brian Wulfric's men.

Pray that I stay hidden in the heart of our enemies,

RUSSEL,

Ex Votum Irruptus'

It was a very strange letter. Starting with the use of her middle name for the salutation, and running through to the use of Albus Dumbledore's middle names...well, some of them, and a bit reversed in order...it was a very strange sort of letter. Hermione didn't know whether or not to believe the writer. She didn't know of anyone in the Order named 'Russel', and she didn't know of any spies, other than the traitor.

Of course, if he'd used her middle name, and the late Headmaster's middle names, it was conceivable this was his middle name, too. She didn't know everyone in the Order, after all. Not that closely, at any rate. She could make enquiries, but was torn. If this was a spy in the Dark Lord's organization, as the writer seemed to imply, she'd never heard of any spy other than Professor Snape. But on the other hand, wouldn't it be wise to have more than one spy, and prudent to *not* tell all and sundry about the existence of the second one, let alone reveal that wizard's identity? But...why pick her? True, the only unattached female she knew of in the Order was Tonks--who was now in a relationship with Lupin--but Hermione wasn't even technically *in* the Order, yet, and it would be difficult to get the Order members to believe her.

She needed to know if this letter, this ring, and this offer were all genuine, or merely part of some elaborate ruse. Was it really a genuine offer, and a genuine way to smuggle information out of the Dark Lord's camp? Or was it all just a lie? And why would they lie to her? Would it be for something even more sinister than to trap her and her friends somehow?

Professor Snape's treacherous defection had been a terrible blow to her trust; she'd always respected the man, and tried her best to defend him...but now her naivety and trusting innocence were shattered and could not be reformed.

"Sweetie?" Daphne Granger prompted her daughter. "What's the letter about?"

Hermione scooped up the ring and tucked it into her pocket, adding the refolded letter. "Wizarding business. Mum, Dad...about next school year. Um...I'm not going back."

"What?" Jeffrey Granger exclaimed, stunned.

"You can't be serious!" her mother added, shocked.

"I am. There's been a lot of things that've happened in the wizarding war, and...I do want to pass my N.E.W.T.s and get smashing grades that you could be proud of," Hermione admitted, doing her best to keep the tremor out of her voice. She'd made the offer almost impulsively to Harry, back at Professor Dumbledore's funeral, but knew it was the right decision. She'd had plenty of time to reflect on her choice. "But I'm needed outside the school a lot more. And before you protest, I'm seventeen. That's legal age, in the wizarding world. I've given it a lot of careful thought, and there are just some things more important than textbooks and grades. My friends need me, and I'm going to be there for them."

Jeffrey and Daphne exchanged looks. Hermione braced herself for the barrage of disappointment and questions...but to her surprise, her parents sighed, and moved to

embrace her on either side. Her father addressed her confusion. "We've never been more proud of you, Hermione."

"We've always been a little worried that you'd bury yourself in your books, thinking that was the most important thing in life," her mother added. "But you've just shown us you're all grown up, now. You know what's really important."

"We raised you right," Jeffrey added, squeezing and releasing his daughter. "Now, tell us about what's happened. You just wrote a brief letter saying the Headmaster was killed during an attack on the school--"

"--I've never been so frightened in my whole life, when we read about that!" her mother interjected, hand pressing to the base of her throat. "An attack on the school! I want to tell you to stay in the Muggle world, to let this wizarding thing settle itself...but I know that's just a futile attempt at a mother burying her head in the sand..."

"Yes, so let's hear the whole thing out," her father insisted, gesturing for all of them to take a seat at the breakfast nook.

Taking a deep breath, her hand stealing briefly into her pocket to touch the strange ring...Hermione began. She wouldn't, and couldn't, tell them everything, of course. Certainly not about the Horcruxes. If word got out that someone was looking for pieces of Lord Voldemort's twisted soul and intended to destroy them, it would go badly for her and her friends. Very badly, if the Dark Lord himself heard about their quest. Instead, she aimed her revelations more towards the fact that, with the Headmaster gone, they desperately needed every agent of the Light they could get into the field, then played up the fact that Harry was bound and determined to fight, and that she and Ron were equally determined to watch his and each other's backs, since they were far more effective as a team than as individuals.

Her parents tried to understand, and tried to be supportive despite the concern and worry seaming their faces; Hermione was grateful for that. Her road wasn't going to be easy. She would do what she could to make sure her parents were as safe as possible, but even a threat to her parents' lives was not going to stop her from doing what was right. All she could do was to make sure they knew she loved them, and to try to make them understand why she had to leave school, without giving away any secrets.

Whoever Russel was, if his offer was genuine, Hermione felt sympathy for him. She wasn't lying to her parents, but she wasn't telling the full truth, either, and it wasn't easy to lie by omission. Who knew how much more difficult his own situation must be?

...

She almost missed the first ring-message. She'd been taking a shower, and when she came out and wrapped a towel around her hair, her gaze fell on the ring. The scale-like pattern had vanished, replaced by letters and numbers. Blinking, Hermione frowned, then snatched up the ring, ignoring the gravity-borne tug of the awkwardly half-wrapped towel on her head. She stared at the warm metal, turning it carefully in her fingers. **Alphonse Lubbock, 126 Bridgetowne Pla...**

The rest of the tiny writing broke apart and reformed itself into the original scale-pattern; she hadn't gotten to it in time.

Bridgetowne Place? Bridgetowne Plaza? Hermione wondered. *And what does it mean?* In her distraction, she almost pushed the ring onto her finger, then grimaced and pulled it away. *I've got to find a better way to hold onto this ring than just carrying it in a pocket...and if that bit about the 'unbreakable betrothal' is true, I definitely don't want to end up wearing it!*

Retreating to her room once she was dried and dressed, Hermione rummaged through her jewelry box. It didn't take her long to find what she wanted: a long rope-chain, gold-plated and suitable for hanging something that she could lift and look at, yet hide under her clothes. It wasn't the chain that had come with the Time-Turner, of course; that had been a part of the Time-Turner itself. But she'd liked the length of it, and had sought for a Muggle version to hang pendants and watches and such from, and had ended up buying this in the summer after her third year.

Opening the clasp, Hermione strung the ring on it, then looped the chain around her head and tucked the ring into her cleavage. The unnatural warmth had faded. The circle of gold nestled between her breasts comfortably; in a few moments, Hermione could hardly tell it was there. She'd developed quite a bit from the minor curves of her third year; no one would know the ring was down there, only that she wore the chain.

Wondering who Alphonse Lubbock was, and worrying over what might happen to him, Hermione focused on packing the last of her things. After spending the night at his aunt and uncle's, Harry would be going to the Burrow with Ron, today. Having met the Dursleys, Hermione was quite happy to have spent the night in the much more loving arms of her own family. But she couldn't stay long; they had a wedding to prepare for, after all.

Maybe she could ask Molly Weasley who this Lubbock person was.

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"...Lubbock?" Molly asked, brow wrinkling in thought. "Alphonse Lubbock? Now that's a name I haven't heard in ages... Why do you ask?"

"Um...I heard someone mentioning his name, and that he lived at 126 Bridgetowne...um, Bridgetowne," Hermione pretended to fumble. "Oh, I can't remember the rest of it."

"126 Bridgetown Place, Lincoln. Yes, I remember now," Molly nodded. "That was the address he Floo'd to, when Arthur went to pick up our clock, the last time we had a new hand added to it." She smiled in fond memory. "It was three days after Ginny was born. I was still a frightful mess from the birth, weak as a kitten--but so proud to finally have a little girl in the family! First female Weasley to be born in three generations, you know..."

Her brow wrinkled again. Hermione realized Mrs. Weasley was looking older than before. The war, the threat to all of her children, the death of Professor Dumbledore, all were taking their toll on her. Freckled skin was beginning to wrinkle a little more, and not just in the places where smiles would carve their mark. That red, curly hair was now visibly salted with grey. And there was always a worried look in her eyes, no matter how happy she seemed.

Hermione prayed the ring wasn't a lie; she would do almost anything to make Molly Weasley smile again, in that moment of realization. Annoying and bossy and naggy as the woman could be, fussy and overprotective...she was like a second mum to everyone. Impulse made Hermione hug the older witch, who startled, then wrapped her arms around Hermione, too.

"Thank you, dear," Molly murmured, giving her an extra squeeze. "Actually, I'm going to do something. I am going to call on Mr. Lubbock, and see if he cannot fix that clock of ours. I'm sick and tired of it spending almost all of its time pointing at 'Mortal Peril'! It's not very informative, pointing twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week to it, when we're actually off shopping, or at school or work. 'Mortal Peril' should be a *direct* threat, thank you very much."

Dusting off her hands dramatically, Molly headed for the hearth. Hermione recalled *why* the ring would give the wizard's name, and quickly cast around for some sort of distraction. "Er--Mrs. Weasley, you've got lunch on the stove. Why don't I give Mr. Lubbock a Floo-call? I'm not very good at tending to meal-making the magical way, I'm afraid, otherwise I'd do it for you."

Molly, stopping at the hearth, glanced over her shoulder and smiled. "That's very sweet of you, Hermione dear...though we'll have to correct such a ghastly oversight in your witchy education. Alright, then; go ahead and give him a Floo-call for me. Tell him it's Arthur Weasley's Locator Clock, and that we're sick and tired of it pointing to Mortal Peril--I wish I could do something about the *real* peril we're all in," she added with a touch of grimness, "but we're doing the best we can. We don't need a bloody clock reminding us about it all the time."

Smiling, nodding, Hermione approached the large hearth cautiously. While Molly was distracted with the potatoes and chicken she was roasting, Hermione drew her wand, doing her best to shield its presence from the other woman, in case Mrs. Weasley turned around. Taking a fistful of Floo-powder from the holder by the hearth, she knelt down, cast it on the flames with her left hand, and called out, "126 Bridgetowne Place, Lincoln!"

As soon as the flames roared high and green, Hermione poked both her head and her wand cautiously inside. She hated the dizzying, spinning sensation, but had the spell she wanted on her lips, bursting out of her the moment the spinning stopped.

"*Probitelumis!*"

Light exploded from her wand. Several voices cried out, something crashed, and Hermione worried she'd just blinded poor Mr. Lubbock's family. Squinting against the gleaming web-work, the first thing she saw was an old man shuddering on the ground, several pieces of overturned furniture, and a trio of dark-robed, silver-masked bodies. Death Eaters. They were physically trapped by the web of light, two of them smashed back into the sofa, and a third pinned against the wall near what looked like the front door; that one had overturned an end-table and shattered a candle lamp when the spell had hit, which thankfully wasn't burning at the moment.

Thankfully, there weren't any other Death Eaters in the room. The spell could only handle up to five Dark wizards or witches at a time. It continued to pour from the tip of her wand, like a Muggle laser light; all she had to do was hold onto it with her willpower, and it would keep them pinned in place.

"...Hermione?" a voice called through the Floo, faint and barely able to reach Hermione's ears. It was Molly. "Hermione, what's going on in there? Did you just shout a spell?"

Hermione thought rapidly. She didn't dare withdraw her head and her wand; the Web of Light spell had to be maintained in person. A break in her physical presence or her concentration, and the threads of light pouring out of her wand would cease to imprison the Death Eaters in Mr. Lubbock's parlour. Calling back over her shoulder, she called, "Death Eaters! They've attacked Mr. Lubbock!"

"What--what? Death Eaters?"

"Get Harry and Ron! I've got 'em pinned, but I can't retreat!" Hermione ordered her. The silver-haired man on the floor had stopped shuddering, worrying her as his age-lined face went slack. Either he was dead, or unconscious, but she dared not step through to find out herself; she needed to maintain the Web. What she needed was backup.

"Come out of there, girl, before you're killed!"

"*Get Harry and Ron!* Hermione yelled, frustrated. "*Now!*"

The webbing of light flickered. Firming her concentration, Hermione ignored the tugging at the leg of her jeans, until a different pair of hands patted on the small of her back. "--Hermione?"

That was Harry.

"Three Death Eaters, Harry! I've got 'em pinned, but I can only go forward, not back! And I think Mr. Lubbock is hurt!"

"We'll be right behind you," Ron's voice asserted, his voice more muffled than Harry's. "Mum, what's the address?..."

"...Got it. We're ready," Harry told her, patting her. "Go through; we're right on your heels!"

Scrambling through, ignoring the twisting dizziness as it passed from her shoulders through her stomach, hips and legs, Hermione kept her attention on her spell-bound captives as she righted herself on the far side and stepped out of the way. Harry came through next, wand drawn and ignoring the soot staining him from tee-shirt to trainers. Moving to the other side of the hearth as Ron came through after, Harry almost tripped over a still form lying by the fire tongs stand.

It was a dog...guttured, burnt, mauled, and patently dead. The two wizards eyed the web-work of light spilling from the tip of Hermione's wand, and the three Death Eaters responsible. Ron dropped to his knees by the wizard on the floor. "He's passed out, but he doesn't look harmed--maybe *Crucio*, I think."

"*Accio Wand! Accio Wand! Accio Wand! Argencustoda!*" Harry commanded, as soon as all three Death Eater wands flung across the room and into his hand. Silvery ribbons shot out of the tip of his wand, wrapping themselves around one of the masked Death Eaters on the couch. He did it to the second one, then to the third. The web-work didn't pin either him or Ron; it was meant only for those who were Dark at heart. Those who shunned the Light could be trapped by it, or so the creator of this obscure little spell had asserted.

"*Ennervate!*" Ron asserted, crouching by the wizard on the floor. The older gentleman gasped, eyes flying wide. He started to struggle, flinching away from Ron, but when the freckled young man patted his shoulder, soothing him, he quieted. "Easy, easy; we're here to rescue you. Is there anyone else in the house?"

"N-No, just me and my dog. I live alone. Who are you?--I know you! How do I know you?"

"I'm Ron Weasley. You're Mr. Lubbock, aren't you? The wizard who made our clock?"

"Weasley, yes, the clock...oh, my house--my workshop--they must not get into my workshop!" He urged Ron to help him up onto his feet, just as the fire flared green. Harry whipped around, having secured the last Death Eater. Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped through the fire, followed by a witch and a wizard none of them knew, but whom both had a tough, no-nonsense look about them.

"What's going on, here?"

"Hermione knows what happened, Mr. Shacklebolt," Ron offered, supporting the old wizard they'd rescued.

Hermione wrinkled her nose at having the responsibility of explaining dumped on her shoulders, but now that Harry and the two newcomers had their wands trained on the prisoners, she cancelled the Web of Light spell. "Molly Weasley wanted her clock looked at by Mr. Lubbock, here, so I said I'd give him a Floo-call, because she was busy fixing our lunch. And when I poked my head through, these three were torturing him. So I pinned them in place with a spell, and got Harry and Ron to come through and finish capturing them."

"And I must thank you, and Mrs. Weasley, too, for thinking of calling me! You've rescued me from a fate worse than death," Mr. Lubbock asserted. "That is, if they haven't broken into my workshop, yet! I need to check on everything..."

"Violetta, go with him. Mr. Weasley, you go, too. Mr. Lubbock looks like he needs someone to hold him up. Once we've secured the house, however, you'll need to go to St. Mungo's to be looked at, Mr. Lubbock."

"Yes, yes...and maybe *now* the Ministry will see the need to perform the Fidelius Charm on me," the silver-haired wizard mumbled as Ron helped him to move. "One taste of the Cruciatus Curse is more than enough for me...oh, my poor Libby!" His gaze had fallen on the mangled corpse of the dog. "Those foul beasts murdered her most cruelly, trying to get me to talk..."

...

Hermione felt a little guilty, later, when everyone back at the Burrow praised her for mentioning Mr. Lubbock, and for being so quick on the draw, thus saving him. She didn't feel guilty for mentioning him, nor for saving the old wizard, but she did feel guilty for her vague 'I heard someone mentioning his name', and the assumption that she'd had to draw her wand quickly, instead of having it already drawn. She was still skeptical about *why* she'd been given the ring...but whoever had sent it to her had indeed apparently sent a message meant to foil a Death Eater attack.

Of course, that made Hermione feel guilty that she hadn't done anything immediately about the message she'd received. Between packing, saying goodbye to her parents, Apparating here, putting her trunk in Ginny's room, and coming back downstairs, she'd wasted almost half an hour. Everything had worked out, more or less, but she still felt guilty for being almost too skeptical.

It helped to distract her thoughts when Molly insisted on teaching some of her favorite kitchen charms, to help prepare the rest of their lunch. She knew some, of course; Professor Flitwick had taught basic household charms to his students. These charms went beyond the basics, however. They were designed to feed a small army of people in as efficient and tasty a manner as possible, and Molly Weasley was good enough at what she knew to have taught Filius Flitwick a thing or two. Then again, with her brood, she'd had plenty of practice.

Bill wasn't yet home from St. Mungo's; the Healers there were doing the best they could with cosmetic spells to ease the wounds he'd received at the hands of the werewolf, Greyback. Fleur was thankfully staying with him through the latest procedure, and though she was annoying at times, Hermione had to admit the French witch did love the eldest Weasley son. The wedding would be in two weeks, plus a couple days. With the twins at their shop in Diagon Alley, that left Molly, Charlie, Ron, Harry, Ginny and Hermione to sit down at the kitchen table with chicken and potatoes, carrots and peas, home-made bread and fresh-squeezed pumpkin juice.

Seated next to her, Ron daringly slipped his left hand onto her thigh, beneath the cover of the table. Hermione felt a little thrill at the touch. After so many years of having a bit of an on-again, off-again crush on the redhead, and the horrible way he'd slobbered all over Lavender Brown this last year, it was nice to know he was finally paying court to *her*. Covering his hand, she pressed it to her thigh, squeezed, then released it so she could pick up her fork and knife to eat.

At least she and Ron *could* have a relationship. Ginny had already confided to her that she and Harry had broken up, to keep Ginny less of a target by their enemies. Hermione had spent some time comforting the crying younger witch up in the girls' dormitories at the school, just before they'd left. As it was, it was kind of painful to watch the two of them, the way Harry and Ginny's eyes would linger on one or the other between bites, how those gazes would meet, then skitter away in discomfort, before going back to sneaking covert looks a few moments later.

Hermione knew that if she lost Ron, she'd have a hard time recovering. She didn't know if what they had was true love, not this early in their relationship, but she wanted both of them to live long enough to figure it out. Given who they were and what they were going to do, it was a bit much to ask, but she wanted to ask anyway. Not that it would be easy, under the gimlet eye of his mother; at a questioning stare from Molly, Ron slid his hand from her lap and up to the table, where he used it to eat his meal.

The fire flared green, while the boys were clearing the table. To their surprise, it was the female Auror, Violetta, and Mr. Alphonse Lubbock. They dusted themselves off, and while the woman sort of faded into the background in a posture of watchful silence, the elderly Mr. Lubbock greeted Molly with a smile and a handshake and a kiss on her cheek that made the much younger witch blush. He had a toolbox with him, and with Charlie and Ron's help, they got the clock down and set on the kitchen table.

"Mr. Lubbock used to work as an Unspeakable, in the Department of Mysteries," Molly whispered to her children, as she fluttered them out of the kitchen with flapping fingers. "He's one of the best chronomages out there. Now, leave him alone to work, and we'll see if we can get that ruddy clock to stop pointing to 'Mortal Peril' when it's not directly perilous. Go play Quidditch out over the garden, or something."

Distracted by that thought, Harry, Ron, and Ginny asked Charlie if he could stay long enough for a game. With his duties at work light for the moment, the second-eldest Weasley agreed, and they headed off to fetch their brooms and playing gear. That left Hermione at a bit of a loose end. She watched them play for a while, admiring and smiling at Ron, but grew bored. She much preferred Apparition to broom-flight, even if the squeezing sensation was a bit horrid.

Wandering back into the house, she watched Mr. Lubbock work from the entry to the kitchen, carefully staying back out of his way. She wanted to ask him questions about his work, but didn't want to intrude. Since she'd seen plenty of Quidditch before, but not anyone working on a magical clock, she was content for the moment.

"That was a spectacular spell you cast, young lady. What was it, exactly?" Mr. Lubbock asked her, his nose almost buried in the workings at the back of the clock.

"Erm...the Web of Light spell."

"Extraordinary! Never heard of it--can you hand me that mini-spanner, there? The one with the red tape around the handle. And don't touch the ends; they're hot."

Edging closer, Hermione peered into the toolbox, found what was wanted, and carefully handed it over. "Here you go, sir."

"Thank you."

"Erm...I suppose I should leave you alone, now, and...and not ask you any questions," she murmured, trying to be respectful of his need to work, but vastly curious about what he was doing.

"Nonsense! I love chatting while I work. Used to drive my fellow Unspeakables batty. Mind you, I *could* confine my conversations to inane subjects, such as the weather, or the latest Quidditch scores, but I love talking about my work, too. Now, if you'll keep in mind that I cannot give away any of the Ministry's secrets...ask away, and I'll answer those questions that I can."

"Okay...what are you doing? At this moment," Hermione clarified. "I do realize you're fixing a rather extraordinary clock, of course."

He chuckled, and fiddled with something on the inside of the clock. "Loosening the Peligrometer."

"And what's that?"

"The danger-sensor. Would you be a dear girl and look at the front of the clock? I've just got to get this last casing off--" he grunted, and Hermione now realized his arm was embedded in the clock past the elbow, when the case itself was not much deeper than the length of his long-fingered hand; such sights always seemed so magical to her Muggle-raised sensibilities, "--and then I can fiddle with it. I need you to tell me the very instant the hands on the clock stop pointing to 'Mortal Peril'."

"Certainly, sir." Moving around the table, Hermione stared at the collection of hands, all of which pointed to the 'hour' in question.

"Your name is Hermione Granger, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Didn't you apply for a Time-Turner, a few years ago? I do keep a hand in the old office gossip, still."

"Yes, sir, in my third year at Hogwarts. I wanted to study a broader selection of subjects than time would normally allow."

"Yes, yes, quite extraordinary. And you handled yourself well, I hear; no mucking about with time, no breaking the law..."

If one didn't count freeing a supposedly convicted murderer and a hippogriff from a pair of unjust death-sentences Hermione thought, but kept that thought carefully to herself. Instead she merely demurred, "Well, I try to be very responsible, sir."

"An admirable quality--there we go. Watch the hands, now!"

Several seconds passed. Hermione tried not to blink. Finally, the hands twitched and started to separate. "Now, sir!"

"Excellent! The ruddy thing *was* overly sensitive, but then I designed it to suit Mrs. Weasley's distinctive mother-hen nature," he muttered, extracting his arm long enough to grab the various plates and screws needed to reassemble the innards he'd dismantled. "...Marvelous woman. Did she ever tell you she saved my life, once? Didn't even know it, of course, but she gave me a Floo-call about fixing one of her mother's clocks when she was about your age, and interrupted me before I could take a bite of a fruitcake I'd been sent by a nephew. My cat Friskums ate it instead, while I answered the Floo-call. Poor thing died on the spot. Turned out the bugger wanted his inheritance a little early," Mr. Lubbock related with a matter-of-fact aplomb that bemused Hermione. "Gave him an inheritance of a ten-year sentence to Azkaban, instead, and wrote him out of my will. So, when young Molly married Arthur, I thought this family-tracking clock would make a nice gift in thanks."

Hermione smiled. "That was a really nice gift, and very kind of you. And practical, too, given how many children they ended up having. It's a very good way of being able to keep track of everyone."

"Yes, well, it's one-of-a-kind. I don't hand out my special inventions to just anyone, you know. Or as I like to say, they'll all be handed out in due time." Extracting his beaky nose for a moment, the aged wizard gave her a merry smile, before returning to his work. "Blue-tape spanner, please, and watch the ends, it's cold--mind the red one as you put it back where you found it, as it's still quite hot."

Content, Hermione played 'surgery theatre nurse' for him, handing him tools and putting them back as requested, wherever he described. Finally, he extracted his arm and screwed the back plate back into place, then pulled out a handkerchief and gave the clock what looked like a loving dusting, his age-spotted hands caressing the carvings with the linen. Snapping the dust out of the kerchief, he tucked it back into his pocket, then stood and moved over to the toolbox, peering over Hermione's shoulder. He poked at the contents, eyeing their placement, then nodded.

"--Excellent! Everything exactly where it should be. You have a very organized and logical mind, young lady. Have you ever considered working in the Department of Mysteries? They could always use bright, intelligent, apprentice witches such as yourself."

"I've given it some thought, yes," Hermione found herself admitting. "But with the war on, and everything...I'll be kind of busy with other things for a little bit."

"What, with rescuing old wizards like myself?" Mr. Lubbock grinned. He dug into his pocket, angling his body so that his back was to the bored Auror sitting on a stool by the pantry door, reading what looked like a paperback romance. The aging wizard pulled out a bracelet, dropping his voice to a whisper. "...Here. It's not quite a magical clock, but in these times of trouble, you might find it a bit more useful."

Hermione took the bracelet with a puzzled frown. It was a ring of gold, banded about the middle with what looked like twenty four segments of dark blue abalone. Looking up at him, she asked under her breath, "...More useful? What does it do?"

"It's another of my own inventions. I call it the Velocitemplet," he whispered with a hint of pride in his voice. "Go ahead, move the middle band around."

Eyeing the armband, Hermione gripped the gold edges in one hand, and shifted the section with the inlaid shell. It clicked, moving the distance of one segment. Nothing happened. She clicked it again, moving it two segments. Still nothing. When she looked up at him, he smiled, flashing his straight but age-yellowed teeth at her again.

"It's not charged, yet. What you have to do is pick a time of day when you have roughly half an hour of doing absolutely nothing scheduled. Then you click the band all the way around until it stops. It's best to do this in the evening, just before going to bed. In a safe place by preference, of course.. It will slow *you* down for twenty-four minutes...or however many minutes you need to recharge the thing. For each minute charged, the abalone will transform into mother-of-pearl, so it's a quick visual clue as to what's charged and what's been expended. You gauge where it is by the way these two thin onyx bands...here, on the gold outer band, and here, on the center bit...line up to each other. But, so long as you do not take it off your arm...you can *get back* the time that you gave up to charge it.

"Not literally, of course," he murmured, shrugging. "You won't reappear in your pyjamas in your bed. Nor will it turn back time like a Time-Turner...which I couldn't give out anyway, since that's strictly Ministry-controlled...but it *will speed up* time. For up to four minutes at a go, at varying rates. You will be able to move and interact with your environment at a much faster rate than the rest of the world normally travels at...though you'll be exhausted afterwards, and if you try Apparating in either condition, slowed or speeded, you'll splinch for sure. Keep it charged, keep it on your wrist, and you'll be able to act with remarkable haste, should you ever have need. And hopefully that will save your life one day, as you have saved mine."

A pat on her shoulder, and he reached past her to close up the toolbox. As soon as it was closed, he raised his voice. "--Molly? Your clock is fixed! I'm on my way home, now! Give my best to Arthur when you see him!"

Auror Violetta jerked to attention, quickly marking and tucking the book out of sight in the folds of her robes. Mrs. Weasley came bustling out of the living room, feather duster floating behind her. "Must you go so soon?"

"Yes, I must; I need to be there when they perform the Fidelius Charm on my house. Can't be too careful, these days. I don't even want to think about why You-Know-Who wants an old chronomancer under his control...ah, well, I'll be back for the wedding! Make sure you have a small photo of the bride-to-be ready for me--and those delightful twice-baked potatoes you make!"

Eyeing the bracelet, Hermione tucked it over her wrist. It rested there for a moment, then tightened just enough to her skin that it did not slip or move. That would allow her to manipulate the shell-band one-handed. She wanted to experiment with it, but it would be best to wait for evening. She was also unsure whether or not to tell the others about the bracelet. The fewer people who knew about such an advantage, the better.

She shouldn't keep secrets from her friends...but there was the letter, which had faded to blank parchment by now, and the ring strung around her neck. As far as Hermione had ever known, there had only been the one spy in the Dark Lord's service. A traitor in the end, to her shock, outrage and sorrow. If she told Harry or Ron about the ring, or about this Russel fellow, they might let it slip to someone else. As it was, Professor...and *Snape* knew too many Order secrets. The fewer who knew about the ring, and the bracelet, the less chance there was of the enemy learning, too.

The bracelet, she decided, she would keep silent about. At least, until she'd had a chance to test its properties. Harry and Ron would undoubtedly have a bunch of questions about it, and she wanted to be *able* to answer them, before she had to answer. 'Know-it-all' might be considered an insult, but it could also be considered a compliment...but it took a bit of work to be one.

...

The bracelet worked, but it came with a couple of caveats, Hermione discovered. While she was 'charging', she was as petrified in place as if she'd been hit with a Freezing Charm. She could think and breathe, but she couldn't move, and couldn't react, not even when Crookshanks jumped up onto her lap and rubbed himself against her. All she could do was breathe, though it took some effort, and blink with equally stiff effort. And when Crooks head-butted her, seeking attention, he couldn't budge her. Even the rumpled folds of her pyjama top were hard for him to move, Hermione gradually realized. She was literally slowed in time, for those twenty-four minutes.

With one exception: if she kept her fingers on the shell-band at the center of the bracelet, she could just manage to move enough to un-click a minute's worth of time. One click at a time. Until, rather than twenty-four minutes' worth stored in shades of mother-of-pearl cream, she ended up with about seven, the remaining unused minutes still marked in abalone blue. She finished filling up the bracelet, figuring it was easier to keep a full bracelet on hand--or rather, wrist--at all times, but kept that option in mind, if she ever had to terminate the 'charging' effect early. One of the other drawbacks appeared each time after the charging session: she felt like she had hyperventilated, a bit of dizziness mixed in with that tingling feeling she got whenever she breathed too much, too fast. It was definitely a wise idea to do the recharging minutes while lying in her bed

As for 'spending' the minutes...it was difficult to tell how fast time passed in the dark hours of the night, when everyone else was asleep at the Burrow. But seconds ticked by like minutes, and everything appeared to be moving slower than treacle poured from a jar stuck in a snow-bank. The bracelet's stored minutes came in six speeds, too. She could use up to four minutes' worth of time at a stretch, by her own reckoning of time, but she could move up to six times as fast, if she used all twenty-four minutes, or three times as fast as the baseline, if she used only twelve.

In fact, when she watched a game of Quidditch being played by the others while testing the double-speed option, when she experimented with full-speed, even the wings of the Snitch slowed to an icy-treacle movement. The drawback to using a burst of speeded-up time was a depleting exhaustion that followed; the more time she used, the more exhausted she was, and the faster that time flew, the more drained she felt. Either clicking repeatedly every few minutes to get twenty-four minutes' worth at the first level of speed, or ratcheting the bracelet all the way around all at once for four minutes of full-speed, left her literally falling-down tired.

The Velocitemplet was not something meant for casual use, Hermione decided, after the second experiment left her drained and bruised from collapsing on the floor of her

bedroom at Headquarters. In the end, that was what kept her silent on the decision of whether or not to tell her friends. They might want to use it for the silliest of things, or have her use it frequently. Between the dizzying stillness of charging the bracelet, and the draining expenditure of using it, she wanted to keep it for a last-option sort of thing. Like the ring, it was also definitely something she didn't want their enemies to know existed.

At least with the kindly Mr. Lubbock, she didn't have to worry nearly as much about his motives for giving it to her. The ring didn't grow warm in the days following his rescue, but she kept it tucked down her shirts, just in case. Ron noticed the chain, of course, mostly when they were kissing. Not that they had much opportunity for kissing, since his mother seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to interrupting such moments, but he did tug playfully on it once, asking, "What have you got tucked down there?"

"Er...just something I got at my parents'," Hermione dismissed, and distracted him with a bit more in the way of kissing.

She felt a little guilty at the minor deception, and a little guilty from something else. The letter had said that the ring could be used as a 'powerful form of protection', if she remained chaste. If it had been given by someone who was honestly on their side, she could trust that protection would be there if she ever had to don it to escape a bad situation. On the other hand, if it was a deception meant to lull her into trusting the giver...she didn't know why that person would bother warning her about donning it and thus binding her in an 'unbreakable betrothal'.

If he wasn't a spy for her side, wouldn't it be more advantageous *to not* tell her about the potential for the two of them to be bound together? She didn't know much about archaic magical betrothals, but Hermione guessed he might have a fair bit of control over her. Not her mind, of course, but being able to do things like snog other men, and so forth. Unless, of course, he just didn't want to be bound to a Muggle-born witch who was going to be skipping her seventh year of school...

A witch who would be going up against masked and robed Death Eaters in the near future, one of which might turn out to be him. Vacillating between being skeptical and wanting to believe, Hermione kept her silence on the whole matter. Her own doubts were more than enough to deal with; she didn't need to add Harry's and Ron's to the mix.

...

Fire seared her breasts, making Hermione gasp. Ginny, busy trying to twist her red hair into a sophisticated, upswept style, frowned at the other young witch. "What? Does it look horrid?"

"Uh...well, you missed a bit in the back," Hermione blurted out, unable to think of anything tactful to say, when all she could think of was yanking the ring out of her cleavage. She wasn't a member of the wedding-party, but she was supposed to be getting ready, too, and had already fixed her hair and face. They were both still in the jeans and shirts they had worn through most of the morning's preparations, fixing up the Burrow for the outdoor ceremony. Which was a good thing, because she had to take care of her little problem. "Um...I've got to go to the bathroom. I'll help you into your dress in a bit, okay?"

"What, Phlegm's 'Tradishunall Frensh Wedding Breakfass' disagreeing with you?" Ginny quipped mockingly.

"Er, something like that."

"She's still a bit snobbish, and I don't like her cooking...but at least she does love Bill," Ginny sighed as Hermione headed for the door. "And he loves her, though his wits seemed to have drained out of his head at some point in the falling-in-love process."

Mumbling an agreement-like sound, Hermione darted out of the bedroom. She didn't bother to descend the steps, but pulled the ring out of her bra and tilted it towards the light coming from the window at the end of the landing. The message etched there made her heart skip a beat in fright.

Creevey - 18 Cadfael Lane, Shrewsbury

The Creeveys. Colin and Dennis Creevey. Muggle-borns, like her. Hermione's mind raced right along with her heart. Hurrying down the steps, she leapt them two and three at a time, and emerged in the kitchen with a breathless thump. Arthur looked up from the cufflinks he was trying to fasten onto his shirtsleeves, surprise widening his eyes.

"Hermione? I thought you were Ron, or maybe Harry? What's making you take the stairs like a boy?"

"Um...how quickly can a Floo connection be made to a Muggle hearth?" Hermione asked, still trying to come up with a way to explain why she was asking.

"It only takes a minute or so--did you want to invite your parents?"

"No--" Her gaze fell on the clock, which was now pointing at either 'Getting Ready' or 'Traveling' for most of the family. In specific, her eyes met the smiling faces of the Weasleys marked on each of the clock's nine hands. "--No, actually, it just occurred to me that you haven't hired a photographer for Bill and Fleur's wedding!"

"By Merlin...you're right! How could we overlook recording our eldest son's happiest day? I'll go and see if I can find that Muggle camera I have--"

"--Actually, Mr. Weasley," Hermione interjected, stopping him with a hand on his arm before he could hurry off to his work-shed, and distracted him physically by finishing the fastening of his cufflinks for him, speaking as persuasively as she could, "you're going to be far too busy as the host and the father of the groom to be taking photographs...which is why I thought of the *perfect* person to take pictures at Bill's wedding: Colin Creevey. He's a Muggle-born like me. Knows all about cameras, and does a truly good job of taking pictures, too. I know it's really short notice," she asserted, trying not to babble in her need to convince him as quickly as possible, and probably failing from the way he blinked at her, "but I was thinking, what if we invited Colin and his family--all of the Creeveys--to the wedding? His family have never seen a wizarding wedding before, I'm quite sure, and I think they'd be delighted to attend. And it would be a wonderful way to pay Colin, and perhaps get him commissions for a career as a wizarding photographer, once people see what he can do with the pictures of your son's wedding--what do you think?"

"...Muggle-born, you say?"

"Yes, both him and his brother, Dennis," Hermione agreed. "And if they brought their family, and stayed for the reception afterwards, then you could ask bona-fide Muggles all sorts of questions while they're enjoying your fine wizarding hospitality. And so I was thinking, if a Floo-connection could be made quickly to their house, they could come right over with their finery, get dressed here so as not to worry about ash and soot, and spend the day with us. Colin could block out where the posed photos could be made, perhaps against Molly's bed of bluebells, and we could help Dennis answer any questions their Muggle family members might have, before the wedding starts."

"That's a splendid idea, Hermione! I'll go ask them...oh, bother," he grimaced, looking down at his finery. "I just got dressed. Hand me that jacket, there," he ordered her. "I'll Floo work right away! I hope they don't have a fire-plug thing, like those dreadful Dursleys had..."

Anxiously, unsure of just how much time they had left before the attack was made, Hermione waited by his side while he contacted his friends at the Ministry, and fed him the address. Molly came down, and Hermione found herself in the awkward position of explaining why the older witch's husband had his head and torso poking through the fire, when he was supposed to be keeping himself neat and clean to welcome the guests, who would be arriving in half an hour. She thought Hermione's idea was 'sweet', and ordered Arthur to take care with his clothes while fetching the Creeveys.

When Arthur stepped across with a spare bowl of Floo Powder, Hermione snatched a fistful of powder for herself and crossed right behind him, wand once again clenched in her hand, ready to defend or attack. But all she got, once she stepped around Mr. Weasley's back, was a shocked set of Muggles, and a puzzled Colin and Dennis.

"--Hermione?" Dennis blurted out, overriding Arthur Weasley's stammered explanation of his arrival, which was hindered by all the shiny Muggle gadgets within sight...such as the X-Box the Creevey boys had been using to play video games right before their arrival.

"Hello, Dennis! Hello, Colin! You must be Mr. and Mrs. Creevey; hello!" Hermione quickly asserted, and gestured at herself and her wide-eyed companion. "I'm Hermione Granger, a school chum of Dennis and Colin's, and this is Mr. Arthur Weasley, the father of our friend, Ron. We're here because Mr. Weasley's eldest son, Bill, is getting

married today...and we kind of forgot to book a photographer!" She gave the stunned parents a wry smile and shrug. "Well, the first person I thought of, naturally, was Colin, who has a real knack for both normal and wizarding photographs. So, Mr. Weasley is here to ask if you--as in, all of you--would like to come to a real wizarding wedding, replete with reception and dancing in the evening, today."

She nudged Mr. Weasley as discreetly as she could, and he cleared his throat, getting over his awe and getting down to business.

"Quite right. I know it's very short notice, madam, sir, but it's going to be a lovely ceremony, the food will be very tasty, and everyone there will be very friendly and welcoming...or I'll see to them personally if they act otherwise," Arthur added, flashing them a smile. "Nothing but the best for my eldest son's biggest day. Ron's actually spoken very well over the years of the young Messrs. Creevey, here; it would be an honor to have Colin take the photographs of my son Bill, and his bride-to-be, Fleur. And it would be a good experience for him, if he's thinking of entering the field of wizarding photography. You can make a lot of contacts at a wedding, and impress a lot of people, if the pictures are done right."

"--Mum? Dad?" Colin asked, rising from the floor in front of the sofa so that he could look at his parents, who were seated at what looked like the dining table in the section of the room behind it. "Could we go? Please? Ron's a friend of mine, and if they think I've got what it takes, I wouldn't want to disappoint them!"

"Well..." Mrs. Creevey hedged, looking at her husband. "We *were* going to go to the movie theatre, this afternoon..."

"The movies will still be there tomorrow," Hermione coaxed as charmingly as logic could allow. "But how many chances will you get to see a real wizarding wedding? Aside from maybe when your own sons are ready for such things, if they, um, ever choose a witch for a bride..."

"What kind of a ceremony is it?" Mr. Creevey asked, suspicion creasing his brow in a frown. "Tree-worshipping Druid stuff? We'll not be expected to go 'sky-clad', or whatever those bohemian types call it?"

"No, no," Arthur hastened to reassure him. "Anglican ceremony. The whole family's solidly Anglican, and have been since Good Queen Bess's day." His brow wrinkled for a brief moment as he added in an aside, "Well, I think Fleur's actually a Lutheran...but we try not to hold that against her! Will you come? Please?"

"Well, we'll have to get dressed, and...erm...get in the car..." Mrs. Creevey hedged.

"Actually, you just pack up what you want to wear in a bag, and step across the hearth, here," Hermione corrected her. "That way, your nice clothes for the wedding don't get mussed, like mine have," she added, dusting at a bit of ash on her shoulder, "and then you can get dressed at the Burrow, which is the name of the Weasley's home. And you can have your casual clothes with you for later, if you want to relax during the reception. It's going to be a sort of summer barbecue thing, so only the wedding bit will be really formal."

"Well...I suppose I could give traveling the wizard-way a try," Mrs. Creevey allowed, some of her doubts fading away. "And Henry can't say 'no' to a good barbecue--will it be alright if our little girl comes along? Or should we get a sitter? She's only fourteen months, and liable to cry throughout the ceremony, I'm afraid."

Arthur Weasley unwittingly came to the rescue, for that one. "By all means, bring the baby along! Good heavens, you *cannot* have a proper wedding without a little one crying in the background! Boys, go get your dress robes. Hermione, go help Mrs. Creevey pack up what she and the baby will need. We should have you back by midnight or thereabouts, and the Floo connection's going to be open until tomorrow morning, but if you end up too tired to Floo home, well, I'm sure we can find a corner to tuck you into for the night, and a means to get you safely home again. I really do appreciate you being able to come and help us out on such short notice. And I'll definitely pay young Mr. Colin for the film and the photograph paper, and the chemicals and so on and such..."

Chapter 02

Chapter 2 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

Author's Notes: I'm honestly surprised that the dialogue at the end of this scene hasn't happened in the actual canon books, yet... It's a perfectly valid desensitization technique, after all! ~Lotm

II.

No attacks came, while they were at the Creeveys. Hermione couldn't let down her guard, though. She conjured spare diapers for the baby, loaned other odds and ends, and made sure the Creeveys had no reason to return to their home until very late. But though she offered to let them sleep in her and Ginny's rooms, the Creeveys insisted on returning to their own home around eleven o'clock that night. Hermione, hands wringing, followed them to the hearth, trying to think of a way to have them let her go first.

A thumping sound and a craggy voice stopped them. Never before had the paranoid words of Mad-Eye Moody sounded so like a guardian angel: "Stop right there! You can't let these Muggles return to their home! Not without someone checking it out, first."

"Alastor, they're only just going home!" Molly protested.

"Exactly! It's when you least expect it that the enemy will strike! We're in a war, madam, and these fine people will not go home unprotected! Arthur, draw your wand; you're with me. We'll scope it out, and if it's all-clear, we'll come back and let them through."

Hermione faked a cough to catch the Creeveys' attention. "It's, er, best if you let Mr. Moody have his little idiosyncrasies, like this," she murmured to Mr. and Mrs. Creevey. "It'll only take a moment or two, and no harm will be done by it, really."

Sighing, they let the scarred Auror have his way. Even Arthur Weasley rolled his eyes, but joined Moody in the fireplace, each one with a fistful of powder. Arthur cast his, while Moody reserved his 'for a quick return, in case we need it'. Green flames roared up, and the two men whirled out of view.

Five seconds later, the fire roared again, accompanied by a dopplered, incoming stream of curses that made Hermione's ear's burn and Mrs. Creevey and Mrs. Weasley pale. Both men stumbled out of the hearth, Arthur's face so pale, his freckles stood out in stark relief. "D...De...oh, dear god, there were *Death Eaters* in their house! Alastor, if we'd just sent them across without checking--!"

But Alastor Moody was already ordering a fresh toss of Floo-powder to take him to the Ministry of Magic, Auror Headquarters, growling that he'd get an army and go after

the bastards. Hermione's knees gave way with relief, making her fumble out one of the chairs at the kitchen table so she could sit down without falling. Once again, Russel had come through for her. It took a little bit of explaining for the Muggle Creeveys to understand just what sort of danger they would've been in, had they not come across to the wedding and stayed so late, and then Hermione found herself praised once again for her seemingly spur-of-the-moment idea to invite the lot of them to the party.

It was close to one o'clock in the morning before the Ministry Aurors would let the Creeveys return. The house was a bit of a mess, though nothing a bit of magic hadn't been able to put to rights again, Arthur reported when he came back from the final inspection. Protective wardings had been cast on the house to keep further such attacks out, and the excitement was finally dying down.

By that point, however, Hermione's mind was so tense with speculation and nerves and relief all jumbled together like lottery balls rotating in a tumbler, she couldn't sleep. Getting into her pyjamas, she crawled into the cot crowded into Ginny's narrow room and lay on the bed. Ginny talked about it for a little while, then subsided into sleep as she relaxed, but Hermione couldn't. This was the second time Russel had helped her to save someone. So far, she'd managed to make it look like a spectacularly lucky coincidence in each case, but she wouldn't be able to keep that up forever.

Her shoulder hurt. Startled, Hermione sat up halfway. The pain instantly eased, but when she lay back down, it burned again. It took her a moment of groping to try and massage the ache before she realized her necklace had slid under her pyjama top when she had laid down, causing the ring to slither around until it was behind her. Dread flooded her. Grabbing her wand from the desk beside her cot, Hermione yanked the bedcovers over her head and whispered, "*Lumos!*"

Under the abruptly bright glow of her wand, she examined the ring. There was no writing on it, though she turned it all around, examining the smooth-polished surface. A moment later, she realized there were no scales, either. *What had the letter said?* She wracked her memory. ...*Touch it to a piece of parchment! Right, right...* Poking her head out of the covers, she glanced at Ginny, who was soundly asleep, and turned the other way. Her cot was wedged up against the girl's desk; all she had to do was open a drawer and root around for a piece of scrap parchment. As soon as she had the piece, she ducked back under the covers and set the ring on top of the page, holding her wand so that she could see what might happen.

Words seeped out from the ring, spilling into copperplate lettering. Russel, whoever and wherever he might be, was using dicto-quill, she suspected. The message was simple, and straightforward.

Are you there?

Realizing she needed to make a reply, Hermione ducked out from under the covers, snagged a book from the desk and tried a silent *accio* to summon her self-inking quill from her bags under the cot. The last thing she wanted to do was overturn an inkwell on her bedding. Pulling the covers back into place, she tried another wordless bit of magic, something to cool and freshen the air under the covers.

When she'd been little, her father had teased her about needing a snorkel to be able to breathe, whenever she'd tried to pull the covers over her head and hide from the monsters in the closet, et cetera. He'd always patiently show her that there were no monsters in her closet, under her bed, or in her wardrobe, and her mum would give her a kiss on the forehead if she were especially troubled, which she had once upon a time called the 'mummy's nightmare shield', and they'd pretended it was magical.. Now that she was an adult, she knew that the monsters and magic were both quite real, and that her parents could only protect her from them about as well as pulling the covers over her head. Which was to say, not at all.

It was unsettling, becoming an adult.

Grasping the quill, making sure the ring was resting on the parchment by trapping it under her left hand, the fingers of which she used to hold her light-tipped wand aloft, she wrote back. **I'm here.**

The words vanished after a moment.

...To make sure I have the right person, what is your name?the ink spilled and wrote.

That was a bit of a silly question. Hermione started to scribe her first name, then paused. Cagily, she wrote back, **You called me Jane. Did you want that, or my other name?**

Clever girl. Initials, please, he prompted her as their previous words vanished.

H.J.G.

Excellent. And to reassure you, I am RUSSEL...Fawke's son, I suppose you could say.

Fawkes had been Professor Dumbledore's phoenix familiar; he was gone, now, but the phoenix still represented the Order.

I trust you are alright? You were not injured? Russel wrote. **In either instance?**

She knew he meant the Death Eater attacks. Hermione nibbled on her lower lip, then wrote back, **No. Were you?**

No. I was not there. One day I might be. If so, I would rather not be caught. I am far too valuable where I am at the moment to be incarcerated just yet. There is no one else left who can do what I must do...and I must not be uncovered. I realize this puts you in a terrible position, but I have no one else to turn to. Brian was the only one who knew how deep my cover went. Without him, I am forced to rely upon you, and I do not know if I can trust you. Nor, I suppose, do you know if you can trust me. We are both working blind, at the moment.

Hermione waited until most of the text had faded enough so that she had room to write, then replied **I don't know if I can trust you, either, frankly. I've never heard of you, and all the discreet enquiries I've made so far suggest no one else in the Order has ever heard of you.**

No, they do not know me. Have you told them about the ring, then?

She debated how to answer, finally settling on a cautious, **Not yet.**

Thank you. And wise of you, to keep that option in reserve. Brian spoke well of you, those times he mentioned you. I will have to trust in his judgment, and hope I have made the right choice. I can't write for long, but I wanted to let you have a chance to ask me questions. Some, I cannot answer. Some, I will not answer. But I will try to assuage some of your curiosity.

So, you won't tell me who you are, I take it?Hermione wrote back.

No. Sorry.

She'd expected that. **What about, where are you?**

In the lair of the serpent himself...hiding under the covers. Literally. Not the most adult position to be in, but I cannot risk being seen writing to you anywhere in the open. And I should warn you, if I'm about to be caught, both papers will burn in a sudden flash. Please do not extinguish yours, as that would also put a stop to mine being burnt, and risk exposing our correspondence. At least, do not extinguish it while your ring touches it--you have not put it on your finger, have you?

No. I've strung it on a chain around my neck, actually.

Good. Neither of us needs that sort of complication. It would certainly make my situation even tougher. I hate the position I am in as it stands. Friendless, contact-less, and hopeless, in many ways. I'm stuck here until the end of the war.

Hermione felt a twinge of compassion for Russel, at those words. **Don't you have anyone you can turn to?**

Not after the traitor killed the head of our Order. And I cannot end the life of the man who did it; Brian forbade it.

That made her frown; she knew he meant Albus Dumbledore, but his words didn't make sense. **I don't understand. How could he forbid it, if he was already dead?**

Forgive me...I cannot speak about this in any detail. All I can say is that many things were discussed, beforehand. Many possibilities. Very few of them made me happy, but I am bound to not discuss them, until Headmaster Dumbledore is told that the Dark Lord is dead. Please keep this in mind. It is all I can say at this point in time.

Well, that'd be quite a trick, given that he's dead, Hermione wrote back, frowning at his phrasing. **And it's not a case of discussing possibilities beforehand, either.**

No, it isn't. But there is more than one way to hold a discussion with a former Headmaster.

...He's a very strange man, whoever he is, Hermione thought distractedly. She thought for a moment, then wrote, **So, what else shall we talk about, then?**

I'm hardly going to waste my time on inanities. I am curious, though. How did you effect those two rescues, without revealing where you got the information about the attacks?

Pure dumb luck, Hermione wrote.

Of course. I should have guessed. Go on.

Well, the first time, Molly said she knew Mr. Lubbock, and that he'd made their clock. I don't know if you know their clock, but it's rather unique; it has nine hands, each with a picture of one of the family--now ten, actually; Fleur's been added today when he came by as a wedding guest, now that she's married into the family. Anyway, she said she wanted to have the hands stop pointing at 'Mortal Peril' all the time, and I said I'd poke my head through the Floo for her while she worked on lunch. I had my wand at the ready, of course...

He didn't interrupt much, just asked a question or two, until she brought him up to date with the current averted fiasco.

...And I couldn't sleep, even though everything's gone back to as normal as it gets, anymore. So I was awake when the ring heated up.

It was a risk I had to take, on whether or not you'd be too deeply asleep to answer. Thank you for being awake. And for filling me in on the details of what happened.

About that, Hermione interjected. **How can you keep all of this from being read by You-Know-Who via Legilimency?**

Because I am a better Occlumens. There was only one person who was a better Legilimens than the Dark Lord, and only that person was ever able to penetrate my mind. Unfortunately...he is now dead. This leaves me secure in my secrets if I am careful, despite the Dark Lord's strength...but it will make it very awkward when the truth must come out about my activities. I hope to be alive, on that day. I don't expect to be, but some small part of me still hopes to be.

You sound very depressed, Hermione wrote, then scratched that out and scribbled quickly, **--That was a stupid thing to say, wasn't it?**

Yes...but an accurate observation. How can I not be depressed? Thanks to the traitor's actions, there's no one alive to help me prove I'm on the right side, not the wrong one. Not until the war has been won. And the likelihood of that happening is depressingly low.

I wish there was some way I could cheer you up, Hermione found herself offering.

...Thank you. The sentiment is appreciated, however futile the practice.

You're welcome, I think. I wish I could do more.

You've done enough, for tonight. Brian once told me I needed someone, a friend I could talk to, or I'd explode. I never believed him, until I was cut off from all contact. I am not accustomed to saying I need something; I am used to doing without, and to denial. But...I needed this. Unfortunately, I will not be able to communicate this directly with you very often. Thank you for listening, and for extending some of your trust.

Hermione knew a conversation-ender when she read one. Quickly, she wrote, **Wait--before you go, a quick question.**

Yes?

How do I contact you? How do I make the ring work? Do I touch it to the paper and start writing?

You would need to say my full name while touching the ring with your thumb, and speak the message to encode the ring directly, or speak my full name and then touch the ring to paper to initiate this sort of contact...but the risk is too great. If someone on your end of things discovers the secret of the ring, there is hope that they will be an ally, not an enemy, and would continue to keep it a secret alongside you. If anyone on my end of the matter discovers the communicative properties of the ring, I am dead. And I gave my word to Brian I would not throw away my life until this war is over.

I must go now, he added. Mind the paper, for it will burn. RUSSEL, ex Votum Irruptus.

Goodnight! Hermione scrawled quickly, and had just enough time to exchange quill for wand as the paper seared and crumbled to ash. Thankfully, it flashed too quickly to damage anything. The only traces of their conversation were a slight powder on her bedding, a smoky scent under the covers, and the self-inking quill in her hand.

A cautious poke of her head out of the covers showed Ginny still safely asleep. Putting the quill away, Hermione extinguished her wand and set it back on the desktop, which was serving as her nightstand, she lay back down on the cot. Now her mind whirled with a different set of questions, but at least some of her tension had eased.

...

With the wedding over and Bill and Fleur off on their honeymoon trip, there was little reason for the trio to stay at the Burrow. Two days after the wedding found them arriving at Headquarters, though from the wrinkling of Harry's nose, he hated having to do it. But they couldn't stay at the Burrow; Molly would pitch a fit if she found out what the three of them were going to do, and on her own ground, she was indisputably In Charge. Here, at the Black house, they were technically adults in the wizarding world, and therefore supposed to be treated as equals. Well, except for Harry, who still had a few more weeks to go to his seventeenth birthday.

They'd had to scramble to make a new Secret Keeper for the place, the night of the attack on the school. And to find a wizard strong enough to cast the necessary spell. With Albus Dumbledore dead, the chance of Snape leading the Death Eaters to the place had been so great, they'd done a makeshift job of it: Moody, being the only one to even think of the possibility, had rushed off and cast the spell...and he'd chosen Mrs. Figg, of all people, to be the recipient. She was a Squib, and an old lady, but her Floo had been connected, she'd been at home and awake, and she was the last person anyone would think of for a Secret Keeper.

Unfortunately, Harry, Ron and Hermione discovered upon entering the place, she'd brought her cats with her. They hadn't been here when Arthur had brought them to the park across the street to meet Mrs. Figg and thus be let into the place by her, shortly after arriving at the Burrow for the summer. But the cats were in the house now. The

whole ground floor smelled like fur, and kitty kibble.

"Well," Hermione sighed, trying to look on the bright side as she set down Crookshanks' cage and unlatched it. She didn't speak loudly, not wanting to wake up the portrait of Mrs. Black just yet. "At least Crooks will have some friends to play with..."

"Yeah, right," Ron snorted under his breath. "Come on; let's go see which rooms we can claim."

"I hate being back here," Harry whispered, staring at the curtained painting just down the hall. "I hate *her*, too."

"Actually, I have a *cure* for that!" Hermione whispered back. Reaching into her pocket, she drew out an egg. Harry gave her a puzzled look, and she held her finger up to her lips. Padding quietly up to the curtains, she silently levitated the egg, cracked it open with her wand, separated the yolk from the white with a bit of magic, and yanked the curtains open. "*Tempera silentis*"

"YOU FILTY MUDBL--!"

The egg yolk splattered over the harriidan's pinched, oil-painted face, choking her mid-insult. Cutting her off, too. She clawed at the yellow splatter marks, tried to move out from underneath the stain, but it clung to her face, keeping her in place. Grinning, Hermione yanked the curtains shut, and dusted off her hands dramatically.

"There! *Evanesco*," she added, vanishing the egg shell and egg white. "I made a point to look up any and all known methods of silencing a painting, and finally found that wonderful little spell in a book by a wizarding artist named Gerry Jesso in the school library. I've been dying to get back here to shut her up for over half a year!"

"Brilliant," Harry breathed, eyeing the still, quiet curtains. His eyes gleamed behind the round lenses of his spectacles. "*BLOODY BRILLIANT!*" he shouted...and the other portraits in the hall roused and started shouting at him. Both of them clapped their hands over their ears, but without Mrs. Black to egg them on...so to speak...they quieted down quickly. Especially when Harry yelled, "--Quiet, the lot of you! Or we'll permanently silence *you*, too!"

Silence descended on the hall. A figure at the end poked his head through the kitchen door. "Harry? What was all the ruckus about?"

"We were just shutting up Mrs. Black for a good, long time, Remus," Hermione quipped, grinning at him as she headed his way. "Blissfully silent, now, isn't it?"

"Right. Well, I've told Ron what rooms are open; Hermione, you can have the same room you and Ginny usually use. Harry...I wasn't sure if you wanted to share a room with Ron, or...or move into Sirius' bedroom. I thought I'd leave that up to you."

Harry grimaced. "With Ron, I think...I'm not up to dealing with the memories, just yet."

"I understand. If you ever need to talk..." their former professor offered.

"I know. Thanks," Harry acknowledged. "Listen, are there any books of names, around here? I mean, who's who in the wizarding world, that sort of thing."

"I think there are some genealogy books in the library, and the parlour might have a book or two. And then there's always the infamous Black Family Tapestry," he added with a touch of humor, but his smile was more wistful than merry. "Tonks isn't on it, of course."

Harry nodded. "Thanks. We'll look into it."

"How is Tonks?" Hermione asked, lingering behind as Harry headed back to the hall to collect his things. Unlike her and Ron, he'd come away from his so-called home with all of his worldly goods. She didn't have as much to unpack, so didn't bother heading upstairs just yet. Just asking the aging werewolf about his love brought a distinct warmth back into his whole posture. Happiness had a way of doing that.

"Wonderful. She'll be home, after work. Erm, coming here, that is. I won't be staying long, just a day or two more, but I was glad to make it to the wedding, yesterday. I heard about the deal with the Creeveys--good work, Hermione."

"Um, thanks." Uneasy about the topic of her 'serendipitous' rescue, she sought to change the subject. The hearth behind Remus flared green, saving her from the topic. A magenta-and-purple striped head poked through the verdant flames.

"Wotcher, Walter! Give us a kiss! I'm on my coffee break! ...Oh, hi, Hermione! I, er, didn't see you there."

Remus hurried over to the hearth, crouched down, and--blushing--bussed Tonks on the lips. Hermione quickly turned and studied one of the cupboards with as utterly absorbed a scrutiny as she could affect. The fire stopped crackling, and Remus cleared his throat. Figuring Tonks was gone, Hermione politely faced him again. The brightly-haired Auror was indeed no longer visible, though she'd left purple lip-prints on the edge of his mouth. Hermione gestured vaguely at her mouth, and he caught on, quickly wiping his face with a handkerchief pulled from his pocket.

"Er...thanks. She didn't know anybody was here, and..."

"And I think it's wonderful," Hermione reassured him. "So there's no need to be embarrassed. The two of you deserve happiness, together. Um...just one question--why did she call you 'Walter'?"

"It's my middle name," Remus explained. "Remus Walter Lupin."

"--Wait a minute," Hermione interjected. "I thought your middle name was J-something. It was on your briefcase; I saw it when you were our teacher, on the Hogwarts Express."

"What, John?" he asked. "My mother called me that, but my father named me Walter, after his father. Mum never liked him, so she used her own father's name. No, on the birth-certificate, it's Walter. Sirius used to joke that my first name should've been Grantham," the middle-aged wizard continued, "so that he could nickname me 'G.R.W.L.', or 'Growl' for short. Of course, he called Pettigrew P.E.P., for Peter Eugene Pettigrew, and James was J.A.P. for James Albert Potter, and Sirius was S.O.B., which was short for Sirius Orson Black--we all had nicknames, in our youth. Even Sirius' brother, before he went to Hogwarts and wound up in Slytherin. We called him 'Rabby Burns'," he quipped, affecting a mock-Scottish accent. "We would've called him 'Robby', but he didn't have the right middle initial for that."

Hermione's heart squeezed in her chest. She stared at Remus, trying to make her throat work. "What...what was his middle name? Regulus Black's middle name?"

"Um...Alphonse? Alfred--Arcturus! Named after the middle name of the uncle who left his fortune to Sirius, Alphard Arcturus Black," Remus recalled. "Turned out to be a total disappointment to the old--mmmph!"

Hermione pulled back from her enthusiastic, ear-grabbing kiss, suddenly realizing what she'd done. She'd just planted one on her ex-professor's lips! On a pair of lips that belonged to Tonks! Jerking her hands away from his head, she backed up a few steps. "Uh...um... That's nothing personal--it's only that you've just solved one *hell* of a mystery for Harry, Ron, and me--we'll tell you about it later!--Sorry for swearing!" she added over her shoulder as she pelted out of the kitchen, racing for the stairs. "Harry! Ron! Where are you?"

They popped their heads out of one of the doors on the second floor. Ron frowned at her. "What's up?"

Hermione pushed them back into their bedroom, shutting the door behind her. Eyes gleaming, she waited just long enough to catch some of her breath before gasping, "--I just found out who R.A.B. is! Remus told me!"

"--What?" both wizards exclaimed.

Harry grabbed her arm, green eyes gleaming with hope. "Who is it?"

"Regulus. Alphard. Black! It makes perfect sense! He was in the Death Eaters, he must've gotten close enough to hear enough about the Horcruxes to figure it all out, and he was the one who stole the locket!"

Ron looked between the two of them. "--That's why the Dark Lord killed him! That had to have been it!"

"Exactly!" Hermione agreed.

Harry, brow pinched in a frown, held up his hand. "There was something...the locket! Don't you remember? We found a locket, while we were cleaning out the parlour, right before our fifth year! I can't believe I forgot about it--the ruddy thing looked exactly like the locket I saw in Dumbledore's Pensieve! It might even still be down there!"

"Not if Mundungus nicked and sold it," Ron cautioned them.

"Oh, god, I hope not--I'll kill the little wanker!" Hermione swore, and there was a mad scrum for the door as all three tried to open it at the same time. They got it sorted out: Harry bolted first, Hermione after him, and Ron followed hard on her heels. It was a good thing she'd silenced the worse of the portraits, for they made enough noise thumping down the stairs two and three and even four steps at a time, it shook the floorboards.

The glass-fronted cabinets were empty...and from the patina of dust, had been empty for quite some time.

They'd forgotten about Sirius' determination to throw out virtually everything during their cleaning spree that summer.

...

Depression cast a pall through the already gloomy parlour. Harry lay sprawled on the sofa, Ron in an armchair next to him, and Hermione sat at the writing desk, forehead in her hand. They didn't have the first clue of where to go to find the lost locket. Not even a clue as to where wizarding rubbish went, really. It was a very despairing task to contemplate.

"...Hang on," Ron finally murmured, sitting up a little in his chair. Or at least slouching less. "Harry, could you draw a sketch of the locket? Good enough to identify it?"

He lifted his dark-haired head from the arm of the sofa. "I suppose so, yes. But what good would that do us? We don't even know where to look, what landfill it's been dumped into, and there's a year's worth of yet more rubbish that's probably been dumped on top of it by now."

"Yes, and it'd be a filthy job, trying to dig it out again...which means we need to find someone who by their very nature wouldn't mind getting filthy...if he were *ordered* to look for it," Ron asserted slyly. Then cast Hermione an apologetic look. "Sorry, Hermione, but desperate times call for desperate measures. Harry, sketch out the locket, and summon Kreacher. *He* can go digging for it, while we start looking for Helga Hufflepuff's missing cup. The less time we have to spend on each task, the faster we'll get to the end of our quest, and the end of the war."

Hermione wanted to protest...but even she had to admit it was the best apportioning of their resources. Kreacher could devote more time to the task than they could. Giving up her place at the desk, she let Harry sit and sketch the locket with a pencil, erasing several times until he got it right, or at least as right as any of them could remember. Taking his place on the couch, she dropped onto the worn springs and waited.

Finally, Harry was done. Turning, he drew a breath to steady himself, then asserted, "Kreacher, you are summoned."

The ugly, old house-elf appeared in the center of the room. A sneer of disgust twisted his lips, but he bowed subserviently low. "Master summons me? ...I see he's still in the company of that filthy Mudblood and the spotty-faced blood-traitor."

"Those are *freckles*, not spots!" Ron growled.

Gritting his teeth, Harry lifted the sketch he'd made. "Kreacher, pay attention. I am looking for this locket. It used to be stored in these glass cabinets, here. I want you to find it and bring it to me, as quickly as you can--"

Kreacher's eyes widened, and his mouth compressed as he studied the sketch while Harry spoke. His long pointed ears trembled for a moment, then he snapped his fingers before Harry could finish. The three friends eyed each other in dismay.

"Bugger!" Ron exclaimed softly.

"Yeah, I was going to tell him he couldn't talk to anyone about this--"

Kreacher snapped back into the parlour, a gold chain clutched in his spindly fingers, muttering in that sour, not-quite-quiet way of his. "What could Master want with the young master's locket, I don't know; *he* would've been a far better master..."

Harry flicked his gaze to the others, just as stunned as they were. "Kreacher, where did you get that locket? We thought we tossed it out!"

Again, the house-elf sneered, clutching the locket to his chest. "Kreacher kept it as a sentiment of a *true* son of the Black family...not some blood-traitor who should've been drowned at birth..."

"*Enough*, Kreacher. Hand it over," Harry ordered him. Fingers trembling, the house-elf obeyed. Harry took the locket, wrapping the chain around his fist. He thought for a moment, then said, "Alright, Kreacher, you will not talk about this to anyone but one of the three of us. Now...go clean Mrs. Figg's cat-boxes. That's your punishment for calling Hermione a Mudblood, and Ron a spotty blood-traitor."

Grumbling and glaring, the old house-elf shuffled out the parlour door. Ron was grinning as he flicked his wand, shutting the door behind his creature. "I like that sort of punishment... Now, is that the locket you saw in Dumbledore's Pensieve?"

"Yes, it is," Harry agreed. He tried to pry it open, but couldn't. "But it's stuck."

"Give it here..." Ron gave it a try, but couldn't get it open. After a minute of struggling, he tossed it at Hermione. "Oy, see what you can magic up."

Hermione didn't think it would work, but she started with *Alohomora*, then moved on to a couple of other unlocking, unwarding, and opening-designed charms. Nothing. "...I don't think it *can* be opened."

"Great. R.A.B.--Regulus--said he was going to try to kill this Horcrux," Harry reminded them, speaking of the note from the decoy locket, "but how will we know if he's succeeded already, if we can't find out whether or not the soul's still in there?"

Another somewhat depressed silence filled the parlour, though not quite as gloomy as before. Hermione turned the locket over and over in her hands, then passed it to Ron when he held out his hand silently. He, too, studied it for several minutes, then passed it to Harry. After another minute, Ron's freckled brow creased thoughtfully.

"Harry...how did you and Dumbledore kill the other Horcruxes?"

"Well...the diary, I stabbed with the basilisk's tooth. It's poison is quite deadly; if Fawkes hadn't cried on my wound, I'd have died myself. Instead...it killed Tom Riddle's soul-infused memory."

"Yeah, after he nearly killed my sister," Ron muttered. "But we don't have a basilisk handy. And the ring, Salazar Slytherin's ring--how did Dumbledore destroy that one?"

"I don't know," Harry shrugged helplessly. "He never said. The book, I could stab easily enough with the tooth; it was only leather and paper. The locket is metal. We'll have to find another way."

"Maybe if we crushed it?" Ron offered. Harry sat up, excited by the possibility.

Hermione had a terrible feeling. "Wait--why is the locket sealed? *Think* about it. To keep that piece of Lord Voldemort's soul inside. If we crush the locket open without dealing with the soul, it could escape, and return to its master. He might not notice the destruction of one of his Horcruxes, but he might notice the return of a soul-fragment. We've got to be really careful, in dealing with these things."

"Yeah, but we don't even know if the soul is still in there, or what condition it's in," Ron pointed out.

"...Condition," Harry muttered, looking at the locket in his hands. "Condition...Hermione, you spent a lot of time in the Infirmary, at the end of last summer. Doesn't Madam Pomfrey have some sort of spell to let her know what the condition of a person's soul might be?"

"It's possible...some of the curses and jinxes do affect the soul of a person," she mused. "But I'd need to research that in the school library. Or ask her to do the spell herself, directly."

"No, I'd rather not ask her to cast a soul-sensing spell on a locket," Harry decided with a shake of his head. "She might know enough to realize we thought it was a Horcrux, just from asking. The fewer people who know we're after pieces of Riddle's soul, the better. I don't want him figuring out what we're up to, until it's too late and he's the only fragment left."

"So, it's back to school, then, is it?" Ron asked his two friends.

Harry sighed, slumping in his seat. "I guess it is..." Staring at the locket in his hands, he finally slung the chain around his head. "Until we can figure out what to do with this thing, I'm going to keep it with me at all times. I don't want Kreacher nicking it again--though thank god he did--and I don't want it out of my reach. If a piece of that slimy bastard's soul is in here, I want it where I can kill it as soon as we know how."

"Oy, you're rather brave," Ron observed, eyeing Harry with respect. "If I had *that* thing 'round my neck, it'd give me the collywobbles night and day!"

Harry grimaced at the locket before slipping it under his shirt. "Tell me about it."

...

Rather than risk Apparation--Hermione was the only one who had passed her license test; Ron had failed his by a left-behind eyebrow, and Harry couldn't take it until after his birthday at the end of July--they used the Floo. It disgorged them in the Great Hall. Dusting themselves off, they headed past the long tables, currently empty, their benches inverted on each table-top, and exited the hall.

The damage from the battle was almost entirely gone, but there were still traces of it. Scrubbed spots on the aged stone where the scorch-marks had been removed, in the main halls. Scorched marks where the house-elves had yet to get. A broken timber shored up by a bit of enchanted scaffolding...and house-elves working on the railings of the moving staircases. The stairs weren't moving; someone or something had frozen them in place so that the house-elves could work without worrying about being crushed against a wall or suddenly not having any place to step.

The pattern they demarcated was not one conducive to reaching the library quickly. They had to climb to the fourth floor, go all the way to Professor Flitwick's classroom, and use the back door out of that, which led to a back stairwell that took them down to the second floor, where they had to come back to the central stairwell twice more, just to cross to the floor and corridor that led to the library. Stepping inside, they oriented themselves and headed for the medimagic section in the stacks. It was eerily quiet without the rustling of pages, the scratching of quills, or the whispered conversations that were all Madam Pince had allowed, noise-wise. But they found a series of texts that looked promising, carried them back to the study tables, and sat down. Hermione passed around parchment and quills from the book bag she'd brought for taking notes, and they started flipping through the texts.

Voices impinged on their research, some while later. "...and I need to know now whether or not to order that series, so that it'll arrive in time if I do."

That was Madam Pince's voice, heralding her arrival as she came through the library doors.

"Well, I'm still in two minds about opening the school for next year--Mr. Potter! Mr. Weasley! Miss Granger! What are you three doing in here?" Professor McGonagall asked them, her gaze darting between the three friends. "School's out for the summer! You're not supposed to be here!"

Hermione scrambled for a plausible excuse. "We know that, Professor...but after what happened, we really want to get a jump-start on our studies and..."

"...And we realized we know almost nothing about first-aid magic," Ron finished for her, to her gratitude. "I mean, there's a war on, you know? And we might not always be able to Madam Pomfrey in time. Or to St. Mungo's."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "And um, well, this is the first place we thought of to start looking up those sorts of things."

"*Please* let us stay," Hermione pleaded, making up her mind on the spot to do some research for that very end while they were here. Ron's cobbled-together suggestion was very wise, really. If they did get hurt, they might indeed end up in a situation at the time where they needed to heal each other before they could get to a mediwizard. "We'll put everything back exactly where we found it--you know that we're responsible, Madam Pince; we're not first-years."

Madam Pince pressed her lips together, her brow furrowing, but the Headmistress touched her elbow. "...I think they should be allowed to stay. Provided they spend at least an hour or two helping you to sort and shelve books. For each day they spend here in the library, during the summer break."

"Oh, we'll definitely help!" Hermione promised quickly. The other two nodded, albeit with lesser enthusiasm. Madam Pince *hmpfhed*, but said nothing against the suggestion, just headed for her desk.

Professor McGonagall moved closer. She peered at the books they were reading, then murmured, "I don't know what the three of you are up to, but you'd *better* learn those healing charms. You're probably going to need them...and that's the sorriest fact I know."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry breathed, relief etched on his face that she wasn't going to toss them out. "Believe me, we'll learn them."

Ron waited until they were left alone before wrinkling his nose. "Great. Homework in the summertime--and we're not even coming back here."

"Ron, it's a really good idea--"

"--Cool off, Hermione!" he returned in an undertone. "I *realize* we should learn some good healing charms. And I'm all for it. I'm just...I'm just whinging for whinging's sake, y'know?"

Shaking her head ruefully, Hermione bent over her books. She'd already made a partial list of potentially useful charms to learn while searching for the soul-sensing one they needed. "The moment you stop learning, Ron, you're dead. Literally, in our case. We're in a war, after all."

"Believe me, I do know."

"Hey," Harry interrupted them. "A little less arguing, a little more researching?"

"--Mr. Weasley? Mr. Potter? I require one of you to shelve this cart of books on an upper row! And don't dawdle!"

"...I'll go," Ron offered, setting his quill down with a sigh.

...

They didn't find what they were looking for in the regular section of books. Not by the time the librarian hurried them out of the library when supertime drew near. Going back to Headquarters for the evening, they quietly practiced the healing charms they'd researched, though Harry and Ron twitted Hermione on her use of copying-spells. She argued back that, since it wasn't for an essay, it made more sense to copy the pages by magic than by hand, or worse, try to attempt to convince Madam Pince to allow them to take the books off the school grounds.

Harry, still technically under-age, wasn't supposed to be doing magic until he turned seventeen. But as it had been explained to him, if he did magic in a non-magical household, he'd get in trouble, but in a magical household, there was no way to tell who was casting the spells. If anyone had dropped by his and Ron's room, Hermione and Ron were willing to lie and swear they were the only ones casting spells, but no one bothered them after supper. So they practiced, and slept, and returned to the school the next day.

It took them another day to finish the non-restricted books. Again, nothing was found that quite covered what they were looking for, though they did copy a whole new list of charms to practice that evening. On the third day, the trio dug into the more advanced medical tomes of the Restricted Section...and hit pay-dirt in the second book they opened. While Harry went over to Madam Pince to distract her with an offer to help organize more of the shelves, Hermione quickly cast the necessary copying spells. Ron went to help Harry, while Hermione skimmed through the rest of the book, copying down a couple more spells she hoped might be helpful.

When they returned to 12 Grimmauld Place, Mrs. Figg was in the kitchen, busy feeding her dozen or so cats. Harry, Ron and Hermione tried to get into the parlour, but it was locked, apparently due to an Order meeting. Exchanging looks, they retreated upstairs, to Harry and Ron's room.

Ron dropped onto his back, sprawling on his bed; he fished a couple medical spells from his book bag, but didn't do more than idly glance through them. Harry sat on the edge of his, and tugged the locket out of his shirt.. Hermione leaned back against the desk they'd stuffed into the small room next to the door, dug into her bookbag for her notes, and started reading the necessary spell. She practiced the wand movements first, then kept her wand still and mouthed the triggering word a good dozen times. Only when she was satisfied did she set the papers down.

She did not approach Harry, however, but turned instead to Ron. "Hold still. I'm going to test this on you, first."

He gave her a dubious look, but set his papers next to him on the shabby green bedcover, and laced his hands together over his stomach. "If you get this wrong, and you end up making my nose grow or something, I won't snog you for a week."

"Way to put the pressure on, Ron," Hermione mock-muttered. Harry smiled wistfully, and she knew he was thinking of Ginny. Gripping her wand, she lashed the length of vinewood in the prescribed pattern, intoning, "*Psycandum!*"

Coloured lights burst, not from her wand, but from Ron's body. They were all hues: a fountain of glittering gold, radiant pink, vibrant red, shimmering blue, even a pulsating green. There were some darker spots, and Hermione quickly consulted her copied notes, comparing the glitter to the marks on his skin. They matched the scars given to him by the brain that had attacked him roughly a year ago. Otherwise...he was fine. Very healthy, in fact.

Banishing the spell, Hermione turned to Harry. He held out the locket. She shook her head. "Place it on the floor, please. I want to make sure I've got this spell right, and I don't want interference from its proximity to you."

Shrugging, he stooped and dropped it in the middle of the threadbare rug covering the small amount of walking space in the room.

Hermione cast the Soul Scan on him. Not on the locket. He shimmered with a fountain of light and energy, too. He also frowned. "What was that for? I thought you were going to do the locket?"

"I'm practicing. Well...your hues are different than Ron's, and you're mostly healthy...except for the scar on your head."

Ron peered at his best friend. "Yeah. That's an ugly shade of olive drab, mate. It's really not your colour."

"Gee, thanks," Harry muttered, rubbing his forehead and making the sparks shift and play with the movement of his body. His colours were stronger and somewhat darker than Ron's, but no less healthy-looking.

Hermione cancelled the spell, turned to the head of Harry's bed, and cast it over his pillow. Nothing happened. Nodding, she gripped her wand, knelt next to the locket on the floor to one side, so the other two could see, and cast the spell again, taking extra care to pronounce and swish correctly. "*Psycandum!*"

A sickly spurt of light rose up from the locket. Muddy orange, drab green, greyish blue, and bilious purple gleamed up out of the locket, and only the locket. The chain lay in a limp, unremarkable puddle, as did the carpet.

All three of them shivered at the sight. Ron was the first to speak, his voice quiet with awe, and a little fear. "Whoa...a piece of his soul is really *in* there--and it's arse-faced *ugly!*"

A wave of her wand, and Hermione ended the sickly shimmer. Her voice, too, was quiet. "According to the footnotes, a soul that has those colours is in very bad shape. The hues should be either strong and bright or pastel and light, depending on the nature of the patient and the vitality of their body. Either richly coloured, or brightly glowing, or some combination thereof. Those colours weren't rich or bright...but then it *is* just a fraction of his soul."

"What I want to know is how to kill it. To make it dead. Non-living," Harry stated with quiet determination, sinking from the edge of the bed to his knees beside her. And a lot of caged anger, as he glared down at the locket. "I'm almost tempted to try the Killing Curse on it."

"--No, Harry; you can't!" Hermione protested, while Ron reached out and touched his arm.

"Don't do it, mate. You don't want that kind of a dark stain on your own soul."

"Yes," Hermione agreed, relieved Ron's tone was adamant. "Harry, if you tried that, you'd be *no better* than him. We'll find another way. There has to be one!"

He knelt there on the floor, hands fisted on his thighs. Finally, he sighed, the tension leaving his body in exchange for a defeated slump. "...I wish Professor Dumbledore was still here. We could've asked him what to do, to kill this thing."

"I know." Hermione touched his arm in comfort. "That was a good thing you did, letting go of your anger."

He made a soft scoffing sound. "Letting go of my anger. Sounds like one of those stupid Occlumency lessons..."

"Harry...they're not stupid," Ron stated, surprising Hermione. "They actually sound really smart. You said it yourself--Snape was reading your mind, in the battle back at the school. If you could learn to block him out, and...and Voldemort," he managed to say as Harry tensed again, "then the next time you meet up with one of them, neither of them will be able to get inside your mind. And...and /want to learn, too.

"The last thing I want to do is betray either of you," the freckled wizard finished, glancing between Harry and Hermione. "I think, while we're studying healing charms, and looking up information on Helga Hufflepuff and Rowena Ravenclaw, Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin, and any missing artifacts from among them...I think we should study Occlumency. All three of us. Eventually, we're going to run into Death Eaters, and one of the two of *them* as well.

"It's just *stupid* to go around with your mind wide open," Ron finished firmly. "And none of us are stupid."

Hermione nodded slightly, careful to not send Harry off the idea with too much enthusiasm.

He knelt on the floor, thinking, and finally snorted. "Maybe I *have* been stupid...but not any more. The only problem is, we're going to end up re-shelving the entire school library, at this rate. Okay. A crash-course in Legilimency, Occlumency, mediwitchery...anything else we can think of?"

"I'm sure we'll run across it," Hermione returned dryly.

"Or it'll run across us. Across us and over us, trampling us into the dust," Ron muttered. Harry picked up the locket and slung it around his neck again. That made Ron eye him as if he'd sprouted two extra heads. "Oy, you're rather brave, putting that thing around your neck now that we know for sure a piece of You-Know-Who is inside it."

"Voldemort, Ron," Harry chided him. "Voldemort's Horcrux. Well, one of them. And it's not brave; it's practical. I don't want to lose it, and I want to keep it on hand so we can kill it, the moment we figure out how to do so."

"Horrible thing," Hermione muttered. "Horrible Voldemort. Horriblemort," she added, playing with the words, trying to desensitize the last bit of reluctance out of herself over saying the name aloud. It earned her a startled look from Harry, and a stunned look from Ron.

"Horrible...mort," the youngest male Weasley repeated slowly, cautiously, testing out the combination. "Horriblemort... Voldiemort!"

"--Voldiebutt!" Harry offered, catching on to the game.

"Moldybutt!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Voldietorte!" Ron added.

"Eww! I wouldn't even want to *touch* that, let alone eat it!" Hermione retorted, wrinkling her nose. All three of them laughed, and some of the tension left the room. She giggled again, thinking about it. "Well, I can see I'm not quite so terrified of saying his name anymore... Come on; we've got a ton of healing charms to practice and memorize."

"Yes, Professor Granger," Ron mock-groaned, flinging one arm mock-dramatically over his eyes. He lifted his arm just enough to eye her speculatively. "So...are you gonna give me a detention where I have to snog you for half an hour without coming up for air?"

"I'll make you snog *him*," Hermione returned flippantly, poking her thumb at Harry.

"Gross!" Harry made a face at her. "I'd rather kiss his sister, thank you!"

"Well, it's supposed to be a *detention*," Hermione defended. "It's not supposed to be pleasant to contemplate!"

"...Professor Granger," Ron asserted, as if that settled her future employment.

Hermione made a face at him, but had to consider the idea more seriously than that, deep down inside. She'd considered it as a possibility; she loved learning, and wouldn't mind trying to pass on her scholastic enthusiasm to students in the future. The only problem was, they had to ensure that there would *be* a future in which students could safely learn.

Chapter 03

Chapter 3 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

Author's Notes: Sheesh, you'd think they'd have thought of doing this with the school earlier on! ~Lotm

III.

The ring stayed quiescent for more than a week, then burned under her shirt while Hermione was studying with Ron and Harry in the school's summer-quiet library. Startled, Hermione covered her slight jump by rising from her seat at the book-piled table they shared. Heading into the stacks, she pulled out the ring, examining it warily in the light from one of the tall, narrow windows slotted between the rows of shelves on that side of the chamber. Another name, and another address. She didn't know the person.

Nibbling on her lower lip, wondering how long she had in which to react, either half an hour or a couple of hours, Hermione debated as quickly as she could on how to handle this one. She couldn't just pop her head through the Floo and tell this Angelina Cathcart person to pack up her bags and move out in fifteen minutes flat. Yet she couldn't in good conscience *not* warn the witch. Worried, she headed back to the table, tucking the ring back under her shirt.

Ron wasn't studying at the moment. He was folding an airplane out of a spare sheet of paper. "...And then Dad said the enchantment is...um...*Memoceleros*!"

The airplane took off, zoomed around the table, and made a beeline straight for Hermione. Startled, she caught it even as it thumped point-first into shoulder. Ron grinned and winked at her. Prying open the paper, Hermione read the note he'd written. It was short and to the point: ...*Wanna snog in the Restricted Section? I've always wanted to do that, at school!* Shaking her head ruefully, she started to crumple the note. Then stopped.

Inspiration struck.

"Ron, how do you do this, again? Make one of these paper-memo airplanes?"

"It's easy; I'll show you." Bending his head over another sheet, he demonstrated. Sitting down across from him, Hermione practiced. She sent him a reply saying 'yes'...and it wobbled a bit but limped over to him. Then sent a memo to Harry with a silly little take-off on a Muggle cartoon she was sure he'd seen, along the lines of *I tawt I taw a bid bad Moldie-mort!*, whereupon he sent back with a grin, *I did! I did see a bid bad Moldiemort!* That broke her up in giggles, and left Ron demanding to know what the joke was.

Aware of the fleeting nature of time, Hermione ordered Harry to enlighten him on the subject of the old Warner Bros. cartoons from American television, and said she was going to the girls' lavatory. Catching her book bag, she hurried out of the library. But not to the nearest lavatory. Rather, to the nearest classroom, the Runes lab. A judicious use of the Unlocking Charm, and she got inside. From there, she let herself into the professor's quiet, tidy office, and rooted around until she found quill and paper. Enchanting the quill so that it wrote in copperplate that couldn't be traced, she dictated a note.

Attn: Auror Department

Ministry of Magic

I have just been given a reasonably reliable tip that the home of one Angelina Cathcart, residence 'The Carriagehouse, Buxley Gardens, Birminghamshire', will be attacked at some point by Death Eaters, somewhere between now and dawn. Please set a watch on her house, as I fear for her life...

Hermione debated what to sign on the note. Not her own name; that much was certain. And 'Deep Throat' would only be greeted with suspicion, confusion, or a dirty look, depending on who knew what Muggle scandal it referenced. In the end, she merely signed it, *'Yours Sincerely, Ring of Truth'*, and put the time and the date underneath. Folding and enchanting it, she scooped up a fistful of Floo powder from the pot on Professor Vector's mantel, cast it into the fire, and lobbed the memo-airplane through.

Anxious but unable to do anything else, Hermione retreated from the office and classroom, locking doors behind her as she headed for the lavatory; she hadn't lied about that part, just hedged on what she also had to do while away from the boys.

...

Eavesdropping on the Order members the next morning, Hermione learnt that her anonymous note had been almost successful. The Ministry hadn't paid it much heed, sending a single Auror to investigate the matter. The man had wound up in St. Mungo's with severe injuries, as had Miss Cathcart...but both were alive, and both would recover. Miss Cathcart would even recover quickly enough to marry her Muggle fiancé, according to Tonks. The Metamorphmagus had taken to dropping by Headquarters to chat with the three of them, having professed that she was a bit lonely when 'that time of the month' came by and Remus had to maintain his cover among the werewolf packs.

Relieved it had sort of worked, Hermione made sure to keep a couple of scraps of paper on her, pre-folded and enchanted to fly off to the Auror Department as soon as she could write down the time, place and person of the next attack. But once again, the ring fell quiet. Harry's birthday approached, and she found herself with a different problem on her mind.

Ron wanted to 'advance' their relationship. Hermione was torn. She liked him, and she liked kissing him...but she didn't think she was ready for anything more advanced than that, just yet. But he was hinting at a night some point after Harry's seventeenth birthday, which was going to be celebrated at the Burrow, a night when he'd sneak into her room and go as far as they could, physically.

All she could see, when she thought about that, was a series of images that disturbed and unsettled her. For one, she wasn't ready to be a mum, and didn't have any contraceptives on hand. Muggle or wizarding style. For another, the thought of becoming another Molly Weasley made her shudder. She *liked* Molly...but Hermione definitely did not want to end up giving birth to a whole brood of children. Two or three, yes--she'd never wanted to be an only child, herself, but her mum had developed cysts and had to have her uterus removed not long after Hermione was born. And Hermione really wanted to wait until she was older, settled in a career and stable financially. No, she didn't want to get pregnant. Or contract some weird wizarding disease, though she doubted Ron had anything of the sort.

She also thought of the ring, and the implied, last-resort protection it represented. Not that she wanted to get magically engaged to a wizard she didn't even know, but Hermione remembered Dolohov's curse from last year and the battle in the school halls this year all too vividly. They didn't have any more Felix Felicis to improve their chances of surviving the next all-out battle with their foes. A magical betrothal--whatever that meant--was definitely a last-resort option, but she should try to hold that option open.

Then there was the fact that she just didn't want to get married right now. She was fresh out of school, still quite young, had no job at the moment beyond trying to save the world--and that didn't pay a single pence, let alone a Knut--and right now Hermione wasn't even sure if she wanted to marry Ron, who was her boyfriend. Never mind a wizard who was not only a complete stranger, but a Death Eater as well. Spy or otherwise, he was a Death Eater, and she would do well to keep that much firmly in mind.

But she did take the time to investigate what the Hogwarts library had to say about magical betrothals. Research was her standby, her comfort-zone when she ran up against a wall of ignorance. Her findings did not let her down, though they did distress her a little.

It turned out there were several different kinds of magically binding betrothals, marriages, and even hand-fastings. Ring-based ones were varied, but most of them either revolved around marriages or hand-fastings. Those that involved marriages were donned during the marriage ceremony, and were a sort of 'you want to get married, so we'll enforce it' thing. Those involving hand-fastings were more of a 'I want to see if you, my partner, are fertile, so put on this ring and we'll be committed to each other for a year and a day, and we'll be considered legally married the moment you get pregnant' situation. Not all of them, but that covered the majority. A few, rare situations involved a form of marriage taking place the moment the rings were donned and the joining consummated, or even just a kiss exchanged, to seal the bargain.

It made her leery of putting on the ring, but such rings usually came with a powerful range of protective spells that made her think it might be worthwhile, if she were in a situation that was desperate enough. Some even came with something that sounded like a guardian spirit, perhaps something like a Patronus, but unfortunately, the text wasn't very clear. The protections otherwise ranged from touch-me-not spells and other defensive charms, to offensive capabilities that could blind, cripple, and in a few cases, cause impotency in would-be attackers. No one talked about it, per se, but she'd seen the way the Death Eaters had toyed with flashing that Muggle woman's knickers, back at the Quidditch World Cup. Rape was an unpleasant possibility for anyone caught by Lord Voldemort's side.

It was enough to know she should indeed be very leery of putting on that ring...and at the same time, just a little hesitant to throw away her virginity, and the potential for such valuable protection. Some of these betrothal rings didn't care about the state of chastity of their bearers, true. Others, however, did. The letter that had arrived with her ring implied it was one of the latter.

Which left her wondering what to do about Ron Weasley's increasing interest in having sex with her. She didn't want to offend him, but even without the ring factored in, she just didn't feel ready for a step that big. Sex was bound to be distracting; they needed to focus on winning the war. As it was, they could've gotten a bit more in the way of studying done if it weren't for the snogging sessions. She liked kissing him, but...she wasn't ready to lose her virginity, and she didn't think taking off even more time for something she wasn't ready to do was a wise idea.

They were due to go to the Burrow for Harry's very first official birthday-party, which was being planned by Molly. She'd overheard Ron asking him what he wanted for his

birthday, and had asked when that birthday was and what he was doing for it. Appalled to learn his Muggle relatives had never celebrated it, she'd immediately started planning 'a proper wizarding birthday'.

Ron had blushed, and Ginny had quickly reminded her mum that it was going to be Harry's seventeenth birthday, his coming-of-age birthday, and that she should probably not hire any wizarding clowns. Mrs. Weasley had looked a little disappointed at that, but sighed and admitted the clowns probably wouldn't be feeling very funny, what with the war and all. But she had arranged everything, including Order escorts for Ron and Ginny and Hermione so they could go into Diagon Alley and pick up presents for Harry.

Now, on the night before that party, Hermione studied a last few medical charms in the quiet of her bedroom. Harry's present sat wrapped on her desk next to her thick pile of notes; she'd bought him a copy of *Houdini-Hexes*, a book on binding and releasing charms, whether it was locks, ropes, chains, or even certain spells.

A knock on the door startled her, as she was working on the wand-movements for a sprain-healing cantrip. Red sparks shot out of her wand, making Crookshanks, curled up next to her on her bed, flick an ear in irritation as they vanished only an inch or so above his fur. Lowering her wand, Hermione called out, "...Come in!"

Ron's lanky, freckled body eased inside, shutting the door quickly behind him. "Shhh! I don't want everyone in the whole house to know I'm in here."

That set off her Sneaking Around instincts. Ron was Up To Something, and given that it was clear he didn't want anyone to know he was in here, with her...she had a fair idea why he was in her room so late at night. But she needed to hear the words, rather than try a guess that might backfire. They'd had too much miscommunication through the past few years as it was. "Ron, why are you in here?"

He grinned at her, crossing the room to her bed, and took her face in his hands. She should've seen it coming, but he just swooped down and planted her one on the lips. And it was nice, and it was good, and she wanted to do more, but when he nudged her backward, putting one knee on the bed to add leverage to his unspoken demand, Hermione felt very uncomfortable.

Twisting free, she escaped off the bed. "Ron, no..."

"Hermione, I just want a kiss! And a chance to hold you," he added with what looked like an honest shrug. Then spoilt it by adding, "And touch you, and kiss you some more, and see where all of that leads us."

Uncomfortable, Hermione shook her head instinctively.

"C'mon, Hermione!" Getting off the bed, he crossed the short distance between them, trapping her against the vanity that was serving as her desk. Again, he cupped her head, burying his fingers in her hair so that he could draw her close for a kiss. She enjoyed it, since she did like kissing him...until he pressed his hips into hers, and she felt the unmistakable lump of his arousal.

Breaking free, she sidestepped him and backed up, realized she was headed for the bed, and stood her ground. "...No, Ron. I don't feel comfortable."

He flashed her a smile. "Then lie down on the bed. I know I'll feel a lot more comfortable there, too."

His obtuseness was frustrating. "That's not what I meant!"

"Then what *do* you mean?" he demanded. "Don't you want to snog with me?"

"Yes--no--I do like kissing you! It's the rest of it I'm not comfortable with!" Hermione blurted out. "I'm not ready for it!"

"What's there to be ready for? All I want to do is lie there with you, and hold you!" he asserted, pointing at her bed. Crookshanks' ears were flat, though that could've been more from the rising noise of their argument than from anything else. If Ron's ears could've done the same, she guessed they would have, because he continued, "I'm not going to...to force you to do anything! I'm not that kind of bloke! Besides, Mum and Gin would have my ears and all other pertinent bits cut off, and my brothers would just flat-out kill me!"

"I know, Ron. I *know*. But, lying there makes me think of the simple things, like kissing and cuddling, leading to more...and I'm not *ready* for anything more. So...I guess I'm going to have to ask you to leave, now." Moving to the door, she grasped the knob and opened it.

"Hermione..."

"No, Ron. Not tonight."

Disappointment drawing his brows together, Ron left her room. Closing the door, Hermione debated using a locking charm. Fire seared her skin, making her gasp. Grabbing the chain, she pulled the ring free. It was clear. Relieved, Hermione sat down at the vanity table and fetched quill and paper. A jab of her wand at the door locked and warded it, granting her solitude. Pressing the ring to the sheet, she read the words that blossomed at the touch of gold.

Who was the blooming idiot whose idea it was to hold Harry's birthday party at the Burrow? Headquarters would be a lot smarter and safer, wherever that may be, now!

This was a bit of a tone for him to take! **My, you're in a snit**, Hermione dared to write back. **And it was Mrs. Weasley's idea.**

That woman has no sense, Russel wrote back as their previous words faded from view. **Harry comes of-age on his seventeenth birthday. The protections Brian placed upon him via his blood-relatives cease to exist on that day. Anyplace he resides will automatically become a bloody target, thereafter! There won't be one timber laid atop another, by the end of tomorrow night! Get the party, and the Weasleys, moved out of there as soon as possible!**

Hermione frowned at that. She didn't think Molly Weasley would be all that easily budged from her home. **How? If you know Mrs. Weasley, you know what she'll be like. She won't want to move. And what about all the Aurors and Order members who'll be there? Wouldn't that be enough to thwart the enemy's plans?**

They'll be attacking en masse. Or rather, I should that *we* will be attacking en masse. Please do not be there. Any of you.

The paper flashed, vanishing in a puff of fine, white ash. The ring felt cold, underneath her hand. Hermione nibbled her lower lip in worry, then grabbed her quill, enchanted it, and penned a note on a fresh piece of parchment.

To: Order of the Phoenix

Headquarters

I have very good reason to believe the Burrow will be attacked during Mr. Potter's birthday party by a large task-force from the Enemy. It is likely that this force will be sufficient to destroy the Weasley's home, as they will be prepared for resistance. Please vacate the premises, and hold the party in a far more secure location, such as your Headquarters. Your lives are more valuable to our mutual cause than any mere piece of property.

Sincerely,

Ring of Truth

Folding and enchanting it, Hermione slipped the airplane into her shirt as she opened one of her old Charms textbooks. A quick reading and a quick practice of the necessary wand movement--just a subtle, looping snap of the wrist, which when combined with a bit of silent enforcement would produce the desired effect--and she left her room. As suspected, there were a few Order members awake and occupying the kitchen, which was one of the least gloomy locations in the house. Mrs. Figg was one; she was knitting in a chair by the aga, one of her cats curled up on her lap, and another two at her feet. Moody was drinking from his hip-flask, and, to Hermione's surprise, Fred and George Weasley were also present, drinking something that looked suspiciously like bottles of Muggle stout.

It looked like the three wizards had been contemplating something without words, something of grave importance. Mad-Eye's presence complicated matters, making her fold her arms across her stomach defensively. If he spotted the note with his magical eye and realized what it was... He grunted and shook his head, distracting her from her worries.

"Dammit, my eye's stuck, again. All I can see are those damned cats at your feet, Arabella."

It took Hermione a moment to realize Arabella was Mrs. Figg's first name. She moved over to the hearth, flashing a smile at Fred and George. They smiled back, albeit a bit wanly. Moody was digging at his magical eye, attempting to extract it; after the impostor, Barty Crouch Junior, had borrowed it and Moody's wooden leg to impersonate him while he was supposed to be the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, the eye kept giving the real Alastor Moody trouble every now and again. Thankfully, that meant that his eye wasn't anywhere near her and her enchanted letter.

A flick of her wand behind her back, and the fire roared green in a near-perfect imitation of a Floo call. Whirling to face it, Hermione snuck the airplane out of her shirt and tossed it into the harmless illusion. It circled around and came flapping back out again as she let the flames die down, landing on the table with a flutter of its wings between the twins and the semi-retired Auror.

"Careful!" Moody hissed at George as he reached for the airplane. "It might be a trap!"

Fred sighed and drew his wand, poking the paper with a couple revelation spells. The aura emitted by the paper was a steady light blue, indicating no harmful magic associated with its enchantment. Only somewhat satisfied, Moody examined it by passing his eye over the paper. Literally, in fact; he'd managed to extract the magical, bright-blue glass eye and held it caged gently in his fingers.

"...It looks safe."

"Good," George muttered, grabbing and unfolding the sheet. He scanned the neatly penned lines, his mouth tightening. "...It's that 'Ring of Truth' fellow, from the Cathcart case Tonks was talking about. Says the Burrow's going to be hit tomorrow, and we should pry Mum and Dad out of there before it's too late."

He passed the note to his twin, who also read it with a grim, tight expression, then Fred handed it to Mad-Eye. The aging Auror read it, snorted, and passed it to Hermione. "I don't know who this 'Ring of Truth' fellow is, but that Cathcart deal was badly botched. *Vigilance* is what we need, not slipshod, half-arsed work!"

"Considering you yourself pooh-pooh'd the idea that the first letter from the Ring of Truth fellow was even the slightest bit reliable, Alastor," the aging Mrs. Figg chided him, turning her knitting about so she could work the other direction comfortably, "I think it's rather hypocritical of you to now claim you were actually supportive, that first time around."

Moody muttered something under his breath that sounded like, "Squibs and their damned cats..."

Hermione, accepting the letter from him, realized he had a cat in his lap, too. Mainly because his hand, once free of the paper, dropped below the edge of the table top to pet the calico curled up companionably down there. She pretended to read it as if for the first time, and took visible concern at the note. "This 'Ring of Truth' person--he or she wrote another note?"

"Yes, and the Auror sent to handle the case ended up facing off against a trio of Death Eaters," Moody reminded her. "Didn't you ask me about the witch, and how she was faring at St. Mungo's?"

"Oh, yes, right, I remember it now. I've been a bit distracted with other thoughts. Well, if the first note turned out to be genuine, it makes sense to assume that this note will be, too. I mean, the party will be a valid target. Which means we need to get Mr. and Mrs. Weasley to vacate the Burrow as quickly as possible," she asserted. "Any idea on how to do that?" she asked the twins.

Fred shook his head. "You won't get Mum to move."

"--I mean, you *could*," George added, and Fred nodded, "but she'd be all weepy and resistant, and want to pack up everything, and it would take forever to get her out of there."

"Not to mention *Dad* would take forever, and would want to take all of his Muggle artifacts..." Fred shook his head. "No, it would probably be faster to defend the place somehow. It's not as if you could just pack up the whole Burrow and make..."

"Oy, Gred,": George prodded his twin, "you just thought of something, didn't you?"

"...That I did, Forge," Fred returned, a sly look crossing his features. "Hey, Mad-Eye...how do you feel about casting a *second* Fidelius Charm? I mean, if Mrs. Figg is ever captured--no offense, Mrs. Figg, and you know we'd defend you and your cats to the death--wouldn't it be *vigilant* to have a second line of retreat waiting in the wings? With a different Secret-Keeper, of course?"

Hermione's eyes widened. Why hadn't *she* thought of this? "That's ruddy brilliant--oh! And I know the perfect way to combine the birthday party with the hiding of the Burrow. We make *Harry* the Secret Keeper! The Burrow's been like a second home to him, and I'm sure he'd hold its secret tighter than life or death!That is, if you and your parents wouldn't mind?"

"Mind, hell! We think it's *brilliant*!" George exclaimed, exchanging looks with his twin.

Fred grinned. "Once little Gin's all grown up and out of school, we've a mind to hex Harry until he agrees they're perfect together, so why not keep it all in the family to begin with?"

"Of course, we'd have to hex him if he does anything other than snog with her while she's *still* school," George added mock-threateningly. Hermione grinned with relief.

"You'd better go on to the Burrow, then," Moody ordered them. "An' stay there, to guard the place overnight."

Both twins rose from the table, and George flipped the older wizard a snappy salute. "Constant--"

"--Vigilance!" Fred saluted on George's verbal heels. And on his physical heels, too, as he followed his twin to the hearth.

"The Burrow!" George asserted, casting a fistful of Floo powder at the embers as soon as Fred and he stood upon them. They whirled away.

Moody watched them go, then lifted the cat from his lap to the table-top. As the calico yawned and stretched, he got up and stumped over to the cupboard, fetching a glass and filling it at the sink. Returning to his seat at the table, he plopped his eye in the glass and whizzed it about, cleaning it. The calico nudged his scarred hand, and he petted the feline almost absently. "Shouldn't you be getting to bed?"

Hermione nodded, knowing he meant her and not the cat. She quietly wished him and Arabella Figg a good night, and headed for the back stairs. Mounting the steps to the floor with her room, she wished she knew Russel's full name. If she did, she could contact him and...no, she couldn't. Aside from the fact that the ring going off magically at the wrong moment could get him noticed and tortured or killed, he didn't need to know about the Burrow being placed under the Fidelius Charm.

After all, she still didn't know *why* he'd sent her the ring, and these messages. They could still be designed as a trap, a ruse to lull her into a false sense of security with an initial spate of accurate, truthful reports. It was rather cynical to think that way, she had to acknowledge...but after Professor Snape's unbelievable defection, she'd lost too much of her innocence and naivety to keep turning a blind eye to such dour and unpleasant possibilities. Really, there wasn't any harm in being cautious.

Including being cautious enough to check her room thoroughly enough to make sure Ron wasn't hiding in it, waiting to pounce on her the moment her guard was down.

...

Whatever the twins said or did to convince their parents, it worked. Harry, Ron and Hermione were escorted by several Order members earlier than originally planned to the edge of the Weasley property. Harry was then walked over the property's stone-hedge marked boundaries with Moody and Mr. Weasley so that he could mark and remember exactly what comprised the Burrow in his mind. That was the key to being a Secret Keeper. It wasn't just about hiding the house itself; if the wizard or witch holding the Secret was thorough enough, they could hide the entire property. And then, with Molly and Arthur vacated to the edge of the property, Moody cast the spell on Harry.

The land instantly shrunk around them, swallowing the Burrow and its gardens and fields. Harry looked into the space where the property had been, then looked back at the others. All of the Weasleys were studying him anxiously, true, but their eyes also held looks of trust and faith in him. He opened his mouth to speak aloud, then wisely closed it. Rather than announcing it openly, he went first to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and murmured directly in their ears. Arthur hugged and slapped him on the back; Molly squeezed him and wiped at her eyes with her kerchief. Harry then introduced Bill and his wife to the location of the family home, followed Ron, the twins, Ginny—even Charlie, who had Apparated to the edge of the lane a few yards away with an utterly puzzled look while Harry was murmuring to his sister, apparently thwarted from Apparating directly into his family's home—and then he reached Hermione.

"...The home of the Weasleys is the Burrow, outside Ottery St. Catchpole," Harry whispered in her ear. He moved on even as the landscape unfolded itself, squeezing the vegetable gardens, chicken coop, broom shed, and that marvelously ramshackle structure of magic-supported improbability the redheaded family called a house back into her view. Relieved, Hermione stepped across the boundary, waiting for the other Order members to be welcomed across, including Mad-Eye Moody. While the battle-scarred wizard had been the one to cast the Fidelius Charm on Harry, he himself could not see the place without Harry's whisper in his ear, not even with the spinning blue stare of his magical eye. But eventually they all stepped across the invisible boundary, and that was when the birthday party began.

They were well into the cake-cutting and present-opening, when four owls swept down out of the sky, landing just beyond the boundary. Hermione spotted them descending, and crossed the border between the Burrow and the rest of the world, marked by a line of grass-tufted stones that could have laughingly called itself a fence a couple centuries ago. Extracting the familiar-looking letters from their legs, she stepped back across as they winged off to return to their owl-post duties. Two of them were bulky, no doubt containing her and Ron's prefect badges.

Fred met her halfway back up the path. "What've you got there?"

"Our school letters." Dutifully, she handed each one to Ron, Harry, and Ginny. Only Ginny opened hers with any enthusiasm.

"Oy, listen to this," Ginny offered as soon as she'd skimmed hers. "It's from Professor McGonagall!"

The others came closer.

"*Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Headmistress Minerva McGonagall*...that's going to take some getting used to," Ginny observed, before continuing. "Let's see...Order of Merlin Second Class, so on and so forth..."

"*Dear Ms. Weasley,*

In light of the attack perpetrated against this school, its staff, and its student body at the end of this last year, we considered long and hard whether or not to keep Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry open. After giving it careful consideration, we have elected to open the school September 1st as usual. Seeing the dedication of certain of our students to the pursuit of Knowledge and Preparedness this summer, in spite of the grave danger they face, we feel it would be far more dangerous to not instruct our children in the proper use of magic, including the Defence Against the Dark Arts.

We will, of course, understand if your family does not feel you will be safe at Hogwarts; it is true that virtually nowhere in this land is safe, anymore. However, we feel that, with certain precautions and necessary steps undertaken, Hogwarts can be rendered potentially more safe for our students than their own homes.

In aid of this, the following security measure has been added: The entire school and its grounds will be placed under the Fidelius Charm. The Secret Keeper will meet the children just before they need to enter the school, in order to invite each and every single student inside personally. Those whom have not been given clearance to enter the school grounds will therefore be unable to find it, let alone enter and threaten our hallowed halls. Hogsmeade weekends shall be determined on a case-by-case basis, and only under increased Auror patrols. Furthermore, all baggage shall be checked for suspicious devices, regardless of how innocuous-seeming.

We trust these measures will allay your family's concerns, but if not, we will quite understand. Please reply as to whether or not you will be able to attend by no later than the Ides of August, being the fifteenth of this coming month. The school term starts September 1st; please be at King's Cross Station before 9am, in order to board the Hogwarts Express..."

Her voice trailed off, since the rest of the letter sounded like it was pretty much the standard sort of information. Ron, Harry and Hermione exchanged somewhat guilty, remorseful looks. The rest of the Weasleys, Tonks, Lupin, and a few others exchanged puzzled looks. Mad-Eye Moody, however, grunted in satisfaction.

"She works quickly, that witch. Only just told her about what we were doing to the Burrow last night," the aging wizard added. "It's rather smart of Minerva, too, concealing the school with a Fidelius Charm. A pity there aren't more people who can hide the really important places like the school."

"...I think it's a marvelous idea!" Molly praised, recovering her voice. "And I have no objections to my children attending a Secret-Kept school!"

Hermione had to privately agree with her. Hogwarts would be well-protected, so long as their Secret Keeper was protected. Cracking open her letter, she read the same missive, noted with a twinge of pain that she'd been selected to be Head Girl...and that she'd have to return the badge. Hermione checked the booklist out of habit alone, even though they would have no meaning for her.

The list of Defence textbooks made her heart lurch with excitement...until she realized she wasn't going to be attending what was supposed to be her seventh and final year. Three books were written on the list for Advanced Defence: *The Art of Magic* by Sun Wen, *Conversations on the Art of Magic* by Nihon Dzengshuen and Yling Lotun, and *The Tao of Defence*, by Huan Ji. It was exciting to think that her classmates were going to be able to study what sounded like Chinese magic. It was very disappointing to realize she wouldn't be attending those classes.

Making up her mind, Hermione decided she would get the textbooks anyway, and study them in her spare time. All of them, not just the ones for the DADA class. The only real problem she could foresee was ensuring that Harry, Ron and she were granted access to the school grounds, once the Fidelius Charm was laid. Well, it wasn't as much of a problem, since Hermione could see the three of them going along on the train-ride, getting to the gates, being let in...and then exiting the school grounds, mission accomplished. It was the thought of seeing the disappointment in their Head of House's eyes that made her nervous. A disappointment that would be severely

compounded by the fact that it had been *their* presence in the library this summer that had made up the new Headmistress' mind on whether or not to hold the school open.

No, it would be better to tell Professor McGonagall in person, ahead of time. Tucking her letter back into its envelope, she met the gazes of her two best friends and nodded slowly; they nodded back, letting her know that they agreed that they had to meet later to discuss this newest development. The resources of Hogwarts were too precious to not have access to them. Especially if some of those Horcruxes were Hogwarts-related, such as the missing heirloom-cup of Helga Hufflepuff.

...

"...Unbelievable!" Minerva McGonagall stared at the trio standing in front of her desk, which had until recently been the desk of Albus Dumbledore. "What do you mean, you're *not* coming back to Hogwarts? You have to finish your seventh year!"

"We *cannot* stay here," Harry asserted quietly, determinedly. Hermione was glad he'd elected to handle this task. She absolutely hated the look of disappointment that had blossomed in their Head of House's eyes upon the revelation of what the three of them intended to do.

"Nonsense! The school will be perfectly safe, once the Fidelius Charm has been enacted!"

"--It's not a question of safety," Harry interjected before the Scottish witch could get up a full head of steam. "We..." He glanced to his friends, then continued grimly. "We've been charged with a quest, and I intend to see it through as soon as we feasibly can. And we're all of-age. We don't *have* to attend school anymore."

"But--if you don't complete your studies, you won't know enough to defend yourselves!" Professor McGonagall protested.

"If we *delay* our quest, this war will keep dragging on!" Harry returned sharply. Hermione was very proud of him; he sounded like an adult. "What we have to do...it can and *will* end the war. For good. I cannot waste a year's worth of time sitting in classes here, when I could be out there, putting an end to all the torture, and the terror, and the people *who are dying*. Not and live with it on my conscience!"

Ron and Hermione both nodded, adding their support silently.

Minerva eyed the three of them firmly. "Well, I'm quite sure this little quest can be handled by someone else--someone a lot older and wiser! You'll pass on this quest of yours to an Order member, and you will be here on September 1st, arriving on the Hogwarts Express!"

Hermione couldn't let that one stand. "No."

Her firm denial made Minerva frown at her. "...Miss Granger? I cannot believe you, of all people, are supporting this...this madness!"

"Professor...Minerva," Hermione amended daringly, trying to reach the other witch as an equal. "This isn't a matter of being able to hand off this quest like one would hand off a grocery list. It's a matter of prophecy. The prophecy involving Harry and...and Lord Voldemort."

McGonagall flinched a little at the boldly stated name; Hermione took advantage of her reluctance, continuing.

"We know most of what needs to be done, and we are bound and determined to do it. Professor Dumbledore charged Harry with this task, right before...well, Ron and I are *not* about to leave him to handle it on his own. We don't do things that way."

"It's all three of us," Ron added firmly. "To the bitter end, if need be."

Minerva shifted her gaze from her students to the portraits hung on the wall. To one of the portraits in particular. "...Albus? Is this true?"

The image of Professor Dumbledore continued to snooze.

"*Albus!*"

Ron, Harry and Hermione all jumped. The aging witch had a formidable voice when she wanted, and she clearly wanted, right now. Even the oil painting of the sleeping former Headmaster twitched. He 'woke up', blinked his eyes at her, and smiled gently. "...Yes, Headmistress? You wanted something?"

"What's this about a quest you've set for Harry? And what does it have to do with that prophecy?" Minerva McGonagall demanded. "What is going on, here?"

His smile faded, as the portrait of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore stared sadly down at the four of them. "I'm afraid it's not your concern, Minerva. Leave it be."

"It *is* my concern, if these three are refusing to come back for their seventh year! Now, answer my question!"

"Yes, I've set a quest for Harry; yes, it entails the fulfillment of prophecy; and *no*, I am not going to tell you what it's all about. It's far too dangerous for you to know about, my dear," he chided her. "And it's not your task to undertake. Nor that of anyone else in the Order who is currently unaware of it."

"Well, what *can* you tell me about it?" she demanded testily.

"I can tell you that it is absolutely necessary, if we are to defeat Tom Riddle and win this war. I can also tell you that there is far more going on than any of you yet know...and that I cannot say to you and most everyone else what most of that is, until I am told that Lord Voldemort is dead," he cautioned them. "The risk of certain secrets being uncovered before it is all over is far too great to risk a leak."

"If Harry believes he must attend to this quest, rather than complete his seventh year, then I will support him as much as I can. I must ask that you trust in me, and do the same. And I say that he could have no greater companions than Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, in this quest. The love of a good friend is both a shield and a weapon, in times of trouble--now, if you don't mind, I was having a lovely dream that Drobbles' Best Blowing Gum had just come out with a new, caramel flavored gum. I'd like to get back to it, if you don't mind."

Propping his bearded chin on his hand, his elbow on his desk, the painted former Headmaster returned.

The new Headmistress stared at the portrait a long moment. She sighed, lowering her gaze to the trio standing before her desk. "Well. It seems you will not be coming back to Hogwarts after all."

"Er...that's not *entirely* true," Hermione hedged.

At the arch of the older witch's brow, Harry explained. "We, erm, kind of need to be able to access the school library."

"Access...the school library?" she repeated.

"Yeah," Harry expanded as Minerva sat back in her chair. "A lot of that research we've been doing this summer, well...it's quest-related."

"Well, some of it's related more to defense and mediwitchery, but it's all for the cause," Ron amended.

"And so we need to be able to meet with the Secret Keeper, so we can enter the school grounds, should we need to in the near future," Hermione finished. "Because we

don't quite know all that we're looking for, only some of it, so far. And the library here at Hogwarts has the most smashing collection of references we know."

Again, Minerva studied them in silence, and again she sighed heavily after several long seconds. "...Though I am *thoroughly* disappointed in the three of you...I can concede the need to end this stupid war as quickly as possible, to limit the number of people being harmed and worse...but you're throwing away your education, and quite possibly your very lives. Have you considered that?"

"Yes. And if I die taking Voldemort out with me," Harry asserted, "then it's worth it."

"Yeah," Ron agreed.

Hermione nodded.

"...Very well. I will need your prefect and Head Girl badges back, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger. And it would best if you *weren't* seen on the school grounds whenever you visit. Hogwarts is meant to be a haven, this coming term. If you come and go at will, the other students will wonder what is up, and the enemy might get wind of it and set a watch just beyond the school grounds. You will therefore come and go in stealth, you will visit at night, during the hours of curfew, and you will wear Mr. Potter's Invisibility Cloak, or take other such measures to ensure you are not seen.

"You should use the Floo in Madam Pince's office, though she might object. I will see what I can do to pacify her. If not, you will use the Floo in the Great Hall. However, I *will* expect progress reports--not of any details," she added, holding up her hand as Harry started to protest, "but in general, how far along you are getting in your quest. The Hogwarts School library is indeed a most impressive collection of wizarding tomes, both magical and informational. It is not a resource to be used lightly, nor freely. And, should you need assistance from myself or the other instructors, whether it is in a realm of knowledge or research or whatever, I will do what I can to assist you. If...if Albus thinks what you're doing will end the war that much quicker, I will do what I can to facilitate the matter.

"Now, if the three of you don't mind...I have a portrait to interrogate."

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall," Harry breathed, relaxing some of his tension.

"You're the tops, Headmistress," Ron added, stepping forward to set his prefect's badge on the edge of her desk.

"We'll just go on back to the library to continue our research," Hermione added, stepping up to do the same as Ron moved back. The Headmistress and former Head of Gryffindor eyed the gleaming Head Girl badge for a moment.

"Correction; gentlemen, you are dismissed. I wish to have a word with Miss Granger before she departs. Alone, if you please," Minerva McGonagall added. Harry and Ron exchanged looks, but exited the Headmistress' study. When they had gone and the door had shut, Minerva spoke again. "...Why, Hermione? Your entire career at this school has been wrapped up in your academic studies! You should've been in Ravenclaw in fact, though I admit I've been far too proud to have a student of your achievements in my own House to want to give you up to them."

"Why?" Hermione repeated. "Why am I going on this mad quest, instead of staying here at the school? Because I was sorted into Gryffindor, in the end," she stated softly. "Because as much as I love learning, I know there are more important things in the world that I need to be doing. And I have to help Harry and Ron go do them."

McGonagall nodded, looking down at her desk top. She lifted her gaze after a moment. "...I was going to offer you an apprenticeship in Transfigurations. You've got all the enthusiasm a good educator needs, a true love of learning that you could easily pass on to others. Plus the necessary level of discipline, when you care to exercise it. I was even going to offer to teach you how to become an Animagus. Of all my students, you have the greatest potential for it.

"Are you certain you want to throw that potential away?"

Hermione wrinkled her nose in distaste for her mentor's choice of words. "I don't look at it as 'throwing away' my potential, Professor. I look at it as lending that potential to my friends, and to the task at hand. Yes, I'd rather stay here at Hogwarts, and I'm really flattered you think I've got what it takes to be a teacher," she added honestly. "But I'm needed elsewhere, however much more dangerous it will be than safely staying here. I must do what is right."

"Then I shall wish you the best possible luck." Rising, Minerva held out her hand. "Good luck, Hermione. To you, and to Harry and Ron. Do keep me apprised of what you can, when you can."

Nodding, Hermione shook hands with the older witch, then left the office. Heat spilled into the sides of her breasts where they pressed together. Russel was trying to contact her. One eye on the rotating spiral staircase, Hermione pulled out the ring as she descended. The surface was polished smooth. Not just contact her, but talk with her.

Hermione turned left out of the gargoyle-guarded entrance to the Headmistress' study, instead of going straight or right to get to the library. The nearest classroom was her old Arithmancy room. She'd left her book bag in the library, the same as Ron and Harry, but needed paper and pen, and privacy. Unlocking the door, she looked quickly around, but couldn't find anything. Gritting her teeth, Hermione walked up to one of Professor Vector's chalkboards, found the well at the bottom prepped with fresh sticks, and pressed the ring to the dark grey slate with her left palm.

Squinting, she made out the dark ink letters of his message.

Brilliant. Ruddy BRILLIANT of you! He's in a towering fury, and I've just got to share my elation with someone. The Fidelius Charm on both the Weasley residence, AND the school? Bloody fucking brilliant, if you'll pardon my language!

Hermione arched a brow at Russel's crassness, but picked up the chalk and wrote back, **Well, it was Fred's idea, initially. Then Moody mentioned the Burrow to McGonagall, and she just carried it through to the logical conclusion for the safety of the school.**

...What the bloody hell are you writing with? I can barely make out anything!

Chalk, on a chalkboard in one of the classrooms at the school. It's all I have on hand. Your own ink is barely coming through.

Well, we can't have a precious Hogwarts chalkboard going up in flames. Go find paper.

The ring turned cold, under her palm. Withdrawing it from the surface of the slate, she watched as the ink of his words faded, and the chalk of hers crumbled to dust, drifting to the floor. Tucking the ring back out of sight, Hermione debated whether or not to break into Professor Vector's office. In the end, she decided to just head back to the library. It would be faster, even if it ran the risk of her conversation with Russel being uncovered.

Nodding to Ron and Harry when she arrived, Hermione grabbed a stack of the sheets she had brought, fished a hairpin out of her bag to enchant into a spiral wire, and Transfigured herself a hand-sized notepad. She dug out a Muggle pen and set both beside her, returning to her work, waiting for the ring to burn again.

It remained quiescent for the rest of the day. A little put-out, since she'd gone to the trouble to make herself a tablet she could carry elsewhere, Hermione returned to Headquarters with the other two. Where she discovered a rather upset Arabella Figg, a torn-eared tabby, and a glowering Crookshanks. Using one of the healing charms she'd learnt got her back in the elderly lady's good graces, but she had to pick up Crookshanks and carry him back to her room.

Whatever fuss he'd gotten into with the calico, at least he wasn't harmed. Setting him on her bed, Hermione gave him a lecture about Getting Along With The Other Cats. She knew he probably wasn't paying attention to it--half-kneazle smart or otherwise--but she had to do something to work off the nerves of waiting for Russel to contact her.

Chapter 04

Chapter 4 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

Author's Notes: Today, Ronald Weasley comes of-age in his mother's eyes. Merlin help the poor sod... ~Lotm

IV.

The ring didn't burn until late that night. She was on the verge of sleep when she felt it heating the skin of her right breast. Dragging herself back to consciousness, Hermione enchanted the candelabra by the bed to life, grabbed pen and paper, and pressed the ring to the tablet with her thumb as she held the spiral-bound pad in her hand.

Sorry for the delay; I was interrupted by the Furious Fiend. I'm one of half a dozen people stuck in this house most of the time, right now, and that means a limited audience he can rant at. Luckily I wasn't the one he tortured, today. But I feel sorry for young Malfoy. He was bleeding at the mouth, by the time it stopped.

Hermione stared at the bald words written on the tablet, horrified. She'd never liked Draco Malfoy, but Harry had admitted the platinum prat had lowered his wand at the end, unable to hex and kill Professor Dumbledore. There was some good inside of the prat, so surely that was worth something. And yet now Draco was being punished for something he hadn't done. It evoked in her the same sort of pity she felt for Kreacher, the kind that twisted its way around her revulsion and side-stepped her distaste.

She couldn't think of anything to write, other than, **I'm sorry to hear that. I never liked him, but no one deserves that.**

It was suggested by the Rat that young Malfoy be allowed to 'escape', to flee to the school, and thus allow us an agent on the inside, once it's sealed. I am happy to report he was tortured, too. I cannot abide him--he sold out his only friends, and for what? Umpteen years as a rat, a magical hand, and the fact that he's still despised by everyone who knows him?

That creased her brow. Not that Pettigrew was tortured, but that his idea was shot down. **Why isn't that a good idea? Getting Malfoy back into the school, I mean?**

Try to think about it, Jane. For a start, it's known by too many on the other side that he let the Dark Servants into the castle. They'll never let him anywhere near the Hogwarts Secret Keeper for that reason alone. For another, no one will ever think a student is innocent anymore, thanks to Malfoy's complicity. The students will be watched, as will the staff, thanks to the Moody/Crouch incident, Russel wrote to her. She had to read quickly to keep up with his writing, since it was scrolling up the sheet of the smallish tablet, just to fit it all in front of her eyes. They'd have to figure out who the Secret Keeper is, and then attempt to get that person off the school grounds. I suspect this person will not actually leave the grounds, but instead each student and staff-member will be personally handed a revelatory note by someone who knows them...and only after they pass a rigorous screening process. Or am I wrong?

You're probably not wrong, she wrote back. I know Professor McGonagall is going to be extra cautious with her students' safety, this year. I suspect Hogwarts will be harder to break into than Fort Knox--that's a Muggle reference.

I know what 'Fort Knox' is.

Hermione eyed the neatly penned script. It had wobbled in the middle. **Are you using a dicto-quill charm?**

Yes; I would think that obvious.

Well, your last sentence wobbled a bit. Was something wrong? she wrote, curious.

I was repositioning myself.

She smiled at that. **Back to hiding under the covers, are we?**

Something like that.

Curious, she prodded, **What do you mean, 'something like that'? Either you're hiding under the covers, or you aren't.**

You don't want to know that, Jane.

That did it; she couldn't resist the challenge. **Yes, I do, actually. You roused the curiosity in me, and now you should be a gentleman and satisfy it.**

Her words faded and the page remained blank for a moment before he replied. **I'm not being a gentleman right now, though I am attempting to 'satisfy it'.**

That didn't make any sense. **I don't get it.**

Jane, are you really that ignorant? Or should I say, that chaste?

No, she wrote back, trying to be honest, just really that confused.

I'm masturbating.

Oh. Cheeks flushed, Hermione stared at those two blatant words. They seemed to linger an inordinate amount of time. Finally, she couldn't help asking, **...Why?--Aside from the obvious reason of pleasure, of course.**

Because I have a scrap of paper stuck in the leaves of a naughty wizarding book, and am titillating myself with the feather end of my quill pen! I paused, and she absorbed that idea, then Russel added more. I quite like the sensation, really. I'm also having to share my quarters at the moment. The traitor has been made the Secret Keeper of Riddle Manor...and I have a roommate that I cannot abide. They won't let the Secret Keeper be alone even for an instant...though my roommate doesn't know my coverlet has been enchanted to dampen ambient noise. Such as the scratching of a quill pen against paper. And my head isn't under the covers; they're just drawn up to my ribs, this time. I'm being quite brazen at the moment, writing-to-you-wise.

Her heart leapt in her throat. **You'll be caught!**

Hardly. The bastard in the other bed is snoring hideously at the moment. I do wish the wizarding world had heard of Muggle nasal-strips. The only thing I have to worry about at the moment is that damned snake. I swear, the thing can read! And after what I saw today...I needed to talk to someone normal, someone sane. Merlin knows I'm not, stuck in my situation as I am. Thank you, by the way.

Again, a touch of compassion for his situation thawed some of her wary reserve. **Well, I'm here for you. What do you want to talk about?**

Anything. Nothing about the Enemy, at the moment; I don't want to rouse suspicions if I'm observed. Actually... His words trailed out, then he asked, **This is a terrible imposition, but...you're of-age, right?**

Seventeen, almost eighteen. Why?

I want you to 'talk dirty' to me. Or rather, 'write dirty'. That way, I get to interact with someone who isn't an enemy, and yet our conversation will look merely like some novelty paper picked up in a joke shop.

Her face burned hotter than the ring under her thumb. **I can't do that, actually.**

Why ever not?

I don't know how.

You're of-age in the wizarding world, and you don't know the first thing about talking sexily to someone? Merlin's arse, don't tell me you're a virgin, too!

I AM, actually, she scrawled back. And I'm not ready for sex! If I'm not ready for snogging on my bed with Ron, what makes you think I'm ready for talking sexily with you?

...My apologies. But you should learn. It would make the perfect cover as to why I have pen and paper in bed with me. And I need these moments of sane conversation with you. Trite Muggle cliché though it might be, I need to reach out and touch someone, and be touched by them. In a communicative/interactive sense, that is. If I just wanted to fuck someone, there's any number of warm bodies I could get my hands on, if I wanted. (Pardon my language.)

I'm sorry, she wrote back. I don't think this is such a good idea.

--Don't stop writing! Please!

Hermione shook her head, though she knew he couldn't see it; he'd misinterpreted her meaning. Getting up from her bed, she sat down at the vanity-desk, resting the tablet on its surface. Holding it in her hand was alright for a short conversation, but not this longer one. **No, I meant the talking-sexy thing. I wouldn't have the first clue of where to begin, and I'd have to study the subject, and I'd feel really weird, almost like I would be cheating on Ron.**

It's not actually cheating, Jane. It's nothing more than a ruse, should anyone discover me writing in bed. Besides, if you're that inexperienced, wouldn't you rather get some experience under your belt before you set about seducing your boyfriend? Even if only by discussing it in theory? Trust me, he won't disrespect you for being knowledgeable in this area. At least one of you should have a solid clue as to what to do. I doubt he has much experience for this sort of thing.

That made her think of all the time Ron had spent 'playing suck-face' with Lavender Brown, this last school year. **He's got a bit of experience in kissing.**

He's a teenaged boy. He's got enthusiasm, stamina for repetition--though probably not for duration, yet--and he probably cares about you, but that's about it. Trust me; I'm not so far from his age that I don't remember what it was like to be a teenaged boy, all hormones and no self-control. I don't know why God messed things up by giving a high sexual drive to inexperienced male teens. A true lover takes his time, stimulating all six senses and satisfying his partner several times, before striving for his own moment of bliss. But that takes time and experience to learn.

...What do you mean, all six senses? Hermione enquired, frowning at the tablet in her hands. **There's only five: sight, sound, taste, touch, and scent.**

You're a witch, Jane; you have a sixth sense. It allows you to sense the presence of magic, and to utilize your own power when casting a spell. But since it's one of the last things to develop fully in a teenaged wizard or witch, at the tail-end of puberty, it tends to be taught in seventh year so that the boys have a chance to catch up with the girls. It's part of what makes Apparation possible, and how you can tell if someone has enchanted your door to play a prank you, when you start to reach for the knob. You'll learn, if you have a competent Defence teacher. Of course, with the teachers you've had the last few years...well, everyone knows what a disaster most of them were.

Only some of them, Hermione defended. Professor Lupin was very good, though he had to quit because of his condition. And though he was an impostor, so was Barty Crouch Jr., when he was pretending to be Alastor Moody. And...to be absolutely fair, so was Professor Snape.

Her words faded from the page, with no immediate reply.

...Brave words, considering what the bastard traitor did.

Scrupulously fair, rather, Hermione countered. I will not condone what he did. I can't even understand it. And though his teaching methods were too harsh towards others and too partial towards his own House...he knew what he was teaching, in Potions and Defence. A million bad deeds cannot revoke the benefit of a single good deed, she wrote, picking her words carefully. Conversely, a million good deeds cannot always compensate for a single bad deed, though it's easier to gain forgiveness through a serious effort at making amends. I don't know what drove him to do what he did, to think as he does, but he was a good teacher, in my opinion. I will not cast aside what he taught me, just because he was the one to teach it.

You are far too forgiving, Jane. I just want the traitor dead. Brian was my mentor, and my friend. This betrayal is unforgivable. The only 'amends' to be made should be the biblical kind. An eye for an eye, a life for a life. He owes the world the life of the most powerful, benign wizard in three hundred years! How can he make amends for that?

I don't know, she replied, nibbling on the end of her pen. No one knows the full truth of a situation while that situation is happening. You may call me naive for doing so, but I shall cling to the thought that there's a reason behind his betrayal. A logical, if not necessarily understandable, reason. If there aren't reasons, then the whole world is mad.

You're a Muggle-born who discovered that magic was real, in a world that doesn't believe in such things. Didn't you think the whole world was mad, when you were first told? Russel asked her.

A bit. But it also made the inexplicable things in my life suddenly sensical, instead of nonsensical. What about you? I presume, if you're a...you-know-what, she amended capily, about to write 'Death Eater', you're not a Muggle-born. But have you ever had a bizarre mystery in your life plaguing at your sense of logic, and then suddenly had it revealed and explained, and everything finally made sense in that one shining, glorious moment of comprehension?

Silence for several seconds, long enough for her words to fade, then ink spilled once more across the page. **Yes. Speak to me of what makes you most animated, Jane. Speak to me of your academic interests.**

That quirked her brow. **Why?**

You're very passionate about the subjects you like. Fairness, logic, intelligence... Which is your favorite subject in school? he wrote.

That made her pause on her side of their written conversation. Finally, she penned, **...Almost everything, really. I didn't like Divinations--at least, not as Professor Trelawney taught it--but I loved Potions, Transfigurations, Arithmancy, Runes, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Charms... Mostly, I liked the synthesis of different sorts of magic. The way Arithmancy could be used to calculate the probable outcome of a Potions project, how Runes could provide defensive or offensive protections against the Dark Arts, how Charms and Transfigurations could be moulded to work hand-in-hand...**

Past-tense? Are you not looking forward to your classes in your final year?

Hermione didn't know how to answer that one. On the one hand, she didn't want to lie to Russel; if he was genuine, lying to him would hurt him, because she was getting the feeling he was trying to reach out not only for contact, but for friendship. But on the other hand, if he was loyal to the other side and lying to her, would it be wise to tell the other side in advance that she, Harry, and Ron would not be returning to Hogwarts?

...Well, naturally I would love whatever I'd learn in them. I just thought you wanted me to reply from the heart of my experience, and all I've experienced so far are my first through sixth years.

There; that technically wasn't lying. It was merely conditional. She *would* love learning...*if* she were going to attend her seventh-year classes.

True. What do you think of Charms, as a discipline?

It's quite interesting. Possibly the most useful of all magical disciplines, in everyday situations. Potions would come second, I think. Transfigurations and Runes aren't quite as everyday in their usefulness. But Charms has to be the most practical-applications class I've run across. From boiling a cup of tea to summoning a good book, it's very practical, and yet very magical, though I suppose that's my Muggle-born nature showing through. What about you? Are you Pureblooded, or half-blooded?

Half-blooded. Though I try not to tout that aspect. How often do you use Charms, in your life? Do you still cling to all or most of the Muggle activities that could be done more easily and efficiently by magic? Or have you succumbed to your gifts, and use magic for all sorts of things, from tying your shoes to fixing your meals in the summertime?

Well, I couldn't use magic at home, until this summer. I turned seventeen on the nineteenth of September last year, and by then, I was already enrolled in school. And I really haven't been home, this summer. She debated a moment, then risked a tiny lie. I don't think I'll ever return; I don't have anything in common with them anymore.

The words faded and were replaced by his own. **If you love them so strongly, why haven't you returned, when you clearly long to?**

Hermione stared at Russel's reply. *What? That wasn't what I wrote!* She didn't think he was being sarcastic. **Erm, sorry, could you tell me what I just wrote to you?**

A long pause, then he responded, **You just attempted an outright lie, didn't you?**

...Yes.

No outright lies can be exchanged via this form of communication. They're betrothal rings, Jane. They're designed to foster honest communication between a couple, from back in the days of arranged marriages, where the bride and groom often met in person for the first time at the altar. You can hedge and twist the truth all you like, but you cannot outright lie to me. What did you try to say to me?

I'd rather not say, Hermione wrote back bravely.

Then I shall extrapolate. You said you longed to return to them, that you still had much in common with them. Ergo you were trying to say you weren't going to return to them, that you had no ties to them, perhaps trying to make me think they wouldn't be very emotionally strong targets. No doubt in the hopes that, if you appeared to be estranged from your family, I'd have no reason to tell my fellow idiots to go after them, to hurt them in order to hurt you. Because you don't fully trust me.

Well...yes. She blushed as she wrote it.

You're very wise to reserve judgment, Jane. I shall not take offense. I would do the same, were I in your position, and did not yet know the person with whom I was communicating. After all, I do know a little bit more about you than you know about me, but such is the nature of my position, hidden as I am.

Hermione stopped nibbling on her lower lip, surprised by his leniency towards her attempted deception.

Russel continued. **Now that you know, however...try to be a little more precise in how you twist the truth. Obviously, you do have quite a bit left to draw you back to them.**

Well, of course I do. They're my parents, and I love them. I'm not really ever going to be able to fit back into their Muggle world, but they're my parents, and I love them. And I'll hurt anyone who hurts them. I can be quite inventive, you know!

I'm sure you can be. You do not know how lucky you are to love your parents, and know that they love you. Most of the families of the sort whose children get sorted into Slytherin aren't nearly as loving and nurturing. Let's discuss something else, so you won't feel concerned over any interest of mine in them. How about something utterly absurd, like clothing?

That made her laugh. **...Clothing? Are you a fashion-hound, Russel?**

I buy tailored clothing, as opposed to off-the-rack, if that's what you mean.

Really? What colours do you like to wear?

I look best in blue, I think. Or a dark red, but I have to be careful to not pick one with the wrong undertone. Greens are only so-so, with my complexion and hair-colour, and I avoid cheerful shades, such as yellow and peach. I like jewel-colours, not pastels. And you?

Hermione thought it a little odd to be discussing fashion with a Death Eater, even if he was supposed to be a spy for the good side. **I don't look too bad in jewel-tones, either. Pastels aren't my thing. But I like best colours like cranberry red, forest green, twilight blue...**

Twilight blue? What the ruddy hell is that?

It's that medium blue with definite but soft grey overtones. If it were a bath-towel, it would have a sort of silvery, misty, heathery sheen to it. And I like pewter silver, too. There's just something cuddle-able about a thick, fluffy, silvery-grey towel. It makes me feel comforted, somehow.

You're insane.

Hermione took offense at that. **Considering I'm talking to a man who's dictating to a quill in the middle of Death Eater Central while masturbating--!!**

She blushed right after scribbling the second exclamation point with an emphatic thump of her Muggle pen. In fact, she wished fervently that she could take it back.

Unfortunately, the only reason why her words faded from the page was because the ring she pressed to the page made those words fade. Not because they never reached him in the first place.

...So, what colour are your knickers? Lacy bra, or plain?

Gaping, Hermione stared at Russel's words. She was so tempted to snap, *Neither! Keyhole!* But that would've been a lie. Instead, she scrawled, **What makes you think I'll tell you that?**

Because I'll tell you what colour mine are?

Absolutely not!

Not even a hint?

NO!! She thought about underlining the word, for good measure.

...Pity. I suppose I'll just have to imagine you naked, then. Naked, and sprawled on your bedsheets.

I am not naked! I'm wearing nightclothes, sitting at my desk in my room!

Pity. Nightgown and knickers?

...Yes, she reluctantly allowed, not quite trusting him.

Then I'll just have to imagine tugging your nightgown sleeve aside and kissing the curve of your shoulder.

Her face burnt with heat. She could almost feel what it would be like for a hand to tug her shirt free, and for warm lips to caress the tender, ticklish skin of her abdomen. But she wasn't about to confess that. **Then you can also imagine me whacking you on the nose with a scroll, like a misbehaving puppy!**

That's twice you've nearly made me laugh out loud. Careful, Jane; you really don't want to get me killed. I'm far too valuable to the Order, still.

Oh...go wank yourself silly! I'm going to bed, now--ALONE!! FULLY CLOTHED!!

Three times, he wrote back as she started to set down her quill. **I'm smiling, which is not a wise thing to do, where I am. But chatting with you is a lot more fun than it ever was, chatting with Brian. Goodnight, Jane. Sweet dreams.**

She had just enough time to remove the ring before the top sheet of the tablet flared and vanished. Thankfully, it didn't take the whole tablet with it. That would've been awkward.

She wanted to chide Russel for attempting such a scandalous topic with her. She didn't really know him, and he certainly didn't know her! Yet, at the same time, Hermione knew she couldn't really deny her curiosity. His comment about gaining at least some experience *was* valid; if she knew more about sex and sensuality, perhaps she wouldn't feel quite so uncomfortable with the subject.

There was another point to consider. While she might worry about looking like a fool in front of Ron for wanting to do some research on the subject first, it was highly unlikely she'd ever interact with Russel directly. Even if he survived the war and the good side won, he'd probably be happy to fade into obscurity, or return to whatever life he'd had before mucking it up by getting mixed up with Voldemort and agreeing to risk his life as a spy. She'd never see him again. Hermione knew it was quite valid, psychologically, to 'experiment' sexually by discussing theory with a complete stranger. The internet was becoming quite popular for things like that, in the Muggle world.

By picking someone unfamiliar and unlikely to be encountered in everyday life, a person wouldn't have to worry nearly as much about embarrassing themselves, because they wouldn't be reminded through daily encounters with that person. All they'd have to do would be to stop visiting that chatroom or whatever. Of course, she couldn't exactly leave Russel in the lurch during the war; if his offer was genuine...

Hermione stilled. If his offer *was* genuine! He'd basically said that the rings were enspelled to abort absolute lies, revealing the truth instead. They could write to each other a skewed viewpoint on the truth...but it had to be the truth.

Unless...unless he was lying about that aspect...

It was possible; she could point to the fact that he'd seen through her lie as a proof that the rings prevented lies. But even a typical Slytherin could've guessed that she loved her parents and still had strong ties to them and the Muggle world. It was therefore equally possible he had simply guessed and took a risk that she'd been trying to fake him out on that topic.

Her head hurt.

Unsure of his intentions, unsure of his motivations, unsure if anything he'd said was the truth or part of an elaborate lie, Hermione rested her forehead in one hand, the fingers of the other toying with the chain that held the scale-patterned ring.

To trust, or not to trust... Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous uncertainties and potential lies, or to take up the facts, and by comparing, oppose them... Huh. Mum would have my ears for mangling the Bard like that. Sighing, she stood, stripped, and crawled into bed. *The fact is, I can only do as I've done. Reserve judgment, hope to heaven and back that his offer is genuine, and keep one hand on my wand, just in case...*

There was only one problem. After extinguishing the candles, Hermione lay in the dark for a long time afterwards, trying very hard not to think of a wizard curled up in a bed somewhere, stroking himself as he looked at the pages of a book filled with naughty wizarding pictures. It definitely didn't help that she hadn't the faintest idea what Russel looked like. It might've been easier to deal with her curiosity if she'd had a face to go with to such a potentially erotic image--preferably an unattractive face

How could she possibly be curious about Russel, when she wasn't ready to be curious about Ron?.

...

Ring of Truth sent two more messages, before the start of the new school year. Hermione, Harry and Ron didn't board the Hogwarts Express at Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters. Instead, they were each personally handed a note by Headmistress McGonagall, in a handwriting they didn't recognize, telling them where to find Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry two days beforehand. And on the night before September 1st, when Molly and Arthur brought Ginny Weasley up to the Black residence so that they wouldn't have far to go to get to the rail station...the truth came out, regarding the trio's intentions.

It started with Mrs. Weasley, of course. Ron had diverted his mother on the subject of new school supplies by saying his sixth-year robes were fine, and that Harry was getting him his books and supplies and such for an early birthday present. But it was the coward's way out, and when her voice echoed up the stairwell, Hermione saw him flinch.

"Hurry up and get your trunk packed, Ron! Your father wants it downstairs tonight, so it'll be quick to load into the Ministry car for tomorrow morning!"

"You're going to have to tell her," Harry reminded his best friend. His and Hermione's concentration were shot by that imperious, motherly demand. They'd been trying to

practice Occlumency versus Legilimency, but it wasn't easy. Only Harry had ever had actual lessons with a trained Occlumens, and he'd been so antagonistic against his teacher—with good reason, it had turned out—that his lessons weren't worth much. It hadn't helped that Professor Snape had also hated the young wizard. Having Molly Weasley yell up the stairs at them didn't exactly lend itself to their struggles.

"Ronald? Did you hear me?"

Ron winced, and rubbed the back of his neck, shoulders hunched. "Why is it mums never use your full name unless they think you're in trouble."

Hermione clasped his shoulder and steered him towards the door. "Brace yourself for your middle name, too, Ron."

"I don't want to do this--Harry, why don't you tell her?" Ron pleaded. "She likes you!"

"Sorry, mate." Harry put his hand on Ron's other shoulder, assisting Hermione in pushing the tall, lanky redhead towards the door. "Today is the day you become your own man."

"Yes," Hermione agreed. "By standing up to her."

The look of horror and dismay on his face was comical. Reluctantly, Ron let himself be pushed out of the room just in time to see his mother climbing the stairs.

"Ronald, dear, I told you to pack up your trunk and get it downstairs!" Mrs. Weasley chided her son. "You're old enough that I shouldn't have to do everything for you! Now, go pack your trunk!"

Ron straightened. He swallowed before speaking, but he seemed to gain strength from her words. "You're right, Mum. I *am* old enough. I'm of-age, and capable of making up my own mind on what I should or shouldn't do. And...I am not going to Hogwarts for my seventh year."

Molly Weasley's mouth dropped.

Ron, ever the strategist, leapt into the silence boldly. "You heard me! I'm not going back. In fact, I've already talked to Professor McGonagall, and turned in my prefect's badge. Hermione's turned in her Head Girl badge, too."

Her stunned hazel gaze shifted to Hermione, standing behind and to one side of her youngest son.

"And Harry's not going, either. We've got far more important things to do."

His mother blinked, recovering slowly...and then rapidly. "...The *hell* you say! No son of mine is--"

"--Mrs. Weasley!" Harry's voice cut through the start of her diatribe like a sword-stroke. Hermione felt proud of both of them, Harry and Ron; they were proving their mettle as men, these days. Still somewhat young, but men. "Professor Dumbledore charged us with a task, which we have to take care of, this year. We cannot do so while confined within the walls of Hogwarts!"

"We're all of-age, Molly," Hermione added quietly but firmly. Like Professor McGonagall, she chose to use the other woman's first name, to underscore their status as equals. "We have weighed the pros and the cons of the task we were assigned, and we have concluded that what we must do is vital for the war-effort. I realize you long to protect your son, but you cannot coddle him forever. He is a man. He is a man," she repeated, "and a wizard grown, and you should be proud of him. And proud of yourself, too. You raised Ron to know what is right, and what is the right thing to do."

"We're not going back to Hogwarts," Harry repeated. "We're going to follow Albus Dumbledore's instructions, and help end this war."

"And you can yell all you want, Mum," Ron concluded as Molly looked back at him again. "My mind's made up. The only thing you could do to me is to banish me from the family. I don't think you'll do that; we've already lost one of us. Percy was an arse and walked away from us of his own volition, and banished himself by it, but I'm not going to walk away. I'm going to do what I know is right, and do all I can to protect our family, and I'm going to help Harry bring an end this war. I'm not going back to Hogwarts as a student. Now, either you can accept that fact," he finished, squaring his shoulders, "or you can be silent. Because no amount of yelling in the world is going to change my mind."

Molly Weasley stared at her son. Hermione thought she looked like she aged five or six years, just standing there, staring at her son. Tears glistened in those hazel eyes. Hermione, unable to take any more of watching the normally redoubtable mother crumbling in silence, shoved Ron forward with a hand planted on his spine. He got her hint, and wrapped his arms around his mother, gingerly pulling her close. A choked sob, and she collapsed into his embrace, hugging him back fiercely.

It was uncomfortable, watching Ron deal with his mother's grief. A glance at Harry showed him disconcerted, too, glancing away as if seeking some place he'd rather be. Hermione caught his eye after the third time, and tipped her head towards the pair. Reluctantly, awkwardly, he joined her in flanking the two of them, and together they sort of enveloped Molly Weasley in a group-hug. It did seem to calm her down a little faster, and when she stirred, the three of them released her. Harry even dug up a handkerchief and offered it to her.

"...I don't know how I'm ever going to tell your father about this," Mrs. Weasley muttered. "And I'm *terribly* disappointed in you, Ronald. But I cannot do anything about it--and you *lied* to me!" Her fingers snatched the curve of Ron's ear, making him wince and grimace as she shook his head with it. "You said Harry would be buying your books and things!"

"Technically...it's not a lie," Hermione hedged for him. That only got Mrs. Weasley's glare fixed on her, but she withstood it as much as she could. "He said *would be*. If we were actually going to go back to the school, I'm certain he'd buy whatever Ron needed."

"Yeah," Harry agreed quickly. "As it is, we really don't need much in the way of funds, at the moment. We've been eating here at Headquarters, and doing chores about the house for Mrs. Figg, in exchange for her cooking--on the promise that she'd never cook anything with cabbage in it," he half-muttered. "I smelled cooked cabbage too many times through the years, whenever my aunt and uncle foisted me onto her during some outing of theirs."

"You know Fred and George would give us jobs in their joke shop, if need be," Ron coaxed his mother. Hermione felt good about the way he lowered his pride a little on the whole money issue, just to reassure his mother. "And we do plan on handling this matter as quickly as we can."

"Well...what *is* this secret mission the Headmaster set for you? And why did he give the task to you?" Molly demanded, recovered enough from her grief to start poking and prodding at her son's decision. "Why not an adult...I mean, why not an Order member?"

Hermione was glad the older witch had changed her wording, however belatedly. And she was even more glad Harry fielded that question "If we could tell you, Molly, we would. But the fewer people who know what we're up to, the better. You're just going to have to trust us."

"And trust that we'll keep each other safe," Hermione added, slipping her hand into Ron's.

As she'd hoped, his mother noticed the stealthy movement with a keen gaze. Speculation ran across her face, along with suspicion, before it melted into wonder and hope. Mrs. Weasley didn't say anything directly, however. "Well, you'd certainly better. I've effectively lost one son, and nearly lost another. I'm not going to lose a third. And *you*, young man," she added, poking Ron in the chest with a warning finger, "are going to be the one to tell your father that you're not going back to school!"

Ron winced, but allowed his mother to prod him downstairs, Harry and Hermione trailing in their wake.

...

So. How much of sex and sensuality have you researched?

Hermione stared at Russel's words, taken aback by their bluntness. He'd caught her in the bath, and she'd been forced to dry off her hands before picking up the tablet. Wondering how to avoid the question, she finally wrote, **Why do you want to know something like that?**

You're an over-achiever, from what I've heard. And devoted to knowledge and learning. I would be highly surprised if you hadn't researched the subject in some depth. So. How much have you learned?

Sighing, she wrote the truth, as boldly as she dared. **Quite a lot, in my spare time. In fact, you interrupted me while I was reading a wonderfully smutty romance novel. I'd just read one of the good parts, too.**

I see. And did you enjoy yourself, while you were enjoying the text?

...**You just want to know if I wanked.**

Frigged, my dear Jane. 'Wanking' is a masculine activity. Women 'frig'.

Not according to the novel; women masturbate, these days. 'Frigging' is an old-fashioned term. Besides, a good lover would lick her until she screamed with pleasure.

Her face felt hotter than the water, writing that. Russel didn't seem to take offense, though it took him a few moments to reply. **Indeed. And have you tried any empirical experimentation, with your newfound knowledge?**

No. I'm still uncomfortable with the whole subject.

Why? Sex is both natural and healthy. Were you raised a Puritan?

Hermione snorted, sinking a little lower in the bath. **Hardly. Anglican. But I was raised to not treat it casually. Sex shouldn't be about humping whatever's in sight. It should have meaning, and be an extension of caring.**

Ah. You prefer to 'make love' rather than 'have sex'.

Yes, I do. Or rather, I would. I haven't done it, yet, but I imagine that's what I'd prefer.

So you don't think there's any point in going at it like a pair of rabid kneazles? You believe that sex should be always tender, gentle, and missionary-style?

Hermione pondered his point. **No...I think that, in the right mood/context/whatever, shagging like rabid kneazles might be a lot of fun. And the more positions, the merrier, probably. I'm just saying I'm not interested in sex without a relationship.**

So, you'd prefer for a handsome, charming prince to sweep you off your feet, whispering the sweetest of nothings in your ear, and making promises he couldn't possibly keep if he existed in the real world, all just to win your affections long enough to get into your knickers?

That's a rather cynical thing to say!

That's a rather realistic thing to say,Russel wrote back. **The moment some manipulative, scheming male realizes you can be bought by words of affection, he's going to attempt to ensnare you by them. I'm just giving you fair warning. A declaration of lust is a lot more genuine than a declaration of love.**

Affronted, Hermione scrawled back, **And what have you against love? Love is the most powerful force in the universe! I'll be you've never felt a single scrap of love for anyone!**

Romantic love? No. But I loved my mother, and I loved Brian. He was the father my own should have been. And I'll bet you've only ever felt scraps of infatuation and affection for another, and never felt an actual, true, deep, abiding love.

Hermione started to write a scathing reply, then paused and absorbed his words as they faded from view. **...Is that one of those lines you say some scheming, manipulative male will try to pull on me? Sorry, Russel, but 'deep, abiding love' just doesn't sound like something someone in your position would be saying.**

Do not make assumptions about me, Jane. You do not know me nearly well enough to make such sweeping statements.

Chided, Hermione nibbled on the end of her pen. Grudgingly giving in to her good side, she wrote back, **Sorry.**

Forgiven. And to answer your question...at the time, no. I was speaking honestly, not manipulatively. But I'll keep it in mind for an option.

And to her shock, he drew a winking smile-face, the ink spreading cheekily across the surface. Swiftly debating how to answer, she drew a smile face with its tongue sticking out, replete with little drops of spit. **...Cheeky bugger.**

What, no animatory spell?

I'm not that good at those. I can hardly draw a stick-figure without breaking out into a sweat.

Hm. So. What are you wearing tonight? What colour and shape of nightgown, I mean?

What are you yourself wearing? Hermione countered.

Blue blankets, white sheets, and my fist.

Holy...! The breath left her body, making her sink a little lower in the bath. An image flitted into her mind of a lean, strong back, a body curled on its side, propped up by an elbow, knee slightly drawn up, and fingers fisted around an unmistakably erect prick as its owner peered into a paper-bookmarked tome, watching the naughty moving wizarding drawings in between answering her replies.

Naughty Jane--don't you know it's polite to reciprocate? Let me guess. It's not too terribly late, so you'd still be in jeans and a tee-shirt, right?

That made her decide to have fun with him. **Nope. Guess again.**

Nightgown? Or pyjamas, perhaps?

Nope. Guess again.

Dare I hope, naked? (I reiterate: I am very, very glad you are not Brian. That is NOT the sort of image I ever wanted to contemplate about him.)

She laughed at that. **Nope. Try...bubbles. Lots and lots of bubbles.**

Silence, as her words faded. Then, **Ohhhhh, Jane, you're going to give me a heart-attack...now I'm imagining you in the bath with your hair piled on top of your head, a nipple peaking through the foam like a miniature version of your knee...and that you'd love to do naughty things with that quill in your hands. Naughty strokings of the feather-tip against your quim...**

Nope.

...Nope?

Muggle pen. She grinned as she wrote it. **Makes writing on the spur of the moment a lot easier, if I don't have to fuss with an ink jar.**

A bit too practical for my imaginings...but I can work around it. Of course, to complete the image, you said you were reading a deliciously smutty book, and you're in the bath, no doubt by candlelight, which means that you probably have a tin of chocolates somewhere on hand. Or perhaps just a box of empty wrappers...

Nope. Though I'd gladly hex someone for a box of high-quality dark chocolates. Raised by dentists as I was, I never really got the chance to develop a sweet tooth, but I do love quality dark chocolates. Nothing cheap from the candy bins for me...which means I don't get to buy it nearly as often, either. Quality does not come cheap, by any measurement.

Then I shall dig some high-quality chocolates out of my imagination, wrap my waist in a towel to 'preserve my modesty'--I can be a gentleman when I want to be--and perch my imaginary self on the edge of your bathtub, so that I may teasingly feed them to you, one at a time.

Is this part of that manipulation thing?

Maybe. You're a fully grown witch, aren't you?

Well, yes.

A pity you're still in school. But you're of-age, for certain. I do have some scruples about who I will or won't seduce. So, are you going to be a good little pen-pal, and touch yourself for me?

I don't think that's appropriate.

Come now, how are you ever going to learn enough to be able to seduce the wizard of your dreams, if you don't practice? Haven't you ever touched yourself? Felt that sweet ache low in your abdomen, that slow rise of burning need? Breathless anticipation, twisting muscles, fingers flying as you strive to bring yourself to completion?

She'd touched herself, before. She'd even given herself a good orgasm or two, before. But the thought of touching herself while he...well, he couldn't exactly *watch*... Feeling rebelliously naughty, Hermione wrote, **Well, I have touched myself before, and gone all the way about it, and had a good time. But you spoke of gaining experience. How would you have me do it?**

It took him a moment to reply. **...Are you going to follow my instructions?**

Why not? I'm feeling adventurous. And...a good orgasm is an acceptable substitute for a fine-quality chocolate, I suppose.

Again, you threaten to make me laugh. It's good to know your priorities lie aligned with the chocolate. Let's see...you're in the bath, presumably on your back. Wand nearby, I trust?

Yes.

Good. Enchant your quill--sorry, your Muggle pen--with a Dictation Charm. You'll need one hand free for this, because I'll want honest feedback, yet the other one needs to keep the ring in contact with the paper. And I presume you've learnt how to enchant things wordlessly by now, so all you have to do is think firmly enough, and the pen will do the writing without you having to speak. Just in case you're not alone in whatever house you're occupying.

Blushing, Hermione enchanted her pen. It poised itself over the tablet in her hand. Thinking firmly, she tried three times, before getting the knack of it firmly enough that the pen wrote, **Ready!**

Touch your lips. Feel how soft they are. Nibble on your fingers, and gauge the sensitivity of your lips as opposed to the pads of your fingertips. Stroke your face from brow to chin, detouring around either side of your eyes, so that you caress your cheeks... Are you complying?

A bit of effort, and the pen wrote, **Yes...**

Good. Now, tip your chin back a little and lightly stroke your throat. Make a little circle in the hollow at the base...and stroke your collarbones...now back up to your lips...and back down to the slope of your left breast. Lightly wiggle your touch back and forth, until you get close to your nipple, then circle down under it. Don't touch it just yet; we don't want to rush your pleasure. Are you circling just beyond your nipple?

Yes. It took less effort this time to make the pen move, but then she'd always been a quick study, and it really was just a variation on wordless magic. Her areola was shriveling under her touch, sending pleasant tingles through her nerves. **I like it.**

I thought you might. Now, with the nail of your thumb, very lightly scrape your nipple.

Oh! She hadn't meant for the Dictation Charm to write that, but it had felt so startlingly good.

Now, stop, and move the back of your thumb to your other breast, and rub the smooth surface of your nail against your right nipple--and just the nipple.

She complied. **Oh! That feels different...**

But good, yes?

Perving over the thought of me playing with myself, are we?

Nice to know you're enjoying this, too.

She laughed out loud, hushing herself belatedly. The bedroom she shared with Ginny was next-door, and the girl needed her sleep, since she was getting up early to go to the train station. Loud noises this late at night also ran the risk of waking someone else up. Like Ron. It was one thing to perv, as it were, over a bit of enchanted writing with a near-stranger. It was another to be caught doing so. Ron might think that was either a 'cheating', or an indication that she was ready for sex with him. This might've been a form of cheating, but she still wasn't ready for sex just yet.

I feel incredibly naughty, doing this. Guilty, and bad.

But it also feels good, does it not? Letting go of your inhibitions... Touching yourself... Seeking and delivering pleasure to your body...and a woman's body is MADE for pleasure, Jane...now, slide your hand down your stomach, smoothing out any bubbles in its path, until you reach your mound. Cup yourself firmly down there, and wriggle your fingers a little. Then...withdraw them with the lightest and most teasing, scraping touches. Feather your fingers through your

pubic hair, and tug ever so slightly on them.

OH! *That was unexpectedly pleasurable!*

Now, slice your finger quickly through your nether-lips!

"*Oh!*" That felt too good to end it there; it felt as if she'd just scorched herself with a sexual fire. Arching her body, Hermione swirled her finger over her clitoris, flicking and rubbing and prolonging the stimulation, burning her nerves as she brought herself to a trembling peak. *Oh...oh god, yes...oh yes oh yes...ohhhh--YES!*

Body bucking, bubbles sloshing, she came. Shuddering, sagging against the sloped back of the porcelain tub, Hermione forced her eyes open. There, just beginning to fade, were the words she'd been thinking, written in the blue ink of her ball-point pen.

...ohhhh--YES!

Oh, dear god...

Oh, dear god...

Embarrassment flushed her face, her throat, even her upper chest with scarlet heat. Marshalling her thoughts with the same discipline she was trying to use for Occlumency, Hermione glared at the paper. She wished she could glare at the source of her wanton little adventure, but she didn't know where he was, nor even what he looked like.

A moment later, something seeped rapidly up out of the surface of the tablet sheet. He'd spilled something on the page, and it had come through to her end of things, via whatever magic allowed the rings to communicate like this. Tilting the tablet closer to her face, Hermione peered at it in the candlelight. It was white, and kind of creamy-looking, and it smelled rather musky at that close range...and her cheeks burned a second time as she realized what it was. Semen. Jism. Ejaculate.

Russel's cum now stained the surface of her tablet. As she stared at it, unsure what to do, ink seeped into view, angled off to one side of it. **Taste it.**

She wanted to protest; she wanted to exclaim that the very idea was nasty, and that he was a total pervert for asking her to do such a thing...but the young witch didn't. Instead, hand trembling, she brought the tablet even closer, and licked it from the sheet. She thoroughly licked it, too; in fact, Hermione made absolutely sure that the page was marked with a tongue-sized swath of her saliva, and watched it fade from her view with smug satisfaction.

Oh God!

She smirked, imagining him getting hard again at the thought of what she'd done.

--Tell me how it tastes!

Yes, she could see him trying to prolong his pleasure by having her describe everything to him. So she did. **It's a bit stingy, musky and salty and a little bitter...but not bad. Not that bad at all. I might even be willing to try that on a real man, licking it directly from his skin.**

More!

Unsure what else to add, Hermione took a page out of what she'd read in the smutty romance book lying neglected on the bathroom floor, and described one of the scenes that had intrigued her. **I would catch you while you were asleep, early in the morning. Gently ease back the covers, so as not to awaken you. I would admire your masculinity, no doubt somewhat hard from a morning erection, she silently dictated, blushing at her boldness, and then I would lean down and inhale your scent. I imagine it would be very musky, with distinct hints of myself left over from our recent nocturnal activities.**

Oh, god...

When my lungs are properly full, I will move down a little...and lick you from testicles to tip in a slow, broad lap of my tongue. A swirl at the tip, and I would engulf the head of your penis in my mouth, sucking it in as deeply as I can take it. I can almost feel it in my mouth right now...warm, firm, musky, a bit salty at the tip where your jism still seeps from your climax...twitching...

OH FUCK!

More pearly drops seeped through the page. Hermione didn't hesitate, but licked that from the page, too, before leaning back and dictating, **Mm, thank you. That was tasty, too.**

Merlin, you're a fast learner... I'll bet you'll horribly embarrassed shortly, if you do not feel that way already, too.

You'd win that bet, Hermione acknowledged, trying to ignore her burning cheeks.

Don't be embarrassed. You did well. Thank you for the pleasure...and thank you for being so bold. House Gryffindor, right?

Yes.

Typical. I'd better bid you goodnight, so you can finish your bath and get some rest. You'll have an early day, tomorrow. And do watch out for surprise attacks; I don't know if any are planned, but if they come, it'll be before you get to Kings Cross Station. I'd imagine every other point along the route from there onward will be heavily watched and guarded, but not before the students get on the train. Again...thank you, Jane.

You're welcome, Russel, Hermione wrote back, blushing one last time.

The paper flashed, incinerating itself. Disenchanting the pen, she set it and the tablet on the floor and relaxed into the tub. Idly, her hands traced patterns over her torso, echoing what he'd told her to do. Feeling herself growing aroused again, Hermione almost stopped, embarrassed by what she'd done, exactly as he'd predicted.

Part of her mind rebelled, however. Why shouldn't she experience sexual bliss? Why shouldn't she revel in her sexuality? There was nothing wrong or immoral about masturbation, really. And, well...Ron technically hadn't asked her to go out with him; they'd just started snogging and cuddling, after he'd broken up with Lavender. So it wasn't entirely cheating.

And it was kind of thrilling to know that she, a virgin, had made a man climax twice. In rapid succession, no less, just from a little bit of the magical equivalent to cybersex! Hermione finished her bath feeling rather brave.

Chapter 05

Chapter 5 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

Warning, gratuitous discussion of 'wands' ahead...how terribly smutty-sounding! ;-D ~Lotm

V.

They were running out of ideas. The locket still held a soul, they needed to find the missing cup of Helga Hufflepuff, one or two other miscellaneous objects that might or might not be Horcruxes...and they hadn't a clue where to look for any of it. Needing a trip to the lavatory, Hermione snagged Harry's Invisibility Cloak from Ron, who had just returned from his own trip, and crept out of the library. Madam Pince had threatened them most sternly if they disrupted the peaceful order of her domain in their nighttime accesses, and refused to let them Floo into her office, which left the trio sneaking through the school halls late in the night, as if they were still enrolled as students. It was an awkward situation, but it was the best they could do.

It didn't take her long to use the lavatory, nor to wash her hands. Making sure the Cloak covered her from head to toe, Hermione crept out of the bathroom, turned the corner that led back to the library--and tripped over someone. A very short someone, who had turned the corner from the other direction a bit sharp and a bit fast. They both sprawled painfully on the stone floor, the Cloak tangling about their limbs. Hermione ignored the stinging of her palms and the aching of her knees as she scrambled around. The other person had squeaked, and she was afraid she knew the owner of the voice.

It belonged to Filius Flitwick, Professor of Charms...as she'd feared. He shoved his diminutive body upright, dusting himself off with a scowl. "*Lumos!* When I find out who you are, I'll have forty points from your House!"

He snatched at the Cloak, fumbling for the rumpled, half-invisible, half visible folds. Hermione, seeing no other choice, flung the Cloak over his head as well. His eyes widened, recognizing her in the glow of his wand. There was a strange smell about him, too. Sort of reminiscent of...of alcohol? Smacking her palm over his mouth just as he started to blurt her name, Hermione hissed at him. "Shhh! Please, Professor! Don't let on that I'm here! The portraits have eyes and ears!"

He stilled under her touch, then nodded slowly. She removed her hand cautiously, and the aging wizard hissed, his breath smelling like firewhiskey and cheap ale, "--Miss Granger? Why aren't you in school? You're supposed to be in my Advanced class!"

"I'm busy doing other things," Hermione whispered back. "But I've Headmistress McGonagall's permission to use the library, if I go about it in secret. You can ask her, if you like."

"I'll definitely do that--for heaven's sake, Miss Granger," Professor Flitwick half-hissed, half-squeaked. "Why aren't you enrolled in this school, anymore?"

"It's a long and dangerous story, Professor, and I think you'll be a lot safer not knowing." Again, as she paused for breath, Hermione smelled the pungent vapors of firewhiskey on the diminutive instructor's breath. Frowning at him, she asked, "Professor--have you been drinking?"

"No! No...well, yes. I went down to--oh, my precious! I've lost my precious!" he hissed, distraught, and stooped to start patting at the folds of his robe, even the folds of the Cloak covering them.

Hermione's jaw dropped. Of all the things she'd expect to hear from the half-size wizard, a quote from Tolkien was *not* one of them. "You've lost your...*what?*"

"My wand! My new wand! My lovely, new, precious wand--ah!" Snatching up a narrow wooden box that had been concealed as much by a twist in the Invisibility Cloak's folds as by the hem of his own robes, Filius Flitwick cradled the box lovingly to his chest. "Oh! I hope I haven't broken it!"

His diminutive fingers trembled as he opened the case with a soft snap of the latch. Inside lay an age-darkened shaft of wood, oak from the look of it, about ten inches long. It was carved in a pattern that Hermione couldn't quite make out, until he shifted his own wand so that the light fell on it more steadily. Feathers. The wand had been carved with the shafts and barbels of feathers.

"...Do you know what this could be?" he whispered reverently. "It could--no. No, I will not speak the words aloud. If I am wrong, it would bring a disgrace not only to my collection, but to my reputation as the Head of my House. I must perform several tests upon it to authenticate it--goodnight, Miss Granger," Professor Flitwick stated briskly, bobbing his head briefly. "Try not to get caught by Argus. He'd be doubly interested in hanging you by his chains, now that you're not officially a student. A waste and a shame, that."

"Wait--Professor, what do you mean, collection?" Hermione couldn't help asking as he started to back out from under the Cloak, snapping the lid of the wand-case shut on its unusual contents. "What sort of collection?"

"My wand collection, of course! I used to take all the wands from my toughest opponents, back in my dueling days. I've added to it since then, with the wands of some of the more famous witches and wizards I can afford, though I wish I could afford more." He straightened and gave her a proud, if tremulous, look. "Albus bequeathed me his wand, in his will. That was the wand that took down the infamous Grindelwald, you know. It's quite the prize for my collection, even if I wish with all my heart I didn't have the chance to own it..."

His hands patted and stroked the case in his arms, then he backed out from under the Cloak and hurried away, clutching his 'precious'. Hermione blinked and watched him retreat. All this time, and she'd never known Professor Flitwick had a famous-wands collection... She wondered in brief amusement if he'd want Harry's wand for his collection, too. Or even the Dark Lord's wand, though she thought that owning and wielding it would be almost as icky as wearing that locket-Horcrux. Dismissing the encounter, Hermione hurried back to the library.

...

You're not at the school. You haven't been there all month. We've just had word, coded, in a letter from one of the Slytherin students. Whoever is watch-dogging the mail has been keeping word of your absence out of the students' letters home. Where are you?--No, wait, don't answer that. I do not want to know any details, if you aren't at Headquarters. Unless you're in your bed, of course?

Hermione was glad he corrected himself. Since she was currently at Gringotts, standing in the queue with Harry and Ron while they waited to for an escort to Harry's vault, her position was a little vulnerable. Her two friends were busy discussing Quidditch as a way to pass the time. Apparently they'd come on the wizarding equivalent of payday, and there were a lot of people here. Tonks was here with them, and the Auror woman, Violetta, who had apparently joined the Order shortly before Dumbledore's death. They were a few bodies back in the queue, but that was all they needed to be; once they were in goblin hands, only a fool would attempt to attack the trio of friends.

Keeping the tablet close to her chest, Hermione wrote back, **I'm in a public place. Mind your manners.**

I'd love to ask you why you aren't at the school, but I haven't the time. I finally got a chance to be alone with Mr. O. A certain object of silver and blue significance apparently came through his shop twice, in his lifetime. The first time, he sold it to a puzzling fellow. The second time, it had been stolen from wherever the puzzling fellow had put it, had undoubtedly exchanged several hands, and wound up sold back to the shop without the seller knowing its

significance. Unfortunately, Mr. O was not in the shop that day; his nephew filled in for him, and during the bustle of the day, the object, after being purchased and placed behind the counter for examination by Mr. O when he would return...it was stolen from the shop. The puzzling fellow is very much interested in where this object went, though he will not say. He is keeping Mr. O to extract information on tracking down wands, how to trace their ownership lineages--as some are resold and resold over time--and has been torturing a list of collectors' names from Mr. O...who has thankfully proven most resistant to coercion. Brian asked me to investigate unusual interests and activities on the puzzling fellow's part. I hope this information is significant to your quest. ~RUSSEL.

The page flared and the ring trapped under the joint of her thumb turned cold. Hermione ignored the curious look Ron gave her over his shoulder. Quickly scribbling down what she could recall of his words, she committed the three most important bits: object of silver and blue significance, Mr. O's nephew, and list of collectors' names. 'Puzzling fellow' obviously referred to Riddle. Tom Riddle, aka Lord Voldemort, was apparently interested in tracing down a wand. And 'silver and blue significance'...

"Rowena Ravenclaw's wand," Hermione whispered.

"What was that, Hermione?" Harry asked her.

She pressed the tablet to her chest, wondering how to reveal her information. "...I just figured something out, that's all."

Ron turned to look back at her. His gaze narrowed, and he reached out, plucking on the chain and tugging the scale-patterned ring into view, eyeing it as it dangled and gleamed. "Where'd you get this ring, Hermione? Is this what you've been wearing all along?"

"I got my hands on it at my parents' place." Snatching it from his grasp before he could slide his hand down the chain far enough to touch the metal, she tucked it back down into her shirt, out of sight. It was the truth; she'd gotten it there, if out of a letter that had been mailed to her parents. "The line's moved."

They shuffled forward in the queue. Harry moved closer, prompting Ron to do the same. "So, what did you figure out?"

"Um..." Dropping her voice, Hermione offered, "I figured out why Mr. Ollivander was kidnapped. *Tom*," she stressed quietly as they strained to listen, "is looking for a wand. Rowena Ravenclaw's wand."

A bunch of clues had come together in her mind. The encounter last week with Professor Flitwick, Russel's information, the bits about collections and collectors. She had no reason to think the wizarding world would be any different in regards to collecting things than the Muggle world. Her two friends were giving her a puzzled look.

"Listen, it's simple," she explained as they moved forward again. "People like to collect things. Famous things. Mr. Ollivander sells wands. We know Tom wanted something special from Ravenclaw for...for you-know-what," she hedged carefully. "*Why* would he kidnap a wand-maker, unless it's because that wand-maker remembers where all of the wands are?"

"But why would he do that?" Ron argued under his breath. "Surely he had the wand hidden, like he had the locket."

"It's not a locket that hardly anyone ever knew about, it's an artifact of Ravenclaw history. And there are wizards out there who collect such things...and in the collection business, there are unscrupulous people. Thieves willing to steal objects, either for their own collections, or for profit, selling to those who don't quite care how they get their hands on their obsession. Some objects are stolen, fenced, sold, stolen again, lost, found, stolen, sold...hundreds of times! The more important it is, the harder it is to hold onto it, sometimes. Even if it's not overly famous outside of collecting circles."

It was their turn. Breaking off the conversation, the trio waited while Harry requested access to his vault. They were shown to a cart with a goblin, and as the cart rocketed along the tracks, Hermione huddled with her friends, clutching at the edge of the bumping, jostling cart as she revealed the last bit.

"And just last week, I told you I bumped into Professor Flitwick. He had a wand in a box, and smelled like he'd been drinking...like he'd been meeting someone down at the Hog's Head, like Hagrid sometimes does. The wand looked very old, and he said if he'd damaged it, it would bring disgrace to his House...and yet how many people know that Professor Flitwick even *has* a wand collection? I certainly didn't!"

"Probably only his Ravensclaws knew," Ron observed. "And maybe only a select few, at that."

"Yes, but is it *her* wand, and does it have...you-know-what in it?" Harry asked Hermione.

She rolled her eyes as the cart came to a stop. "Harry, I'd just come out of the loo. I wasn't expecting to trip over a professor, and I wasn't exactly thinking about any of this at the time. I was more concerned about him giving away my presence."

They climbed out, and the goblin used the small golden key Harry had provided to open his vault. While he was busy filling a sack with golden Galleons and silver Sickles, Hermione saw Ron averting his gaze. Moving close, she touched his arm and murmured in his ear. She had to lift onto her toes to do so, given how tall he'd grown. "...We're all in this together, Ron. Share and share alike."

He looked down at her, some of the pain of envy fading from his gaze. Then his nose wrinkled wryly. "Well, that may be, but I'm not sharing *you*. He can have my sister, for that."

Hermione wrinkled her own nose. "Eww! Harry's like a brother to me! The brother I always wished I'd had," she added as Harry joined them, the goblin shutting the vault door. "At least, I hope you don't mind I think of you as a brother, Harry."

His brows rose. "Mind? D'you think I'd mind having the smartest witch alive as my sister? You've got to be nutters, if you'd think I'd *mind*!" He looked at Ron, including him in the conversation. "The two of you are like the family I always wanted, but never got to have."

Ron grinned, climbing into the cart and helping Hermione in after him. He grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him in, and the goblin started the cart along the tracks once again. "Well, I'd take a blood-brother oath with you, Harry, but I think we both know how you'll end up a part of my family. That, and it'd end up being incest, so I'll pass...that is, you'll probably wind up in our family *if* you'll wait until after she's out of school. I'll have to beat you senseless if you try anything other than snogging, before then."

"Yeah, you and what Quidditch team?" Harry joked, nudging Ron with his shoulder.

"Me and my whole family, that's what team!" Ron shoved him back. Hermione watched them jostle each other very much like brothers would. Nervous, she gripped the edge of the cart, hoping it stayed on the rails. The goblin, unconcerned, continued to work the lever-like controls.

...

The sign in the window said *Temporary Management under Redmond Ollivander*. Mr. Ollivander's nephew, once they stepped inside, looked a bit twitchy. He had the same shock of hair as his uncle, though his hair was dark brown. He was middle-aged, not quite to the point of wrinkles, but there was a definite set of tension in his body. He greeted them with a distracted smile. "Hello. Which one of you needs the wand? Replacement, or repair?"

"Enquiry, actually," Hermione corrected him gently. He seemed a bit high-strung, glancing at the doorway occasionally.

"We're looking for information on whether or not a certain wand ever came through this shop. What it was made of, what it looked like, that sort of thing." Harry stepped up to the counter. "I realize your time is valuable, keeping shop for Mr. Ollivander during his absence, but it's very important."

"Yes, well, Uncle Roland is still out of the country for the moment," the clerk offered with a weary, imperfect smile. Clearly, maintaining the pretense that everything was

just fine had grown tedious after so long. "But I might be able to help you. What do you want to know?"

"We want to know if this shop has had a certain wand here within the last fifty years. Rowena Ravenclaw's wand," Harry stated, his volume low but his words crisp and clear.

Mr. Ollivander's nephew jumped, he twitched that hard. "R-R-Rowena R-Ravenclaw's w-w-w..."

"Please, Mr. Ollivander," Hermione coaxed him softly, moving up on Harry's left while Ron closed in on the right. If the man bolted, they'd be able to stop him, but their intent wasn't to hurt him. "We realize your uncle's disappearance makes you very anxious, and we don't want to add to your anxiety. Or to your troubles. We just want to know about the wand, that's all."

"In fact, we think we can ease your troubles, if you tell us what you know," Ron added. "Did you sell the wand to a short gentleman, an aging wizard about this high?" he asked, holding his hand down near his hip.

"No...no...that wand came through the shop, yes, but it was over three years ago. The wizard you mentioned, I do know him; he stops by every once in a while. That's Filius Flitwick. He teaches Charms up at Hogwarts; surely you're young enough to know him. As for the wand...well, I lost it."

"Lost it?" Harry asked, as Hermione mentally nodded, pleased that Russel's information was being confirmed. Harry pressed the point. "How did you lose it?"

"Well, I was filling in for my uncle while he was at St. Mungo's, since he'd been hit by a bungled charm from a broken wand brought in as a trade-in for a new one...er...I think it was ashwood, with a unicorn hair, badly splintered and frayed. Some fool had tried to fix it with Spell-o-Tape, but didn't bring it in immediately for repairs." Redmond Ollivander shook his head. "If he or she had done that, it could've been repaired, but by the time we got it, the unicorn hair had been badly frayed. Only my uncle didn't realize quite how badly, and the next thing he knew, he was picking his head up from the floor quite literally..."

Ron's face had coloured; even his ears looked ruddy.

"...Anyway, I had a customer, a shifty-looking fellow, sort of short and dumpy, with dark hair, brown eyes, and a potato-nose--you know the kind, broken several times? He'd brought this box with this wand in it to me. I recognized it at once, of course; Uncle made sure I knew what all the famous wands look like, though I'm nowhere near as good at remembering wands as I am faces. You don't forget the sight of an oak wand, phoenix feather core, carved in a pattern of feathers. They don't make them like that anymore. These days, it's all plant-themes, or Danish simplicity, or Grecian column-themes... Yes, I'm very certain it was Rowena Ravenclaw's wand. I might've been a Hufflepuff, but I knew that wand was hers, the moment I saw it. I'm that much of an Ollivander..."

"Anyway, the man wasn't asking nearly what the wand was worth, and I didn't want him to know what it was worth, so I dickered the price down a bit, paid for it, and tucked it behind the counter, since I had a sudden influx of customers coming into the shop. And that's when it happened. In the half hour or so between putting it behind the counter and finishing with my customers...the box had vanished. Uncle was *furious* with me, I can tell you that! He could've gained back thirty times what I paid for it, in auction to several interested buyers!" Redmond Ollivander finished. "Now...could you tell me *why* everyone is so interested in finding out where Rowena Ravenclaw's wand might be?"

Ron pounced on that one with a soft frown. "Who else has been asking?"

"Well...a woman, with dark brown curls, a little taller than this young lady. Middle-aged, too. And a tall, dark blond man--just earlier today, in fact! I didn't like either of them, but especially not the woman. She came by yesterday, actually. The man just seemed rather...intense. But the woman threatened me. It was a veiled threat, nothing I could've taken to the Aurors, but she was very unpleasant to deal with," he shuddered. "It was like her eyes were dead. Nothing human behind them. Horrid!"

"We're sorry you had such an unpleasant time of it," Hermione commiserated.

"Yeah. We'll just leave you, so you won't have to think about it any longer," Ron soothed him as the trio headed for the door.

"Wait--aren't you going to tell me *why* you're all looking for that wand?"

"...It's better if you don't know," Harry replied over his shoulder, pushing open the shop door.

Hermione really wanted to tell him his uncle was alive, though his condition and whereabouts were unknown but presumed unpleasant. She couldn't do it, though. Not by walking back to him and whispering in his ear, nor by sending one of her memo-notes. Oh, she *could* send the shop clerk a 'Ring of Truth' memo...but if word got back to the enemy that someone on the other side knew what had happened to Mr. Ollivander, things could go badly for Russel. Especially since Hermione had no way of knowing if he was the only person accorded the privilege of visiting the wand-maker, aside from his official tormentors. If he was, the finger of suspicion would point straight to the spy in their midst.

Even though there was still a part of her reserving judgment, most of her was beginning to trust in her secret correspondent. Russel had helped her to save several people, and given her a good piece of quest-related information. His sincerity about being on the Order's side seemed valid, so far. She really wanted to believe in him...but that unbelievable betrayal by Professor Snape had damaged her faith in her fellow human beings.

Until she could meet him, could look into his eyes and see what her gut instincts said about him in person, Russel had to be kept on the 'accept with some reservation and wariness' list in her mind.

...

Professor Flitwick's private parlour was a study in...shortness. Hermione, upon being let inside along with Harry and Ron, all three having snuck their way through the castle under Harry's Invisibility Cloak to this late-evening meeting, felt like she was back in her primary schooling days. It almost looked like the Head of Ravenclaw shopped out of a kindergarten supply catalog. Diminutive tables, half-sized sofa, scaled-down Muggle recliner... About the only things that were normal sized were the books crammed into the ceiling-high shelves, and the size of the hearth, which bore a cheerily crackling fire.

There weren't any display cases of wands in evidence, however. Disappointed, Hermione turned her attention towards the Charms Professor. He had doffed his teaching robes, and wore a purple satin lounging robe, replete with dark velvet lapels and a cream coloured ascot. She supposed it was better than finding him in curlers and a tatty chenille robe, but it was an awkward moment all the same.

"Well," Professor Flitwick asserted after gesturing them to take a seat on the sofa. Ron's knees were halfway up his chest, though he tried to look as graceful as their host, or at least nonchalant. "What brings the three of you to me, so late in the evening?"

The two younger wizards looked at Hermione, who had shifted forward to set her bookbag on the floor. She didn't think jumping straight in about Horcruxes and so forth was a good idea. "Er, well...you mentioned the other night that you collect wands. We're rather interested in wands, ourselves. Famous ones."

Professor Flitwick eyed the three of them in pensive silence, arching a fuzzy white brow.

Harry offered a smile. "So we were kind of hoping we could see your collection."

"Ah. Well, my collection is off-limits at the moment. I'm authenticating the newest acquisition, and bringing the lot up to snuff. With Mr. Ollivander's unfortunately disappearance, I don't quite trust his nephew to take care of the oldest ones adequately. But...there *will* be an exhibition of wands in just over a week at the estate of a friend and fellow collector of mine, Frederique Marselle. Collectors from all over Europe, and even a few from the Americas, will be attending. It's strictly by invitation only, for the serious collectors, but...as one of the exhibitors, I'm allowed to bring a few friends," Filius granted, slowing his words with dramatic deliberation. "As I told Miss

Granger, I've got Albus Dumbledore's wand in my collection. That'll be a huge draw among our circles. And..."

"...And?" Harry prompted him.

"...And it would be a huge draw if I could also have on display the wand of the Boy Who Lived...and Who Faced Off Against You-Know-Who," the diminutive professor finished. He quickly held up a hand as all three drew sharp breaths at his temerity. "I realize you don't want to go about unarmed--and I certainly wouldn't blame you, given that you're surely a target of You-Know-Who's wrath...but if you could just *come* to the exhibition, and, oh...showed off that marvelous Patronus Charm of yours..."

Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged looks. Hermione instantly thought that, if word got out Harry Potter would be at this wand exposition, it might draw the Death Eaters out of the woodwork. They'd have to put the Order on alert. Harry, however, was already nodding slowly. "I think we can manage that. So long as you understand I'm not handing my wand over to anybody to touch or examine, not even for an instant, and that's including to anyone I do know and trust."

"Given the current state of the world, I think that's quite understandable. Well. Pack for the weekend, and be here at my chamber door by no later than seven o'clock in the evening of October 24th. I'll have a Portkey ready and waiting. And, er, do bring a couple changes of dress-robos? It's bad enough none of you were in my House--though I really wish you had been, Miss Granger--but I'm not going to let you come to such an elite weekend without promises that you'll be on your best behavior, and that you'll dress appropriately," Professor Flitwick instructed them.

"We'll be clad to the nines, Professor," Harry promised. "Better even than the Triwizard Tournament Ball."

Filius eyed Ron, who was blushing. Standing and gesturing them towards the door, he sighed, "Yes, well, you'd better. Seven o'clock, on the Friday after my birthday--don't forget! And Miss Granger, if you'd be so kind as to lend yourself towards a few Charms demonstrations for some of my colleagues, I'd appreciate it. Consider it your payment for disappointing me by not returning to this school."

"Yes, Professor," Hermione sighed, hefting her bookbag back onto her shoulder. Between Harry and his fame, and her and her grades, she could envy Ron his anonymity.

"One last thing. Mr. Weasley, one of the collectors is Jens Yorsen, of Denmark."

Ron blinked, frowned briefly, and then his eyes widened. "--The famous wizarding chess master?"

"The one and the same. Do *not* disappoint me, if you have the opportunity to play a game or two with him. The Marselle chess set is a full-sized one. It's kept in their rose atrium, I believe," Flitwick informed him. "If the three of you cannot uphold the honor and glory of Rowena Ravenclaw, then you'd better well do it for Hogwarts as a whole."

That was the opportunity they needed, and Hermione pounced. "Professor--that wand I saw the other night, was that Rowena Ravenclaw's wand?"

He gave her a startled look. "Well, you certainly are quick-witted, even if you weren't bright enough to come back for your seventh year. Only time will tell, Miss Granger. Only time will tell. Now, off you go. I have too many classes tomorrow to not need my beauty sleep!"

Manfully, Ron held himself back until they were in the hall and the door firmly shut behind them, though his face had reddened with the effort of silencing his laughter. "...*Beauty sleep?*"

Hermione whapped him on the arm as Harry cast the folds of his father's Cloak over the three of them.

When they arrived at the library, their former Head of House awaited them. She sat perched on the edge of the checkout desk, facing the double doors. Once they had closed and Harry had removed the Cloak, revealing the three of them, she spoke. "You are needed at Headquarters."

The three friends exchanged looks. Ron was the first to speak. "...Why are we needed, Professor?"

Her mouth tightened for a moment before she spoke. "The Order is going to discuss your situation."

"We're not coming back to this school," Harry stated flatly. "We're making progress on our task, and we're not giving it up."

Minerva McGonagall's mouth tightened further. "Nice of you to tell me that, Mr. Potter...when I told you to keep me apprised of said progresses."

"--We *just* figured out one of the clues to the quest," Hermione interceded quickly. "Just today."

"Well, I'll need a bit more than that, before I can allow the three of you to continue to use--or should I say abuse--this facility," Headmistress McGonagall chided them crisply.

Hermione and Ron looked to Harry. He sighed roughly and admitted, "...We're looking for a wand. At least...we *think* we are."

"What do you mean, you think you are? Either you are, or you aren't," the Headmistress reminded him.

"It's like this, Professor," Ron explained. "We're looking for a set of objects. We don't know what one or two of them are, not for sure, but based on what our opponents actions have been, we're reacting to those actions, sort of like chess. Predicting outcomes."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "If it *is* a wand, then we're pretty sure the wand we're looking for is now in Professor Flitwick's keeping, because the most logical wand to be looking for is one that he says he's got...only he won't let us see it right now, to see if it's the one that we want. But we'll have a *chance* to see if it is, in a couple weeks. Only..."

"...Only to have the chance, we're going to be letting a number of people know exactly where Harry, or should I say, the Boy Who Lived, is going to be for a weekend."

Their former Head of House frowned softly for a moment, then her expression cleared. "The wand exhibition! Filius wanted the weekend off from his duties to attend it. That's being held down in the Marselle Mansion, just outside of Dover. That's where he'll let you see the wand in question, isn't it?"

"Yes, and Professor Flitwick invited all three of us...in exchange for being able to tell people that they'll get to see me and my wand," Harry muttered, visibly embarrassed. "And Hermione's skill at Charms, and Ron's at chess."

"Basically, we're supposed to show-off, to make him look good in front of his peers," Ron summed up. "Not that we don't want to make him look good, but it's the price of admission, for us."

"So we're worried about the Death Eaters hearing about it, and maybe attacking," Hermione finished for him, shifting the strap of her bookbag a little more comfortably on her shoulder.

"This exhibition is drawing collectors from all around the wizarding world; it's only held once every three years," McGonagall cautioned them. "Filius told me that security will be very tight. Still...this does dovetail in nicely with what tonight's meeting is about. I think I can use this information," she murmured half to herself. Her gaze sharpened, falling on each of them in turn, ending with Harry. "One more thing. *Why* do you need to get your hands on one of Professor Flitwick's wands?"

"...We can't tell you that," Hermione apologized as Harry flushed again. "The fewer people who know exactly what we're doing, the fewer leaks will make it to our enemies' ears."

"There's going to come a point, Miss Granger, where that will not be good enough as an answer," the older witch cautioned her.

"Trust us," Ron retorted dryly. "You're a lot safer not knowing. If...V...if Voldemort," he forced himself to say as the Headmistress flinched, "found out what we were up to, he'd throw everything he had at us just to stop us. Even if he had to kill off his own Death Eaters to do it."

"That's a bit melodramatic, Ronald Weasley, don't you think?" Minerva countered, blinking at him. Her gaze slipped to Harry's grim face, and to Hermione's equally set features. "...Isn't it?"

Grim silence met her enquiry. Blinking it off, the Headmistress shook her head. Her hand dipped into her pocket, extracting a short length of tartan plaid ribbon.

"Well. We haven't any more time for these matters, though we will discuss them later. Behave yourselves, young gentlemen, young lady, and touch my bookmark. It's a Portkey to Headquarters," she explained as they moved close. When they were all touching a bit of the ribbon, McGonagall touched it with her wand, and their navels yanked sideways. Hermione didn't like Portkeying because of the bruises—including a particularly painful one from Ron's elbow slamming into the side of her breast—but it was better than broom-flying, and somewhat less uncomfortable than the breathless squeezing of Apparation.

The jostling stopped as they landed in the library of 12 Grimmauld Place. They weren't alone. Caught in a half-clad clinch on the rug in front of the hearth were Remus Lupin, trousers rumpled halfway down his thankfully shirttail-covered arse...and Tonks. Who was blushing redder than her fuchsia-pink hair. Her sports jumper was pushed up to her armpits, with Remus' shirt-clad chest smothering her own torso, and her dungarees clung in rumpled folds to the lower half of one leg, and there was no denying why that very long, knee-to-waist length of skin was so bare. Namely because both legs—the fully naked one on the other side, as well as the denim-clad one on the near side—were wrapped around Remus' hips.

The pair were oblivious to the arrivals forced into inadvertent voyeurism a few lengths away. Between the movement of their hips and the frantic, groan-muffled interlocking of their lips, Hermione doubted even the Hogwarts Express roaring through the room a yard away would've been able to get their attention. Minerva's wand snapped up, and an afghan shot off the nearby loveseat, Transfiguring into a privacy screen between them. She chivied the others out of the room with a silent, impatient flutter of her hand. Grateful to leave, Hermione shut the door...but not before hearing the gasping of a name, and a mild profanity reminiscent of one another wizard had shouted in her presence...if one counted words scrawled on a tablet to be a form of shouting.

"There are times when I really wish I could perform a Memory Charm on myself, and that incident is one of them," Minerva muttered as she hustled her charges down the hall. "Into the parlour with you! And not one word out of you about what we just saw."

"Believe me, I'm trying to forget," Ron muttered. They reached the parlour and entered in time to see Molly and Arthur Weasley Transfiguring chairs out of end tables and knickknacks. "Hello Mum, hello, Dad."

"Ronald," Molly acknowledged. Her jaw was tense, but she didn't say a word against his presence. She did give him a brief hug, though, the same with Harry and Hermione.

Others in the Order were beginning to enter the hidden house, and Hermione found herself pressed into conjuring a few more chairs herself, wedging them in wherever they could be fitted. A flushed but tidied Remus came into the room a short while later, his fingers twined with Tonks'. They took a pair of seats next to Hermione as soon as Minerva cleared her throat, indicating everyone should take their seats, and the young witch could smell musky hints of their activity in the increasing warmth of the body-crowded room.

It made her think inappropriate thoughts, not just about Remus and Tonks...but about Russel. Inappropriate as much because she was supposed to be thinking such things about Ron, as for the nature of the thoughts themselves. If she was going to wonder what she'd look like half-clad and wrapped around the body of her lover, she *should* be imagining Ron's freckled form...not some mystery gentleman she'd never even seen in a photograph. She liked Ron. She *knew* Ron. She shouldn't be so intrigued by someone she didn't know, had never met, and wasn't completely able to trust. And she certainly shouldn't be viewing the mystery of Russel the Death Eater Spy as something *exciting* or *stimulating*... Uncomfortable, Hermione crossed her legs and her arms, and waited for the meeting to begin.

Minerva called the meeting to order by firing a single golden spark from the tip of her wand. It arced over everyone's heads and *banged*, catching the attention of eyes and ears alike. Silence quickly settled through the room.

"Thank you," the thin, greying witch stated primly. Hermione watched her tuck a strand of hair behind one ear, only now realizing just how much grey was beginning to salt those dark locks. "First order of business, the question of inducting Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley, and Hermione Granger into the Order of the Phoenix. The point was raised in our last gathering that all three are of-age, and no longer attending Hogwarts. Having passed these qualifications, having proven their dedication to the cause of fighting against the Dark Lord and his followers, and having—to our knowledge—not revealed the identities of any of our members, it has been suggested they be allowed to join our ranks. This *voir-dire* has been arranged so that you may ask any questions of them that you might have before voting on the matter.

"Any questions?"

Shacklebolt, Moody, and several others raised their hands. Hermione received curious looks from Remus and Tonks, but they weren't among the ones raising their hands. Minerva called on Shacklebolt.

He stood, eyeing the trio in the corner near the podium the Headmistress had Transfigured out of a lamp. "Yes, I think I can ask the foremost question on all of our minds. Why aren't these three in school, where they belong?"

"Harry?" Minerva invited him, gesturing with a hand for him to stand. The use of his first name was an additional invitation, a courtesy for him to join the others as an adult, on a first-name basis.

"Thank you...Minerva." Standing, Harry faced the older wizard. "Before Du...before Albus died, he entrusted me with a secret quest, one that he believed would lead to Voldemort's destruction."

Most of the room flinched at the use of the dreaded name, and several Order members averted their gaze. Hermione and Ron, used to hearing it by now, didn't twitch. Harry continued, nonplussed at the others' reactions.

"He gave me permission to tell Ron and Hermione, so that they could help, but cautioned me against telling anyone else the nature of our mission. If Voldemort were to find out, he would stop at nothing to destroy anyone who attempted...and that is all I can tell you."

Moody stood as Harry and Kingsley sat down. "What do you mean, that's all you can tell us, boy? We're the Order of the Phoenix! Anything Albus told you, he could tell to us!"

Hermione spoke up, cutting through the murmur of agreeing voices stirred by Alastor's assertion. "It involves the prophecy that Voldemort tried to get his hands on, last year." She was rather pleased at how smoothly the Dark Lord's name fell from her lips, causing everyone to wince reflexively as she hedged around the real purpose of their quest. "If he knew what that prophecy entailed, Alastor, he would not hesitate to launch an all-out attack. Just as he would for the nature of our quest. The whole Order is far safer with him not knowing about either subject."

"Yes, but that's *him* knowing," Fred's voice piped up from the back. Or maybe it was George's. The twins were sitting next to each other, after all. "That's not the same as *us* knowing."

"Have *you* studied Occlumency, George?" Ron asked his brother, nailing the correct twin. "I'm studying it right now, with Harry and Hermione, and it's really hard. The fewer people who know a secret, the fewer who can give it away...and there's at least one other bastard besides the basilisk-snogger himself who's on...Voldemort's side," he added, hesitating only a little over the name, "someone who can use Legilimency without having to say a word in warning. You wouldn't even know you'd been hit until it was too late, and if you were thinking about these secrets at the time, it would be very bad for us."

"That doesn't explain why you're not in school," someone else asserted. It was Violetta, the blond Auror witch.

"The sooner we can complete our quest, the sooner this war will be over," Harry asserted firmly. "I'm not going to waste time by being stuck in that school. And I'm *not* going to risk any unnecessary lives. The longer this war goes on, the more people will get hurt...and killed."

"What makes yeh right fer this quest o' Dumbledore's?" Hagrid asked from his seat on one of the sturdier chairs near the back of the crowded parlour. "What says someone else couldn't do it in yer place?"

"Prophecy."

The one-word answer came from Ron's and Hermione's lips as well as Harry's. The three friends exchanged quick, grim looks. Harry finished answering for the three of them.

"That's all we can tell you. Either you trust us, or you don't; it's up to you. We're going to do what we have to do, and we'll do it whether or not we're in the Order. We won't betray the Order's secrets, if we can help it," Harry added, "but if you want us, it's on the understanding that we've got our own task to take care of...and that we won't take orders that conflict with it, nor answer demands to tell you what it is."

His quiet, firm delivery did more to convince the others in the room that they were adults, Hermione decided from the thoughtful expressions around her, than a more impassioned speech might have tried.

"...I am being kept apprised of their progress," Minerva stated into the pensive quiet filling the parlour. "They will let me know what is needed, and how they are faring, and I in turn will judge how much the Order should know. You gave me your confidence after Albus passed, when you voted for me to lead you. I am giving my confidence to these three."

"But, zey are children!" That was Fleur Weasley's voice. Hermione hadn't noticed her enter, and couldn't exactly see the other witch, though she could just see the edge of a blond figure leaning over to peer at Minerva past Hagrid's bulk.

"They are adults in the eyes of wizarding law...and adults by the fact that they know what is the right thing to do." The Headmistress' mouth tightened for a moment, then she sighed. "As much as I would prefer to have them safe at Hogwarts...they must do what they must do, the same as we ourselves. That is the mark of maturity. I would have them acting as Order members, to give them better resources for their quest, letting them feel free to call upon the rest of you for assistance. I had faith in Albus Dumbledore to lead us with the clearest vision, and I will have faith in the three whom he entrusted with his most secret strategies. I vote that we should include them."

"All in favour, raise your wand-hand."

Some arms rose immediately. Others took a few seconds. Hermione made a note to see who was immediately enthusiastic and who wasn't. Some of the latter might merely be feeling pressured to include them...and some of the former, her mind acknowledged with uncomfortable cynicism, might be trying to curry their favour, perhaps to use their presence to further their own ends within the Order, in the future. By the time the last arm went up, nearly everybody that she could see had raised their hands. It looked like Fleur's hand was one of the last, as was Moody's, but Mrs. Figg had been the first one to raise her hand, even though it meant interrupting her knitting.

"Hands down. All those opposed, raise their hands, please?" Minerva strained to see past Hagrid. "...None against. Abstentions uncoun- Well. Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix, Ronald, Harry, Hermione," she acknowledged with a tip of her head. "Don't disappoint us. We'll settle the details of what the expectations will be, the alarm codes, and how to contact the various Order members at the end of the meeting. Right now, we've got reports to hear. Remus, you have a report from the werewolf community?"

Hermione tried not to blush as he stood. From where she sat, she had a clear shot of his trouser-front...and the way his zipper sat at half-mast. Desperate to look elsewhere, she stared at the china hutch in the corner as she listened to his words, trying to quell the heat in her face and chest...chest? The ring in her cleavage had grown warm. Digging into her book bag, she pulled out her tablet and her pen, then surreptitiously fished out her ring while the others' attention was diverted by a question from a plump, grey-haired witch near the hearth. Ready to write down an address, she found herself relieved and annoyed that the ring was smooth.

Are you ready for another session of scribbled sex?

I'm in a meeting, she wrote on the pad, watching both sets of ink fade one after the other, his black and hers blue.

The Order?

Yes.

Have you mentioned me?

No.

Good. Don't. Congratulations on joining, by the way, Russel wrote to her. **Now you can officially throw your life away along with the rest of us total nutters. Harry and Ron are with you?**

Yes.

Good. Don't tell them, either.

Not yet, at any rate, she wrote back. Remus leaned close, bringing along another whiff of sex with him. She protectively cradled the tablet against her chest.

"You're not planning on taking those notes out of this house, are you?" he whispered.

"It's just a mnemonic aid," Hermione dismissed, cobbling the excuse together quickly. "I'll burn the page when I'm done. I just remember things better if I write them down while I'm learning them."

"You were always diligent in your note-taking," her former teacher reminisced briefly, before falling respectfully silent as Shackbolt outlined the Ministry's supposed progress in the war against the Death Eaters.

Hermione glanced at the tablet again. Words faded from the page even as she focused on them. Quickly, she reapplied pen to sheet. **What was that? I missed it.**

Russel didn't respond for a few moments. **I just said I don't want to know what the Order is doing, either. Call it a double-blind experiment, but so long as they don't know what I'm up to, and I don't know what they're up to, the safer we'll all be... I have a question for you, Jane.**

Go ahead, Hermione encouraged him, splitting her attention between the tablet and the meeting, which was turning out a bit duller than expected.

Is it better to die a martyr to the cause, or to continue living afterwards, knowing that you'll be reviled for your past, and unwelcome anywhere?

That was a heavy question. Hermione gave it careful thought. **...While there's life, there's hope, Russel**, she finally wrote. **Once this war is over, we'll be free to tell everyone all the good things you've done. You've already saved several lives, working with me. Mr. Lubbock, Ms. Cathcart, the Weasleys, the Creeveys, the Turnbolls, Mrs. Whidbey...**

And yet I cannot forget the lives that have died because of me, and my seeming complicity, just for the sake of being here in this position.

That again required some thought before she could answer him. **If it were me...I think I would have trouble resolving these questions, too. But I would remind myself that while I cannot save everyone, I can still save many. And that I am needed, that my position is necessary. And that those who take the time to understand my task will understand my actions, too, and the occasional necessity of them.**

That's my Jane; ever the eternal optimist.

Not quite; I'm more of a pragmatist.

Even better; a girl after my own heart. Or what passes for it.

You have a strange way of flattering a person,she wrote.

I'm a strange man, some days. I'll consider your words, for what they're worth. I need you to research something for me, he changed the subject. Hermione kept part of her attention on the meeting, but Russel's request had surprised her.

What do you need?

An amalgamation of a Protean Charm and a Forging Charm. But it has to be able to link objects because of their similarity in shape, purpose and use, not because of the charm being applied to each and every item.

She nibbled on her lower lip. **That's a tough one... It would have a limited range, I think, if it could be made to work at all. I take it you have some metal objects you need forging?**

Something like that. I'd research it, but I'm stuck here. If the library doesn't have what you'll need, you might want to try breaking into the traitor's home. I've snuck a peek through the books the traitor brought here in the rush to vacate the premises, and what I'm looking for isn't in any of the tomes on hand.

What do you need it for?

Sabotage. It has to also work on something cradled in the hands--gloved hands--but whatever the object is, in the hands, that's what it'll link to within the field of effect. And that field of effect needs to be as large as possible, and take effect as close to instantaneous as possible.

That's a tall order. You aren't going to need this anytime soon, are you?

I don't know. I'm not asking you to run out of your meeting and start researching it immediately, but I'll need it before things are brought to a head. I'll get you the address of the traitor's home later, if you end up needing it--I have to go. ~RUSSEL

The paper flashed, vanishing from the tablet. Remus, Tonks, Ron and Harry all eyed her suspiciously. Even Minerva glanced her way. Tucking pen, paper and ring close to her chest, she gave them blank looks, returning her attention fully to the current speaker.

Chapter 06

Chapter 6 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

Author's Notes: Warning, naughty disciplinarian scenario ahead. ~Lotm

VI.

...And I will palm and lift the weight of one luscious breast, cradling it gently in my hand...

Fingers groped and pinched, squeezing her breast uncomfortably.

...While my tongue licks in little laps along the curve of your upper lip, as if it were a rich, dark chocolate eroding under my touch as I seek that first taste of your creamy, heady centre...

The flavour of watercress, ham and mustard assaulted her senses, along with the poking and prodding of a tongue.

...My teeth will nibble your bottom lip with a delicate scrape, stimulating the need for more...

Their teeth bashed together. Grimacing, Hermione pulled back, wanting to end the clinch. Ron tightened his grip, grinding the lump of his erection against her hipbone with uncomfortable pressure. Straining back, Hermione gave up and wedged her hand between their mouths, cutting off their kiss. Ron loosened his grip, finally allowing her to step back.

"...What's wrong?"

*Where to begin?*she thought. But how do I put it tactfully? "Ron..."

"What?" he repeated defensively. Great. Once he got defensive, there was no way to get through to him delicately. Hermione sighed and said what was on her mind.

"You...well, you're mashing my breasts like they're boiled potatoes." She winced even as the words escaped, but it really was the best description. The offended look in his eyes didn't help. "And...it wouldn't hurt to brush your teeth after eating ham and watercress. The mustard's not too bad, but I don't like ham, and I don't like watercress," she found herself babbling nervously as his brows drew down. "Not second-hand, at any rate. And, um...I'd really appreciate it if you also didn't try to stick your tongue down my throat like that."

That forced a disgusted noise from his throat, and his hands flopped up and down, slapping against his denim-clad legs. "--Hermione, we were French kissing! You're supposed to get your tongue down the other person's throat!"

"Well, not by shoving it! All that did was make me want to clench my jaw, so I wouldn't gag! Kissing should be... It should be done with a lot more finesse, care, and consideration!"

"--Are you trying to tell me I don't know how to kiss?" Ron blustered. "I've had a lot more experience at it than you, I'd wager!"

"I'm just trying to tell you that I like a little more refinement in such things!" Hermione shot back, irritated by his comment about 'a lot more experience'. She didn't need a reminder of all the time he'd spent playing suck-face with Lavender Brown, during their sixth year. Shifting forward, she grabbed his crotch, ignoring his flinch. "You were doing this to my breasts!"

"--Hermione!" the freckled wizard all but shrieked, yanking his groin back out of her squeezing fingers. "Dammit, that hurt! You could've maimed me!"

"You were hurting *me*," she pointed out, feeling a small twinge of guilt, but only a small one.

"It's not the same thing! Breasts don't hurt like bollocks do, when you grab 'em roughly like that!"

"How would *you* know?" she challenged him tartly, shifting her hands to her hips. "You don't have any, Ron! How would you know what hurts or what doesn't...*unless I told you?* And I am *telling you* it hurt!"

"--You know what? I'm not in the mood anymore!" Turning, he stalked out of the library. It had a dismal atmosphere for reading, but not too bad a one for snogging. Or so the two of them had thought. Sighing heavily, Hermione sank onto the loveseat, trying not to stare at the section of rug where Remus and Tonks had lain the other night.

As if timed by the hand of the devil, her ring grew warm, inside her shirt. Crossing to the writing desk, she pulled out a sheet of paper, a quill and an ink jar, since she didn't have her tablet with her. Words spilled across the page as soon as she pressed the ring to its surface.

The Naughty Secretary Scenario

What the...? Hermione stared at the words, taken aback. It sounded like he was in a frisky mood...and it was the descriptiveness of their last couple of sessions that had caused the dichotomy between what Russel had promised and what Ron could deliver. She wasn't in the mood for this, and dipped her quill in the jar, ready to tell him so. More scrawled into view, further confusing her.

This is the fifth time you have been late for work, Miss Janeson. You should know better than to disrupt my office with such juvenile antics.

Miss Janeson? Why would he call me...oh! Someone must be looking over his shoulder! Her weariness with the whole snogging-and-sex situation evaporated under the awareness that she was expected to perform like a piece of adult-shop novelty stationery. Pen to page, she wrote back dutifully, **I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Fawkeson. Isn't there any way I can make up for what I've done?**

You need discipline, girl; punishment and discipline. Come here, and stand in front of my desk!

Yes, sir, she wrote back, feeling a little uncomfortable at the scenario. She just wasn't very experienced in such things yet, despite the handful of smut-conversations they'd held. He'd said he might have to perform such a thing for real, to disguise why he was in bed with quill and parchment. Hermione had always thought that was just a flimsy excuse for titillation. Now, she couldn't tell if this was real or not.

Now, fold your arms, put them on the desk, and put your head on your arms. Do it!

...Am I being given a time-out, sir?

You're being taught a lesson! Head to that desktop!

Yes, sir.

Good girl. Or rather, you'll learn how to be a good girl! Now, put your cheek on my blotter, and reach back behind yourself. Quickly! That's it...grab your skirt, and draw it up.

How high, sir? Hermione wrote. She hesitated, then added, **Up to the backs of my knees?**

Higher.

Up to the middle of my thighs?

Higher!

But sir...if I draw it any higher, you'd see the tops of my stockings! That wouldn't be very professional of me.

I said, higher, Ms. Janeson! Pull that skirt hem all the way up to the TOP of your knickers! NOW!

--Yes, sir!

Now, keep your skirt bunched around your waist. I am going to draw down your knickers.

But sir! That would be highly inappropriate!

I am going to give your backside a thrashing, Miss Janeson! You will not be allowed to have anything in the way that might cushion the blows of your disciplining! It's either learn your lesson, or be sacked--which would you prefer?

Please...I'll keep my skirt up, sir. I need this job...

Good. Hmm. Your suspenders are in the way. Next time, you will don your knickers outside your suspender belt. I'm not going to bother unfastening and refastening the straps. To punish you for the inconvenience, I'm simply going to take these scissors from my desk drawer, here, and cut them off!

Oh, no, sir! Please don't! I can't go around without knickers for the rest of the day!

Consider it a part of your punishment. Keep that skirt high! You don't want me to cut it off as well, do you? There. I shall pull the cloth free, and...it's damp. Your knickers are damp, Miss Janeson. Damp, and musky. I think you're enjoying this...

N-No, Hermione carefully scripted, to simulate a stammer. She tried not to squirm in her seat. Just like the other times, Russel was demonstrating his ability to describe an erotic moment in an uncomfortably arousing level of detail.

Oh, really? What if I were to rest my hand on your bum? I could slap it--thus!--and watch your flesh quiver from the blow. And again--so!--and watch the pale,

creamy curve turn pink under the soothing caress of my hand...and if I were to slip my hand down between your thighs...oh, you're wet, aren't you? Crisp pubic hair covering warm, fleshy folds...and the wetness you're trying to conceal. Move your feet apart, Miss Janeson--now!

Y-Yes, sir...ohh, sir...

You like that, Miss Janeson? Do you like the feel of my hand touching you? Circling and stroking and fondling you so intimately, like this? Do you prefer the slap of my hand--hard!--or the soft caress of it, afterwards?

Unsure what to write, Hermione settled for an ambiguous, Oh, sir...

Oh, yes, you're very wet. I think you like both. Well, I still have to ensure that you'll never mess up again in my office. Shall I pound it into your head? ...Or into your cunt? Your cunt, I think; how naughty of you to still have your skirt lifted high.

But you told me to--

--SILENCE! he slashed across her words. Do you feel that? That is the touch you will submit to, if you expect to retain your employment status with my company. I could get a dozen witches in here to take your place, and if you want to stay gainfully employed, you will submit to being spitted on the pike of my prick!-- There! Take that and like it!

OW! It was all she could think of to write. Her face was flaming; she didn't know what to do about this part of the scenario. Being bent over a desk and taken from behind sounded titillating and even thrilling in the trashy romances she'd read over the last few weeks, but to actually go through with it in practice? The guy would have to be rather short-legged, she decided.

Never had anything so big, so deep, have you?

N-No, sir...

Ungh! Each stroke is deep enough, I slam into your creamy buttocks with a delicious slap, but I can't get deep enough!

I know, sir...

Oh, yes, take it deep! Feel the desk biting into your thighs! My fingers bruising your hips! The thrusting of my flesh!

Please, sir!

Please--what?

Please...deeper, sir! H-Harder... Fuck me, sir! Hermione wrote with unsteady fingers. She was biting her lower lip again, but this time from the heat of the scene they were describing. Every time Russel tempted her into role-playing like this, he tapped deeper into her imagination. Like that crystal powder florists sold to be put into vase water, he fed her flowering sexuality, encouraging it to bloom.

He was certainly a lot more successful at arousing her than Ron was, with his breast-mashing and tongue-gagging antics, sad as that fact might be.

God, yes! Take it, you little slut! Take all of it!

The ink of his dicto-quill wobbled, and creamy white seeped through the paper. Setting down her quill, Hermione hesitated, then lifted the paper, ring caught against the surface under her left palm, and licked the liquid he'd spilled. It tasted odd, musky and bitter, salty and something else, with a chaser of wood-pulp, but it seemed like the right thing to do in the heat of the moment. She always felt utterly naughty doing this, even slutty, but after having done it once and not minded, it seemed a bit hypocritical to refuse to do it again.

"...Hermione? Why are you licking that paper?"

Hermione shrieked and slapped the paper onto the writing desk, thumping her ring with a clunk on top of it. Heart pounding, she peered wide-eyed over her shoulder at Harry, who was halfway between her and the door. Somehow he'd entered the room so quietly she hadn't even heard him. A moment later she jumped again as the parchment flashed and vanished in a brief wash of heat.

"What's going on?" Harry asked her, coming closer.

"Oh, er...just practicing some magic," Hermione hedged breathlessly, giving him a smile and a noncommittal shrug. "You startled me. What's up?"

"Ron. He's sulking and says it's your fault."

That made her snort, "More like *his* fault. Ham-handed...!" Mastering the urge to glower, since Harry wasn't at fault, she sighed and shook her head. "All I did was make a few observations and a couple reasonable requests about how he was...well, I tried to suggest how he could snog a little better, and he took offense. He'll get over it, I'm sure."

"Hermione...you don't go telling a bloke he could snog a little better," Harry told her, wincing at the topic.

"Harry, if I don't tell him what I don't like, how will I get him to do something else?" she shot back.

"I don't know--by telling him what you *do* like?" Harry offered.

"Well, he stormed out of here before I could get to that part," Hermione retorted darkly. "And I'd rather not talk about it right now."

"Alright," he agreed, dropping the subject. "I came in here to tell you that Mrs. Weasley, Tonks and the twins will be escorting us tomorrow when we go to get our formal dress robes. Or rather, Molly and Tonks will be escorting you, and Ron and I will get Fred and George. We'll separate after visiting Gringotts. I was figuring we'd need about four or five outfits to fit in, though I'm not quite sure what to get. D'you have any idea what a...a swanky wizarding weekend would require?"

She shook her head. "Not exactly. Something to wear during the day, and something else to wear during the evening that's fancier. And...something we can move in, if anyone attacks the place."

"That's what I was thinking. I think I saw an upscale shop near Fred and George's place, in Diagon Alley." He gave her a wry smile. "I don't know if Madam Malkin's has formal robes that are formal enough. I've never been to anything like this."

"None of us have," Hermione agreed. "What time are we leaving, tomorrow morning?"

"Seven o'clock. Ron and I have our Apparation license tests to take, at the Ministry of Magic. Shackbolt set it up for us."

"I'll be ready," Hermione promised. The ring, still trapped under her palm, heated up again. Thankfully, Harry left with a nod, closing the door behind him. Peering at the gleaming metal, she saw no scales, and rummaged for another sheet of paper.

Sorry about that. My highly unwanted roommate got nosy, and I had to cover my tracks as to what I was doing in bed with paper and pen. You performed

brilliantly, by the way.

Thanks. I guess.

I've found out something important, but you must promise to NOT act upon it. At least, not prematurely. Do you promise?

Hermione wasn't sure what to make of that request. She decided it couldn't hurt to hear what he had to say. **To the best of my own judgment**, she wrote, **I will stay my hand until I deem the moment is right to act.**

...I suppose that will have to do. Here's what's happening: Mr. O has been released. He has returned to his shop under the pretense that he was called overseas unexpectedly to deal with a terminally ill relative--and if anyone investigates, all the evidence will point to this as being true; the relative has died and Mr. O has been handling the estate, so on and so forth, and is finally free to come home. Now, there's going to be a very large gathering of wand-collectors this weekend. Rumor has it that the Boy Who Lived will be attending. If this is true, that gathering is more than just a prime target for the wand that our puzzling fellow is so interested in locating. He'll want to make a strategic strike. However, if you try to act on this information before the exhibition, it would make him change his tactics. It would be better to catch them all in the act, or at least as many as you can.

Hermione read between the lines and wrote back, **Let me guess: Mr. O will be under the influence of the Imperius Curse...and a couple of your fellow 'idiots' will be going along with him as his invited guests?**

You're as brilliant as advertised, Jane. Only I'm being considered to go as one of the 'guests'. I'm in two minds about being included in this enterprise. On the one hand, if I'm on hand, I can help discreetly with sabotage and damage-control. On the other hand, if I'm captured, the Order loses its last and most secret spy in the enemy ranks. It's a calculated risk for several reasons, but it's been judged that my talents are better-served being close on hand, as all of the 'guests' will be in disguise. I've a fair hand at crafting certain glamour charms, among other means of disguise. And I will have a Portkey on me at all times, ready to yank me out of there literally at a thought, if I'm in danger of being captured.

So then I might actually get to see you?

Yes, but not in my true form. None of us will be recognizable. I take it you'll be there along with Harry?

And Ron, she admitted. **We're attending as Professor Flitwick's guests.**

You also think the wand in question will be at the exhibition, then?

It's very likely, she returned carefully, hedging as truthfully as she could, **that if the wand is in the possession of a collector and recognized for what it is, it'll be brought to the exhibition as a marvelous centrepiece for that person's collection. They won't be able to resist showing it off.**

That's our line of thought, too, here in the enemy camp. I still don't know why he wants it, but he wants that wand. I've overheard some of his plans for how he'll hide it once he gets it, and it'll be very difficult to extract, once it's in his possession. You and your friends need to get to it first.

We know. We'll be on the lookout for it, she promised him.

So...are you addicted to the flavour of me, yet?

She blushed bright red, glancing over her shoulder to make sure she was still alone. **That's a rather intimate question.**

That's a rather intimate act. I wish I could risk contacting you during the weekend, but it would not be easy to slip away unnoticed from either group of our fellow 'guests', and it would be unimaginably dangerous if we were caught talking in anything but the most casual and openly social of instances. But I can imagine it, when I stare at you from across the proverbial crowded room.

Do you know what I look like, then?

Yes. Brown eyes, curly chestnut hair, average height, average curves, nice smile. Oh, yes, and according to the traitor's description of you before the monster leading us, you're an insufferable, hand-waving, book-parroting know-it-all, with no imagination, no talent for improvisation, and an inability to think for yourself. I hate him.

Hermione hated having Snape's opinion of her addressed so bluntly. She'd respected the man for his knowledge, and had even admired him for his work in the order, but now... **How much trouble would you get into, if you gave him a Whirling Wedgie Jinx for me?**

Russel didn't answer for a few moments. Then more ink spilled out from the ring. **Damn you--I laughed out loud. My stupid, loathsome roommate wanted to know what was so funny. I lied, of course. Thank Merlin he won't be going on this mission. No charm or potion could disguise his ugly mug for long, and far too many people would want to kill him for the deaths he's caused... Unfortunately, I must go. But...**

Yes?

Dark chocolate with creme centres, or dark chocolate with caramels?

Dark chocolate with nuts, actually. Or mint-flavoured solids. I never liked cremes or caramels.

I'll see what I can do. Goodnight, Jane. ~RUSSEL

Goodnight, Russel. ~Jane, she returned, and sighed as the second sheet immolated itself.

...

Marselle Mansion was what Hermione expected Malfoy Manor to look like. Not that she'd ever seen the latter edifice, but by counting the glow of the windows in the evening gloom, this one had five wings, four floors above the ground level for the main buildings, several towers extending a couple floors above that, two dozen house-elves within immediate view, actual wizarding servants--guards hired for the event, she suspected--and a very vigorous screening process just to get in the front gates. There were three queues: one for exhibitors and their collections; one for male guests; and one for female guests.

Having arrived in the meadow between the gates of the mansion and the cliffs in the distance--the estate had an anti-Apparation charm laid on it much like Hogwarts did--the four of them had been separated into their respective queues. Flitwick levitating the chest containing his treasures as well as his trunk of clothes, and Harry, Ron and herself levitating their trunks. Her trunk passed inspection, but when the magic-sniffing device was passed over her body, Hermione had to reveal both the ring and the bracelet. The witch scanning her pressed a white, roundish stone into Hermione's hand.

"That's a Truthstone," the middle-aged woman stated. "State what the objects are for, one at a time, and be truthful about it. Any lies, and they'll have to stay out of the compound."

Hermione wondered how Russel and the others were going to get past this part of the procedure. Maybe Polyjuice potion or something... Clasp the stone in her palm, she stated quietly so that Ron and Harry in the next line over wouldn't hear, "The ring is a betrothal ring. The bracelet was a gift from a friend."

"What does it do?"

"It's supposed to help me manage my time better. But I haven't really needed to use it so far," Hermione added as dismissively yet vaguely as she could.

"Let me see the stone," the witch commanded. Hermione opened her fingers, displaying the all-white stone. There was a faint, palest grey impression of her fingerprints wrapped around the curved hemisphere, but the witch didn't comment, just tapped the stone with her wand to scour it completely white and nodded at the gates behind her. "You may pass."

Grateful her friends hadn't noticed, Hermione closed the lid of her trunk and floated it in her wake as she walked onto the mansion grounds. Harry was already waiting, and after a minute, Ron joined them, looking a little sour at having to leave behind some of his brothers' Wizard Wheezes creations. It took another five minutes before their former Charms professor made it through the inspection of his own luggage and person.

As they waited, they watched the other wizards and witches being permitted onto the grounds. All were wearing upscale wizarding robes, and seemed to come from a wide variety of backgrounds and continents, including Africa and the Americas. But finally the short wizard managed to join them, and they headed up the drive to the sprawling, oversized house. A couple house-elves commandeered their luggage, all save for the large, hovering chest that Professor Flitwick guarded jealously, glaring fiercely at the one house-elf that dared squeak anything about taking charge of that piece of his luggage.

It didn't take long for them to be shown to their quarters in the main wing; it was a suite of rooms, a sitting room, a bathing chamber, and two bedrooms connected by a changing room. With a few flicks of his wand, Filius claimed the changing room, changing the day-couch to a four-poster in a show of Transfiguration that would've done his colleague, Minerva, proud. A poke of his wand at the 'master' and 'mistress' chambers to either side settled where the other three would sleep.

"Harry, Ron, you will sleep in the master chamber. Hermione," he added, having asserted that they could call him by his first name for this trip, since they weren't on the school grounds and didn't need to maintain his dignity, "you will take the mistress' chamber. Since none of you are married, it wouldn't be proper to have the arrangements any other way. I shall take the dressing room for three reasons:

"To provide a chaperone buffer for Miss Granger; to ensure that anyone trying to come at me and my collection in off-hours has to first breach the wards on your own rooms--and you *will* put up suitably complex wardings," he warned his former pupils, "--and, well, because I'm told I snore half as loud as Rubeus Hagrid, which is far too loud for anyone else to get any sleep. Now, hurry up and change into your evening robes. Dinner will be served sharply at eight, and I want us all looking at our best. You will dance attendance upon me, and display every possible courtesy and sign of respect around me; I want to impress my fellow collectors, and you will assist me in doing so. And ward your chambers!"

Bemused, Hermione did as she was bid. Who knew Filius Flitwick, the kindly Charms professor of Hogwarts, would turn into such a fuss-budget over a simple wand-collection exhibition? Still, she donned the dark blue gown Harry had bought for her in her room, taking care to charm her hair into an upswept style that flattered the slender line of her throat, and the strapless neckline of the gown. The velvety material had been scattered with tiny magical rhinestones that glimmered in an exact match to the heavens overhead, sans clouds. As the evening progressed, so would the slow slide of constellations across her bodice and skirts. Harry hadn't let her ask the price of the gown, just dickered in private with Madam Clarke for the whole of their clothes, the owner of the couture shop they'd visited.

The skirt was fitted over the first few inches of her hips, then flared in folds to an uneven hemline, short in the front and long in the back, not quite baring her knees and not quite trailing on the ground. She'd picked out sensible navy flats to go with the gown and matching tights; if she had to fight or run, Hermione wanted to be able to run. Strappy sandals might've been more flattering, but they were impossible for running. Tucking the gold chain of her ring-necklace into her cleavage, hiding it behind the sweetheart neckline, she checked her image in the enchanted mirror in her chamber. The mirror-Hermione eyed her body, smoothed her hands down her curves, then reached up and tugged on her bare earlobes.

Earrings. Right. Digging through her jewelry box, she pulled out some abstract shell earrings her mother had given her. They came in three segments, one dangled behind the other; the smallest was a creamy mother-of-pearl, the next a sort of opalescent shell she didn't know, and the third a blue abalone. Strangely enough, she'd bought them back in the summer before her fourth year, and had almost forgotten about them, but the oval shaped dangles would go nicely enough with her currently entirely mother-of-pearl inlaid bracelet. Slotting them into her ears, she checked her reflection. They weren't high-society diamonds, but they did look nice.

She worked on her makeup last. Foundation, a hint of rouge, eye-shadow and eye-liner, and just a little bit of lipstick. She didn't need mascara to make the most of her lashes; they were short, but thick. A knock at the door came just as she was starting to apply the finishing touch of lip-gloss. Ron's voice penetrated the door.

"Hermione, are you ready?"

Slicking her lips, Hermione pursed them, smiled, and tossed the tube of Muggle make-up back into her toiletry bag. "Ready!" Crossing to the door, she opened it, displaying herself with a flourish. "Ta-da--oh, Ron!"

He was clad in a midnight-blue tuxedo. It went well with his colouring, as did the hints of coppery threads in the lapels, cummerbund and bow-tie. Certainly better than the black-and-white of Harry's own tuxedo would have been. As it was, the hints of blue made his hair seem even redder in a vibrant way. Hermione blushed, closed her mouth, and enjoyed the way that he gaped at her, too. Tucking her arms around his elbow, she guided him away from her bedroom door, pausing just long enough to pull the door shut and activate the warding runes she'd traced on the other side, earlier. Eyeing Harry, who looked spectacular with those touches of green in his cummerbund and tie, picking out the green of his eyes, she freed her hand and held it out to him.

"I couldn't have asked for two more handsome escorts, tonight," she praised both of them. "I'll feel like a princess at a ball, in your company."

"Just do not forget, Hermione, that I as your host get the first dance with such a lovely young witch!" Filius asserted, coming out of the boys' bedroom and shutting the door with a thump and a trace of his wand. He was clad in cream piped with dark red; it looked fabulous on his small frame, and seemed to make him look a little bit taller. His hair had been braided into a queue down his back, and even his beard had been neatly plaited. He grinned at them. "I used to cut quite a rug, when I was your age. I might even still be able to do the Charleston... Come! Supper awaits!"

This time it was Hermione who mouthed silently, trying not to giggle aloud as the Charms professor led the way, "...*The Charleston?*"

...

The huge dining hall had been arranged in five long tables with damask table cloths, real silver and fine china table settings, bowls of flowers, and candelabras with white taper candles enchanted with pastel-hued flames. Fairies darted in and out of the chandeliers overhead, and a ghostly quintet played soft chamber music in a gallery niche over the main hearth along one long wall. There were fireplaces at either end as well, and the mass of bodies and crackling flames kept the whole chamber comfortably warm despite the chill in the corridors leading to the hall. Gowns and robes and suits of every hue gave the congregation a bright look, and jewelry glittered on females and males alike, though the latter were more likely to wear commendation medals and ribbons, or perhaps heirloom brooches, and more than one sleeve cuff glittered with a hint of a bejeweled wand-sheath.

The four of them had been assigned to seats along one side of the table nearest the main hearth. Glad her gown was sleeveless and gloveless, Hermione sipped from her goblet of ice water to cool herself down, and discreetly whispered directions to Ron as he stared in dismay at the plethora of forks, knives and spoons laid out to either side of the plates, telling him to start at the outside and work his way inward with each course. There were still bodies assembling, and the seats on her left and across from the two of them were empty, though Filius was chatting amiably with a dowager-jeweled witch who had been seated across from him and Harry.

A thin figure with a shock of grey hair entered the hall with a pair of younger men. The normally intense stare of Roland Ollivander had been softened by a smile, and it only broadened as most everyone near him rose to greet him and shake his hands, while the rest of the room called out greetings. Word eventually trickled their way of Mr. Ollivander's plight in Canada, tending to a terminally ill great-uncle who had passed away, and whose estate had been willed to the famous English wand-maker. With him were two younger wizards, the middle-aged Redmond Ollivander, the nephew, and a younger fellow Hermione hadn't seen before.

It didn't make sense. There were only three of them, and Russel had implied that he and at least one other Death Eater would be in attendance. In fact, the implication was that there would be several Death Eaters disguised among the guests. So the stranger had to be Russel, but where were the others?

The house-elf guiding the trio led them straight up to the three empty seats, one next to Hermione and two across the table. In the scrum of well-wishers standing to welcome Ollivander Senior back, the younger of his two guests peered at the place-cards, then slipped around to the other side of the table. Heart thumping in her chest, Hermione peered at the card for the plate next to hers. *Rorik Ferguson*.. Not Russel Fawkeson, but then it was probable he wouldn't use the same pseudonym for this mission that he used in his correspondence with her. The initials were the same, but that was about it.

She glanced at the approaching wizard, studying him more closely. He was relatively young, maybe in his early thirties at most, with long sandy blond hair that hung in two thin plaits to either side of his face and in soft, loose locks down his back. 'Rorik Ferguson' had grey eyes framed by thick eyelashes, a golden tan that stood out among the English-pale faces of his two companions, and a lean body to match his lean face. That body was clad in a royal blue shirt, and a blue-and-green tartan kilt. The black, fur-flapped pouch that was his sporran hung in front of his hips, and his calves were covered to the base of his tanned knees in blue knit socks. With black leather shoes on his narrow feet and his wand slung like a dagger in a silver-and-sapphire sheath at his side, he looked rather handsome.

"...This must be my seat."

Hermione stared at him as he pulled out his chair. That wasn't an Scottish accent. It wasn't even an English accent. Noticing her curiosity, he held out his hand. "Rorik Ferguson, London, Ontario. And you are...?"

"Canadian," Hermione murmured, sliding her fingers into his. He smiled and she blinked. "Er, I mean, you're Canadian, I take it?"

"Yes. London, Ontario. As opposed to London, England." Bowing over her hand, he released it and sat down, then made a show of peering at her own place-card. "Hermion-own Granger. A pleasure to meet you."

"Her-MY-oh-knee," she corrected. "It's Greek."

"Ah. You're from Greece, eh? I got the chance to visit there, once, but it was several years ago."

"No, I'm from Oxfordshire. England."

"Ah. So I'm sitting next to a bona fide English Rose," he teased her, shaking out his napkin and laying it over his lap. Under the edge of the tablecloth, his hand caught hers, making her look at him sharply as he dragged it onto his thigh. "How marvelous. I was afraid I'd be seated next to a Plain Jane."

Russel. Her face flamed. Hermione struggled to control her reaction, reaching for her water goblet with her free hand. Ron leaned across, almost bumping into her elbow.

"She's with *me*."

Of all the times for the redheaded wizard to be possessive... Russel...*Rorik*...leaned forward, then back, and finally stuck out his arm behind Hermione's velvet-covered spine, offering his hand. "Rorik Ferguson, London, Ontario. And you are...?"

"Ronald Weasley. London, England."

"Weasley? You aren't related to the Busby Clan of London, Ontario, are you?" Rorik asked Ron. "Because you look a lot like Gerald Busby. He runs a Quidditch Supply Shop in Bunyan Square...no?"

"We don't have any relatives in Canada," Ron dismissed.

"Right. Well, there's lots of redheads everywhere, I suppose. Do you know Roland? It seems like everybody around here does," Rorik continued amiably, gesturing at the man chatting with Filius Flitwick now, discussing his 'stay' in Canada. The Canadian at her side used his left hand; a glint of gold on his third finger drew Hermione's attention briefly to the scale-patterned ring he wore. "I met him when he came to stay with my next-door neighbor, Osmund Halifaxton. A sad shame when the old fart died; he was just getting the hang of curling."

"...Curling?" Ron asked.

"Curling! It's a stone-on-ice game, sort of like shuffleboard--it's in the Winter Olympics," Rorik added pointedly. "It's one of the indoor games."

"Sorry, mate; I play Quidditch, and that's it," Ron dismissed.

"Let me guess; you're a pure-born. You know, you wizarding-world-only types are missing out on some really fun games." Shaking his head, Rorik took a sip from his own goblet, then tucked his hands in his lap. Covering Hermione's hand, which was still resting on his kilt-covered thigh. "Besides, Hali was a little too old to go zooming about on a broom. Quidditch is a game for the young and athletic. Curling is a game for the strategist."

"So is chess," Ron pointed out. Hermione felt like she was turning into a fenceline between two bulls, each taking turns to snort at each other through her.

"Yes, but chess is between individuals. Curling is a team effort--I'm sorry, are we boring you?" Rorik asked Hermione abruptly. About as abruptly as the warm, lean, callused fingers caressing the back of her hand. "You put two wizards together, and you're going to have to expect sports-talk sooner or later, I'm afraid."

"It's alright," she murmured, glancing at him. The neckline of his shirt gaped a little, revealing something black and shiny. He caught her staring and twisted to face her a little, releasing her hand so that he could tug his collar aside.

"Translation pendant," he explained as she stared at the cameo-like object. It was a cabochon of jet carved with a raven caught in mid-flight, wings outstretched and head turned slightly to one side, strung on an inch-wide velvet ribbon. "It'll translate any language within hearing distance, though it's only useful for about twenty yards in a crowd like this."

"Did you make it yourself?"

"I didn't carve it; I'm not that artistic. But I did enchant it. When I heard Roland was hurrying to get the estate settled so that he could make the exhibition, I shamelessly begged to come along. I'm just an amateur collector, only a few minor pieces so far, but a chance like this doesn't come along more than two or three times in a lifetime, eh? Are you a collector?" he asked her.

"More of a fan of wand-collecting, I suppose you could call it. I'm actually a former student of Professor Flitwick's. He's one of the exhibitors," Hermione allowed, trying to treat this moment as casually as the wizard on her left. "We couldn't resist begging to come along, either, but then one of his wands used to belong to a dear friend of ours."

"Ah." Before he could say anything else, someone rapped a fork against a crystal goblet, cutting through the chatter in the grand dining hall. The last few attendees quickly took their places as a plump but stately witch gave the opening speech of the 116th Triennial Wand Collectors Exhibition. Hermione tried to pay attention, but the woman's rolling tones were not suited for oratory in such a large chamber. They weren't suited for oratory even in a smaller room, really.

It didn't help that Rorik continued to touch the hand still resting on his thigh, sliding his fingertips over the backs of her fingers, dipping occasionally between them in a stimulating yet soft caress. Hermione didn't know what to do with her hand; she knew she should probably remove it, and yet it felt embarrassingly good to leave it there. She was Ron's date, after all; if anyone should have put her hand in their lap, it should've been Ronald Weasley, not 'Rorik Ferguson'. But a glance to her right showed Ron nibbling on a wand-shaped bread stick. And when the mercifully medium-short speech terminated and the feast appeared on the tables, much like it did back at Hogwarts, Ron's attention was firmly fixed on filling his plate and his stomach. She did get to extract her hand, however, in order to join the applause of the other guests at the end of the plump witch's speech.

The dishes were a little strange, and came in small but very artistically arranged portions. There were nearly a dozen courses, too, but it was all well-paced, and there were guest speakers who stood and addressed the others with the use of the Amplification Charm. Mr. Ollivander was one of them, and he seemed so normal, so self-possessed and in his element, Hermione was hard-pressed to think he was under the control of someone's Imperius Curse. But as he sat down again, Rorik leaned close and whispered in her ear while everyone was still clapping.

"Ollivander's nephew is a fan of puzzling fellows. Do not be alone with him, ever. There are two others as well."

The plump witch stood at that point, tapping her goblet once again for attention. She announced in her deep rolling tones that dessert would be served in a buffet in the chamber adjoining the grand ballroom, and that the guests were free to linger at the dinner table, or to start heading in that direction. Exhibitors would be allowed two hours to set up and display their wands in the morning, and then the exhibits would be opened at ten o'clock sharp. The woman added in her stentorian tones that a chalkboard could be found outside the ballroom, which would double as the exhibition hall tomorrow, detailing the schedule of demonstrations and question-and-answer sessions for the featured collections of this year's exhibits.

At that point, the supper ended and the attendees started chatting, some staying in their seats, others rising and drifting towards the ballroom.

"Yes, yes, my scheduled time will be one o'clock tomorrow afternoon, in the prime slot right after the luncheon buffet," Filius' voice rose in an important squeak as he addressed a question. "I'd love to talk with you more on your own collection, Nimue darling, but Miss Granger has promised me the first dance, and I'd be remiss if I didn't twirl her about the floor so that she could be free to dance with her two swains."

"Er, actually, Hermione and I are more like brother and sister," Harry interjected quickly, blushing. "She's dating Ron, not me."

"Young love," Filius chuckled as he hopped down from his chair. "It's so hard to keep up with these things. Mr. Weasley, would you be so good as to help me escort Miss Granger to the dance hall?"

"Certainly, sir," Ron returned respectfully, rising quickly and helping Hermione shift her seat back from the table. Hermione hastily nodded a goodbye to 'Rorik', placing her hand in Ron's as the younger wizard guided her out of the ornately carved chair.

"Look, Ronald--there's Jens Yorsen!" Filius asserted a moment later, patting Ron's free arm, since Hermione clung to the other one. "You simply *must* challenge him to a game of chess, this evening! I have every faith you'll be able to last at least fifty rounds with him!"

Harry, Ron and Hermione found themselves guided over to the Danish chess master and wand-collector. It didn't take more than a few moments of polite conversation before Filius was offering a challenge on Ron's behalf to a game of chess with the older wizard, later in the evening. Hermione felt Ron's arm stiffen and saw his adam's apple bob with a swallow, but he extended his hand for a firm, brave handshake with the older, somewhat portly man.

"...I'd be honored, sir," he managed, and managed to stand bravely in the face of Yorsen's dismissive look.

"Speed chess, in one hour, in the glazed atrium just beyond the ballroom?" Yorsen offered dismissively. "Fifteen seconds per move?"

"You're on. And...fifty Galleons says I can last at least fifty rounds against you--and a Galleon more for me, for every round beyond that."

"And a Galleon more per round for *me*, for every round *below* that," Yorsen drawled, looking like a sandy-blond version of Draco Malfoy when the Slytherin prefect had been mock-bored with some trivial wager, never mind that he was about ten stone heavier and four inches taller.

"--And a hundred Galleons, if I win!" Ron retorted. Hermione bit her lip and tugged on his arm, trying to get him from backing down from such a reckless wager.

"If you *can* win, I'll double however many rounds it takes, and add *that* to the hundred Galleons," Yorsen dismissed. With a last, derisive look, he strolled off. Hermione realized that Filius looked like a miniature version of Ron, with fisted hands and furrowed brow.

"Arrogant bugger," the Charms professor muttered. "You'd better last fifty rounds, Ron; I've got the money to cover it, but I'd hoped to do a little wand-shopping, this weekend..."

"I'll cover him," Harry offered, making Ron give him a grateful look.

"...Thanks, mate."

"Just remember, I'll take it out of your hide, if you don't last those fifty rounds," Harry warned him.

"Well, it's something to look forward to, at any rate. Come! I'm still feeling the urge to dance away some of that splendid meal. Even a wizard of my age has to watch his waistline!"

Bemused, the trio followed. It took them a little while to reach the ballroom, as Professor Flitwick just had to stop and chat with fellow collectors, and the occasional previous Hogwarts student or Charms colleague. But they did reach the ballroom, and with a flick of his wand, Filius lifted himself into the air, as if standing on an invisible platform.

Holding out his hands, he beckoned to Hermione. "Come, Miss Granger--you do know the waltz, don't you?"

She did, and it was the sort of music currently playing. It was a little strange, dancing with a partner who was 'walking' on an invisible, magical floor at about mid-thigh level relative to her, but he was quite talented as a dancer. With just a few subtle cues with his shoulders and the way he held her hand, he guided her around the dance floor.

"You're a rather wonderful dancer, Hermione," her former professor praised her as they twirled past Ron and Harry for the second time. "Did you take formal lessons?"

"Yes, when I was younger. My father paid for lessons at the local Muggle dance studio."

"Yes, well, Muggles do know how to cut a rug!"

When the dance ended, he brought her back to Ron, and found himself requested into a dance with a grey-haired witch whom he greeted with great delight, chatting with her like old friends. Hermione watched them go, then found herself drawn onto the dance floor by Ron's hand around her waist. He was a bit better as a dancer than he'd been, or rather, hadn't been back in their fourth year. Not nearly as polished as Professor Flitwick, but he certainly didn't step on her toes. And it felt nice to be held by him.

"You look very beautiful tonight, Hermione," Ron whispered to her as they paced slowly around the room in a simple foxtrot. "I wanted you to know that earlier, but...it was more important to make my legs keep working so I could stand and walk with you, than to make my mouth work, too."

For a fumbling sort of compliment, it was very sweet. Hermione reached up and pecked him on the cheek. "Thank you, Ron. You made my knees weak, too. You look very handsome, tonight."

"I feel handsome, with you on my arm. What was up with that Rorik fellow, though? He kept flirting with you. I didn't like that," Ron added with a frown.

"Well, he did say he was grateful to not be seated next to a Plain Jane," she offered. "Some men flirt with anything that catches their eye. I don't think he was serious, though. It might've just been that he was Canadian, and they might do things differently, in Canada." She shrugged eloquently. "Or it might've been a touch of homesickness alleviated by the sight of a friendly face, or maybe the fact that the majority of the witches at the exhibition here are all old enough to be our mums..."

"I suppose," he shrugged.

"Besides, I'm dancing with you. I'd rather think about being in *your* arms right now, thank you."

He smiled at that and pulled her a little closer. When the song ended, he brought her to the edge of the dance floor. Harry caught up to them, looking a little flustered. "--Mind if I dance with you, Hermione?" he asked her in an urgent hiss, glancing over his shoulder. "Only I'm being hunted by a flock of witches who want to dance with the ruddy Boy Who Lived, and they're scaring me--they're all your mum's age, Ron, but they keep wanting to *touch* me!"

"Touch you?" Ron repeated?"

"Two of them pinched my bum!"

Hermione bit back a giggle. It was a very nice bum, from an aesthetic point of view, but she didn't think he'd appreciate her pointing that out at the moment. "I'll take pity on you, Harry." Holding out her arms, she accepted his awkward leadership onto the dance-floor. It really wasn't the same, dancing in his arms. In Ron's, she felt like a female. In Harry's arms, like a relative. It reminded her of a conversation they'd held not that long ago. "You know...we never did get around to discussing that whole brother-sister thing."

Harry looked up from their feet, green eyes wide behind his gold-rimmed spectacles. "Brother-sister thing? Oh, yeah. At Gringotts, that one time. I do think of you as a sort of sister. I even kinda wish you *were* my sister, for real."

"I feel the same way about you. I mean, I always wanted a sibling; I never wanted to be the sole focus of my parents' familial ambitions," she related with a shrug. "It put a lot of pressure on me to perform, academically."

"Whereas I always wanted a family that accepted and loved me," he muttered, guiding her with a minimum of fumbling around a slow-moving couple.

Hermione smiled at him. "I do love you, Harry. As a sister to a brother."

The smile he gave her would've melted the coldest heart. "Thanks. I feel the exact same way--brother to sister. D'you suppose...do you think there's a way to adopt each other?"

She rolled her eyes, smiling. "We're wizards, Harry. I've heard of a blood-binding ritual that'd literally make us blood-relatives, and I'm sure Professor Flitwick knows the details, or where to go to look them up." Her smile faded into seriousness. "Do you *want* to do that? Make it official?"

"Make you my sister for real?" Harry stopped moving, forgetting to dance for a moment. A couple almost bumped into them, but he didn't even flinch. The fierceness in his gaze was tempered by the caring she saw accompanying it. "I think more than anything. I can't count on my aunt and uncle, and my cousin's a joke...but you're not a joke, Hermione. You're family, to me."

"Then let's make it official," she agreed with a smile. A slightly watery smile, but then it was an emotional moment for her. They started dancing again, and when the song ended, Harry brought her back to Ron, who had fetched cups of punch from the buffet. He handed one to Harry and the other, half-drunk, to Hermione. Hermione looked at Harry over the rim of her cup, giving him an encouraging you-do-it look.

Harry cleared his throat. "Listen, Ron, mate...um...Hermione and I are interested in doing that blood-relative spell-thing. To be officially brother and sister. You, er, don't mind, do you?"

Ron's brows rose. "Do I mind? I think that's a smashing idea! D'you think Professor Flitwick knows the spell?"

That made Hermione giggle. "I'll ask him."

"I'll ask him. You two go dance. But not for long," Harry added, peering at the ornate clock over one of the doors into the atrium. "It's almost time for your chess-match."

"Right," Ron agreed, taking Hermione by the waist and hand again. "A twirl around the floor for good luck...and maybe a kiss or two," he grinned at his partner, "and then I'll show that Danish Disaster that *I'm* the newest chess-master!"

How she resisted rolling her eyes at his doggerel, Hermione never knew.

...

--Excuse me, Mr. Yorsen?"

Jens Yorsen broke off his conversation with the svelte brunette witch standing at his side, clad in a feather-trimmed black evening robe. He'd barely paused to glance at the board since the first move, almost negligently calling out the moves of his pieces. The game had barely begun, and it was clear to all who were watching that he wasn't going to waste any more attention on his youthful opponent than necessary. Now that Ron was seeking his attention, he arched his brow superciliously. "What is it? Do you need more than fifteen seconds per move?"

"No," Ron countered, tucking his hands into the pockets of his tuxedo trousers. "I just thought you should know I have you in check...mate. That'll be one hundred twelve Galleons. Since I defeated you in six turns, and you did say a hundred plus double for every round I lasted."

Yorsen frowned. "What are you talking about? You couldn't possibly have me in..." His gaze, falling on the waist-high pieces, puzzled out the undeniable, irrevocable pattern they formed. "...checkmate..."

"In six moves, mate. You really shouldn't let your arrogance get the better of you," Ron returned with just a hint of smugness. "Or be distracted by a lady, however pretty."

The brunette at Yorsen's side sniffed, but not overly disdainfully. Yorsen stared at the pieces. "I forgot to move my pawn... I can't believe I forgot to move my pawn!"

"One hundred twelve Galleons," Ron reminded him.

"I demand a rematch." Yorsen looked up at him, this time with a little more respect in his gaze, and a lot more focus and determination. "A rematch, double the money!"

Ron opened his mouth, then closed it, thinking. He looked over at Harry, who shrugged, then at Hermione, who also lifted her shoulders, letting the choice be his. Squaring his shoulders, he faced his opponent. "I'll take the hundred-and-twelve, and we'll leave it at that. But I will play another game with you, without any stakes...*if* you promise to give me your full attention, this time. Speed-chess."

Yorsen folded his arms and rested a finger on his jaw, considering the redhead's offer. "No stakes? Just a game of wits?"

"Just you, me, and the board."

"Alright. I still don't think you can last twenty-five rounds, let alone fifty."

"I don't think you can last fifty, either." Kissing Hermione on the cheek, Ron muttered, "You might find this a bit boring; I know chess isn't your thing."

"...I'll go peruse the dessert tables for the first few rounds," she agreed. "Just promise me you'll still be going strong by the time I get back."

"I promise," he vowed, and kissed her lips before letting her go. "I won't let you down, Hermione."

"Don't let *me* down, young man," Filius muttered from nearby. Ron flashed him a grin, and ordered his pieces back to their starting positions. With a granite rasp, they took their places.

Chapter 07

Chapter 7 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

Author's Notes: O.o ...The Kilt has made its first appearance! And look...Russel can dance, too! ~Lmao, aka Lotm

VII.

"...I think you'll enjoy these particular treats," a husky voice murmured near her ear.

Hermione looked up from the array of cream puffs, tortes, tarts, neopolitans, tiramisu cakes, puddings, biscuits, and chocolate-dipped fruits. Somehow Rorik Ferguson had managed to move close to her without her hearing a thing. Close enough that the pleated edge of his kilt brushed the velvet folds of her gown. Enough that the warmth of his body could be felt radiating against her own. Her heart skipped a beat or two, and that warmth spread into her cheeks. "Hello, again...Rorik."

"Hello, again, Her-my-oh-knee," he enunciated carefully, flashing her a grin. Lifting his hand, he showed her a small paper box. "You look like the kind of woman who would rather be tempted by a high-quality chocolate, eh?"

"Dark chocolate?" she asked, feeling her heart skipping again.

"With nuts," he promised. "Brought all the way from...Canada."

She blushed again, and accepted the box. If she'd had any doubts before, this seared them away. The exchange of the box into her hand had been done discreetly, with their bodies angled together obscuring their actions from the rest of the room. "Thank you...Russel."

"You're welcome, Jane." Picking up a tiny cream puff from one of the trays on the buffet table, he popped it into his mouth.

She opened the box, revealing nut-cluster cups in little brown wrapping papers. Keeping her voice low, she asked, "So...who among the other guests enjoy a good...sorry, a bad puzzle?"

"None of them are in view at the moment," he muttered back. "And it's best if you avoided them; they're truly evil hosers that'd as soon high-stick you in the faceguard as tap gloves and play fair. We're just here for a simple little quest, and when it's completed, we'll depart quietly. Be ready to thwart us--would you like to dance?"

"Ah...sure," Hermione replied, thrown off by the abrupt change in subject. Removing one of the nut-clusters from its wrapper, she tucked the box into the pocket hidden in the seam of her dress as he guided her toward the ballroom by a touch of his hand on the small of her back. It wasn't until after she'd placed the chocolate in her mouth that she realized she should've been a bit more wary about accepting candy from a near-stranger. But then the dark chocolate besieged her tongue, melting in rich, bittersweet delicacy and revealing the texture of the toasted almonds it contained. Unable to help the moan that escaped her closed mouth, Hermione found herself swept into his arms.

"Do you waltz, Hermione?"

It was a moot point, since they had already swung into the rhythm of a Venetian Waltz. Replying verbally would've required swallowing all that tastebud-ecstasy before she was good and ready. Hermione settled for nodding her head. It wasn't that the candy was drugged; it was just simply that divine. Russel's grey eyes gleamed with wicked mirth as he watched her rolling the almonds around on her tongue, very much like he was swirling her around the dance-floor.

"...Chocolate got your tongue?"

She almost choked, trying not to laugh. Chewing and swallowing the almonds, she cleared her throat as the waltz came to a close. "It's your own fault, for seducing me with such smashingly good chocolate."

"Seduction?" he enquired, arching a brow. "Hmm, my nefarious plot is succeeding. Tell me," he added as the opening strains of a new piece of music began, "do you know how to tango?"

"It's been a while, but yes. I took dance lessons a few summers ago, so I might be a little rusty," Hermione warned him.

"Good. I hate being the only rusty dancer in a tango." And, shifting his stance just a little, Russel led her in the opening steps of the Latin dance. Hermione followed, guided by his shoulders and hands, by the turning of their bodies. They fumbled a couple steps at first, since it was a bit more complicated than a waltz. Rusty or not, by the refrain, they were moving together with increasing confidence. And increasing closeness.

When the next verse of music ended, Hermione was no longer dancing at a proper-form distance. She was snugged chest-to-chest with him, dancing with relatively simple steps that were being executed with an elegant, crisp passion all the same. The most intense part of their posture was the way he held her gaze with his, his tanned face making his grey eyes seem lighter than she knew the colour had to be. Dancing with him was a lot more exciting than dancing with Ron; the younger wizard made her feel good when she was in his arms, but her heart never pounded quite like this. Nor did her nerves tingle, nor her blood race, nor her breath catch in her lungs as his hips snapped against hers with one of the moves they were executing, imprinting her senses with a quick impression of a distinct and very masculine erection.

A phrase drifted through her mind as he did it again, spinning her around in a more complex, leg-intertwining move than the ones that had come before. *A vertical expression of a horizontal desire...* Hermione blushed at the realization. She liked being held by Ron, in a comfortable sort of way...but she loved the excitement of being held by Russel. Shameful as it was to admit, even if only to her own self...she preferred being held like this, vertically seduced by a man who was at least twelve to fifteen

years her senior, and who was a Death Eater and supposed spy for the Order.

A man who could quite possibly be a liar of the most consummate order. It was part of his excitement, and his appeal to her, Hermione decided reluctantly. Ron just didn't have that same alluring air of mystery. Nor the air of maturity, nor that sexy confidence that spun her out and back, thumping their bodies together in a distinctly vertical expression of that horizontal desire they'd been expressing so far only on paper, not in person.

This was turning out to be very in-person.

"...You realize," he murmured into her ear as they swayed and stepped together during the bridge, "that my colleagues will interrogate me as to what I'm doing dancing with you."

"I don't want to put you into grave danger," Hermione returned equally discreetly.

"I will be telling them that I am attempting a mild seduction to distract you. Tomorrow, we will hopefully locate what we came to seek, and attempt to leave with it. I am simply turning your head with eloquent praise, and distracting your delectable body with the touch and passion of my own--by the way," Russel/Rorik added in an aside, "you are *far* more fun to dance with than Brian would've been, especially given that I don't dance with wizards, period, never mind aging ones. Instead, I am seducing you subtly and successfully, and by doing so, I will hopefully turn your pretty head and keep you from reacting quickly enough against me, if and when we strike tomorrow. Or perhaps Sunday. I hope you don't take offense at my efficiency."

"Efficiency?" Hermione. "I'd call it practicality, myself."

"Well, it's practical, yes," he agreed, snapping his hips into hers. When she returned with a lust-like bump of her own, he smiled briefly. "But efficient as well, given that I'm honestly interested in flirting with you physically. I do hope that, by being honest about it, you'll be able to keep a clear head on the morrow."

"As clear as can be," Hermione promised calmly, though she felt rather flustered inside. He *was* flirting with her, as she'd wondered. Interested in flirting with her. Russel was expressing multiple reasons for all those salacious letters, both to disguise his communications activities, and because he wanted to flirt with her. She just had to ask something, though. "You started flirting with me before we'd met in person. How could you know I'd be attractive in person, when we'd never met before?"

"Oh, I'd seen you before our communications," he murmured in her ear, leading her into a somewhat complicated set of steps...and promptly stepping on the toe of her flats. "--Dammit! Sorry. It's been too long since my own lessons."

"Forgiven," she murmured back. "When did you see me?"

"Here and there. Never paid much attention to you, at first. You were just a companion of Harry's. Dismissible. No offence."

"None taken." Hermione was a lot more phlegmatic and practical about being overshadowed by the Boy Who Lived than Ron was. She knew Harry hated his celebrity status, and she knew that she had her own circle of fame where she overshadowed him, academically. And she knew it was better to be forgettable than memorable, where their enemies' attentions were concerned. As it was, she had several strikes against her: she was Muggle-born, undeniably intelligent, magically powerful, and one of Harry's two best friends.

"Good," he murmured, his tone pleased that she hadn't taken offence. A tilt of his head, a tickle of his long, sandy brown hair against the bared skin of her shoulder...and his tongue licked a damp path up the side of her neck to an incredibly sensitive spot just behind the lobe of her ear. Her steps slowed, then faltered as his lips closed on her earlobe, nibbling on the flesh next to the wire hook of her earring.

Thank god the music ended! She wasn't even dancing anymore. It was too distracting, trying to fight off the electricity racing through her nerves, melting her bones. Her boyfriend had tried this exact same maneuver during one of their snogging sessions...and all Hermione had felt was distaste for the saliva, and a ticklish sensation. This wasn't ticklish, or disgusting. It was outright arousing.

She didn't want to--to her shame--but somehow she summoned the strength of will to push him away from her, schooling her face from surprised to disapproving. "That was uncalled-for, Mr. Ferguson! I have a boyfriend for such things, and you aren't him!"

Striding away, she escaped the dance floor as another song began. Her breasts heated. For a moment, she thought it was just a match to her flustered, warm cheeks. But no, it was the ring. She almost ignored it. Ducking outside, Hermione sheltered herself in the shadow of a columnar cedar and extracted the ring, examining it in the light of the half-moon gleaming through the greenhouse-like roof of the atrium. It had only two words written on its scale-altered surface:

Forgive me.

Confusion swirled through her. It settled into two distinct camps. She forgave him. She just couldn't forgive herself. *I'm supposed to be dating Ron! I'm supposed to be cleaving to him! Dammit--I'm supposed to be attracted to him! Not drawn to a near-stranger...*

Memory swirled up out of the unsettled depths of her thoughts. Hermione recalled a conversation she'd had with her mother just two summers ago, between her fifth and sixth years. She'd complained that Ron Weasley was as thick as a bedpost when it came to her feelings, and bemoaned the fact that she found him attractive, but he didn't seem to see her at all as an attractive girl.

... "There is a world of difference between attractive and attracted, Hermione," her mother had commiserated. "You can find any number of people attractive. Even other women can be attractive. It's a state of appearance, demeanor, carriage, confidence, intelligence...a person is or isn't attractive on their own merits, really. I'm sure he finds you attractive. But attracted is another matter," Daphne Granger had instructed her daughter. "We can to an extent choose who we find attractive, usually by adjusting our own thinking as to what we define as 'attractive'. But attraction in the sense of attracted is something far less controllable. Either you are, or you aren't...and it's not always easy to say why. I myself didn't figure it out until I found a set of twins attractive, but I only found myself attracted to one of them, after dating both. That, as you know, turned out to be your father.

"Jonathan made me happy, when I dated him first. He made me laugh. It felt like being in his presence was putting on a fuzzy slipper, for he was very comfortable to be around. I could have married him and been happy. But Jeffrey was all of that and more. He was exciting--like a fuzzy maribu slipper. Now, I know this analogy is going to be terrible," her mother had cautioned her, "but if he'd been a high-heeled maribu slipper, I'd never have been able to last nearly so long with him as I have. No, your father is more like a slipper with an inch-high heel. Comfortable to wear for extended periods of time, without delving into the sort of pain you find with the type who's a three-inch heel. Don't go for the flashy ones that you're attracted to; find the one man who has substance as well as style. Jeffrey also makes me laugh, just like his brother did, and I do feel comfortable around him, but the passion is still there--Oh, don't make that face at me, young lady! How do you think you came into existence, if not through passion?"...

Hermione felt torn. She cared for Ron; she even thought she loved him...but she didn't feel the same spark of passion for him that she felt for Russel. Ron was her friend, and her mother had added that friends made the best lifelong partners, and he certainly didn't feel like a brother to her, as Harry did. But Russel made her heart pound in her chest, made her body vibrate like a tightly wound and plucked string. *Do I feel lust for him, or something more? Is he a high-heeled slipper, or is he a low-heeled flat? ...I cannot believe I'm comparing my love-life to shoes.*

Love-life. There was the phrase for it. She had a love-life. Hermione acknowledged the fact that she was now in a new phase of her life: she was old enough to have lovers, if she wanted. *But all I know is, I don't feel ready for such a big choice! I only just started dating Ron.* Her gaze sought the tall redhead through the crowd of onlookers, and

she heard his voice competing with Yorsen's over the scraping of the enchanted stone chess pieces. She could see herself living comfortably with him. He didn't have her passion for book-learning, and she didn't have his passion for Quidditch; still, they were friends enough to put up with each others quirks.

Hermione tried picturing herself ten years from now, if she ended up marrying Ron. Assuming, of course, that they won the war and both of them lived...she could see herself with a couple of curly-haired children, some redheaded, some light brown. Comfortably married. Not rich, but not poor, either; like her own mum, she'd be a working mum, once the children were old enough for daycare, or primary school. She didn't know what jobs either of them would have, but it would be a good marriage.

Turning her attention to the problem of Russel, she tried to picture herself married to him...and couldn't imagine it. He was a spy. The likelihood of his living through the end of the war was less than her and Ron's chances, and the two of them were almost as severely targeted as Harry was. And she didn't know what she had in common with Russel, other than the intrigues of war. She had more in common with Draco Malfoy, almost! And there was that diminished but lingering fear, that Russel was a double-agent playing her for all he was worth.

Right now, if Russel/Rorik was a shoe, he was a strappy four-inch heel. Sexy to wear for short periods of time, but a pain in the foot for contemplating a lifetime's wear. She might not have a grand passion for Ron, but she did care for him more than she cared for Russel.

...So why do I feel disappointed with my decision?she found herself asking silently, as she worked her way into the crowd around the chess-board. Squeezing past two portly wizards, she managed to reach the edge of the board in time to watch Ron take one of Yorsen's rooks. Puzzling it through, Hermione came to a conclusion. *Because I'm not ready, that's why.* I'm just not ready to make a life-altering decision about who I'm supposed to...no, who I'm going to spend the rest of my life. I want it to be my decision. When I'm ready for it. And when the man in question is ready for it, too, she allowed, watching Yorsen retaliate with an attack on one of Ron's pawns.

Ron studied the new patterns as the pieces scraped their way into position, the pawn dragging itself off the board after Yorsen's bishop whacked the other piece with its stone crook, knocking it over. He certainly looked like an adult, handsome in his navy suit, confidently poised as he calculated his options. He wasn't a freckled boy puzzling over his Transfiguration homework, anymore.

Glancing at the hovering slate someone had conjured, she watched an enchanted stick of chalk marking another tally on the board, the moment Ron made his move. Thirty rounds. Thirty-one. She knew enough about chess to see that Yorsen had captured two more pieces than Ron, yes, but Ron had managed to capture some powerful pieces, whereas more of Ron's losses had been in pawns. Thirty-two...thirty-five... Ron castled, exchanging a rook with his king, moving it into a protected position away from a check by Yorsen's queen. She wanted to hug him, but refrained. Yorsen retreated his queen, blond brow furrowed in anger.

He picked the wrong square to retreat to, missing the position of Ron's knight. Ron captured his opponent's queen. He lost his knight in the very next round, but even Hermione knew the queen was more versatile and therefore more powerful than a knight. The witch at Yorsen's side touched his elbow, murmuring something, but was brusquely shaken off and given a curt, "Don't distract me right now!"

Glad she hadn't touched Ron, hadn't risked his concentration, Hermione watched as the tally board crept into the forties. Both players were moving more cautiously now, though with no less speed as they each took less than the allotted fifteen seconds to make up their minds. Forty-eight...forty-nine... Ron made his fiftieth move, and though he lost his remaining bishop, it made Hermione jiggle in place, hands clasping as she strove to not squeal in happiness. Fifty rounds was nothing to sneeze at, when playing against a chess master of Yorsen's calibre! The crowd in the atrium was now stiflingly hot, as the watching wizards and witches shouted out that the freckled youth had met his goal, and was still holding his own. More bodies tried to crowd into the garden, and a series of running commentaries to those in the back was instigated as fifty quickly became fifty-three...fifty-seven...sixty rounds...

Ron lost his queen, at sixty-two. That leveled the game a bit more, and not in his favour. By sixty-seven, Ron was in a bind that even Hermione could see. He managed to eke it out a few more rounds...to seventy, seventy-one...seventy-two... Round seventy-three.

"Check...mate'," Yorsen pronounced, giving Ron a tight smile.

Ron nodded, and crossed to the midpoint of the board to shake the Danish wizard's hand, but his attention was still on the board.

"Your mistake was in moving your bishop to Queen's five," Jens Yorsen informed him archly as soon as their hands parted. Most of the crowd broke up and drifted away, but Hermione and Harry moved onto the board, joining the two of them. "After that, you couldn't recover."

Ron shook his head. "No...actually, I made the mistake before that, when I lost my first knight a few rounds earlier. I shouldn't have sacrificed him. I should've gone with the bishop, then; I would've only been on shaky ground for four or five rounds after."

Yorsen's brows rose. "...Indeed? How long have you been playing chess?"

Ron shrugged. "Since I was five."

"Professional lessons?"

"No, my dad taught me, and I'd just play with him or my brothers, and sometimes my sister. Then my schoolmates, when I got old enough."

"--Ronald, here," Professor Flitwick asserted, striding onto the board and clapping a hand on the lower part of Ron's back, "played the best game Hogwarts has ever seen, and he did it back in his very first year. And I believe you still owe him his hundred-and-twelve Galleons?"

"You'll get it when the goblins set up their booth, tomorrow," Yorsen told Ron. "I'll order the transfer to your account then."

Ron winced, at that. "I, er, don't have an account. Not my own, at least, not yet."

Hermione winced, too. In an instant, he'd gone from competent chess player to wet-behind-the-ears teenager, with that confession. Yorsen eyed him askance. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen. Why d'you ask?"

The older wizard arched a brow, though more in a puzzled than skeptical manner. "Seventeen, and you don't have any money of your own? How would you have paid me, had you lost?"

"He has a lot of friends," Hermione stated, threading her fingers through Ron's.

"A lot of friends who have faith in him," Harry added.

Filius Flitwick add his squeaky two-Knuts' worth. "And I only place sucker's bets!"

"Professor!" Ron protested. "That remark was uncalled-for. Would you please apologize to him? He's a really good player!"

Yorsen's face twisted, then a rusty-sounding laugh escaped him. "Good one, Flitwick! For that...I will add five hundred to the pot. If you'll consider possibly going pro, Weasley," the Dane added, making Ron's face colour at the compliment. "It'll mean playing against Muggles, but as much as any wizard would hate to admit it, the best players are to be found in the Muggle realm. Even if their pieces don't move on their own."

"Uh...I'll consider it, but I kinda have other plans, for the moment," Ron managed, as his fingers tightened around Hermione's. Six hundred and twelve Galleons was a small fortune! And yet...he made her proud by adding, "You don't have to give me that much. The bet was only for a hundred and twelve."

"I regularly compete for purses of five hundred, young man," Yorsen informed him. "You've reminded me to not underestimate my opponent. Even if he doesn't look threatening. Consider it your contribution to teaching me an expensive lesson in humility--I insist. You can make it up to me by engaging me in a chess-game over breakfast, tomorrow. Smaller-scale, of course. The only other players of your calibre or higher who are here this weekend are too old to like getting up that early."

"I'll be up that early," Ron promised, squeezing Hermione's hand again. This time in happiness. She knew he loved Quidditch, but chess was his game; he had the love, the talent, and the confidence for it.

"Good. Oh, Rob...?"

"Ron."

"Right. Ron Weasley, Miss Bianca LaMenge. Bianca, Mr. Weasley," the Danish wizard introduced his date.

"Right--Hermione Granger, Jens Yorsen," Ron introduced them.

"A pleasure. Shall we dance?" Yorsen asked Hermione.

"Er...alright," she agreed, and found herself led back into the ballroom, while Ron fumbled an offer to dance to Yorsen's date.

"I don't suppose I can pry more information out of you about Mr. Weasley's chess-skills?" Yorsen asked her as he led her into a foxtrot on the dance-floor.

"Actually, I'm not very good at chess myself," Hermione apologized, "so any analysis I gave you would be from a rank amateur's perspective."

"Pity. He certainly has tastes beyond the rank amateur in lovely young witches."

Hermione blushed. What was it with wizards in their thirties who wanted to flirt with her whilst dancing, anyway? Indeed, a few turns later, she spotted Rorik Fergusson dancing with a witch of about his own age. A witch who glared at Hermione over the shoulder of the kilt-wearing wizard. The eyes were a pretty shade of aquamarine, but she'd seen that look in eyes of a dirty grey. Hermione shivered and wondered warily if Bellatrix Lestrange was one of the other two 'guests' disguised among the crowd.

She hoped not; that particular witch was psychotic, and it would be the equivalent of letting a rabid dog charge into a flock of chickens, if her leash slipped for even a second or two from the grip of whoever was supposed to be holding her leash.

Ron claimed her for the next dance. She praised him for his performance in the atrium, and listened as much as she could marshal her sometimes wandering attention to his almost blow-by-blow analysis of the chess game. Not her cuppa, and somewhat less exciting than a blow-by-blow of Quidditch, but she did want to support him in his interests. After that, she danced with Harry, and found herself in a conversation discussing how they'd share out each other's inheritances. Mostly, it was discussing how she'd inherit 12 Grimmauld Place--and Kreacher, unfortunately--if anything should happen to Harry.

It wasn't a happy prospect to contemplate, but they were going up against Voldemort, who was determined to kill the Boy Who Had Lived And Thereby Mocked The Dark Lord By It. For her part, Hermione was determined to get Harry over to her parents' place, so that they'd know just how serious a wizarding blood-binding ritual was, and that they'd literally be gaining a son by it, through his burgeoning connection to her. But she knew her parents cared for Harry already, at least; they cared for Ron, too, but it was Harry who'd be related to them, soon.

It was that which prompted her to seek out Professor Flitwick, once her dance with Harry finished. The diminutive instructor was chatting with a group of colleagues, discussing the merits of ash versus willow in suppleness. She didn't want to interrupt, but Hermione did want to discuss the possibility of a blood-binding ritual with him.

"Er...sir," she interjected quickly but politely into a brief break in the conversation. "I don't mean to drag you away from your friends, but...you danced so well, earlier, I was wondering if you'd favour me with another turn upon the floor?"

"What? Oh! Oh, how flattering!" Filius squeaked, flustered. "Of course, how could I refuse such a charming young witch?"

"Filius, you old dog," one of the more grey-bearded wizards in the circle teased. "What have you got to attract the ladies that we haven't got?"

Hermione, mindful of Flitwick's admonishment to build him up in the presence of his contemporaries in the wand-collection circuit, smiled smugly as she replied for him. "A brilliant mind, a charming personality, an incredible competency in his chosen field...and a graceful way of dancing that makes me feel as if I'm the one floating in midair," Hermione quipped as Filius enchanted himself up to match head-levels with her. "Now, if you can match all of that, and dance like a man a third your age as Filius Flitwick can, see me later on the dance-floor. In the meantime, I'm going to enjoy my time with the most competent dancer here."

"I don't know," one of the grey-haired witches tittered as Hermione hooked her fingers around her former Charms Professor's elbow and headed for the dance floor. "I think that kilted fellow she was dancing with earlier would be a nice catch to twirl about..."

Blushing, Hermione took up a stance for a foxtrot with her partner, and let him lead her around the floor. "Forgive me for interrupting you, Professor. And for, erm, fluffing up your reputation so much. You are a good dancer, though."

"Nonsense! I'll be quite the stud tonight, among the silver-haired set," he chuckled. "But somehow I get the feeling you wanted to have a private conversation with me. Are my instincts correct?"

"They're quite correct, sir."

"If this is about that recently-acquired wand, I won't talk about it until my demonstration, tomorrow, and neither will you, since that would spoil the surprise--"

"No, actually, it's about something Charms-related," Hermione corrected.

"Oh?"

"Yes. Harry and I...well, we've agreed we love each other very much as brother-and-sister. We were therefore wondering if you knew a blood-binding spell to actually make us brother-and-sister, via magic."

"Oh! Well, yes, I do. That's the Brothers-By-Blood rite," he said. "I haven't seen that one performed in, oh, a good thirty...thirty-seven years, if I remember aright."

"Can you help us do it?" she asked him, eager to have the ritual performed. "And soon? Harry and I, we don't want to go on much further without having each other officially as a sibling."

"Well, all the ritual requires is a golden blade, at least two witnesses who aren't related by blood or marriage to the two being blood-joined, and a third someone not related to either, to perform the spell. Let's see...I could perform the spell, Ronald Weasley could be one of the witnesses, and all we'd need is a third unrelated party--actually, we could make the whole thing public right here and how!"

He started to pull out of her arms, since they were near the edge of the dance floor. Hermione, eyes widening, yanked him back into her arms. "Professor!" she hissed. "Try to *think* about what you were just about to do! If you tell everyone here that Harry and I are to become blood-bound siblings, it'll get back to V...to the Dark Lord, and they'll try all the harder to hurt the two of us, or tear us apart!"

"Oh. Right. I hadn't thought about that angle," Flitwick muttered. His gaze slid around the room as they continued to dance, until it alighted on a specific knot of fellows. "I

have it! We'll ask Jens Yorsen. He's not related to any of us, and he's taken to young Weasley as an up-and-coming chess protege, if I'm not mistaken. He'd be perfect. And he has a reputation for being discreet. Arrogant near a chess board, but discreet in other areas. Erm...you *are* dating young Mr. Weasley, aren't you?"

She blushed. "Yes. It's...it's not serious, yet, but it's not exactly casual."

"Ah. Young love." As if that summed it all up, he danced her over to the edge of the floor nearest where Ron and Yorsen were talking. Bowing to her, Filius set her free, admonishing her, "Now, go find Harry, and meet us in the parlour of our suite. The war makes life itself too uncertain to put off something as serious as this, if you're both truly determined to go through with it."

"We are, sir. We'll be there," she promised him.

...

"...*ex sanguifilium!*"

Fire seared through the wounds in their palms. Hermione and Harry both gasped from the pain, but their fingers tightened bravely until the burning of the magic eased and faded. Half-spell, half-ritual, the ancient rite concluded itself with a rippling tingle that swept over and through Hermione's body, ruffling her hair and her clothes, the same as it ruffled Harry's.

"So Be It," Filius intoned in as sonorous tones as his squeaky voice could manage.

"So Mote It Be," Ron and Jens recited, following their place in the ritual as they stood to either side of the pair. "--Witnessed!"

Harry looked into Hermione's eyes, grinning. From the ache in her cheeks, she was grinning right back at him. Releasing each other's hands, they flung their arms around each other, embracing as brother and sister. Harry then picked Hermione up, making her squeak in surprise at being twirled around. He wasn't nearly as tall as Ron, and he'd never bulk up with muscles, but there was a surprising amount of strength hidden in his lean frame. Laughing, she regained her feet, then hefted him up and managed to spin him almost all the way around before having to set him down, out of breath and unable to lift his own mass for nearly as long. He laughed and ruffled her hair, roughhousing with her. She tickled him in the ribs, then kissed him on the cheek and hugged him again.

"My own family," Harry murmured, tucking her head against his shoulder. "My very own sister." He looked at the crescent-shaped scar on his palm, then at the matching one on hers. They'd carry those scars to the end of their lives, as proof of what they'd done.

"Hey," Ron offered, smiling at them. "At least you didn't have to grow up with your sister. They're very pouty and impossible between the ages of three and fifteen. Between three and thirty, come to think of it!"

"Oh! I should tell Ginny what you just said!" Hermione mock-scolded.

Jens Yorsen offered his hand to her. "Congratulations on adding to your family."

"Thanks," she smiled, releasing Harry. It did make her think though; she turned to Harry, waited until he'd shaken hands with the chess-master, waited a little bit more for Yorsen to leave, then offered, "...That does remind me: we'll need to introduce you to your new mum and dad, as soon as we can."

"Mum and dad?" Harry asked.

"Of course!" Filius interjected as Harry and Ron both gave her blank looks. "When you and Hermione became brother and sister, you not only accepted her as your blood-relative, but all of *her* blood-relatives as well! You're now officially related to Mr. and Mrs. Granger."

"Mum and Dad already like you," Hermione promised Harry. "They've only met you a few times at most, but I've told them lots about you, and they do care for you. I think they'll adapt to the idea of having a son--and not just a son-in-law--fairly quickly, once they get past the shock of wizarding ways."

"Oy!" Ron interjected, his freckled nose wrinkling. "I just realized--you're not only related to him, 'Mione...you're now related to the *Dursleys!*"

"--Eww!" The reaction escaped her before she could help it. She'd heard too many horror-stories about Harry's so-called childhood home. "I'm now...? To *Dudley?*"

"Worse. To *Uncle Vernon*. Though thankfully he's only related by marriage," Harry pointed out fairly.

"Thank god for that!" she muttered. "Right. Well, we'll just have to disown them, and stick to my folks."

"It's only fair, since they've already disowned me," Harry admitted with a shrug. "And Aunt Petunia would *hate* you; I just know it. You're smart, pretty, and a smashingly good witch. Kind of like my mum was, I think."

"Yes. In fact, I do believe Miss Granger has quite a lot in common with your late mother, Lily Evans," Flitwick offered. It was a reminder that he'd taught long enough at Hogwarts to have known that generation, back when it had passed through the school. "Both young ladies were smart, and quite adept in Charms...though Hermione has a real knack for improvising new Charms, quite unlike anything I've ever seen... I think your parents would have approved of taking her on as a daughter, Harry. A good choice, all around."

"Thank you, sir," the younger wizard smiled.

"Well, I'm feeling rather tired. All that dancing lighter-than-air, I suppose," Filius winked in Hermione's direction. "Remember to observe the proprieties and be gentlemen, boys, where Miss Granger's reputation is concerned. Goodnight--and don't forget that chess-match tomorrow morning, Ronald!"

A chorus of "goodnights" followed the professor as he retreated through the boys' bedroom to his modified dressing chamber. Ron stared at Hermione. She stared back, blushing. Harry looked at both of them, and sighed.

"Okay, I'm going to go to bed, too. You two can stay up and snog, if you like...but if you do anything to my *sister* that she doesn't like, I'll have to thrash you, mate," Harry warned his best friend.

"Actually...I'm a bit knackered, myself," Hermione confessed, wrinkling her nose ruefully. Stepping close, she kissed Harry on the cheek, then shifted and kissed Ron on the lips. Moving back, she gave the latter wizard a regretful look. "I think I'll turn in, too. All that dancing did me in as well. I'll see you both tomorrow morning...and keep your eyes open. I wouldn't be surprised if there weren't followers of You-Know-Who lurking in disguise as guests."

"Yeah, like that Ferguson fellow, the one in the kilt," Ron muttered. "I didn't like him!"

"You didn't like the fact that he was flirting with me, Ron," Hermione corrected. "But I won't deny he could be a Death Eater in disguise, given that he came with Mr. Ollivander, and Mr. Ollivander's release from wherever he'd been up until now was too coincidentally timed with this exhibition, and the resurfacing of that wand...but that's a speculation for tomorrow, I think. I'm going to bed, now." And before she could let herself react to the irony in that statement, she nodded to them both, heading for her bedroom door. "Goodnight!"

Almost expecting Ron to follow her anyway, Hermione adjusted the wards on her door long enough to let herself through, and reset them behind her. Sagging briefly against the door, she rested there for a moment, then stooped and slipped off her navy flats. The plush pile of the misty blue carpeting felt good against her nylon-clad feet.

Shuffling over to the bed, she sank onto the coverlet, squirming to avoid the lump digging into her thigh. A reflexive check of her bracelet showed it was still fully charged, as she started to pat through her skirts to find the problem.

Her cleavage warmed. Extracting the ring, she found it smooth and featureless. Russel was requesting written communication between them. Sighing, Hermione used her wand to summon pen and paper, extracting the box of chocolates from her skirt, the source of her discomfort. Thumb on ring and ring on tablet, she read the words spilling out from its golden edge.

Do you forgive me?

Yes, she wrote back. She wasn't sure how honest she should be with him; she *was* still dating Ron, and Russel wasn't exactly a good dating prospect, even if she should end her relationship with Ron right now. **You were a bit forward, but I suppose that is your style. However, you were a bit too forward for such a public location. What else was I to do? There's a number of people here who know or guess or have realized that I'm with Ronald Weasley. How would it make me look, if I were to date one fellow, yet let another one be so physically familiar with me, without any sign of protest?**

...Oh. Yes, I'd forgotten that aspect. Wasn't there an article that came out a few years ago, during the Triwizard Tournament, about you stringing Harry and that Durmstrang fellow along at the same time, like some wanton tramp?

I WAS NOT A TRAMP! I certainly WASN'T dating Harry! she scribbled back. **He's like a brother to me!**

My apologies; again, I have offended, and I didn't mean to. I didn't believe you were doing that, at the time; I was just relating what was in the article. But...what do you mean by stating that Harry is your brother? You can't actually be his sister; you're not related to each other.

Hermione stared at the page, flustered. He couldn't possibly have guessed that. Not unless Jens Yorsen was a Death Eater in disguise. That wasn't highly likely, however; Yorsen was too well-known, and too good a chess-player. Somehow she didn't think Voldemort had all that many high-quality chess masters on his side. And she trusted Professor Flitwick to have been extremely discreet in asking Yorsen to come be their second witness, just now.

Which meant that the ring had taken her statement 'like a brother' as a shading of truth that was too close to a lie, since Harry *was* her brother, now; he wasn't merely 'just like' one...and it had taken that 'lie' and judged that it needed to be corrected to the truth. The rings really *did* force them to write truthfully to each other...

...Jane?

Someone knocked on her door. Startled, Hermione scratched a line across the page with her pen, instead of making a reply.

"Hermione?"

Ron's voice came through the door, slightly muffled by the baroque-carved panel.

I have to go! Yanking the ring from the tablet, she jammed it down her cleavage and checked the paper. Her words faded, then vanished in a flash of fire. Satisfied, she hurried to the door, opening it. "Yes, Ron?"

He caught her jaw-line in his hands, kissing her and stepping into her bedroom in a single, smooth move. It was a good kiss, warm and wet and with plenty of tongue, but without clicking teeth, or making her feel as if he was trying to probe her tonsils. His body jerked a little as he kicked the door shut, then he tipped her head just a little more, kissing her more firmly. Hand slipping down to her breast, he cupped it, then massaged it gently.

Even as she inhaled a startled breath at the intimate touch, Hermione couldn't help but think, *So he can learn from my nagging...*

It wasn't until her knees bumped against the edge of the bed that she realized he'd backed her across the bedroom. That brought her attention back to her surroundings with a snap of her eyes as they opened. It wasn't the only thing he was doing; his fingers had found the zipper at the back of her gown. Without her noticing, he'd managed to draw it several inches down.

He's undressing me! Panic gripped her. *I'm not ready for this!* Her hands, which had been gripping and massaging his shoulders, switched quickly to pushing. He pulled back, releasing her kiss-swollen lips, but their new position made the front of her gown start to drop. Hermione slapped her left hand to her breasts, quickly holding it in place over her strapless bra.

"Why don't I help you with that?" Ron asked her, shifting the hand that had been massaging her spine back down to the pull-tab of her zipper. To pull it down, she realized, not pull it up.

"Ron--I'm not ready for this!" Hermione reminded him urgently.

His hand stilled, his eyes widening slightly. "But...it's been a couple weeks! Haven't you had time to think about it?"

"Yes, and I've come to the conclusion that I'm just not ready for this next step!"

Frustration furrowed his brow. He released her, stepping back. Hands delved into his bright auburn hair, tugging it back from his face. "You're not ready. You're not ready! When *will* you be ready?"

"I don't know!" she shot back, equally frustrated.

"Dammit, Hermione!" he swore, tugging on his hair again. "Every time I'm with you, all I can think of is kissing you, and when I'm kissing you, and you're so hot and seemingly willing in my arms--it's frustrating the hell out of me! I love you, Hermione! If you loved me, you wouldn't do this to me!"

"If you *l--*" Hermione blinked, cutting herself off with an effort that would only have stung more if she'd actually, physically bitten her tongue. Breathing hard, lips pressed tightly together, she mastered her initial response, instead stating bitingly, "If you *respected* me, you'd *accept* the fact that, when I say I'm not ready for sex, I *amnot ready!* It has nothing to do with love, or any lack thereof!--And how *dare* you play that particular card? How dare you say that if I *loved* you, I'd tumble into the nearest bed with you?" she accused him, furious that he had done so. "Guys only say that to girls who they're trying to manipulate emotionally! I'm not trying to do anything to you, Ronald! I'm *trying* to tell you that, while I like kissing and cuddling with you, I'm just not bloody ready for sex, yet!"

"I'm *not* trying to manipulate you! I'm trying to say..." Breaking off in frustration, Ron tugged on his hair again, and growled, "I'm saying that I'm bloody tired of having to wank myself every time I think of you!"

Heat flooded her skin. An equal amount of embarrassed colour filled in around the freckles dotting his own hide. They stared at each other. Ron slid his hands out of his hair, covering his face.

"...Merlin! Please tell me I did *not* just say that?"

"You did," Hermione muttered, flustered by the heated confession. It was compounded by her own, secret guilt; she'd frigged herself more than once in the past few months...but more to thoughts of what Russel and she had discussed in their more titillating missives, than to thoughts of the youngest male Weasley. She did her best to set those thoughts aside, addressing his current concerns. "But...I can understand the sentiment, Ron. And the frustration.

"I don't *think* I'm being a tease; I'm not deliberately doing anything sexy or anything," she pointed out. "And I can't help how you feel about me, nor how your body reacts, nor...nor its needs. All I do know is that I just don't feel ready to go all the way, yet. I also don't like feeling forced into a situation I'm not ready to handle."

"I'm not trying to force you!" he protested. At the arch of her brow, he flushed a little, amending, "...Okay, so I'm a little too eager to get into your knickers. But I *don't* want to force you, Hermione. I'm not that kind of bloke. I just...I'm frustrated, and, erm...wanking *does* get a little old after a while."

She blushed but smiled shyly. "It's very flattering to know I, um, inspire you so much. And I think I'm getting closer to *wanting* to go all the way, but...not just yet. I'm asking you to be patient with me, Ron. Can you do that? Please?"

She touched his arm with her right hand, since the left one was still holding up the bodice of her gown. He gave her a look that was a mixture of frustration, reluctance, compliance, and quite possibly real love. It made her think of her imagining them together, ten years from now. It was definitely easier to imagine a future with Ron than a future with Russel.

A sigh escaped him, and he nodded. "I'll do that. Just...don't take forever, okay?" he asked, wrinkling his nose. "Wanking--"

--Gets old, yes, I know," she finished for him, turning the awkward confession into a private joke between them. He sighed again, this time not quite so heavily, and pulled her into an embrace. Hermione stiffened for a moment, then relaxed into him when all he did was hold her. A few moments later, she felt his fingers on her back, but they lingered only long enough to pull up the zip of her gown. It was nice to know his mother had raised a gentleman, however much a frustrated one.

Setting her at arms-length, he gave her a lopsided smile. "I'd better go, then. I won't rush you, but my hormones might try to vote otherwise." Leaning in for a moment, he kissed her, a chaste touch of their lips, then released her and headed for the door. "I'll see you in the morning...and probably in my dreams. You, um, won't mind if I ask your dream-self to get a little more adventurous, will you?"

Her heart melted with the humor of it. "Let her get as 'frisky' as she likes, Ron. One day I will be, too."

"Right. Just don't take forever." Giving her one last look over his shoulder, he opened the door and stepped through.

After the door clicked shut, Hermione sagged onto the edge of the bed, feeling tired. Drained, emotionally. And her feet still hurt from all the dancing she'd done. Fishing her wand out of her pocket, she undid the zipper all the way and slithered out of the dress. Stripping, she donned her pyjamas, wincing a little at how plain they seemed compared to her evening gown, yet glad they *were* plain blue striped cotton and utterly un-sexy. Picking up her toiletry kit, she padded out of her room to head to the communal bath to brush her teeth and ready herself for bed.

She almost ran into Ron as he stepped out of the little room. They jerked back from each other awkwardly, then he managed a smile, sweeping one hand gallantly towards the lavatory. "All yours..."

"Thanks. Sweet dreams," she added daringly, wondering if Ron would turn out to have a tiny bit of maribu on the toe-strap of his proverbial fuzzy slipper.

He blushed, but retorted, "Feel free to let my own dream-self get as frisky as *you* like."

Flustered but smiling, Hermione ducked into the bathroom.

...

Hands caught her, yanking her through a doorway as she passed it on her way down to breakfast. Startled, heart pounding, Hermione drew in a breath to scream, and found herself turned around and slammed against the hastily shut door, a hand pressed over her mouth. A lean, hard body pressed hers firmly to the carved wood, and the other tanned hand had her wand-arm pinned by the wrist, preventing her from hexing her kilt-clad captor. Realizing belatedly that it was Russel, a.k.a. Rorik Ferguson, Hermione shakily let out her startled lungful of air through her nostrils.

Holding her tawny gaze with his pewter grey one, he slowly eased the pressure of his hand. Removing it, he drew in a breath to speak, but his gaze dropped to her mouth, then to either side. A lick of his lips, and he murmured something else instead. An apology, rather than whatever he'd meant to say.

"...I've bruised you. I'm sorry; I didn't mean to. I just didn't want you screaming and rousing half the wing to come rushing to your rescue."

Feeling her heart-rate ease, Hermione licked her own lips reflexively. "It's okay--"

His gaze, riveted on her mouth, darkened. Without warning, he kissed her. Catching the startled release of her breath, he slanted his lips against hers, sucking, then licking. Not with a hard, uncomfortable pressure, but with a muscle-tight restraint she could feel in the tension of his body, still pinning hers to the door. Yet his mouth was soft, succulent, and remarkably coaxing.

Not quite sure when the transition was made, Hermione found herself returning his tutoring nips with ones of her own. Nor did she know when he stopped gripping her wand-hand, though she was acutely aware of the feel of his hand cupping her breast through her dark purple shirt. The feel of his own shirt--white, today--clenched in her fingers let her know she was tugging him closer as her heart-rate sped up again. This was what was missing from her moments with Ron. Breath-stealing passion.

He left her mouth, making it feel abandoned, though her chin and her jaw and the line of her throat rejoiced at having garnered his attention. Her whole body tensed, breasts and thighs aching, her soft curves pressing into his harder angles. Uncurling her fingers, she slid her palms to his shoulders, intending to push him away. Somehow they ended up tangling in his chest-length hair instead. She did manage to tug his mouth away from her collarbone, only to find herself dragging him back into range for another hot kiss.

It felt dangerously liberating, being aggressive. Hermione wasn't quite sure why she could balk and shy in Ron's arms at the thought of leaping into her sexuality, yet fling herself over the cliff's edge with this man, this spy...this potential liar. *Oh, god*, she thought, *don't tell me I'm in lust with the bad-boy image...*

A brief thought of how much she disliked Draco Malfoy banished that possibility. And she'd never liked Sirius in that sort of way, either; he had certainly been a bad-boy poster child while he lived, but she'd found him to be reckless and arrogant. No, Russel was different. Russel was delicious...Russel was unbuttoning her blouse and licking his way down her throat once again, this time not stopping until he was nuzzling and kissing the curve of her breast above the satin edge of her bra.

The scrape of his fingernail over the tight-aching peak of her nipple made her cry out. He twitched, freezing in place. A heartbeat later, he jerked back from her, hands going to his hair, then sliding down his chest. He stared at her, eyes wide and a little wild. "I'm sorry...I'm sorry! I didn't mean... You could tempt the devil himself, with all that passion. Merlin knows I'm probably his second cousin... Are you alright?"

Flushed, Hermione had clutched her blouse together. Her nipple still ached from his touch. Both of them, actually Fumbling the buttons back into their holes, she focused on trying not to blush any further. "I'll...I'll be alright. Please, don't do that again. I'm still dating Ron, and I don't like the way how you make me feel, when he's supposed to be making me feel that way."

He stepped back close to her, and lifted her chin with the edge of his finger. "Don't ever be ashamed of your passion, Jane. For what it's worth...I'm sorry if you're uncomfortable. But you should be smart enough to realize that if I can tempt you, you're not meant to be with him."

Hermione pulled her chin away, moving out from between him and the door. "That doesn't mean I'm meant for *you*. I can see myself living with Ron and raising a family together, ten years from now. I can't see anything when I think of you!"

Silence met her cold words. She turned to find him staring at her, his expression shuttered. Opening her mouth to apologize, she found herself cut off. "--Don't bother, Jane. I realize I cannot offer you anything at this point in time. I am a spy, and my life is forfeit if I am uncovered by either side, before the end."

His own words were chilly, but their brittleness seemed directed more at himself than at her, as his gaze slid away. It wasn't much, and it was both lame and late, but she had to offer it anyway. "I'm sorry."

A slow, deep breath, and he moved away from the subject, looking at her once again. "I wanted to ask you last night what you meant by Harry being your brother. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't lie to me."

"...I'd rather not talk about that," Hermione hedged.

He closed the distance between them, looming over her. She knew he was tall, but this was the first time he'd tried to intimidate her a little by it. Uncomfortable under the pinning weight of his stare, she found herself studying his raven-carved amulet again. He lifted her chin, forcing her to look back up at him. "I *need* to know, if I'm to do damage-control, when word of this gets out. How did you manage it? He has no brothers for you to marry, but words sent through the rings cannot lie, so you must have managed it somehow. Jane--the moment your enemies find out about this development, you'll be an even greater target than before. I need to know, in case I need to protect you somehow! You're my only link to the right side in this war!"

The rings didn't permit lies. Hermione recalled his words, sent through the ring, that he was on her side. On Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore's side. Relenting, allowing herself to believe in the wizard touching her, she gave him the truth. "Harry and I performed the Brothers-by-Blood ritual, last night. We're now blood-related by magic, as brother and sister. And before you say anything more about this being a dangerous weakness, I think it's also a strength. Harry now has family that he actually *likes*, and who likes him back.

"That's worth more than an increased threat to myself. I'm already too talented, too intelligent, too Muggle-born, and too close to Harry. One more layer on top of all of that won't make my fate at the hands of Voldemort's cronies any worse," she pointed out.

He flinched, covering his forearm quickly. "Don't say that name!"

"Why ever not?" Hermione demanded as he stepped back. "Why shouldn't I say it? It's just a name!"

"Because there are rumors that, if you say it in the presence of a Dark Mark, *he* can hear it being spoken!" Russel hissed at her. "And I'd rather not test that theory!"

"It's just a mark!" she scoffed.

"It's a mark with a lot of very powerful magic tied into it!" the dark blond wizard retorted. "I've seen him do things you cannot imagine. Powerful things. And heard rumors of far worse. I'd rather not risk the rumors of his Mark being somehow tied to him turning out to be true!"

"Alright! Alright," she repeated, holding out her hands as she sought to calm him down. "I won't say that name again, in your presence."

"...Thank you." He rubbed his forearm again, then shook his head. "I need to go. This conversation is over."

"I'm sorry," she offered.

He shook his head. "It's not your fault. I'll see you later."

Nodding, she watched him flick his wand at the door, dissolving the wards that must have been pre-laid and triggered when he'd shut the door. Now he opened it a crack, checking the corridor. It must have been clear, for he stepped through and shut the panel behind himself, leaving her alone in the room. Hermione waited a couple minutes, then left herself, in case anyone was watching.

It also gave her a few minutes to compose herself and smooth her blouse into her dress-slacks, so that she didn't look rumpled from their brief but torrid bout of snogging.

Chapter 08

Chapter 8 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

VIII.

Hermione fluttered nervously by the display cases. She just couldn't figure out a way to cast the soul-scanning charm without anyone else noticing. Especially Professor Flitwick. Filius had been around the block more than once; he was very competent at Charms, and would probably be able to tell exactly what kind of medical charm she was casting. And maybe he'd even understand what it meant if and when the wand started scintillating, if it really was a Horcrux. That was something she couldn't allow him to realize. The success of their mission to destroy the pieces of the Dark Lord's soul depended very strongly on secrecy.

They had less than twenty minutes before the exhibits had to be ready, since that was when the hall would open. Ron was chatting with Yorsen, helping him set up his own display as they discussed chess maneuvers. That left her and Harry to help their short ex-teacher. Sidling up to her brand-new brother, Hermione whispered in his ear.

"Harry...you *have* to distract Professor Flitwick and all the others, somehow. I need to cast the spell before the last of the protective wardings go up around these cases, and the use of magic on their contents becomes impossible!"

Harry grimaced, but nodded. She left him to it as she returned to studying the cases, some lined with black velvet, others in white, depending on which material would offset the colour of the wand-wood lying within. She studied the plaques of the two most famous wands in the Charms professor's collection: Rowena Ravenclaw, and Albus Dumbledore. Rowena's wand was oak, with the core of a phoenix feather, from some phoenix named "Gullveig".

That's an awkward, ugly name, she thought, wrinkling her nose.

Next to it in equal prominence was the wand of Albus Dumbledore. Willow, like Ron's, though this one had been made with the core of a phoenix's tail-feather, not a unicorn-hair. The name listed on the plaque made her blink.

Gullveig, too? That's one heck of a coincidence! I know they live forever, constantly being reborn from their own ashes, but...well, it might explain a little bit of why Fawkes chose Albus...

"You know, it's a real pity you can't put my own wand into your collection, Professor," Harry stated abruptly, and loudly enough for the exhibitors in their section of the large room to overhear. "You did say my wand would be quite a *coup* for your collection. I can't give it up, of course; not while I still need it," he added, twirling the length of holly in his fingers when Hermione looked up, as distracted as everyone else by his words, "but it did face down the wand of Lord Voldemort himself, and helped me survive!"

Half the people listening gasped. Most everyone in the room twitched. All save for two people. Hermione, who quickly turned back to the display case, mouthing, "*Psycandum*." ...and Ron, who called back through the shocked silence, "--Don't you mean Lord Voldiedork?"

"What, Moldiemort?" Harry shot back.

"Voldiebutt?" Ron suggested.

"Snake-Face?"

"The Basilisk-Snogging Bastard!"

The crowd of exhibitors stared at the two young men, shocked to their core at the blatant display of brave but juvenile disrespect.

The wand glowed with sickly colours, much the same as the locket had. "*Finite incantatem!*"

It stopped scintillating, and Hermione quickly turned away from the case to check and make sure no one had seen what she'd done. They were all too busy staring at the two young wizards. Even Flitwick gaped as his two former students, his bearded mouth sagging open.

"--Do you two mind? I didn't eat breakfast that long ago!" Hermione chided her two best friends. "You'll make me sick to my own soul, if you keep on mentioning that putrid, slimy blowhard!"

Harry's gaze sharpened, and Ron's laughing expression sobered. They'd caught on to her meaning. Harry nodded. "Sorry, Hermione. Sorry, Professor."

"Er...no harm done. Hand me that case, the one with Nicholas Flamel's wand in it!"

"You've got Flamel's wand?" someone else called out, a fellow exhibitor.

Flitwick beamed with pride as he replied, "I had an 'in' with the old man through Albus Dumbledore, you know! You'd be surprised at how well a 'mere' teacher can be connected, in the wand-collecting world..."

...

"...And though I do regret the highly untimely nature of its presence, I think it the finest example in my collection, having Albus Dumbledore's wand as a part of my display," Filius Flitwick relayed to his audience, standing on a stool brought out to him by a house-elf for the duration of his presentation. "Any questions?"

A veritable forest of hands shot into the air. Calling on one of them--an act which reminded Hermione rather amusingly of his classroom demeanor--Filius bade the wizard in question to speak. It was Roland Ollivander, the grey-haired wand-maker.

"--How do you *know*, for absolute certain, that this other wand is truly the wand of Rowena Ravenclaw?"

"Well, I've performed all the standard tests!" Filius squeaked matter-of-factly. "Spectral analysis charms, material component revealers, age-gauging spells...you name it!"

"A lot of that can be faked," Mr. Ollivander pointed out. Several heads nodded in agreement. He gave the shorter wizard a shrewd look. "I noticed that Albus Dumbledore's wand holds a core feather from the same phoenix as Rowena's. This is a fact backed by my shop's records from the time-period of Rowena Ravenclaw, and the other three founders of Hogwarts. Most phoenixes hand out only a dozen tail-feathers at most, and the records for Gullveig show that she hasn't donated a tail-feather in over three hundred years, save for Albus Dumbledore's. If it is Rowena Ravenclaw's wand...then wouldn't *Priori Incantatem* *prove* it, beyond all shadow of a doubt?"

"Well, yes, I suppose it would..." the Charms Professor allowed.

"Then why not prove it?" Roland Ollivander offered, stepping forward, out of the crowd, his eyes shrewd under the shock of his bushy grey eyebrows. "You could take up Dumbledore's wand, and I'll take up Ravenclaw's, and we'll have a little duel, to prove or disprove the matter! Nothing harmful, of course..."

Hermione's breasts burned. Stifling a gasp, she shifted back behind Ron, pulling out the ring. Words were etched into it, scrolling out of the scale-pattern.

Do not let Ollivander touch that wand!

Of course; if Ollivander was under the Imperius Curse, he probably had a Portkey on him, like Russel did. The moment he had the wand, he'd be yanked away, and there would go their chance to get the Horcrux. "--Professor!" she called out quickly, shifting far enough to plant her hand on her brother's back. "Why don't you have Harry wield the wand against you? He's actually *experienced* *Priori Incantatem*, when he faced Lord Voldemort upon his initial return, two years ago!"

Harry stumbled forward as she shoved him, but recovered quickly, improvising a smile as he followed her lead. "I would be honored to help, Professor. *Priori Incantatem* is quite difficult to handle, if you're not prepared for its side-effects."

"That's actually a splendid idea!" Filius agreed quickly. "You've always had a good aim with the milder jinxes, when you were my pupil--here, you take Dumbledore's wand," the Charms professor added, "and I'll take the wand of my House Founder. It wouldn't do to let this beauty fall into the hands of a Gryffindor, after all," he added with a merry wink, playing to their House rivalries.

"You'd let a *youth* handle such a valuable wand?" Mr. Ollivander protested.

Hermione leaned forward and whispered into Harry's ear as Filius replied that he had absolute faith in 'the boy'. "If you can hold *Priori* long enough, Harry...it might force the fragment out of the wand!"

"I'd rather destroy it outright, by snapping it in half!" he muttered back, turning so that his words reached only her own ear.

"We don't know if that's even the way to kill it. We'll find some other way to destroy the fragment," she promised him, wincing at the thought of destroying such a historical artifact. "If nothing else, I might be able to cage it with the Ghost Trap spell. I learnt it during our research, in case I ever needed to deal with a malevolent ghost, or with Peeves in a bad mood."

"--Come forward, Harry! Don't be shy," Filius beckoned him. Harry obligingly stepped forward, accepting the wand of their former Headmaster.

"...Oy!" Ron hissed, glancing at Hermione. "Did you see that?"

"No, what?" she whispered back.

"That woman, with the dark hair, in the brown dress...she just vanished!"

"That's impossible," Hermione muttered under her breath. "The Mansion has an anti-Apparation charm laid on it, just like the school."

"I'm telling you, she disappeared!" the redhead hissed back.

"On the count of three, we'll both cast the Jellylegs Jinx. Ready?" Filius instructed his ex-pupil.

Harry gripped his borrowed wand a little tighter. "Ready, sir."

I do believe in Ron Hermione thought as the two wizards prepared themselves.

"One..."

If he says some woman disappeared, she disappeared...

"Two..."

But if she didn't Apparate, that leaves only Portkeying--oh!

"Three!"

Harry and Filius flung their curses at each other. Blue light leapt at blue light as the two sparks of magical intent raced at their targets...and snapped into a beam of gold, connecting the two wands. *Priori Incantatem* had begun.

Hermione's mind raced with the implications of that witch's vanishing act. *If she went to report to the Dark Lord on what's happening, he's going to be furious about not getting his hand on Ravenclaw's wand. And he'll know that if Priori Incantatem is held long enough, it just might release the fragment of his soul, exposing it to danger--he's probably going to launch an attack, to try and get at that wand! An all-out attack!*

"Th-th-that's enough, b-b-boy!" Professor Flitwick stammered as the wands began vibrating with the thickening of the golden bolt connecting the two. "You c-can let g-go, now!"

They didn't *dare* risk losing that wand in the coming battle. They had to get that soul-fragment out now! "--No, Harry! Keep it going!"

Harry's brow furrowed with determination, and his knuckles whitened with visible effort as he clung to the late Headmaster's wand. Phoenix-song pierced the confused babble of voices, achingly sweet and higher-pitched, more feminine than she remembered Fawkes' song to be. The single beam broke into a thousand threads that threw themselves into a cage, forcing the crowd and the display cases back from the pair as a webbed dome of energy formed around them. Beads of light built up rapidly in the central beam of magic arcing between them. It didn't take more than two or three rapid heartbeats for them to thicken, nor for them to shift and tremble their way towards the wand being gripped now in both of Filius' hands.

And then the golden bead struck the tip of Rowena Ravenclaw's wand. Ghostly sparks shot from the wand. A bouquet of flowers. A loud banging noise. Strange sigils formed out of smoke, the sound of uncontrollable laughter, a whistling teakettle, chopping vegetables, the roar of a crackling fire from an *Incendio* charm. The shape of a rabbit morphing into a knapsack and back. Every charm, hex, and spell wielded by the wand was being repeated in reverse order, as the phoenix-song sang on and on--

The air filled with a new sound, the banging of several bodies arriving via Portkey, slamming through the others in the crowds and knocking them down. Instantly, the air in the crowded ballroom dropped from being stiflingly warm to dreadfully icy--dreadfully in the Dementor-ized sense, for two of the cowed figures rose up from the tangle of bodies sprawled along a length of what looked like the velvety, aged rope torn from an old curtain or something. Someone had made themselves a Portkey long enough to haul along nine or ten Death Eaters, two Dementors...and a *giant*?

Scared, Hermione grabbed for her wand, her own action far more sensible than the screaming of the exhibitors and guests around them. Those on their feet scrambled for the doors, some even crashing through the French-glazed windows into the atrium in their haste to escape the black-robed, silver-masked foes in their midst. Wand-cases smashed, as the giant stood up, flailing his brutish arms. Hexes started flying, and she started ducking and snapping *Protego* charms as fast as she could.

The only two in the ballroom who were safe from the conflict were Harry and Filius, wrapped in their *Priori* cocoon as they were. The giant waded through the others and started smashing his fists on the cage, but it was a futile effort. The golden web-work only flashed and seared his flesh, making him roar deafeningly. Hermione dropped and rolled under one of the display cases to get away from the insane glare of Bellatrix Lestrange--who *wasn't* the dark-haired witch; she was guarding the other witch's back with a grimace of distaste--and found herself face-to-hood with one of the Dementors the moment she rose on the other side.

Fear sapped her energy, fear that the creature enhanced by its very nature. As it lifted skeleton-like hands to its cowed hood, preparing to move it back for the Kiss, Hermione grasped for the happiest thought she could imagine, shouting, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Silvery mist flung itself from her wand...but her otter Patronus didn't form. The hood lifted higher, scaring her further. She tried again, groping for the thought her and Ron in a decade's time, of Harry now being her brother--

"*Expecto Patronum--Expecto PATRONUM!*"

A body slammed into hers as a hideous, scabby mouth came into view. The hard warmth of her assailant knocked her to the ground, rolling her over. Scared, she grappled with her attacker, trying to shove him off of her as he ended up on top. Until she realized she was staring up into a pair of very concerned pewter-grey eyes. Russel. He'd saved her from the Dementor's Kiss, and now lay sprawled over her, his kilted legs entangled with her trouser-clad ones. He felt warm, heavy, and masculine, incongruous sensations given the current blasting of hexes and screaming of victims around them.

The Dementor reared over both of them, its scabby, vacuum-like mouth still visible, its too-long fingers still pushing back the deep folds of its hood. It looked hungry, and it looked like it wouldn't care if it sucked out her soul, or Russel's. She remembered the kiss they'd shared, not more than five or six hours before, and tore her wand arm free of his grasp. She couldn't let Russel die!

"*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

A winged shape tore out of her wand, flaring bright and strong. For a moment, she thought it was a phoenix, but it wasn't. It was a raven, as silvery as moonlight, and ten times as bright. That was a far cry from her original otter. Hermione almost lost it from surprise, before she firmed her concentration with a hard frown. Pulsating light pushed the hideous thing into the ceiling over their heads, throwing it hard enough that some of the moulded ceiling cracked and plaster-dust rained down on the battle raging below. She didn't know what had happened to the other one, but it wasn't about to come anywhere near the ballroom, given how far-reaching the power of that Patronus-raven had spread, lighting up the chamber around them.

--Hermione!" The shout was Harry's voice. Russel rolled off of her, letting her scramble to her feet. She saw Harry looking at her, at the slim shaft in Professor Flitwick's hands--where an incredibly tiny but incredibly bright spark had floated out of the tip of Ravenclaw's wand--and glancing up at the ceiling. Where the Dementor was pinned. Harry shouted at her again. "Let it go!"

...Bloody fucking brilliant!

A flick of her wand, and Hermione ended the Patronus, just as Harry tore his own borrowed wand away from the conflict with the one in Flitwick's hands. The golden web-work of light faded as the Dementor pushed itself out of the cracked dent in the plaster. It shook itself, oriented on her--then jerked and oriented on that tiny, bright spark. Diving down, it charged the fragment of soul, as Harry ducked around it, pushing their stunned Charms professor out of the way.

The diving Dementor pounced on the soul-fragment, glomming onto it like a hungry teenager at a free buffet. The rasping sound of its suctioning was accompanied by a faint but hideous, high-pitched shrieking, the screeching of a soul in mortal agony. Hermione flinched, hating what was happening even as she knew it was necessary. The keening cut off, the Dementor moaned in ecstasy--an obscene sound that made her stomach churn--and Professor Flitwick's high-pitched voice cut through the noise with remarkable authority.

"--*Expecto Patronum!*"

A shining, silver centaur leapt out of the wand in his grip, charging into the Dementor and smashing it back through the glazed windows overlooking the autumn-faded gardens.

"*Avada--*"

Hermione's head whipped around, looking for the source of that feminine snarl: Bellatrix, glaring at Ron!

"--*Kedavra!*"

Her palm rasped hard against her wrist, as that deadly bolt of green raced at her boyfriend. Instantly the battle silenced, freezing in place as she shot the mother-of-pearl band of the bracelet halfway around. Peering through the treacle-slow confusion, she checked on the danger to her boyfriend from the Killing Curse.

The bolt was still moving, too fast for her to intervene. Hermione shoved the bracelet again, until it jammed up against the far end, dialing in all twenty-four segments. The Curse slowed to an icy-treacle crawl. She had four minutes at this speed in which to act, but she didn't know if that would be enough time.

Shoving her wand into her pocket, Hermione started counting the seconds in her head even as she moved. Picking her way quickly through the seemingly unmoving bodies, Hermione dodged several frozen, flying shards of display cases, ducked between the giant's legs, since the path to either side around him was blocked, and grabbed Ron by the shirt, hauling on his body.

He barely budged. She pulled harder, until she heard his time-stiffened shirt start to rip. The green-glowing curse inched closer. Switching position, she pushed on Ron's shoulder, heaving against his body. She might be beyond the effects of mass and inertia, using up her four minutes of super-speed magically...but *he* was still trapped in the physics of normality.

Seconds ticked by in her head, and the segments of her bracelet clicked one by one from mother-of-pearl to abalone. The clicking was unnaturally loud in the silence of the ballroom battle, a silence broken only by her grunting efforts as she went so far as to brace one leg behind her against the back of the giant's calf. It didn't work. Ron wasn't budging fast enough. The Killing Curse was just too close. It would strike Ron before she could free him, and even a glancing blow would be enough to end his life.

If only she could've hauled a Death Eater between him and that deadly--

A Death Eater? Shoving away from Ron, she scrambled over to Harry. She couldn't grab another Death Eater to throw in the path of that deadly ray; their own inertial mass would defeat her as surely as Ron's had. But there *was* something small enough for her to drag over there, hopefully in time! Grabbing the chain that lay around Harry's neck, she pried the Horcrux locket out of his clothes and over his head. Pulling hard on the time-stuck metal, she hauled it over to Ron's side, ignoring the aching effort it took to get the metal object into place.

The green fire had moved very close, fraction by fraction. It now lay within a hand-span of Ron's chest. Time hadn't stopped, after all, just slowed down to an agonizing crawl. Pushing on the locket itself, she positioned it just so in front of the bolt, then snatched her fingers out of the way. The curse struck and seeped into the locket just three frantic heartbeats and a click of her bracelet after she cleared her fingers. It crawled around the edges of the golden case, brightened...and sucked itself rapidly inside, faster than expected. A moment later, the last of the greenish light winked out.

Hermione felt an hysterical urge to laugh. First the Horcrux soul-fragment from the wand had been eaten by a Dementor--an ally of the Dark Lord's--and now Bellatrix Lestrange's own Killing Curse had killed the Horcrux in the locket? Oh, she wanted to *laugh!* But she didn't have enough time, as her bracelet clicked again, cutting her off mid-chuckle. A glance down showed she had just two pearlescent slots left.

Grabbing the chain, she hauled it back to Harry again, shoving the golden links down around his head and stuffing the locket back under his shirt. The last thing they needed was for anyone to realize that the locket, too, had been destroyed. She turned to check on Ron--and time snapped back into place with an exhausting jolt.

Ron dropped, dragged off-balance by her efforts. Harry screamed his name and bolted towards his fallen friend. Hermione, bumped by him as he thrust past her, staggered back, unable to catch her balance. Hands caught her arms, she thought to help right her--but one of those hands held an age-worn bit of rope, pressing it into her wrist, and before she could get her time-numbed body to react, the Portkey activated. She was jerked away while still caught in the grip of what she realized too late were robed and masked Death Eaters.

They landed awkwardly in a tastefully, if serpently, decorated parlour. Hermione was too exhausted by her bracelet-ordeal to catch her balance; she tripped and dropped, and was yanked painfully upright again by her arms before she could hit the ground. There were other masked and robed Death Eaters here, but as she was hauled around by a jerk on her right arm, the other released, she saw the most frightening figure of her life: the slit-nostriled, red-eyed, pallid-skinned face of Lord Voldemort himself.

"*Accio wand!*"

Her wand jerked out of her pocket, flying somewhere behind her. She was disarmed, trapped in the lair of the Basilisk Bastard--her left hand snatched at her bracelet one last time, but she was out of minutes. Hermione twisted it again, knowing she would be defenceless, helpless while it charged--

"*Impedimenta!*"

She froze in place, with only a single *click* reaching her ears. One minute. She would have only one minute of stored time, once the Stunning Charm wore off... *Don't think about that!* Forcing her mind and heart to calm down, Hermione threw up the barriers she'd learned in her Occlumency studies with the boys. She'd devoted herself harder than them to the study, and had picked it up faster, surpassing Harry's own rusty skills rather quickly, but then that was her nature. Her mind was disciplined from years of sticking to study-schedules, and some of that had translated into the magic of obscuring her thoughts through concentration.

"This is that Mudblood girl, the friend of that boy," Voldemort hissed, rising from a chair that was carved around the edges and padded in a rich, emerald green satin. It looked like a throne, and his Death Eaters were serving as his courtiers. "I sent you to get the wand, not a girl!"

"We saw the wand fall to the floor, milord. It was broken."

Voldemort's face contorted with fury. The twisted, pallid face, with those reddish eyes, looked frighteningly inhuman. Hermione prayed for a shot at freedom, so that she wouldn't be around when his temper broke.

"We snagged the girl, knowing you would want to torture her for her interference," the Death Eater who had hauled her around muttered warily. Hermione could only look at

what was within her frozen field of view, but she was pretty sure she saw an ornate monogram on an oval at the top of that chair-back. The letter 'M'...for 'Malfoy'? The man showed his bravery by adding, "She's quite a prize, herself."

"Yessss... Narcissa said it was *her* decision to make the Potter brat face down the midget-freak, instead of our...emissary," the Dark Lord hissed.

Narcissa. Of course! No wonder that disguised witch had protected her sister's back, during the fray. *And, being married into the Malfoy family, she'd know how to move about in high society without drawing attention to herself...*

"Yes, it was Narcissa, at the exhibition," the Dark Lord agreed, staring into Hermione's eyes.

Hermione had forgotten to maintain her mental discipline. She quickly stilled her mind, thinking about nothing other than the flat, calm, reflective surface of a lake, unrippled by wind or wave. Mirror-smooth in its perfection, unruffled by thought or emotion. Voldemort hissed in frustration.

"--Someone has been teaching you Occlumency! Crude, but powerful--do you think that imagining still waters will save you from your fate? Rape her! Beat her down and break her spirit! *Entertain* us with her torture! You will find, little Mudssssslut, that it is impossible to remain calm while experiencing the deepest torments of humiliation and pain!"

Shite!

"*Finite Incantatem--*"

Hermione slammed the one-click-worth she had of her bracelet into play, the instant the Stunning Charm was removed. Time slowed around her. Not nearly as slowly as it had during the Killing Curse, but it would hopefully be long enough. Turning, she looked for her wand. It wasn't in sight. She quickly patted down the robes of the wizard beside her, then the witch behind him--she couldn't find it! Frantic to save herself, Hermione knew she couldn't save up any more minutes. She was going to be beaten, tortured, raped, brutalized and robbed of her chastity--

The ring! Grabbing the chain in both hands, she faced Voldemort again as she yanked on it, breaking the clasp. Snatching the ring in her right hand, she flung the chain free with her left, and jammed into onto her left ring-finger--

Time jolted back into full play, while the ring was between her first and second knuckles. Voldemort blinked as she shoved the ring home. The wizard at her side grabbed her arm, sneering a frighteningly amused, "It'll be my pleasure, milord!"

Magic roared out of the ring, gleaming with golden scales. Voices screamed and bodies scrambled, and even the Dark Lord staggered back, shocked by the apparition that filled the space behind her. Craning her head, Hermione looked over her shoulder. Into a wall of muscular golden scales. She looked up to identify the rest of it...and her lips parted, her jaw sagging in shock.

A dragon.

A fucking *huge* golden dragon, solid enough to make the floorboards creak ominously from its sheer weight. The ring had conjured a *dragon* to protect her?

"SSSSSHE ISSSS THE PRINCSSSESSSS! YOU WILL NOT TOUCH HER!"

A *talking* golden dragon?!

Someone got the brilliant idea to fling a hex at the creature, instead of screaming or fainting like the others. "*Conjunctivitis!*"

The dragon's scaly foreleg snapped out, grabbing and piercing the man with its claws. Its metallic, horn-studded skull snapped down an instant later, biting the Death Eater's head and shoulders from his body. Clearly unhindered by the eye-harming curse. There hadn't been time for the man to scream, just time for severed arteries to spurt blood in sickening, dark red splatters during the few seconds it took for his heart to stop pumping. Thankfully it fell away from her, spraying several of Voldemort's followers. Hermione didn't know what she would've done if any of that blood had landed on her. Several of the Death Eaters screamed again, wizards and witches alike.

Hermione wanted to scream. But what she *really* wanted was for this nightmare to be over! To be safe back at Headquarters, where no Death Eater could find her, where there were no man-eating dragons that needed to so violently protect her--

The dragon spat out the bloody bits of the man with a meaty thump, shifting its weight. A golden, clawed forelimb lifted, touching her shoulder with startling gentleness--and the yanking sensation of a Portkey jerked at her nauseated belly. She found herself flung onto a threadbare carpet. Unable to keep her balance, too drained by her time-escapades and too shattered by what she'd seen, Hermione fell to her hands and knees with painful awkwardness.

She stayed there for a moment, trembling. Then her eyes squeezed shut, and her body heaved, retching the remnants of the buffet luncheon she'd eaten shortly before Professor Flitwick's scheduled presentation. All she could think of were the scabrous mouth of the Dementor, the bodies of the victims in the ballroom, the evil gleam of the Dark Lord's eyes, and the spurting blood and meaty thump of the dragon tearing that Death Eater apart. She retched until it felt like she was trying to vomit up her toenails.

"--Merlin's Sweet Arse!" A body dropped to its knees beside her, bringing a shock of lavender hair into view. Tonks scraped Hermione's hair back from her face, holding her head as she retched again. "Wotcher, Hermione, what happened to *you*?"

Unable to answer, Hermione focused on breathing in short, shallow pants between heaves, until they slowly subsided. Tonks stroked her forehead, holding her steady, then Summoned a washcloth and a glass of water from the kitchen. Another pass of her wand, a muttered charm, and all traces of her sickness vanished from the Black family parlour carpet, and from Hermione's hair.

Wetting the washcloth, Tonks pressed it to Hermione's forehead, then to the back of her neck. "Easy, there...what happened?"

"Battle," Hermione managed, torn between panting and moaning from her misery. "Death Eaters...Marselle Mansion..."

"Oy! I've got to warn the Order!" Leaping to her feet, the Metamorphmagus raced out of the parlour.

Hermione sagged onto her side, half-curved into a miserable ball. She wet the washcloth again with trembling fingers, then risked rinsing her mouth with a sip of it. Unable to swallow the acrid taste without risking another bout of sickness, she spat it out on the carpet, then reached shakily for her wand to *Evanesc* the evidence...and remembered that her wand was still in the hands of some Death Eater. Probably at Malfoy Manor, but Tonks had vanished, and she didn't have the strength to go crawling after the other woman. Too many minutes of living too fast had passed; she would have to wait until she'd regained her strength to act on the possibility that Narcissa had opened up her home for the Dark Lord's use.

She did, however, push her bracelet back around with trembling fingers. One minute at a time, rather than twenty-four in one go, but then she didn't know if she'd have to react to Tonks' return or not. But the other witch didn't return, and though storing time left her dizzy from hyperventilation and sick to her stomach with bone-deep exhaustion, she got all twenty-four minutes stored. Not that anyone could attack Headquarters without torturing the secret of it out of Mrs. Figg, or killing the old lady outright, but she didn't ever want to be caught without a means of defending herself again.

One of Mrs. Figg's cats came to investigate her as she lay there, recharging her body and bracelet on the floor. It sniffed at the bilious spit, sniffed at her mouth, then head-butted her breasts, rubbing its siamese-coloured flank against her chest. By the time Hermione came out of storing away that particular minute, the cat had moved on in the

fickle fashion of most felines.

It was Crookshanks who came to her next, as she finished the bracelet. He, too, sniffed at her, head-butted her, and lingered until she was free to lift a trembling hand to his ears. Tears seeped from her eyes, as she recalled the battle scene, and wondered if her two friends were still alright. Her stomach rumbled with hunger. It rumbled again, as footsteps shuffled into the room.

"Oh! Oh my goodness! Hermione, dearie! Whatever is wrong with you? Are you hurt?"

"Exhausted, Mrs. Figg," she managed, twisting onto her back. Crooks followed, nuzzling her hand for more attention. She peered up at the elderly Squib. "And...sick to stomach..."

Her stomach rumbled a third time. Mrs. Figg pursed her lips. "Exhausted and sick to your stomach you may be, but that stomach is also hungry! A little chicken broth will set you to rights; the salt will settle your stomach, and I'll throw in a pilot-cracker, too. They were used to cure the seasickness of first-time sailors in the Royal Navy, once upon a time. Can you stand up? Or at least crawl to the couch? I'm afraid that oddly-haired young lady has left to go join the others on some mission, and I cannot lift you myself."

She did feel a little better. Nodding, Hermione rolled over, pushed to her hands and knees, and managed to crawl to the parlour couch. It unsettled her stomach to heave herself onto the cushions. Mrs. Figg hovered nearby until she was on the sofa, then spread an afghan over Hermione's trembling frame. Shuffling off, she went to fetch the broth, muttering about hardtack and saltine crackers.

Voices spilled through the door into the hallway. With the silencing of Mrs. Black's portrait, none of the other paintings had dared complain, so the voices had to be from actual bodies. Sure enough, several spilled into the parlour, the most vociferous pair belonging to an angry Harry and a frustrated Ron.

"--But we *have* to go after her! They're going to kill her!"

"Or worse!" Ron shouted at Mad-Eye Moody. "We'd be lucky if it was *only* the Imperius Curse, and a few bouts of Cruciatius!"

Alastor drew in a breath to reply, then stopped, jerked, and peered over his shoulder with his good eye. Apparently his magical one had spotted her. The blatant look in her direction drew the attention of the others, and with a strangled cry, Harry and Ron flung themselves at her. Harry got to her first, sweeping her up into a sitting position as he hugged her.

"Hermione! You're alive! You're alive!"

"Can't keep a good know-it-all down," she muttered, eyes stinging with tears. They were echoed in Harry's green gaze as he pulled back. Ron tugged him away, leaning in to take his place. Her ring tingled and the floorboards creaked as a voice roared over their heads.

"SSSSSHE ISSSS THE PRINCSSESSES! YOU WILL NOT TOUCH HER!"

"--*Shite!*"

The expletive leapt from several mouths. Moody and Harry whipped out their wands, Ron scrambled back in an awkward crab-scuttle, and Hermione screamed, leaping to her feet, and throwing out her arms as she whirled to face the dragon.

"*NO!!*" It stopped, head pulling back slightly. She yelled again, adrenaline giving her the energy she hadn't had a moment ago. "Don't hurt my friends!"

Its head pulled back further, then it bellowed, "THEY SSSSHALL NOT TOUCH YOU! YOU ARE THE PRINCSSESSES!"

"--Moody's my friend, Harry's my brother, and Ron's my boyfriend--and you will not touch them!" Hermione dared to argue, mind racing. It was the ring, of course; this was one of those betrothal rings with a guardian enspelled into it...and lucky her, she got a huge dragon. This time it wasn't quite as big as it had been in the Malfoy parlour, but then the Black parlour was considerably smaller, and the dragon had been forced to materialize behind the sofa she'd been lying upon. He stepped over the furnishing, swelling in size as he lowered his snout to within an inch of hers.

"YOU ARE THE PRINCSSESSES!"

Apparently even the most talkative of magical dragons--and there was an oxymoron if she'd ever heard one, from a Muggle perspective--couldn't be reasoned with. Especially one that smelled of charcoal at such close range. "Okay--okay! I'm the bloody princess, and no one will touch me!"

A whuff of hot, charcoal-barbeque breath, and the dragon dissolved into a stream of sparkling, golden glitter, whipping back into the ring on her finger. She sagged to her knees, the adrenaline rush fading from her trembling limbs. Harry crouched beside her, extending his hand hesitantly. He touched her shoulder, flinching...but nothing happened. No dragon materialized.

"Hermione...what was *that*?" he whispered, visibly shaken. Ron shuffled onto his knees, but didn't move any closer. Even Moody looked like he was going to keep his distance, just in case. "And why am I the only one who can touch you?"

Miserably, Hermione lifted her left hand. Displaying the ring that gleamed on her third finger. "I think it's because you're now my brother...and because of *this*."

Alastor Moody was the first to realize the significance. His blue, magical eye fixed on the ring intensely for a moment, before swiveling to study her. "That's a betrothal ring. An old and powerful one, from the look of it. I've never heard of one that could conjure a dragon for its guardian, before. Where did you get it, girl?"

"--Betrothal ring?" Ron yelped, looking sharply between the two of them. "Hermione--take it off! Take it off!"

She tugged on the ring. It didn't budge. She pulled harder, and only made her finger sore. From the moment she'd slipped it past her second knuckle, the ring had squeezed itself into the perfect size to cling to her flesh. She couldn't even make it slip as far as her knuckle, yet the ring didn't feel tight. "...I *can't*. It's stuck. Magically."

"Aye," Moody growled. "Those rings come from the days when women were chattel. Some of 'em are permanent, others can be released only by the word of your betrothed...who would have to be wearing the other ring himself, for it to take effect. Which begs the question of *who* is wearing that other ring, if it ain't one of these two?"

Bowing her head, Hermione confessed her sins. "...Russel is wearing it."

"Who?" Ron asked, confusion furrowing his brow.

"You know him as Rorik Ferguson. He's...he's a spy in the ranks of the Death Eaters. The *other* spy," Hermione emphasized. "One known only to Professor Dumbledore. He contacted me by a letter this last summer, and sent the ring with it. So long as I didn't put it on, I was fine, but I could communicate with him--and before you ask," she added to Mad-Eye, who had drawn breath to argue the matter with her, "--I've already tested the truth-forcing properties of the ring myself. Anything we communicated to each other wound up being the truth. We could bend it, but we couldn't dodge it. He is a spy for our side, but he didn't dare reveal himself to anyone, after what *that bastard* did to the Headmaster."

Silence met her rough admission, until Ron drew a breath; Hermione, anticipating his comment, interrupted him before he could begin.

"And before you ask, Ron, he *warned* me against putting on the ring! He said it would create an unbreakable betrothal between us if I did so...but that it would also give me a powerful form of protection, if I wound up having no other choice. And I wound up having *no other choice*. If you haven't noticed, I'm kneeling here without my wand, because it's still in the possession of some stupid Death Eater!"

"You are *my* girlfriend, Hermione!" Ron reminded her sharply. "How could you put on the betrothal ring of another wizard? What could possibly have made you betray me like that?"

"--*I was going to be raped, you selfish arsehole!* she screamed at him, overwrought by his thoughtless accusations. Breathing heavily, glaring at him, Hermione fought to control her temper, until she growled with a bit more control. "I'm *sorry* if that doesn't seem *important enough* to you! But they were going to beat me, and torture me, and rape me, and break me! I didn't have my wand, I didn't have a chance in hell of storing up enough time to find it before they could hurt me, and it was the only thing left I could think of doing to save myself!"

"Storing up enough time?" Harry asked her, frowning in confusion.

Hermione drew in a breath to reply, and found the watchful eyes of Moody fixed upon her face. To hell, if she was going to tell *him*! Jerking her chin at the door, she snapped, "Moody! *Out!*"

His eyes narrowed, but he stumped out of the room, closing the door behind him. Ron eyed her warily, but drew his wand and cast an Imperturbable Charm on the room, sealing them away from potential spies. "You'd *better* start talking, Hermione."

Letting Harry support her, Hermione began from the beginning. "I got the letter the last evening Harry spent at the Dursleys. I didn't know if it was genuine or not, so I waited and kept silent, in case it was a trap. But then Russel sent word that Mr. Lubbock was going to be attacked...and that's why I managed to save him. I poked my head through the Floo with my wand at the ready. You know what happened, then. Out of gratitude, Mr. Lubbock gave me this bracelet," she added, lifting her right wrist slightly. "It's a time-storage device. He called it a Velocitemplet. Basically, by giving up twenty-four minutes of my life in a sort of paralysis...I can get those minutes back, at up to four minutes at a time...and up to six different speeds of time.

"I used the bracelet today during the battle, when Bellatrix cast the Killing Curse at you, Ron."

He blinked, at that. "Is that...is *that* how I managed to survive? You pushed me out of the way of the Curse?"

"Sort of. *I* was free to move about, but you were still stuck in time," she told him. "And the Curse was moving in so fast, I had to put the bracelet at the topmost speed--I never told you or Harry about it, because I'd discovered that using it drains me until I'm literally ill with exhaustion, at that speed. I didn't want either of you pestering me to use it casually, or for selfish means. So I kept the secret of it to myself.

"And I *couldn't* push you out of the way of the Killing Curse," she continued. "I managed to tip you off-balance, but I knew I wouldn't be able to get you out of the way in time. So...I grabbed the locket from Harry, which was easier to drag into place, and put it between you and that scary green bolt. It impacted on the locket, and the Curse went away. So I presume it killed the soul that was trapped inside."

Harry reached under his shirt, pulling out the locket. A touch of his thumb to the edge, and it popped open, revealing a tiny profile-carving of some woman, possibly the profile of Salazar Slytherin's wife, given the way her features had been carved out of the alabaster cabochon with a medieval hairstyle. Lifting his gaze from the locket, Harry absently snapped it shut again. "So you killed it."

She managed a wry smile. "I thought it was rather ironic that the Ravenclaw Horcrux was devoured by a Dementor, and the locket Horcrux by a spell from Mrs. Lestrange's own wand. I don't think old Moldiebutt picked very competent allies to come and attack us, today."

"I'll say," Ron snorted. "I'm a bit disappointed to learn I'm not another Boy Who Lived, but I *am* glad the locket's dead."

"But what happened after that?" Harry asked her. "I saw you being snatched away by two Death Eaters!"

"I'd just put the locket back, when time snapped back to normal speed. I couldn't stop them from grabbing me, and the next thing I knew..." She shivered. "I think I was in Malfoy Manor. Narcissa was one of the 'guests', besides Russel in the guise of 'Rorik', who was there to try a snatch-and-grab of the Ravenclaw wand. Ollivander has been under the Imperius Curse, I'm sure of it; Russel warned me to not let him get his hands on the wand, which is why I suggested you. But...I had my wand stolen when they kidnapped me, and just had enough time to click the bracelet once, for storing one minute at the slowest speed, before I was frozen by *Impedimenta*.

"That was when Uglymort berated his followers for breaking Ravenclaw's wand, and ordered them to torture and brutalize me. The moment they took the Stunning Charm off of me, I activated the stored minute, but I couldn't find my wand before that minute ran out, and I didn't have enough time to store up extra minutes to look some more."

"Why couldn't you?" Ron demanded.

"Because I *am frozen* in time, when I do!" Hermione retorted. "I told you that, Ron; I literally cannot react! I'd have been an all-too-easy target for their brutality," she scolded him. Harry squeezed her shoulder gently, and she forced herself to calm back down and continue her narrative. "...So, with my last few seconds, I took the ring off the chain I'd strung it on, and shoved it onto my finger. I couldn't risk them binding me so that I couldn't try to use my bracelet again...and if I'm not ready to have sex with someone I *care* about, what makes you think I'd want it with someone *don't*?"

"Easy," Harry soothed her. "Go on--when you put on the ring, I take it that dragon-thing appeared?"

She nodded, feeling her stomach churn again at the memory. "It appeared, it roared that nonsense about me being a princess and that no one would be allowed to touch me...and then it literally bit off the head and shoulders of...of one of the Death Eaters, and spat it out. All because the man dared to touch me, and to try and cast *Conjunctivitis* at it. I was scared out of my wits, all I wanted to do was to be back here where it was safe...and somehow the dragon acted like a Portkey, and brought me here. Where I was sick all over the carpet, until Tonks helped me.

"I'm weaker than a newborn kitten, I'm stuck in a betrothal I don't want and which I don't know how to break, and I'm still sick to my stomach with the fear that the dragon was going to do the exact same thing to *you*, Ron...and I *don't* need you blaming me for *saving* myself!" she finished in a half-yell, tears prickling her eyes.

A muscle worked in his freckled jaw. Ron stared at her long and hard for several seconds, then shoved to his feet, cast down the wards, and stalked out of the parlour, slamming the door behind him. The tears that had been threatening her gaze intensified their blurring, and spilled onto her cheeks. Her breath caught in her throat. Harry held her closer as she cried, turning her so that she faced him. Pressing her cheek into his shoulder, Hermione clung to him, sobbing quietly as the last of the adrenaline let-down trembled through her body. At least her tears would help purge the stress-toxins from her body.

Mrs. Figg shuffled into the parlour a short while later, carrying a tea-tray. She eyed Hermione and Harry on the floor, muttered something, and then muttered it louder. "Silly girl! I said you'll catch your death of cold, lying on the floor. It may only be October, but it's a cold October. Get her up on the couch, Harry; there's a good boy."

Harry helped Hermione to stand, assisting her over to the sofa. He had to bear quite a bit of her weight, since her body was still trembling from time-dilation. Hermione suspected it was compounded not only by retching at the memory of all that blood, but because there was something about the way time was squashed about by the bracelet that made anything over the four-minute limit in, say, a twenty-four-hour timeframe a Really Bad Idea.

She let the theory go for now, letting Harry help feed her chicken broth and pilot crackers, ingesting the two in small nibbles to keep her tender stomach soothed. Instead,

she listened as Harry filled her in on the aftermath of the ballroom battle. Seventeen dead, the two Dementors sent running, hundreds of wands smashed...but thankfully *not* Rowena Ravenclaw's, nor Albus Dumbledore's. The exhibition had been ruined, but it could've been so much worse. Four Death Eaters had been captured, including Bellatrix Lestrange, and the giant had been among the fallen, literally, though not exactly among the dead. Someone, Harry told her--possibly Yorsen--had levitated one of the chess bishops at the brute's head, smashing him unconscious...and making him crush a fellow Dark Lord follower as he'd collapsed on top of the luckless wizard.

At least there was a third thing worth laughing about, in an otherwise short, brutal, and very costly battle.

...

It took a full day before Hermione felt well again. Well enough to leave the house, that was. Ron's miraculous avoidance of the Killing Curse had been attributed to a fly that had buzzed through the air at the wrong moment in time, and though the others were skeptical about that theory, it had been spread, to help keep Ron from being another how-did-he-survive target like the Boy Who Lived. But that didn't negate her most pressing concern: she needed to replace her wand. To be an effective witch, she couldn't continue without a wand to help focus her magic, but she wasn't about to go up to Malfoy Manor and politely ask for her vine-wood-and-dragon-heartstring original back.

A quick Floo-consultation with Filius Flitwick let her know that he didn't have any similar models among his dwindled collection that she could borrow. If he'd have let her borrow it, that was; even those collectors whose exhibits had been on the fringes of the ballroom hadn't escaped unscathed, and the Charms Professor's display cases had been at ground-zero, battle-wise. The one thing that had protected the majority of his collection had been the proximity of the Priori Incantatem shield, offering several of the wand-cases a modicum of shelter.

That left visiting Ollivander's. Not exactly the best choice, given it was still highly probable the man was under the Imperius Curse by some Death Eater. Or that his nephew was still a Death Eater in disguise...which explained why Redmond Ollivander had been so high-strung, the day the three of them had visited. Having the Boy Who Lived walk into the shop along with his two best friends must've been nerve-wracking. Not that she'd sympathize with someone like that, but it did make more sense.

It also increased the risk of Voldemort figuring out that they were definitely on the trail of his seven Horcruxes. Hermione wasn't sure if anyone besides herself, Harry, and possibly Professor Flitwick had realized what the Dementor had done with that shining-bright dot that had been fragment of Voldemort's soul they'd gone to the exhibition to collect and destroy. She hoped not; the less the Dark Lord knew about their quest and its progress, the better off they all were.

But she needed a wand. Going to Ollivander's meant leaving the safety of the house. Without a wand of her own, she was vulnerable to attack. Oh, not from lustful males; the dragon had made two more appearances to guard her from that. But it hadn't guarded her from Alastor Moody, who had 'tested' the protections of the ring by firing a Jellylegs Jinx at her from a distance. Once the jiggling of her limbs had stopped, she'd thrown sofa pillows and knickknacks, coasters and whatever else she could grab, flinging them at the infuriating old man until he'd wisely retreated. Still, it had been an informative test. Bastard.

Harry was talking to her; hell, Harry was just about the only male who could get *close* to her, since a visit by Remus set the guardian-thing off, scaring the older wizard to no end. Ron wasn't talking to her, though. If he saw her in a room he was about to enter, he left, mouth compressed and eyes cold with anger. If he was already in the room, he waited until she cleared the door and took the widest berth possible in leaving. And when she tried to talk to him, he ignored her with tight, visible anger.

Maybe she should've flung the throw-pillows and coasters *athim*, the dunderhead. It wasn't as if she'd known in advance what the protections were, nor that she had any control over the near-mindless thing. She could make it stop an attack, but *not* if any male who was even the slightest bit interested in her tried to touch her. Or if they tried to attack the dragon. She'd had nightmares about that Death Eater, last night.

Minerva McGonagall startled Hermione, who was lounging in an armchair in the library, trying to plot out a way to get to Ollivander's shop and get herself a wand without either exposing herself to a Death Eater attack, Death Eater treachery, or setting off the damned dragon simply by proximity to the hustle and bustle of all those bodies in Diagon Alley. "--Hermione? We're having an Order meeting to discuss your, er, ring problem. But I'll need you to stand in the parlour doorway, so that you're not close enough to touch anyone. Do be a good dear, and *don't* touch any males?"

Oh, great. Now I'm the equivalent of a magical leper, a social pariah, a contagion-carrier... Nodding her head, Hermione let the older witch leave. She stayed where she was, listening to the noise of bodies entering the house via the front door and the Floo connection in the kitchen, until things settled down. A single set of footsteps approached, and the Auror woman, Violetta, poked her head in through the door.

"They're ready for you, now."

Levering herself up out of the chair. Hermione headed to the doorway. Violetta stepped back, but not very far. Hermione started to brush past her...and the ring tingled.

"SSSSSSHE ISSSS THE PRINCESSSSSSSS! YOU SSSSHALL NOT TOUCH HER!"

Violetta shrieked and flung herself back from the apparition filling the doorway to the library, hitting the wall and falling to the floor. The dragon faded quickly, now that the threat was over, but it had caused a number of bodies to spill out of the parlour down the hall. Huddled on the floor, Violetta eyed Hermione shakily.

"That's...that's not exactly how I'd planned on 'coming out of the closet'," the witch tried to joke.

"Hmph," Mad-Eye's voice floated up the hall. "At least the ring's egalitarian, in its defence."

"Everyone, back into the parlour--you, too, Violetta," Minerva ordered the others. When they were all inside, she beckoned to the younger witch. "In the doorway, Hermione, but no further, if you please."

Sighing heavily, Hermione took her place. Being the center of everyone's attention made her flush with discomfort. At the Headmistress' pointed look, she sighed again, and began. "I received a letter early this last summer, and a ring. The letter said it was someone naming himself Russel, and claiming to be Albus Dumbledore's man. I was suspicious, so I said nothing, wanting to find out if it was true. When he sent me word that Mr. Lubbock was going to be attacked...well, the lot of you heard how that turned out. And he sent word that the Creeveys would be attacked, too, so I managed to improvise that one as well. And I figured out how to send those memo-messages, calling myself 'Ring of Truth'...because the ring is apparently enspelled to enforce truthfulness over lies, whenever we'd use it to communicate with each other. So this Russel fellow has been feeding me information that has saved several lives.

"He also warned me to never don the ring, because it was a betrothal ring, and it would bind me to him irrevocably. Unless I was in a situation where it was my last resort for defence, and then it would give me protection of an unspecified sort. Yesterday, in the battle...I found myself captured and Portkeyed in the grip of two Death Eaters, and dragged in front of the Dark Lord. My wand was taken from me, and they were going to...brutalize me. Rape, torture, you name it. I managed to get the ring onto my finger, and that's when the dragon first appeared, shouted that ruddy nonsense about my now being a princess of some kind, and...when one of the Death Eaters tried to attack it, the dragon...the dragon bit off his head and shoulders. Literally.

"So I'd really appreciate it if none of you attacked the thing. Nor provoked it in anyway," she finished grimly. "I can't get the ring off. If there is a way to remove it, only Russel would know. And he hasn't contacted me, yet."

"Why haven't you contacted him?" Bill asked her, as Fleur clung to his hand, almost as if she was determined to keep her husband away from Hermione. The eldest Weasley was still handsome, even with his scars, but Hermione had only ever found him attractive; now that he was married, she definitely wasn't attracted to him. She didn't play that sort of game.

"I don't know how," Hermione shrugged, answering his question. "Only Russel knows. And it would've been too dangerous for his end of things, if anyone noticed someone was trying to contact him in the heart of the Death Eaters."

"Who is this Russel fellow, anyway?" Arthur Weasley asked. "I don't know of anyone named 'Russel' among the Death Eaters, though it's possible we've missed identifying

some of them..."

Hermione started to offer the theory that 'Russel' was his middle name, but subsided. Russel was still in grave danger, if the Dark Lord figured out there was a traitor in his midst. Minerva spoke up, cutting through the murmurs of speculation now running through the room.

"It doesn't matter who he is. The fact is, we have two problems to deal with: the over-reactiveness of that ruddy ring, and the fact that there's a spy *none* of us knew about, in the heart of the Dark Lord's camp."

"Professor Dumbledore surely knew," Hermione interjected. "You could ask his portrait."

"I will," the older witch returned crisply. "Now, Harry said this Russel fellow was actually at the wand exhibition. Is this correct?"

"Yes, he was pretending to be a wizard named Rorik Ferguson. He was part of a small team that was there to steal something."

"Why were the three of you there?" Kingsley Shacklebolt asked.

Harry answered that one. "We were there to get our hands on the same thing. But we can't tell you what it was."

"--Well, a *wand*, obviously," Fred, or George, snorted from the rear of the room.

"The question is, *why* were you trying to get your hands on a wand?" Tonks enquired.

"We can't tell you that," Hermione said. "But..." She looked at her former Transfigurations teacher. "But we can tell you that we're now two steps closer to finding a way to defeat the Dark Lord, so the battle wasn't a total--" Her finger heated, cutting her off in startlement. Glancing down at her left hand, she watched as the scales etched into the golden band melted out of sight.

"What's wrong?" someone asked.

"Er...Russel's calling," she relayed, digging her tablet and pen out of the back pocket of her jeans, where she'd been carrying it out of habit ever since shortly after making it. There was a flaw in the program, however; the ring was no longer on a chain that she could trap against the page with her thumb. It was on her ring-finger, which wanted to cup the back of the tablet, not the front. That was too awkward.

Twisting, she pinned the tablet against the doorway, watching ink spilling out from under her hand.

We need to talk.

"You're bloody well *right*, we need to talk," she muttered, pulling the cap from her Muggle ballpoint pen.

"What's he saying?" Molly demanded.

"That 'we need to talk'," she retorted. Speaking out loud, she scribbled her reply on the page. "*I am in...an Order Meeting. They know...about you...and the ring.*"

We need to talk face-to-face. Alone.

"Well?" Minerva prompted her.

"He wants to talk face-to-face, alone. *Not...without...my wand.*"

I'll see what I can do, spilled across the page, even as Minerva protested,

"You will not face him alone, Miss Granger! How do we even know we can trust this fellow?"

"Russel has earned my trust," Hermione returned, waiting for Russel's reply. "He even managed to save me from a Dementor's Kiss during the battle, yesterday."

"No wonder you were so cozy with him!" Ron snapped, losing his temper and his control on his tongue. "You probably had this planned all along, stringing me along and then hopping into *his* bed while you were laughing behind my back!"

The page flared and vanished from the tablet, making several of the Order members gasp.

"--What was that?" Molly demanded.

"Russel, terminating the communication between us...and your son is *anarsehole!*" Hermione yelled, turning to glare at Ron, tablet clenched hard enough in her left hand as she took it down from the doorjamb, the pages were being bent. "For your *information*, you ignoramus, I had*told* Russel I was *your* girlfriend, and that I didn't want him flirting with me! That I could see a future with *you* and not *him!*--But you know what? I'm *glad* we've broken up! The last thing I would've wanted was to spend the rest of my life with an immature *arsehole!*"

Ron flipped her a rude gesture, glaring at her as he drew breath to retort.

Chapter 09

Chapter 9 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

"Ronald! Hermione! Stop that, this instant!" The whip-crack of Minerva's voice cut off any further actions between the two. "You quit the school because you said you were adults, and had adult responsibilities to carry though. *Start acting like adults!* We're all on the same side here, and I *shouldn't* have to remind you of that!"

Hermione bit her tongue against the urge to respond snarkily that she was acting far more like an adult than the redheaded twit. Doing so would've only proven otherwise. She settled for returning the tablet and pen to her back pocket. Ron subsided, too, but refused to look in her direction. Harry, caught in the middle of the feud between his two best friends, looked miserable as he sat and said nothing.

"...We need to know what we're going to do about this Russel fellow," Minerva asserted into the silence following her demand. "And whether or not we can trust him."

"I remind you he's helped the Order save several lives," Hermione interjected as calmly as she could, given that she was still angry with Ron. Forcing herself to set her emotions aside with the discipline of her Occlumency lessons, she continued. "And I told you; he is trustworthy. At least as much as any of us can be trusted. The rings enforce truthful communication, and he has told me flat-out through our ring-communications that he's spying on the Dark Lord for the sake of the Order."

"Then why haven't we heard about him?" Minerva challenged her.

"He said no one knew what his true mission was, except for Dumbledore. And it makes sense, to have two spies who didn't know about each other. We know what happened with Snape," she dismissed, "but if Snape didn't know about Russel, that was one secret he couldn't betray to his master, when he...you know. Russel didn't want me telling anyone about him so that word wouldn't get back to the Dark Lord, but having to don the ring kind of bolluxed that option. We haven't got anyone left who can spy on the heart of the enemy forces. If we lose him, we'll be completely in the dark about our enemies' movements."

"That may be, but what are we going to do about him, and *you*?" Minerva asked her. "Right now, you're a danger to the Order, if even the slightest brush against someone will conjure a...a man-eating guardian-dragon!"

"I don't know! I suspect that's why I have to meet with him," Hermione returned pointedly. "I doubt the ring is causing him similar problems, since it seems to be a relic from a time long before the Suffragette movement. But while I do trust him, I don't trust meeting him without a wand in my hand. And my wand was taken by the Death Eaters. And in order to get a replacement, I have to risk going to Ollivander's, and Mr. Ollivander might still be under the influence of the Imperius Curse."

"Actually, he's not," Shacklebolt interjected. "The fellow who was portraying his nephew, Redmond Ollivander, was one of the ones who fell in the battle. His body reverted to its natural shape after what looked like a dose of Polyjuice Potion wore off. It was a fellow by the name of Burke Hodgekins who was playing the role of Roland Ollivander's nephew, for who knows how long."

"Burke Hodgekins!" Molly exclaimed. "But...he was a Hufflepuff! Only two years behind me!"

"Not all Dark wizards come out o' Slytherin, Molly," Rubeus Hagrid reminded her. "I remember that Hodgekins feller; he was right stuck-up, fer a Hufflepuff. But a good 'and with a wand. If I recall it right, 'e took the Artificing classes right up into Advanced levels. 'E'd be able to fake bein' a wand expert, wi' that in 'is background."

"However it may be, Mr. Ollivander is now free of the influence of the Imperius Curse," Minerva asserted, looking at Kingsley for confirmation. When the Auror nodded, she continued. "Then we'll just have to escort Hermione there. It'll have to be a contingent of females...mostly of females," she amended. "and Harry, too; I believe you said you can touch her without triggering the guardian-dragon?"

"Yes. Hermione and I undertook the Brothers-by-Blood ritual, late Friday night," he related, looking at the others. "We're now brother and sister."

That caused another commotion, but at least it was a happy one.

"Oh! Congratulations!" Molly squealed, heaving out of her chair and bustling over to kiss Harry on the cheek. She picked her way through the chairs to Hermione, grabbing and hugging her, too. Under the cover of the hug, she hissed, "I could *hate* you, for breaking my little boy's heart...but *he*'s being an arsehole about this whole business! Just keep the dragon from biting his head off, dearie...but you can hex off his tallywackie, if he gets snippy like that again. I would've picked the same choice, had I been trapped and in such danger, like you."

Deeply grateful to the older woman for her support, Hermione hugged her back fiercely. "Thank you, Mrs. Weasley. I *wanted* to be with Ron, but...erm...not while he's being an arse. And obviously not under these circumstances."

"Well, this Russel fellow had better treat you right, or I'll give him what-for," was all Molly said.

Arthur was behind her, and he gingerly held out his hand. Hermione took it equally gingerly. Both of them sighed when the dragon didn't appear. "I'd hoped to see you as a daughter-in-law, one day, but...erm...well, you're a good young witch, Hermione. I wish you good luck with this Russel fellow."

Hermione wanted to shout that her fate wasn't sealed to Russel's just yet--but she honestly didn't know if it was or not. Certainly she'd have to talk to him about how to break the betrothal, if such was possible. Releasing Arthur's hand, she found herself faced with Fleur. The French witch wrinkled her nose a little, but held out her hands.

"Bill sayz 'e will not even try, since 'e loves me with all his heart, but zat I am to give you a hug for 'eem and 'eez brozzers, since they cannot try."

"Er, thanks, Fleur." They embraced briefly, then parted. Fleur held Hermione's arms for a moment more, giving Hermione a serious look.

"Arry eez a good man. Young, but good. 'E eez very 'eroic; you will have to zit on 'eem to keep 'eem in line, sometimes. But you are zee elder of the two of you, oui? It eez zee job of zee elder sibling to always do so."

"...Thanks. I'll keep that in mind." Hermione couldn't help smiling at the blond's advice.

"Back to your seats, everyone! Well...it seems as if her escort will be Arthur, Harry, Molly, Fleur...and Tonks, perhaps? That should be enough, I think. Some of you will be out in the open, and the others should be hidden. After having what probably looked like a pet dragon biting off the head of one of his Death Eaters, I doubt the Dark Lord will be very happy to see you out and about in London," Minerva added dryly. "And you will contact the Order the moment this Russel fellow tries to communicate with you again."

Her finger heated. Hermione controlled her reaction to the ring's change in temperature. "When are we going to Diagon Alley, then?"

"Right now, I think. The rest of us can discuss the events of the wand exhibition, with Ronald's assistance as an eyewitness," Minerva asserted.

Harry muttered something in Ron's ear. The redhead stiffened, but nodded with visible reluctance. Hermione had to move out of the doorway to let her five guardians out of the room. "I've got to visit the lavatory," she told Mr. Weasley. "I'll meet you downstairs in a moment."

He nodded, and she hurried up to the first floor. Shutting the door, she warded it and pulled out her tablet and pen again.

Are you still in the meeting?

No, she wrote back. **We need to talk about what's going on with this damned ring.**

Yes, we do. I'm going to have to kidnap you to do so, to make things look good from this end. I'll have to make a couple arrangements, first.

That was an odd thing for him to say. **Kidnap me? Why?**

I have a Situation, thanks to the fact that you donned the ring. I'll explain everything when I meet up with you. Can you sneak out somewhere public in a couple hours?

Actually, I'm about to go to Diagon Alley. Under escort.

Why? Russel asked her.

To get a new wand. Rumor has it Mr. Ollivander is no longer under the Imperius Charm. Is it true?

Yes.

Good, she replied, relieved. I'm afraid to ask you to get me my wand back, in case the Dark Lord does something to it, or stealing it gets you caught. But I didn't want anyone tampering with a replacement wand from Ollivander's, either.

You have a very paranoid mind. How wise of you; that might very well have happened. Delay as long as you can out in the open--at least an hour, though preferably two--and I will come to you. Don't tell the others. What you and I have to discuss isn't meant for their ears. And certainly not for their input!

Hermione had to agree with that assessment. If she was going to talk about her betrothal to him, she didn't need the others butting in with their own opinions of what to do. She certainly didn't need them to hear any details of what she and Russel had done romantically...and she didn't want Ron finding out about those little interludes. If her circumstances with the ring angered him, telling him about that would make him explode.

We need to discuss the ramifications of what you had to do to save yourself. And it will take quite a bit of time, because it's going to come with a lot of explanations, among other things. But don't tell anyone that I'm going to kidnap you. They might be watched by the others when I close in to take you, depending on where that is, and their reactions should be genuine while they're being observed.

Where will you be taking me?

Somewhere safe. That's all I can say. I don't care where you go in the Isles, but don't go back to Headquarters or the School until I've come for you.

Safe, as in we'll be alone?

Yes, he confirmed. What we'll have to discuss cannot be discussed in front of any witnesses, on either side. I'm asking you to trust me, Jane. Do you?

Yes.

I may end up abusing that trust.

Hermione blinked. Somehow, she didn't think he'd meant to write that. **I think you just tried to lie to me.**

...What did I write?

That you might end up abusing my trust.

Oh. Well, I don't want to abuse it, but I may have to, in the effort to defeat Marvolo. Is that honest enough for you?

...Yes, it is, she wrote after a moment of thought. Thank you for clarifying your honesty.

We do share the same goal, though our methods may be vastly different.

Thank you for saving me from the Dementor's Kiss,she added.

Thank you in turn. Why did you cut off your Patronus, like that? And what did it pounce on?

He didn't know about that. Hermione wasn't about to enlighten him about the Horcrux. **I can't tell you that.**

Why won't you?

The fewer people who know, the closer we'll be to defeating Marvolo.

Ah. Right. Remember, try to stretch out your time out in the open as long as possible.

How will you find me?Hermione asked him. **Should I be in a specific place at a specific time?**

It's not necessary. The rings act as Apparation-like Portkeys, now that we're both wearing them...which I'm sure you've already realized, vanishing like that. You probably have to go, now. Remember to shriek convincingly, when I kidnap you. But don't hex me too hard. I've had a rough night.

Hermione could only imagine what Voldemort's temper must have been like, losing the wand, several of his followers, and the prize of herself, pried by unexpected, golden claws from his grasp. The page flared and vanished, taking all possible trace of their conversation from the tablet. Using the lavatory, she washed her hands and headed down the stairs, trying to figure out how she could stall the whole matter. *Gringotts, I think* she decided. *I do have some money in my account, enough for a wand and a couple of other matters. And I'll refuse to let Harry pay, if he has the cash for it on hand, though I don't think he does.*

"We'll have to go to Gringotts," Harry stated as she reached the ground floor, joining the others. Hermione almost kissed him for having practically read her mind. "I'll pay for the wand--consider it a happy-sister-present."

She smiled, warmed by his offer. And suddenly she had an idea of what to do, or rather, where to go, to stay 'out in the open' long enough for Russel's plan to work. "Alright. And for your present...we'll go to my parents, after Ollivander's."

"We shouldn't stay out too long in the open," Tonks reminded her, almost as if following her thoughts.

Hermione shook her head. "I'll have my wand, by then. And this is important. They're his family now, too, and Mum and Dad need to know they've picked up a son."

"Actually, I wouldn't mind visiting with Mr. and Mrs. Granger," Arthur offered. "I quite liked them, the few times we've met."

"You just want to ask them about their dentistry practice, and other Muggle stuff," Molly chided her husband.

"Can't keep a man from having his little hobbies, my dear," Mr. Weasley jested, and kissed her on the cheek to quiet his wife.

...

"Hermione, my baby!" Daphne Granger swept her daughter into an embrace. "It's been too long! If you're not busy with school, why aren't you coming home more often?" She released her daughter and pulled Harry into a hug, next. "And Harry! We haven't seen you since, what? Your fifth year? Longer than that?"

Harry blushed, but Jeffrey Granger had already hugged Hermione and was shaking Arthur Weasley's hand. "Come in, come in!" Jeffrey ordered them, leading them into the parlour from the front hall. "I hope this is a social visit?"

"That, and more, sir!" Arthur agreed in a jolly voice, as Molly hugged Daphne and Tonks was introduced. Thankfully, Hermione's parents took the younger witch's vivid green hair in stride, her mum even going so far as to hug the young Auror.

"Mum, Dad, I've got some big news," Hermione stated as soon as everyone had settled into the living room. She wasn't quite sure how to put it, though. "Harry and I..."

"--*Harry* and you?" her father asked, his brows rising.

"I thought it was 'Ron and you!'" her mother added, bewildered.

Hermione coloured, slashing her hands through the air. "No, no! Harry and I...we've always felt like we were brother and sister. And that feeling has only gotten stronger, through the years. So when we found out there was a...well, it's, um..."

"There's a ritual, in the wizarding world," Arthur filled in when Hermione faltered. "It's called Brothers-by-Blood, and it's a very powerful piece of ancient magic. It literally joins two disparate bloodlines as one. There are certain magics that flow through the bonds of blood-relations, and through Brothers-by-Blood, those magics can be utilized. Protective magics, for one. Lines of inheritance, for another, and even certain cures for magical ailments that require assistance from a direct relation, if the ritual is applied beforehand."

"I know I should've consulted the two of you before going through with it," Hermione apologized to her pensive-looking parents, "but we had the opportunity, we really felt that strongly about it, and, well, we did it. Harry and I are now literally brother and sister, bound magically by blood. Mum, Dad...you now have a son!"

Jeffrey and Daphne stared wide-eyed at the two of them, Hermione and Harry. The clock ticked on the mantel. Daphne closed her mouth and swallowed. Jeffrey blinked.

Harry winced. "Er...if you don't want me, I won't come around and pester you; I mean, I'd understand perfectly...I'm not exactly what any parent would want..."

"...Not want you?" Daphne repeated, finding her voice. "Not *want you*?"

"I don't know how this magic stuff works, but...if you're good enough for our daughter, Harry...you're good enough for us!" Jeffrey stated, pushing out of his chair. Harry stood as well, and found himself pulled into a bear hug. "I have a son," Mr. Granger muttered, hugging the younger man tightly. "I have a son... I thought I'd get a son-in-law, eventually. I mean, it's a bit of a shock and it'll be an adjustment, but...I have a *son*!"

"...We're still working on *that*," Hermione muttered to herself, thinking of Russel, the ring, and a future son-in-law as her mother embraced Harry next.

"Well, sons can be a right handful," Arthur offered with a smile. "I should know; I've got six of them."

"I look forward to finding out," Jeffrey returned. "And I'm not just getting a son; I'm getting a wizard! Now we've got two of them in the family!"

"--Jeffrey, we're going to have to find out how much it costs to adopt someone! We can't have it legal in the wizarding world and not in the regular one," Mrs. Granger chided her husband. "When is your birthday, Harry? And your middle name? I know your birthday's somewhere in the summer, late July or early August, isn't it?"

"July 31st, and it's James," Harry answered, blushing. "Harry James Potter."

"Harry James Potter-Granger. Potter-Granger? Granger-Potter? Urgh, that's a mouthful!" Jeffrey grimaced. "Well, I suppose we can adopt you with whichever surname you'd like to keep, yours, ours, or some combination thereof--Hermione said you have your own house, I believe," Mr. Granger added as Harry stared at him with increasing shock. "But I think we can clear out the sewing room and make you up a room of your own for when you come home for the holidays--oh, I like the sound of that! I have a son, who can come home for the holidays!" He grinned at Arthur and Molly Weasley, hugging Harry with one arm around the shorter male's shoulders, and exclaimed, "I have a *son*! And it's really by blood, isn't it? Not just a sort of wizarding adoption?"

"He really is now Hermione's brother, which makes him your son. It's not very commonly done," Molly replied, smiling back, "but Harry is an extraordinary boy. An extraordinary young man," she corrected as Harry rolled his eyes. "We, er, wouldn't have minded adopting him ourselves, but...well, not to put any pressure on you, Harry dear, but we always thought you'd make a better son-in-law. In a couple years, perhaps?"

He blushed even harder, mumbling, "I'll keep that in mind."

Hermione couldn't help herself. This was the perfect opportunity to officially tease her best friend, sister to brother. "Harry's in love! Harry's in love!"

"--Hermione!" he squeaked, embarrassed.

"Harry's in *lurve*!" she drawled, and shrieked as he lurched away from her father, swiping at her as she escaped.

"I'm going to dip those curls of yours in the nearest inkwell, for this!" Harry mock-growled, chasing after her as she escaped the parlour with a laugh.

"Hermione! Harry!" her--their mother--chided as Harry chased Hermione into the kitchen.

"Children, behave yourselves!" their father bellowed after them.

Giggling madly, Hermione whirled and caught Harry, embracing him even as he skidded to a stop. "--Did you *hear* that?" she whispered in his ear as they balanced themselves. "He said *children*! Not *child*!"

"--Don't make me ground you on your first day as our son!"

To her surprise, tears welled in Harry's eyes. They spilled down his cheeks, and he tore off his glasses, burying his face in the crook of her neck. He didn't say a word, didn't make a sound, just shuddered in her arms, but Hermione could guess what was happening to him, based on what she knew of his miserable childhood with the Dursleys. She knew how loving and generous her parents were, and had taken only a small gamble in the fact that they'd accept him into the family.

After her mother's hysterectomy, Jeffrey and Daphne had discussed adopting a second child, but in the end had chosen to raise Hermione alone. But they'd taken each of the friends she'd made in the local primary school into their home with a warm welcome, treating them as honorary daughters, before she'd found out she was a witch and had to go off to boarding school. Hermione had never brought home a boy as an honorary brother, just female friends. It was a calculated risk to bring him home to her parents as their new son, but not a big one.

She could guess how much their warm welcome meant to him, though. The coldness, indifference and cruelties of his aunt and uncle, the bullying of his cousin, that was all a far cry from being embraced and welcomed and told he would have his own room in the Granger household, even though he was now an adult and living on his own in the wizarding world. He sniffled, twisting his head to rest it on her shoulder, and mumbled in her ear.

"...Are they really going to give me my own room? It's not just an act?"

"It's not just an act, Harry. My parents are the most loving and generous parents in all of Oxfordshire. They always treated my friends like honorary daughters, when I was little. And you deserve a happy family life."

He stiffened a little, pulling upright and blinking red-rimmed eyes. "Now I'm almost afraid of what will happen to them. I've never had a happy family. Mum and Dad were murdered, Sirius was thrown through that doorway, even Dumbledore died... I don't want to endanger them."

"...Oh, put a sock in it, Harry! They're in danger just because they're *my* parents," she chided him pragmatically. "Adding *you* into the mix--what's that *honestly* going to do? Make Voldiebutt shout 'Avada Kedavra' all the faster? Now, you listen to me, Harry James...Harry James Whatever," she improvised, since her father was right; Harry James Potter-Granger was a ruddy mouthful. "I want you to *enjoy* being the son of Jeffrey and Daphne Granger. I don't care if they're going to die in the next sixteen minutes! Life is meant to be lived, family--the good kind--are meant to be loved, and even if all we have are the next sixteen minutes, or sixteen days, or sixteen years, it'll be worth it."

"Now, come on back to the living room, before Dad grounds you for real."

Harry snagged a paper napkin from the holder on the kitchen counter, wiping at his eyes and his spectacles before blowing his nose. "D'you think he'd really do it? Ground me?"

"In a heartbeat. Though he'd be more likely to assign you a chore, like mowing the lawn or vacuuming the stairs," she added drolly. "And if you're really bad, he'd make you do Divinations homework!"

"He would not!" Harry shoved playfully at her, and she shoved him back.

"--What did I say about the two of you fighting in this house?" Jeffrey admonished them as they reentered the parlour.

"Yes, Dad," Hermione muttered. She elbowed Harry, who jumped, blinked, then caught on to what he was supposed to do.

"Er...yes, Dad. Sorry," he added sincerely, and received a beaming smile from the curly-haired man.

A thump and puff of air accompanied the sudden appearance of a lean figure in a blue-and-green kilt and a dark blue shirt. Tonks yelped and scrambled to her feet, Arthur and Molly grabbed at their wands, and Harry gasped, "--You!"

"You must be the Grangers. Don't mind me," he added with polite aplomb as Jeffrey and Daphne gaped. His hand snaked out, grabbing Hermione by the waist and yanking her up against his body, pulling her away from Harry with a breathless bump. "We're just passing through."

"Hermione--!" Harry shouted, reaching out for her.

Darkness squeezed in around her, as Russel Apparated before anyone could stop him from taking her. Glad they'd arranged this together beforehand, since she might've struggled and risked a splinching in the process, Hermione found herself unsqueezed into what looked like a tastefully decorated bed-sit, with a living area, a very modest kitchen, a small dining table, and, tucked into a nook next to what looked like a bathroom, a queen-sized bed. Still caught tightly against Russel by his left arm, she craned her head and spotted a door with a peephole, locking bar, and a hanger on the lever-like handle that said 'Room Service Requested'.

This wasn't a studio flat; it was one of those kitchenette hotel rooms, the kind that were rented by the week, not by the day.

"Where are we?" she asked Russel, looking up at him. "A Marriot Inn?"

"Somewhere like that. We need to talk. Do not touch the front or patio doors," he warned her. "They're warded against entry or exit. Don't use any major magic if you can help it, either; I've warded the room against detection, but it's not permanent, and I'd rather not test the defenses by drawing attention."

"Are you going to let go of me?" Hermione asked, trying to ignore how...nice...his body felt, pressing into hers.

Releasing her, Russel caught her hand and drew her to the loveseat sofa that formed the sitting area, along with an armchair and the telly cabinet. "We've got a lot to cover, and to decide. I'm in a Situation, with the Dark Lord--and please, do *not* speak his name."

"I won't," she promised, finding herself tugged down next to him. "Russel, what are we going to do about this...this ring-thing? That dragon nearly ate three more people! And they're the ones on *our* side! We need to stop it, somehow, or at least figure out how to control it!"

Russel studied her for a moment, then twisted to face her, leaning back into the cushioned arm of the divan. With one knee drawn up onto the loveseat, the posture emphasized the fact that he was wearing a kilt. It wasn't that she could see underneath the pleated wool, just that his bare knee brushed her thigh with the maneuver, drawing her attention to his rather nice, tanned legs.

"The betrothal cannot be broken. You were *informed* that donning the ring would form an unbreakable betrothal between us," he reminded her dryly as she drew a breath to argue the point. "And that doing so would essentially give you my protection...in exchange for becoming my bride. Had you been ignorant of these facts, the ring could've been removed. Of course, the protections would have been extremely weak or even non-existent. But you put it on your finger with the intent to use the protections it conveyed. You put it on, plighting your troth to me. Pledging to be my wife."

"It was a calculated risk. I put on my own ring knowing it was a risk," he reminded her, lifting his left arm from the back of the small sofa and waggling his fingers, making the golden ring on one of them gleam in the afternoon light seeping through the gauze curtains covering the glazed patio door. "I am plighted in troth to you. Irrevocably." His gaze dipped, leaving hers long enough to travel down over her pale blue blouse and faded blue-jeans before returning to meet her tawny eyes. "Before you squawk and protest, you'll need to know just how much damage control we both have to do, above and beyond that guardian-dragon. But let's start with him, eh?"

Hermione held her tongue. He still sounded like a foreigner. Maybe he really was from Canada, though she'd never actually encountered any wizards from across the Atlantic, other than during the World Quidditch Cup a few years ago. Wondering who he was had to wait for another time, however. "Can we at least get him to stop trying to eat people? And all that stupid yelling?"

"The dragon isn't going to be controllable until we consummate our betrothal," Russel told her bluntly. His fingertips rapped softly on the back of the loveseat, drumming briefly. "Its entire purpose is to ensure your chastity. Once that event happens, however, you will be able to control him by his name, and with my assistance, moderate his protectiveness...provided you don't try to snog anyone else, or try anything more provocative than a hug. The purpose of the guardian of the ring is to ensure your fidelity and safety. That aspect will never change."

Hermione avoided the question that she was going to be stuck with him as her only lover, for the rest of her life. Instead, she addressed a more serious concern. "So it confines my fidelity to you. What about yours to me? The parochial society wherein these sorts of rings were made almost never cared about the man's fidelity, only the woman's."

Russel arched a light brown brow. "Would you care so much, if I were unfaithful?"

She narrowed her gaze. "I'm not ignorant enough to think there aren't any sexually transmitted diseases in the wizarding world! And if *I* am expected to be faithful, whoever I'm supposed to be faithful to will *also* have to suffer the expectations and boundaries of monogamy!"

He mulled over her demand, rubbing briefly at his chin. "...Very well. I will be monogamously faithful to you."

Hermione didn't quite trust such an easy capitulation. The glint of his ring as he lowered his hand again gave her an idea. "Swear it upon the ring."

His brows knitted together. "I beg your pardon?"

"Swear you'll be monogamous through the ring. That way I'll know whether you're telling the truth, or a lie."

Staring at her, Russel said nothing for a long moment. His fingers flexed into a fist, then relaxed. A soft breath escaped him, not quite a sigh. Lifting his arm, he twisted his hand, showing her the touch of his thumb against the band snugged at the base of his third finger. "Hermione Jane Granger..."

Her ring warmed on her finger.

"...I swear to you that, *if* you and I consummate this betrothal, I will be faithful to you as husband to wife, until either my dying breath or yours, whichever comes first."

Lifting her own hand, Hermione stared at her ring, watching the words scribing themselves out of the scales in tiny script. It wrapped around the ring several times, but all of it fit. None of it was altered. He was telling the truth.

Unable to just accept it, Hermione lifted her gaze back to his grey eyes. "...Why?" At the arch of his brow, she expanded her question. "Why are you willing to tie yourself to me? You hardly know me, and if our...if our situation is uncovered by the Dark Lord..."

"That is the Situation I needed to discuss with you. He *knows* about us," Russel revealed. Hermione gasped, and he lifted his hand, forestalling her shock. "Not about my status as a spy for the Order. He knows about the rings. I've convinced him that the ring you're wearing must've fallen out of my sporran at some point during the weekend, and that you picked it up, recognized that it was a powerful piece of magic, strung it on that chain you discarded, and took the risk that it would help protect you somehow when he ordered your torturing.

"He realized it was a betrothal ring, one of an unbreakable nature, and was ready to have you killed to free me from your Mud-blooded influence--his words, not mine," Russel amended, lifting his hand to reassure her, "--when I offered the suggestion instead that I seduce and claim you. I reminded him that sufficient sexual ecstasy would be enough to turn even the most levelheaded witch's attention away from what was really happening...and that the best secrets were often spilled in the intimacy of a bed."

"You told him that you'd use sex to beguile and interrogate me?" Hermione summed, taken aback by the idea.

"An extension of what I was apparently doing this weekend, trying to uncover information about the Boy Who Lived, and why he was at the wand exhibition." Russel wrinkled his nose, unhappy. "I don't know what he wanted with that wand, but he was very unhappy to hear it had been broken. *Very* unhappy, more so even than over the loss of several of his followers."

Hermione held her tongue on the fact that it had been a different wand that had shattered, an oak one patterned in a zigzag pattern from the Art Deco era, not in feathers from the turn of the previous millennium. Flitwick had not announced that fact publicly, however. He'd allowed everyone to think that the Ravenclaw wand had been ruined, and with the help of his two remaining students, had hustled his collection back to the school. In fact, the Charms teacher had been adamant about hiding it and his remaining wand collection for a while, until the war with the Dark Lord was over. Most of the collectors were apparently going to do that with the surviving pieces of their own collections, too.

"I've been ordered to get into your good graces far enough to ask questions about your activities," Russel continued. "Things that you might be looking for, and any places that you're trying to investigate. Essentially all the things I'm supposed to be investigating *him* for."

Hermione's breath caught. If Voldemort figured out what they were searching for... Hastily shoving those thoughts into oblivion--if Russel had studied Occlumency, he had probably studied Legilimency as well--she asked carefully, "...And so you're under official orders from the Dark Lord to consummate this betrothal?"

"One way or another, I am to ensnare you, and use you to spy upon you and your companions. Those are my orders, and they are not negotiable." The corner of his lip curled up in a sneer. "He even went so far as to suggest my borrowing the skills of his pet Potions Master, to drug you into compliance if my own charm isn't up to the task. I pledged that my seductive skills would be more than adequate. I don't want that bastard to 'accidentally' poison you, or worse...like giving you more than the bare minimum needed to distract your attentions and bewitch your affections.

"That is the situation we are in, Jane. If I am unable to properly seduce you, I will be punished. You will be attacked and killed, as a dangerous liability. I will not be able to find as easy a manner of reporting back to the Order as I currently do through you, even if they now know about me. I doubt they'll be quick to believe in me, thanks to the unconscionable treachery of their last known spy, and without that necessary level of trust, they might be slow to act...and more lives would be lost."

He finished speaking in a quiet, subdued tone. Most of his tanned face was neutral, shuttered, but Hermione thought she saw a hint of regret, and maybe even remorse in his gaze. Letting his words sink in, she mulled over their choices. They didn't have many, and most of them weren't really viable. It wasn't that they had no other options at all; she didn't believe that there was only one choice, one path. There were always options to be considered. She did, however, admit that there were times when there was only one *good* choice to make. This was one of them.

"How soon..." She paused and licked her lips. "How soon do we have to...consummate the betrothal?"

His eyes warmed, tiny lines appearing at their corners. It took her a few moments to realize he was now smiling. Just a little, but his mouth had definitely curved into a smile. A lick of his lips made her heart skip a beat, then thud in recovery. He hesitated a little more before answering, drawing out her anxiety. "This room is rented for the next three days."

It was a strange sort of answer. Did that mean they would be waiting until those three days were almost up, or making love for almost three whole days? Hermione watched him thrust up off the seat with unexpected energy. When he turned and thrust his hand at her, she hesitated only a moment before placing her fingers in his. Pulling her up, he didn't pull her against him, though she expected it. Instead, he tugged her over to the kitchenette table, where she realized several boxes and books had been stacked.

Two of the boxes contained jigsaw puzzles. Wizarding ones, judging by the movement visible in the descriptive pictures on the box. Another box read *Factoid Folly*, and two more appeared to be decks of cards, one the normal kind of cards, and one some sort of game she'd never seen before. The books were even more eclectic, ranging from *The Hobbit* to something with a handsome man on the front cover. The model looked remarkably like Russel did, save that the man on the cover had darker, longer hair and a somewhat shorter nose, and was wearing a military jacket as well as a kilt; the jacket was hanging open, along with the shirt underneath it, baring a delicious slice of tanned skin. In the background was a star-field, suggesting it was either a sci-fi novel or some alternate universe. The publisher's mark on the spine, she realized, was for a popular Muggle romance-genre company.

"Shall we play a game of *Factoid Folly*? Read a book? Or go straight to the puzzles?"

"Er..." Taken aback by that lurid dust-jacket, Hermione looked up at Russel. "Games? Books? Aren't you, erm, going to snog me within an inch of my life?"

"Later," he dismissed, pulling out a chair for her. After seating her, he pulled out the chair opposite and separated the largest box from the rest. "Have you ever played this game?"

"*Factoid Folly*? No," she admitted, shaking her head. "What's it about?"

"You have these game pieces that you roll the dice and mount the levels of the pyramid, going from stone to stone depending on the direction, number, and colour of the dice rolled. Whatever you land on, that's the category that you have to answer the question. If you get it right, you move on, and if you land on the keystone squares and answer the questions correctly, you get to play with a different set of dice, which might or might not improve your chances of making it to the top of the pyramid, which has to be an exact landing to win.

"All of the factoids are based on information found in the wizarding world," Russel told her, setting out the board, the dice, and a block of cards, which he shuffled with deft fingers and placed next to them. He grinned at her. "I thought it would be interesting to test your knowledge of magical errata, and see if you really are the 'know-it-all' that

my bastard roommate disparages. Shall we roll to see who goes first?"

It was rather odd to realize she was a little bit disappointed that he didn't want to snog her. Studying the brightly coloured board, with its smallish squares and their tiny, moving pictures, Hermione found herself realizing something important: she was only going to be as ready for sex as she made up her mind to be. Which meant, if she started making her mind to *be* ready for sex, she'd find it all the easier to make love to the wizard across from her.

It helped that she did find herself attracted to him, as her mother would say.

"It's really quite easy, once you figure out how the dice work," he coaxed her, passing her a reference card from the box detailing how the dice worked.

Hermione set the card down. "I'll play...but not for points or anything. Anytime one of us gets an answer right, the winner gets to claim a kiss from the other person."

He stared at her a long moment. Head tipping slightly, he asked, "You're serious?"

"Very," she replied bravely.

"You're definitely a Gryffindor. I picked playing games and reading books as ways to get to know each other, and to relax in each other's presence," Russel admitted bluntly, standing up and moving his chair to the side of the table, perpendicular to hers. That, she realized, would make claiming kisses a lot easier. It also made it easier for him to read the board, by tipping it at a slight angle as he continued. "But that suggestion takes a lot of courage, given that you told me just yesterday morning that you weren't ready for physical intimacy."

"And what House were you in?" she returned. "Slytherin?"

"Being poor sometimes gives a burgeoning young wizard ambitious thoughts of attaining great wealth and power," he answered obliquely, rolling the dice. "Even if those ambitions lead him into stupidity. I should've asked the Sorting Hat to place me in Ravenclaw."

"Did you ever attain that great wealth and power?" Hermione asked, taking the dice and rolling them, too. He won the toss to see who would go first.

"No. I wound up in a mind-numbing job I hated for a pittance of a salary, and far less influence than I thought I'd have. My superior liked me, but my peers snubbed me for being far too young to be so talented, and my inferiors loathed me. I'd rather not talk about it."

"So what should we talk about?" she asked as he rolled the dice, consulted the quick-reference card, and moved his piece.

"Red - Romance," he directed her. "What we'd do if we indeed had a great deal of wealth, and/or influence in the wizarding world. Since I doubt you have any of that either, being, what, only seventeen?"

"Eighteen. My birthday was in September."

He grunted. "I'll have to get you a belated birthday present. Well? Read the card!"

Hermione drew the first card, and looked along the red-tinted line, reading the black lettering out loud. "What year was the famous Ipicrys Incident of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, involving the ingestion of a lust-potion by most of the staff and older student body?"

"1517."

"Wrong! It was in 1417," Hermione corrected him. She hadn't even needed to consult the answer line on the card, since she remembered it clearly enough from reading *Hogwarts: A History* so many times through the years. But she didn't tell him that.

"Damn. Your turn. You roll these dice, first," he directed her, handing her the same set of poly-sided objects.

Obligingly, she rolled them, consulted the reference card, and moved her game piece. "Green Healing."

"...Which wizard was the inventor of the entrail-expelling curse?"

Hermione knew that one. She was *sure* she'd read it somewhere before. Closing her eyes, she cleared her mind, then concentrated. She could picture a face with the information...a portrait...a plaque...a sensation of echoing corridors and lime-green robes, and...and--St Mungo's! "The answer is...Rackharrow!"

"Merlin's undershorts, you got it right! I never would've guessed that one correctly," Russel praised her. "Maybe you *are* a know-it-all, Jane."

"I only remembered it, Russel, because I saw a portrait of the fellow while visiting St. Mungo's, once," Hermione pointed out. She reached for the same dice again. Russel covered her hand with his own, stopping her action. Looking at him, she asked, "...What?"

"Aren't you going to claim your prize?" he asked her.

Oh. The kiss. Blushing, Hermione shifted closer, then hesitated. She'd been about to give him a quick, chaste peck on the cheek. Or maybe the lips, to be daring. But somehow, the thought of doing that felt like a cheat. He'd been rather straightforward in his dealings with her, telling her bluntly that he was supposed to seduce her, yet allowing her time to grow accustomed to the idea, and maybe even to him. Yet there was nothing in the mythical rulebook of relationships that said he was the only one allowed to do any seducing.

Not that she knew how to seduce someone, beyond some of the ideas she'd read in her recent collection of smutty books, but Hermione wasn't content to be a passive observer, right now. Removing her hand from under his, she reached up and touched his jaw-line. A slight rasp against her skin told her that his beard was starting to grow again. She wondered briefly how often he shaved, every morning, every other morning...

Oh, god. This is the face I'm going to be waking up to, for the rest of my...wait a minute. Her brows drew down. *This isn't the face I'm going to be waking up to, for the rest of my life! He's wearing a ruddy glamour-pendant!* Her fingers shifted down to the side of his throat, searching for the clasp to the amulet. His hand snapped up to hers, the moment she touched the side of the ribbon.

"Do *not* remove that," he warned her sharply, holding her fingers tightly for a moment.

"But, why not?" Hermione challenged him. "I mean, if we're to through with this, we'll be *married*. How can I not know the true face of the man I'll be bound to for the rest of my life? How can you ask me to tie myself to someone I've never even seen?"

Pushing her hand away, he rose, spinning out of his chair. A few steps and he stopped, his back to her. The set of his shoulders was stiff, and she realized his hands had fisted at his sides. A subtle turn of his head, and he addressed her over his shoulder. "Are you familiar with the tale of Cupid and Psyche?"

His off-the-wall choice of topic made her blink. "Uh...yes. Cupid, the Greek god of Love, fell in love with Psyche, a mortal woman. He wanted to marry her, but...for some reason I cannot remember, he couldn't appear to her in a physical form. So he turned himself invisible and took her back to his home as his bride. And there he loved her, and made love to her in the darkness after nightfall, until one night, she lit a candle and looked upon his sleeping face...and he fled, having to abandon her."

"In some legends, he'd been cursed by Hera, queen of the gods, out of jealousy over his mother, Aphrodite, to never know happiness if he ever took a mortal lover and she

looked upon his face," Russel quoted quietly. "It wasn't until Psyche was given a cup of ambrosia to drink, turning her into an immortal, a minor goddess, that he was permitted to rejoin his wife. I...I did a Divination, in deciding whether or not to send you my ring."

Hermione bit her lip against the urge to say that Divinations was nothing more than a load of silly, woolly guesswork. Russel seemed to be taking it very seriously. "And...?"

"And all the signs pointed to a disaster, if I ever revealed myself completely to you. Tarot, tea, even the i ching--I tested the whole gamut. Every single one of them pointed to disaster, if you saw my true face. So I crafted this amulet, rather than attempting to turn myself invisible. Cloaks can be removed, potions have side-effects...I've merely altered my appearance just enough visually to disguise my identity. And as I'd rather hope that I might actually escape this war alive and in one piece, I'd prefer it if you respected this one piece of my privacy...and not draw down a disaster upon both of our heads by violating my identity."

Hermione slipped out of her chair. She touched the back of his shirt, feeling the firm, warm flesh underneath. "Once the war is over, will you reveal yourself to me then?"

"I don't know. The odds of my surviving are very low."

Regrettably, she knew that possibility was all too true. "Then can you at least tell me if you're handsome, or not?"

Twisting to face her, he gave her a lopsided smile. "Why don't you just imagine the real me as ugly as a troll? I'm sure it'll keep you preferring this facade over any other I might choose."

That made her arch a brow and fold her arms across her chest. "Let me guess--you stole the idea for your appearance and wardrobe off the cover of that lurid romance I saw on the table?"

He flashed her a wicked grin, spreading his arms. "Guilty as charged."

"Can you answer at least one question?" Hermione half-pleaded, eyeing his clothing. "*Why* a kilt? Do you wear them normally?"

"No. I initially thought it would be distinct and different. Something to make me stand out a little, yet make people associate me with only a kilt, so that if I ever *didn't* wear one, no one would recognize me, eh?" He looked down at himself and shrugged. "I'm forced to admit that they're very comfortable. I think I might even wear one after all of this is over. If I survive."

Reaching up, Hermione cupped his cheeks in her hands. He lifted his gaze to hers, his grey eyes puzzled for a moment. They didn't stay puzzled for very long. Not when it was quite clear that she was pressing her lips to his, nuzzling their mouths together. It was a soft kiss, not a hard one, but it was also somewhat sophisticated. Aborted by the donning of the ring though her previous relationship had been, she had learned a few things about kissing from her time with Ron. Some of it negative, what she didn't want, and some of it positive, what she did.

She certainly liked the way he tilted his head into the kiss, seeking a better angle for the mating of their mouths. And the settling of his hands around her waist was nice; Hermione thought she was a little skinny and thus shy of a good hourglass figure, but he didn't seem to mind. Certainly his palms enjoyed stroking up to her ribs and down to her hips, finally circling around to her buttocks. Her own hands stroked through his hair, which was enticingly soft, then cupped his shoulders and tentatively caressed his chest. By now, her tongue had daringly touched his lips, coaxing his own out to play.

Play? No. Conquer? Yes. But only for one heated moment. He seemed to come to his senses after just a few seconds, for his hands shifted from that thrilling kneading her rump, gliding up her body to grip her arms and push her gently back. He licked his lips, as if to savour the taste of her kiss, then released her.

"I believe it is time for you to roll the dice, again."

Disappointed the snogging was over, for now, Hermione returned to her seat and restarted the game.

...

Hermione loved the taste of the sweat dampening his skin. She licked the side of his throat again, ending with a little flick of her tongue behind his ear that made him groan and twitch violently, clutching her backside and grinding her mound against the lump of arousal hidden beneath that kilt. He was a little musky back here, as if he'd applied a light touch of cologne, though Hermione was fairly certain all that she smelled on him was pure, unadulterated man.

The combination of sweat and scent reminded her of something else that was salty and musky. His semen, when she'd daringly, embarrassingly licked it from the pages of their communiques. Blushing hotly, Hermione found herself wanting to slip out of his lap, push back his kilt, and taste him directly. Instead, she teased the flesh she had in reach, not quite ready for such a daring move...though she was getting close. Hungrily, she caught his earlobe in her teeth, scraping it lightly while the tip of her tongue played with the soft, warm edge.

He shouted and bucked, bouncing her with the sudden thrust of his hips. His hands shifted, grabbing her arms with bruising strength, pushing her forcefully out of his lap. Gulping for breath, he hung his head for a moment, then pushed her back out of reach. "Play...the...game. And *don't* bloody do that again, unless you're ready for the consequences!"

The glare he shot her sent a tingle through her. Rather than detracting from the moment, it seemed to compliment the racing of her heart, the taste of him on her own lips. Seating herself, Hermione picked up the current allotment of dice, rolled, and moved her game piece in the requisite direction. She landed on a keystone square, but didn't care. "Orange Legends and Rarities."

She notice his hand wasn't steady as he picked up the next card. "...What does a Philosopher's Stone do?"

Hermione nearly snorted, at that. "It transmutes base metals to gold, creating vast amounts of wealth, and it's used as the base for the Draught of Life, which essentially gives anyone who drinks the potion brewed with the Philosopher's Stone immortality. Until they stop drinking it, of course. I learned *that* one in my first year!"

The corner of his mouth had curved up in a smirk. "Right yet again, Jane."

Sliding off her chair, Hermione dropped to her knees next to him. He frowned in confusion, then widened his eyes as she pushed at his chair until he scooted it further back from the table and slightly to the side. Positioning herself in front of him, she slid her hands from his knees to his thighs. Lifting his kilt. His hands snapped down, manacled her wrists and stopping her from going any further.

"--What do you think you're doing?"

"Claiming my kiss." Hermione hoped she didn't look or sound nervous. She was a little uncertain, but the idea that had formed in her head was something she wanted to try.

"My lips are up here," he reminded her, tugging on her arms.

She clung to his thighs. "We never said the kisses had to be claimed mouth-to-mouth, Russel. And I definitely don't want to kiss your mouth, this time."

Air shuddered out of his lungs, and his fingers spasmed around her flesh. He stared down at her, lips parted, tongue wetting their surface absently, clearly taken off-guard by her meaning. Aware that his fingers were no longer clutching her tightly, Hermione shifted her hands out from under his touch, pushing the Ferguson plaid of his kilt higher.

The gleam of white cotton distracted her. Blinking, Hermione looked down at the clean, white briefs he wore. Disappointment seeped through her at the sight of such

gently and modestly. Of all the things she would've thought a daring fellow like Russel might do, *not* going 'regimental' under his kilt was not on the list. *Wait a minute, Hermione*, she chided herself. *What are you complaining about? You get to undress him! Just pretend he's a belated birthday present!*

That was an appealing idea. Slipping her fingertips up under the rumpled folds of wool, Hermione found and snagged the elastic waistband. Mindful of the lump underneath, pushing up against the fabric, she carefully eased the material up and over his erection. Revealing him all the way to his bollocks.

A penis, Hermione decided, was a very peculiar-looking thing. Sort of like a cross between a sausage, a flobberworm, and one of those geoduck-things from the far side of North America. Her mum and dad had once hosted a dinner for dentistry colleagues, and her mum had sprung for the exotic clam meat to impress their seafood-loving guests. She'd been only fourteen, but she had giggled with her mum over the rather phallic shape of the thing, whilst cooking it.

Russel was longish, slightly curved, nestled in a sparse thicket of brownish, crinkly hairs...and naturally tanned. In fact, Hermione realized that he was entirely naturally tanned. She would've expected his thighs to be pasty white, like a typical Englishman's, but no; from navel to knee, he was the same golden brown as his hands and face. The thought of him bathing nude on some Mediterranean beach crossed her mind...but the most likely explanation was that he had a mixed background, ethnically speaking. There was nothing wrong in that; it only made him seem all the more mysterious and exotic, in her mind.

Aware that his hands had shifted from lying on his thighs to gripping the edges of his chair, Hermione gently but firmly tugged his knickers down. He sucked in a breath, then stiffened his arms, lifting his rump from the seat. Pulling the briefs over his knees and down his calves, she eased them over his moccasin-style shoes and set the scrap of white aside. Returning her attention, she found him parting his knees and shifting forward in the chair. That splayed his thighs, keeping his kilt rumpled up out of the way. The position also made his scrotum droop a little, now that it wasn't supported by his thighs; the little ridgeline running between each testicle, stretching up to the base of his penis, caused his shaft to stand up straighter from the tugging weight.

She couldn't quite catch her breath. This was quite honestly the most daring thing she'd ever done. She'd committed acts of great bravery, and shown unflinching courage in the face of near-impossible odds...but this was just flat-out daring. Shifting forward, she gently touched his thighs, sliding her hands higher and higher, enjoying the contrast of textured leg-hair and soft inner skin. His penis twitched, and she watched the crinkled skin of his scrotum tightening slightly as she came within an inch of the creases separating his thighs from his groin.

Bracing her hands on his thighs, Hermione leaned in, breathing the musky, sweaty, *male* scent of his loins. There was something in the odor of him, something powerfully masculine. Something that reached into her senses, into her synapses...and it flicked a little switch. This wasn't daring, anymore. This was necessary. It wasn't a drug; it was just the primal scent of a man, intimately masculine, acting on the most primeval part of her feminine brain.

Acknowledging this fact, Hermione closed the last few inches between her and him, and pressed her lips to the little arrow-indent just under the tip of his shaft, marking the edge of its mushroom-like ridge.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

X.

A groan tore from his throat. Hermione licked her lips, but there wasn't much to taste, yet. Dipping her head a little, she licked him instead, a broad lap of her tongue. Daring *and* necessary, an exhilarating combination. Another groan escaped him. A drop of clear fluid had welled up at the tip, she realized, and leaned forward to lick at the salty-sweet, viscous liquid.

His hands lurched from the edge of the chair to the curls of her hair, gripping her head as she did it again, this time with a swirl of her tongue to gather a larger sample. "Dammit!" Russel swore, holding her still. "Don't do that!"

"Why not?" His hand were holding her head still, but he hadn't yet pushed her away from his erection. Hermione's lips moved against the velvety heat of his shaft as she spoke those words, and he groaned again.

"Because I'm going to cum, if you do!"

"But, I *want* to taste you at the source," she whispered, looking up at him.

Shock filled his grey eyes. Shock, and something else. His eyes rolled back, his hands tightened, and his hips bucked. "Oh, fuck!"

His penis twitched, bumping into her nose and lips. Something warm and white jetted up, splatting her hairline, her forehead. Hermione grabbed his shaft as his hips continued to thrust, and managed to get her mouth open and around the fulminating tip. It was bitter, it was salty, it was sweet and musky and hot, and she found herself flinching a little as his hands shifted their grip, angling her head so that he could pull her down as he pumped up. The blunt tip bumped the back of her soft palate, making her gag for a moment.

Sucking instinctively to try and control each entry, Hermione swallowed the warm liquid filling her mouth, attempting to move her head in time with his demanding touch. He finally released her hair, gripping the seat of his chair with whitened knuckles instead. No longer pressured to act, with his hips slowing to softer, gentler twitches, Hermione gentled her own actions. One hand gripped his shaft, gently squeezing and rubbing; the other she brought up to cup the sack of his testicles. A last little bit of liquid seeped from the slit at the tip of his penis, then he stilled.

A thorough swirl of her tongue to clean him, and Hermione gently released him from her lips, sitting back. She had semen in her hair, streaked across her forehead and cheek, and her hands were still on his privates. But, messy or not, she felt almost smug with accomplishment. She'd not only gotten him off at her touch, she'd gotten him off at the *thought* of her swallowing the taste of him. And it wasn't a bad taste, really. The flavour took a bit of getting used to in such copious amounts, but she wouldn't object to doing this again, by any means.

"Shit..."

She looked up at him, still holding his semi-softened shaft, feeling the skin of his bollocks tightening again. He held her gaze, blinking slowly, his pewter eyes still a little dazed from his climax. Hermione stared back, unsure what to say, or even if he'd be offended if she released him so that she could clean the sticky liquid from her face.

She licked her lips, nervous, and tasted lingering traces of his semen.

Russel groaned, grabbing her head as he lunged forward. Pulling her up on her knees, he kissed her. It was hot, open and hard, and full of tongue, as if he would lick the flavour of himself from her flesh, from cheeks to tonsils. He even tilted her head down, cleaning the drying liquid from her forehead with a hard, slow swipe of his tongue, only to tip her face up again and plunge that same tongue into her mouth, making sure she tasted it right along with him.

That was beyond daring! Beyond exotic and straight into shocking, and yet incredibly erotic at the same time. He didn't flinch from his own taste, and he didn't balk at sharing it with her. Somehow, she didn't think a lot of guys would do that.

Hermione found herself hauled to her feet, one of his hands still buried in her curls, the other arm wrapped around her ribs as he pulled her tight to his frame. He continued the heated kiss for a few more moments, moulding her curves to his muscles, then broke the interplay of their lips. A stoop and he swept her off her feet, making her squeak in startled surprise. Clinging to his shoulders, she found herself carried straight to the bed, and laid upon the colourfully floral duvet.

It only took him a moment to pull off her trainers, and another to peel away her socks. He paused to toe off his own shoes and strip his socks, then crawled half over her, bracing his weight on hands and knees as he looked down at her. Determination burned alongside passion in his pewter gaze. She couldn't tear her tawny eyes from his as he murmured his intent to her.

"I am going to claim you, Hermione Jane. You have lost your last chance to escape." He lowered himself a little closer to her, pausing with his kiss-reddened mouth inches from her own. "You will be my wife...and I *will not* let you go."

His lips captured hers before she could ask him what he meant by that. His hands stroked her body, claiming the curves of her breasts, the dip of her waist, the flare of her hips. Fingers boldly delved between her thighs, rubbing and pressing the gusset of her jeans up into her mound, making her ache for a touch more substantial. She clutched at his shirt, tugging and fisting the material, wanting it gone, wanting to feel nothing but bare skin between them. And, when he released her mouth, kissing his way down to her breasts, Hermione couldn't remember who had unbuttoned her blouse, him or her.

It didn't matter; clothing tugged, seams ripped, a button popped, and yards of tartan wool were shoved uncaringly to the floor. He wasn't gentle, removing her knickers; the soft knit cotton creaked, then tore. But his lips were soft, as he nuzzled her stomach. When her thighs clenched in uncertainty, he stroked them with his hand, teasing the curls of her mound until her legs twitched apart, opening under the coaxing of his touch, and the urges he instilled.

The first brush of his lips against her femininity made Hermione gasp. A teasing lick down the centerline arched her head back, her knees splaying with instinctive acceptance. She squeaked when he nuzzled her with his nose, and squeaked again when he parted her folds with his fingers and began the first taste. The first of many tastes. Under his gentle, relentless touch, Hermione squirmed, squeaked, gasped and sighed. She even giggled nervously when one of his deft fingers tickled its way down to the bud of her anus, but it was hard to form a coherent protest when everything else felt so bloody good...

Pressure build within her blood. Fire burned within her bones. Lightning seared along her nerves, racing out to her extremities, then rushing inward. Her gasps and groans become wild cries. Sensations crashed together as he sucked and flicked her clitoris, and the hands that had been grasping at the covers flew to her own breasts, pinching and pulling and twisting to distract her from the pleasure, to ground herself in a bit of pain, but in the end only adding to her ecstasy. Deliriously.

She felt him shifting off the bed, doing something as she drifted slowly back down from the heights of her physical rapture. But she couldn't summon the energy to open her eyes, nor gather enough curiosity to ask him aloud what he was doing. Not until the bed shifted again and she felt warm, masculine flesh settling over her, slotting between her damp thighs, did Hermione pry her eyelids open.

He had a largish, dark brown vial in his hand, his thumb resting lightly on the cork. Grey eyes met brown, searching her pleasure-drugged gaze. "May I collect your virgin's blood?"

Blinking, she focused her gaze and her scattered thoughts. "My...? Why would you want that?"

"The bastard traitor needs it for one of his experiments. As he's the second-highest out of the whole foul lot at the moment, I daren't say no. Not without serious consequences."

A shudder rippled through her. Snape wanted *her* virgin's blood? The very thought put a damper on her passion...but there was more to consider here than her reluctance to help the betrayer. Biting her lower lip, she nodded bravely. Russel was taking too many risks already for her to not concede him something that would only be wasted, otherwise.

"Thank you, Jane. Willingly-given is always the most potent." With that, he kissed the tip of her nose. Hermione closed her eyes at the unexpected touch. It was a silly, tender thing, something she'd expect more from a youthful companion than a man fully grown. Her eyes snapped open after a moment, focusing on the bottle with a frown.

"--Why does the bottle have to be so big? I'm not going to bleed *that* much! ...Am I?" she asked him, worried.

He chuckled, setting the bottle on the nightstand. A narrowing of his gaze, a silent flicking of the wand over the bottle, his loins and her belly, and he smiled at her. "You have a perforated hymen. I checked." Smirked, rather. Russel's expression sobered somewhat. "You'll bleed more than some, I think...but mostly it was the only sterile bottle I could find quickly. And you won't experience nearly as much pain as you otherwise might."

"Oh? How so?" Hermione asked, curious.

He snapped his wand over her abdomen again. "*Pars dolorum*!"

Magic tingled over her belly, sparkling for a moment. It arrowed at his own stomach, impacting and absorbing, then pouring out of him and tickling back into her abdomen. She looked up at him. "What spell was that?"

"Shared Pain'. It's the only painkiller that can be used while collecting virgin's blood." He gave her a small, lopsided smile. "And given how vehemently the dragon defended you, I'd say you're a true virgin. If you'd been faking it with a repaired hymen, he wouldn't have appeared and protected you so thoroughly."

"I wouldn't--I've never--I *am* a 'true' virgin!" Hermione snapped, flustered. "And I didn't even know that sort of spell existed! I only just started researching contraceptive potions!" The confession made her flush harder. "...Which I haven't had a chance to make, yet...and I don't have any Muggle versions--"

His fingers touched her lips, silencing her. Smiling, Russel eased his body against hers, unconcerned by the jut of his renewed erection. "Shh. I've taken care of it."

"When?" Hermione asked, brows pinching together in puzzlement. The feel of their bodies touching practically from shoulder to feet was a bit distracting. He felt warm and good, solid and male.

"When I enchanted the bottle to collect what is needed."

"There's a charm to prevent conception?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes." His hand rested on her stomach for a moment, then slid up to cup her breast.

"Where...where did you learn it?" Hermione asked, biting her lower lip to not giggle at the ticklish caress.

Sighing, Russel propped his head on his other hand, giving her an amused look. "Jane, now is *not* the time to play know-it-all. Or rather, knowledge-sponge." His hand

lifted to her hairline, brushing her curls. "Not with my seed in your hair, and your essence on my lips."

Her belly clenched at his words. Hermione didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. She'd really, really liked what he'd done with his mouth, and she'd certainly liked what she'd done with hers. Thinking of his fervent declaration, she eyed him. "...Why aren't you all over me? Before you, um, licked me, you looked like you were going to go wild, and now you're as calm as a cat on a hearthstone."

His hand, which had been gently brushing her hair back from her face, caressed her cheek, turning her head a little more towards him. "I'm not calm. I'm controlled. And...I'm not looking forward to the pain of rending your virginity. I'm also determined to see to the task properly." At the quirk of her eyebrow, he elaborated. "That means taking you from the pain of the initial entry, all the way through to the great pleasure that can be found in the act of intercourse itself. That's a lot of responsibility for a man to undertake with a virgin bride."

That made her think of something. "Um...how experienced are you?"

"Enough."

Unsatisfied, Hermione asked the next question on her mind. "Do you have any...oh, this is embarrassing to ask--do you have any sexual diseases, or--or problems I should know about?"

Russel's eyes narrowed, his short, thick lashes almost brushing together. His answer was clipped. "No. Do you?"

"No! But I have to ask. You've had partners in the past, and if I sleep with you, I'll in essence be sleeping with everyone *you've* been in bed with, and everyone *they've* been in bed with, and so on and so forth... Are you sure? Have you had a checkup?"

His fingertips stopped her deluge of nervous questions. "I have until recently undergone a series of quarterly checkups, as a part of my past employment. I *am* clean."

"Past employment?" she mumbled against the pad of his digits.

"Thanks to the war, becoming a full-time Death Eater put a crimp in my career. Which is rather irritating, since a spy doesn't get paid...and neither do the Dark Lord's followers. Unless one is at the forefront of a raid, and nicks something along the way. But enough about that. This moment," he instructed her, "is between just you and I...and I think I shall have to stopper your mouth, to cease all these questions."

Leaning over her, Russel removed his fore and middle fingers, replacing them with his lips. The act of kissing her seemed to involve pinning her down with more and more of his frame, too. She became aware again of her naked state, and his naked state, and how their bared flesh felt brushing and rubbing together. Her hand lifted of its own accord to his waist, then up to trace the contours of his ribs. He was thin; she could count them easily, but there were taut muscles covering his wiry frame. He was stronger than he looked, lean but wiry.

And yet gentle with her. It was strange to notice how gentle he was with her, when his touch, his kisses, even the weight of his limbs and torso excited her. The contrast was intriguing. Wanting to excite him as well, she stroked everywhere she could touch, glad when he slid over her, one leg slotting between her thighs, his erection grinding into her hip; that allowed her to use her right arm as well as her left. She had to feel her way, too; he was still snogging the daylights out of her. Though to call such possessive, delicious hunger something as juvenile-sounding as 'snogging' was probably a misnomer...

Devouring. That was the word for it; he was devouring her mouth, sucking on her tongue in a way that somehow attached strings from that appendage, through her breasts and ribs, all the way down into her loins. Squirming under him, Hermione got his other leg between hers. She stroked his back, then raked his muscles with stiffened fingertips, not quite scratching him. He moaned and nipped at her mouth passionately.

Thought was becoming overrated. His penis slipped from being rubbed between their pelvic bones to nudge the slick flesh between her thighs, with just a modest hitch of his hips. The tip was blunt, poking and jabbing here and there, but it felt strangely good to be prodded like that. Sparing a hand, he reached between them, balancing on elbow and knees. She felt him grip himself, and then find and nudge her clitoris with the warm, soft-blunt tip...and could've sworn she could feel the pre-cum that had to be seeping out of such a blatant arousal. It could've been her own moisture, of course...but it was erotic, and poetic to think of his flesh weeping with need.

She almost giggled, at that thought. But it was hard to think for very long, not when he was rubbing himself against her, arousing in her a greedy level of need. Was that her, making those whimpering sounds in the back of her throat? Probably. Hermione didn't really care, either, so long as he gave her more, more, more--

He stopped rubbing himself against her. This time her whimper was more of a disbelieving groan. One that grew louder as Russel's mouth left hers in favour of exploring her throat. He nibbled the tendons and muscles, licked the hollow at the base, then suckled his way up the side to the base of her ear, where he latched onto her lobe, then swirled the tip of his tongue into the folds of her canal, and oh, god, stars exploded behind her closed, straining eyelids.

"Now...now...now now *now!*" Knees jerking up, thighs splaying, Hermione fumbled as she reached down to position him. Playing with her clit just wasn't enough, anymore! If she wanted that, she could do it herself! There was a huge hollow place low in her belly, and all her feminine instincts said that, if she could just get him in there, he'd fill and satisfy the sexual hunger he'd aroused.

"Jane!" he groaned, his breath a hot rush against the dampened curves of her ear. He caught her hand just as she reached him, entwined their fingers together, and helped her bring himself to her entrance. Lifting his head, Russel stared into her eyes as he started pushing against her barrier. It was both intimate and strange, peering into his grey eyes, feeling him nudging, and nudging...and nothing *budging*, Hermione realized after a few more moments.

"Dammit!" The curse escaped her without thought, making her blush belatedly. "Er..."

He stopped nudging, looking down between their bodies as he lifted up slightly. "I was afraid of this. None of the perforations are large enough."

"So, what do we do?"

"*You* do nothing," Russel informed her dryly, reaching up under her pillow. Hermione watched him pull out his wand, wondering when he'd stuffed it up there. "You can have nothing done to you, if the blood collected is to remain pure. I will simply have to...alter my shape a little." He hesitated, giving her an apologetic look. "This may hurt a little. You might not want to watch this bit," he warned her, taking himself in hand again as he lowered his chest to hers, blocking her view. Three taps of the wand on the tip of his penis, and icy pain stabbed through her genitals. Hermione gasped, choking back the urge to groan from the uncomfortable, compressing ache.

"What...what did you just do?"

"Altered the shape so it'll penetrate."

She felt the sharpened tip poke against her hymen, watched him rearing back further to find just the right spot. As soon as he was positioned, Russel eased back down again. Some of the little jostles pushed him against her barrier, but not quite enough to puncture it. Instead, with infinite care, he arranged himself just so over her, nudging her knees and thighs into the perfect, welcoming position. Then his head descended, capturing her lips as his dark blond hair curtained out the rest of the room.

She didn't want to watch, but she didn't really feel it, either, as he held himself against her without attempting penetration. Instead, he focused on re-arousing her with lips and tongue, and the caress of one hand as he fondled her breasts. The delicate twisting of one nipple made her gasp, but it was the smooth-hard rubbing of the back of his fingernail against the beaded tip of the other that really aroused her. That made her think of that time he'd written to her, instructing her on how to touch herself.

His hand slipped down from her breasts to her ribs, then made it to her navel. Rimming the dimple of flesh, he teased her for a moment, before sliding his fingers down between them. A delving, questing touch into her damp crease, and he lightly stroked her clitoris. Arousal shuddered through her veins. Head arching back, she broke their

kiss in favour of dragging in enough air to breathe. Moaning, head thrashing as he circled her clit with his fingers, Hermione clutched at his shoulders, wanting to wriggle her hips but not wanting to dislodge him. Another swirling touch made her moan louder, scraping her fingernails down his back.

He jabbed into her. Just a short distance, an inch or two at most, but it was enough to pierce her hymen. Oddly enough, she didn't really feel any pain, just a parting, stretching sensation with a hint of a sting. And a tingle of magic that swept up from her groin, over her skin, and finally drained into the ring on her hand. He froze, however, choking on a pain-filled grunt. A scabble through the covers, and he found his wand again, long enough tap it against the exposed part of his shaft. She felt him shifting shape inside of her, making the stinging just a little worse as his erection thickened back into its proper proportion. A groan tore from his throat, the wand was shoved back under her pillow, and he braced himself on elbows and knees, panting unsteadily into the curve of her neck.

That hand returned to her genitals after a little while. Fingers slotting to either side of her clitoris, he gently rubbed the turgid little peak. Pressing soft little kisses into the side of her throat and the curve of her shoulder, Russel distracted her from the last little bit of pain with those two acts, until her hips twitched up into his. It was just a tiny movement, accompanied by a stinging sensation, but it was enough for him. A sudden shove and the stinging increased, there was a strange popping-sensation down at her vagina, sort of like the plucking of a string...and with it, he buried himself all the way in her body.

More magic swept over her skin. Over both of them, she realized, watching a faint ripple of power pulsing across his own body, draining into his own ring. Pulling back, he struggled to breathe through clenched teeth. Concerned, Hermione touched his cheek. "Russel...are you alright?"

He answered after a moment, his soft, deep voice quiet but sounding constricted. "...You should appreciate the fact...that I'm bearing most of...your pain, at the moment... Damnation, you're tight!"

Considering she was a virgin, or rather, had just stopped being one, his complaint made Hermione want to giggle. It wouldn't have been appropriate, and she carefully restrained the urge. She wasn't a virgin anymore, but that didn't mean she should stop behaving like a lady. And somehow, she didn't think it would be ladylike to laugh at that moment. Not when he was being so considerate. His comment about bearing her pain made her wonder briefly how uncomfortable this moment was for him. Not having liked the pain of his Transfigured penis, she could only imagine how much worse a rendered hymen could be.

Lifting her hand to his cheek, she caressed it with her fingertips, then traced the contours of his brow. It was high and flat, and suited his long, thin nose. His cheekbones were high, making his eyes seem narrow, but she liked the way his lashes framed his gaze, allowing those beautiful grey eyes to flash with half-concealed emotion. His lips were a little on the thin side, but she'd once kissed a boy with puffy, full lips, and had discovered it was like trying to kiss a custard, too soft, with no substance behind the touch.

It could've been that the Muggle boy--she'd been thirteen, he'd been fourteen, the summer between her second and third year--just hadn't known how to kiss. But the man holding himself still over her frame knew how. Those somewhat thin lips could be bruisingly hard with passion, or nibblingly soft with gentleness. Like many Englishmen, his teeth were crooked, but they were white, and if Madam Pomfrey could fix Hermione's teeth, the mediwitch could probably fix his. At least his breath was sweet, though still somewhat musky from the scent of her earlier excitement.

Her fingers trailed from his firm, pointed jaw up to the side of his face, brushing back the locks of his light brown hair. Tucking the strands behind his ear, she caressed the curves of the organ. That made him shudder, his eyes drifting shut. She did it again, using a feather-light touch so that she could enjoy the velvetiness of the outer edge.

"Merlin!" The famous wizard's name was a breathy oath on Russel's lips, his eyelids straining shut.

She bit her bottom lip to stop from giggling, but couldn't control her grin. Her fingertip stroked the edge of his ear, making him shudder again. "You like that, do you?"

Eyes snapping open to slits, he stared down at her. In that one, calculating look, she was finally convinced he was a Slytherin. The hint of danger in the act spiced the moment, and she didn't resist when he used one of his own hands to tilt her head to the side. Hermione felt the brush of his hair against her cheek, the warmth of his breath against her hairline...and the nuzzling tip of his nose, tracing the contours of her ear.

It wasn't just the ticklish sensation of his nose and his breath. It was the gentleness of the caress, the implied tenderness, that he would take his time. Anticipation was also a factor; he definitely took his sweet time before he switched to something else. When the tip of his tongue started tracing her ear, Hermione shivered in pleasure. The delicacy of it was a direct contrast to the blunt, stretching fullness of his flesh buried in hers, down at their loins.

Her hands traced increasingly restless patterns along his ribs and back. Tightly slotted as he was, she could feel the insides of her vaginal walls beginning to turn slick with renewed interest, easing the restriction of his presence. The tip of his tongue, probing and caressing and making goose-spots rise on her skin, was exchanged for the softest scrape and bite of his teeth. There really wasn't any direct connection between the two places, but when he did that, bit her earlobe, Hermione wanted him to move down below. To move in her, move with her. Yet he was holding himself so carefully still, she could see the sweat beading on his forehead out of the corner of her eye, garnered from the effort of holding himself back.

Unsure how to encourage his carefully still frame into moving, she finally just slid her palms down to his buttocks, and pressed. He stopped licking her ear. Hermione flexed her hands again, this time lifting her knees a little to help tilt her pelvis up into his. A tremor rippled through him. She squeezed her hands, adding the prickle of her fingernails. Russel groaned.

His mouth shifted from the curves of her ear to the column of her neck. A swirling lick of his tongue dampened her skin, but only in a small patch. In the next moment, he flexed his hips, withdrawing slightly. It stung, but not badly. Hermione sighed, the soft moaning sound meant to encourage him. That was when his mouth latched onto her neck, suckling strongly just as he surged inside.

Gasping, Hermione clutched at the muscles under her fingers, feeling them flex as he withdrew and thrust again, rocking into a slow but steady, hungry rhythm. It stung for the first dozen strokes or so, but the pleasure being created as he filled her again and again eroded the discomfort. Relegated to the background, the pain faded, immaterial in the face of her pleasure. No, what mattered was the feel of him thrusting into her, the way he tongued her neck even as he sucked on it, the brush of his hair as it swayed with each gentle, rocking lunge of his body.

This was the cure for the empty hunger within her body. The only problem was, it felt like he was feeding her mere spoonfuls of thin soup, when she wanted a whole banquet crammed onto her plate. Her need panted out of her as she planted her feet, trying to rock her hips up into him. "More...more..."

That made Russel growl and bite at the side of her throat, down where the muscles joined her shoulder. He surged harder, and it stung, but it felt so good, so filling. She groaned and raked her fingers down his back, and he picked up the pace. But only by a little bit. Needing more, wanting much more than this easy, almost respectful rhythm, Hermione wracked her mind for a way to break through his control to the passionate man she hoped he could be.

Puffs of warm breath against the damp curves of her ear gave her an idea. Sliding her hands up the length of his spine, she tugged on his hair, turning his head to the side. A lift of her own head, and her teeth caught his earlobe, her tongue flicking against the edge of her velvety, soft captive.

He gasped and thrust hard and deep, shuddering. When she suckled, his head flung back, pulling his lobe from its imprisonment even as he bucked into her a second time. Eyes wide, brow furrowed, he stilled his hips and stared down at her. Hermione licked her lips and pulled him down, trying to reach his ear with her tongue and hopefully make him do that again. The hard, deep lunge of his erection had felt indescribably good. Russel evaded her mouth, stilling the movement of his hips. Shifting his weight, he caught her hands and pinned them to the bed with his own, frustrating her with his lack of movement.

Pewter eyes pinned amber. "You will *not* do that again! Not this time," he growled, softening his tone only slightly. "This time, I *will* make you come before me."

A shiver raced through her limbs at his determined declaration. Hermione arched her head back, unable to resist the pull of such a sensual promise. It had felt so good, when he'd thrust so strongly, however involuntarily. "Harder..." she half-begged, half-ordered. "Please...harder!"

Russel stared down at her for a moment, searching her eyes. Shifting his weight, he released her hands. A tug on her left leg doubled it up, tightening her around him just

to the edge of stinging tightness. Instinct made Hermione lift her right leg, wrapping her calves up around his waist. When his mouth curved in a smile, she knew she'd done the right thing.

He pulled almost all the way out, waited a few breathless seconds as she looked up at him, anticipating his next move. That was when he thrust, burrowing deep. Her head thumped back against the pillows with a gasp. Hermione hadn't expected the pressure would be so different from his previous, shallow thrusts, but it was, and in a very good way.

He pulled out and lunged in again, then again, and shifted his hand with the fourth stroke. The heel of his palm planted itself over her bladder and pressed down. Hermione gasped, startled by the sensation. She knew she didn't actually have to go; she'd used the lavatory about twenty minutes before the end of their interrupted game. It was just that, with each stroke in this position, the pressure of his hand met the rubbing, upward thrust of his penis into the heart of her tilted pelvis. The combination was very strange, and yet very good.

Like her first few tastes of pumpkin juice, it took some getting used to, yet by the fifth or sixth lunging, rubbing stroke, her eyes fluttered shut. By the tenth or twelfth, her head had arched back as the tension-pressure built in a sweet, sweet ache. "More...more..."

He obliged her with a trio of fast, hard strokes. Hermione choked and clawed at the bedcovers, then at his shoulders as the damned tease returned to a slower pace. She scraped her nails down his ribs, clawing him in skin-reddening warning.

"More, damnit!"

He thrust hard, fast, and deep, pausing to grind himself into the apex of her thighs as she cried out. Hermione could feel the pressure in two places: his pubic bone, mashing into her clitoris with a circular pressure, and the tip of his penis in the back of her vagina, against her cervix. He did it again, withdrawing, then slamming home and grinding, pressing down with his palm, increasing the rising need roaring out of her throat from that compressed spot near her womb.

The spasms started on the third hard stroke. Her abdominal muscles clenched. Muscles tensed, then quivered with the fourth. And at the fifth, her whole body bucked and her voice choked, something that could've been his name, or maybe a plea for mercy. Not that he gave her any, and not that she wanted any. Releasing her abdomen, he braced his elbow on the bed and pounded into her, grunting feverishly with each stroke. The friction carried her along, pushing her higher into convulsive bliss, barely letting her notice the tingling sweep of magic through her flesh.

"Mmmh, good...mmmh, *good*," Russel growled in her ear, before sucking so strongly on the side of her throat, it hurt. Coming down from her high, still shuddering, Hermione grabbed his head and turned it to the side, breaking the seal of his lips. That put his ear within her reach. Lipping the lobe, she sucked on it. He swore hoarsely, an obscenity to match the convulsive movements of his body in hers. Each ragged thrust was now accompanied by a pulsing wet heat inside her vagina, timed to his chanting of her name. "Jane, Jane, Jane..."

Her hands stroked through his hair, tugging the strands as they slid to the back of his neck. He shifted quickly, grabbing her wrists and forcing them to the bed. He looked like he was going to snarl something, then his expression softened. Instead of whatever had upset him, he chose to cover her mouth with his, drinking the whimpering dregs of her climax-wrung cries. His thrusts gradually slowed, his weight growing heavy as his lean frame pressed her down into the coverlet.

Pinned under him, Hermione panted for breath. He was heavy, yes, but not crushingly so; she struggled for air because she was hot and sweaty, and had just exerted herself to a higher state of delirium than her self-administered orgasm normally reached, with his incredible help. Tugging her arms free, she wrapped them around his damp, sweaty ribs, listening to Russel struggling to slow his own breath. With his chest half-crushing her breasts, she could feel the rapid, heavy beat of his heart.

This was why she hadn't been ready to make love with Ron. There had only been a candle flame between her and him. Between her and Russel, it was more like a ruddy bonfire. And a ruddy bonfire, she decided, was a hell of a lot better than a mere, lone candle.

The pragmatic part of her mind pointed out that she wasn't in love with Russel, and that they'd just had spectacular sex, but when it got to the part of 'that was all', Hermione kicked that part of the thought out of her brain. It wasn't really 'just' sex. There was more to this liaison than physical need, after all. Emotionally, that remained to be seen, but magically, yes. Indeed, she could still feel a hovering, tingling sensation in her body, a sort of magical pressure against her skin, trembling in little pulses that traveled from all the farthest points on her body toward the third finger of her left hand. It didn't take much effort to guess why.

The rings were waiting for her, or them, to acknowledge what had just happened. She didn't know for absolute certain, of course, but Hermione had read up on these sorts of rings during her excursions to the library. There was usually some sort of acknowledgement or confirmation of the consummation...and they were currently a duly consummated couple. Firming her courage, Hermione murmured what she hoped was the right word.

"Husband..."

A grunt escaped him. Dragging in a deep breath, he replied dutifully, "Wife."

The magic flared visibly for a moment, radiating from their bodies, then soaked into their rings. Sighing, Russel pressed his lips to her shoulder. He nuzzled her neck, then kissed the edge of her jaw. When his lips brushed over hers in a ghost-like touch, Hermione lifted her head from the bedding, kissing him properly. He pulled back after a moment, brows quirked and a bemused, thoughtful look in his lean, tanned face. A shift of his hand, and he stroked a wayward curl back from her face.

"You are a puzzle," Russel murmured, studying her with that odd look in his eyes. It wasn't really puzzlement, and it wasn't calculation, more like sober wondering. His comment made her lift her own brows.

"I'm the puzzle? I don't even know what...what *our* last name is," she reminded him. "And unless you're finally going to tell me what it is, I'm going to continue to refer to myself as Miss Granger!"

"*Ms.* Granger," Russel corrected. "Capital 'M', lower-case 's', 'period'. You're a married woman now, and that's the variant you'll use, until I tell you what your new last name is."

"Which will be...?"

"Not for as long as possible. I have too many enemies among the common sods who know that I'm a Death Eater, never mind the Death Eaters themselves. If they find out you're my wife, they might try to harm you, to hurt me. I will not allow that to happen."

Hermione rolled her eyes in exasperation. His protective arrogance wasn't annoying, but his refusal to tell her was. "It's not like I'd be blaring it all over the place, Russel! I just want to know who I'm married to! What you look like for real."

"Remember Cupid and Psyche," he reminded her. His fingers cupped her jaw, gently holding her head still as she started to turn it away. "Close your eyes, Jane."

She gave him a wary look.

"Indulge me, and close your eyes."

Dutifully, she closed them, feeling silly. Embarrassed, too. She was lying naked on top of a hotel room coverlet, under an equally naked near-stranger whom had just made love to her, binding her to him in magical matrimony. His semi-deflated shaft was still lodged in her body, and he was heavy, since he wasn't bracing himself as considerately as earlier, even if he wasn't quite crushing her. But she did trust him--mostly--and obeyed his request.

"*This* is your husband, Psyche," Russel murmured, dipping his head so that his hair brushed her cheek and his Canadian-accented words tickled the curve of her ear in

warm little puffs of breath. "The invisible but still quite tangible Cupid. You *do* know me. You know my taste," he reminded her, brushing his mouth against hers, "and you know my scent. You know the sound of my heart, and the feel of my body. How I look is immaterial." His fingers caught and laced with hers, dragging her palm to his chest as she breathed in the smell of sweat and sex, male and female, and remembered the taste of him in her mouth. She could feel the thumping of his heart, and the baritone rumble of his words caressed her auditory nerves. "Whenever you wonder, just close your eyes, trust in me...and I will try my best to not abuse that trust."

"If...if circumstances don't interfere," Hermione offered quietly, knowing that his situation would probably force him to lie to her at some point. If he hadn't done so already. Only their communications through the scale-patterned rings provoked the truth and its acceptable variations.

A soft breath escaped him, not quite a laugh. "Hmm. Yes."

She opened her eyes to find him smiling down at her. The corners of his eyes had crinkled slightly, making her guess he might be a little older than his early thirties, though surely not by much. That, or it could've been a result of his all-over tan, if it was a tan and not a genetic inheritance. A glance down showed his sun-kissed chest a definite contrast to her pale breasts. Next to him, she looked positively milk-complected. And not whole milk either, but one-percent at best.

"...Am I too heavy for you?" he asked.

"Heavy? Yes," Hermione began. He started to lever himself off of her and she reached up, missing his weight. "--Too heavy? No."

Smiling, he eased back down...and fell out of her. The slick, squeezing sensation of her body pushing him out, all because she'd tightened her abdominal muscles to pull him back down, sent a flush of embarrassed colour rushing up through Hermione's cheeks. That only made Russel's smile broaden. Kissing the tip of her nose, he murmured, "You're rather enchanting when you blush. I should make you do it more often."

Hermione thought quickly. "But, if you do that too frequently, eventually I'll stop blushing. Then where would you be?"

A chuckle escaped him. He was still laughing when he nuzzled her mouth with his parted lips. Laughter suited him, she decided; it definitely took off the years that the tiny crow's feet at the corners of his eyes tried to add to his face. Fascinated, Hermione parted her own lips, and tasted the velvety sound of his voice. His laughter died at the touch of her tongue. It was bold of her to invade his mouth, but from the sigh that escaped him, and the warm enthusiasm with which he returned the kiss, she was glad he didn't mind.

Russel broke the kiss a minute or two later with another sigh, this time a regretful-sounding one. A last nip of his mouth, and he slid off of her, resting on his side. "...You need a soak, and we both need a shower."

"A soak?" Hermione asked, curious.

"Once I end this Shared Pain spell between us, you will need a soak, trust me," he muttered. Pushing up onto his elbow, he smiled slightly as he looked down at her. "I'll take it you've never bathed with a man, before?"

Hermione swallowed, both unnerved and intrigued by the thought. "Of course not! Remember that whole fierce-dragon-guardian-thing?"

He grinned. "I wish I'd seen it. Come," he stated, coaxing her upright with a tug on her hand. "That bathtub has spa-jets in it, and I've always wanted to try one of those. I think it's big enough for both of us. I'm afraid I forgot to stock any bubble-bath, but we can improvise with shampoo."

"Erm...I really should be getting back, soon," Hermione reminded him as she climbed off the bed with him. "Harry might realize why I'm gone, since he recognized you, but they'll be missing me."

The look he gave her was a sober one. "Hermione...you aren't leaving here for the next three days."

She froze. "I'm...what? You can't keep me here!"

He caught her hand again as she pulled it from his grip. "*Think* about it! I told the Dark Lord I would *seduce* you, to get into your good graces firmly enough that I could spy upon you and the others! The only way I can do that is if I spend a reasonably long enough time to have thoroughly seduced you into being willing to consummate this marriage and thus become my wife! A seduction, I remind you," he half-growled, tugging her naked body up against his own, "that includes ensuring you'd be so enamoured of me afterwards that you'd still be willing to meet with me, rather than burying yourself behind a dozen guards and the Secret-Kept location of the Order's Headquarters....so you and I are going to have a *honeymoon*, in this room. We have food, games, books, the telly if we absolutely must rot our minds, and each other. We'll use the time to snog, and other things, and to get to know each other."

That last comment made her snort. "When I'm not allowed to know what you look like, or what your real name is?"

He scooped her off her feet, startling her. "Close your eyes, Psyche. You can open them when I've drawn a bubble-bath. And I would think you would know it is a man's personality that stands the test of time, not the aging of his face."

Hermione didn't close her eyes. She wanted to enjoy the sight of the semi-sybaritic--by Muggle standards--bathroom. Once she'd seen the girls' prefect lavatory at Hogwarts, with its colonnades, swimming-sized tub, and all those magnificent taps, the Muggle version of luxury was rather feeble by comparison. But not even the prefects' bath had spa jets underwater, even if it was a smallish corner-shaped tub. The bathroom had a showering stall large enough for two and a shelf-seat, a toilet, a double-sink, and that corner-tub, also had a large mirror along one wall of the tub. It was definitely not the standard toilet-sink-shower/tub.

It did make her wonder, though. "Russel," she stated as he set her down on the broad, shelf-like rim of the tub and started fiddling with the tap controls, "you said you're now unemployed. How are you paying for such a grand suite?" A horrid thought crossed her mind. "You're not letting...*him*...pay for it, are you?"

"No, he's not paying for it. I have an arrangement with the owner of the hotel."

"Is he a Muggle, or a wizard?"

"Muggle. You needn't worry over such trifling details," he added, reaching for one of the complimentary bottles of shampoo as the tub started to fill.

Hermione realized there were several such bottles racked together on the counter between the sinks. They made her think of how mussed her hair was, and how sticky with sweat her skin felt. Add in the facts that both of them were still naked, she was far too wet to be anything but self-conscious about her loins, and just looking at him made her nipples feel tight with need--he had a great body--and she could feel another blush starting to form.

Mastering it with a firm self-admonition to stop feeling so self-conscious, she watched him pour half of the tiny bottle's contents into the tub. The steam from the water was beginning to mist the mirror, and she could feel her hair beginning to frizz. Glancing at herself, Hermione noticed a clumped streak of hair just above her forehead. That, she realized with a blush she couldn't control, was from his semen.

"You're blushing again. You don't look happy," Russel observed. "What's wrong?"

She ducked her head for a moment, then admonished herself silently to be braver. "Erm...I'm still a little uncomfortable with this whole naked-thing. And the...the semen in my hair, and the way it's frizzing in the steam, and I can't stop looking at your...uh...genitals. And you have a really nice arse," she forced herself to add. He chuckled and she found herself slightly less embarrassed that he didn't take offence. "I'm trying to cope and adjust, really. It's just...it's taking a bit of effort to be properly blasé about all of this."

"You blush charmingly. But you're going to have to learn to stop doing that, and learn how to get past such feelings. You're still very young," he admitted, eyeing her as she sat on the edge of the tub with her knees pressed together and her arms folded protectively across her breasts. "So I suppose I should tell you to not be too hard upon yourself. And yet I'll admit you're very mature for your age. Seventeen, right?"

"Eighteen. My birthday was a month ago." Hermione almost offered the information that, physically, she was probably a little bit older than that, since she had used a Time-Turner in her third year to take two and three classes at the same times, trying to absorb all the information she could, all at once. But very few people knew about that; she'd sworn not to talk about it, and he frankly didn't need to know. *Chalk one up for the maturity of knowing when to keep my mouth shut* she thought, glancing at the tub. The water was growing deep, the bubbles frothing high. Twisting on the rim, she slipped her feet into the water, enjoying the shock of heat. It was the right temperature, almost too hot to bear.

"Hold a moment," Russel warned her. He ducked back into the other room, coming back quickly with both their wands in his hands. Setting hers on the rim of the tub near the mirrored wall, he flicked his wand between them. "*Finite Incantatem*."

Magic sparkled over both of them, draining quickly away. Suddenly, Hermione felt very...chafed. Sore and tender. Her breath hitched, her teeth catching her lower lip. She released it with a grimace. "That's very uncomfortable."

"It would've been far worse, had you experienced it first-hand," Russel stated. "Let it never be said I am a completely inconsiderate man. Into the tub with you," he ordered her, holding out his hands to help guide her into the hot water. "You'll feel better after a soak."

"I'll feel better after a Healing Charm, I think," she muttered, sinking waist-deep into the bubbles as she reached for her wand.

Russel caught her hand, stopping Hermione. "I'm afraid you cannot do that."

"Why not?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Because if you heal the torn damage, you're healing your hymen...and in over half the cases of a Healing Charm, the hymen was repaired. Which means you'd experience the breaching of it a second time--and I am not considerate enough to offer the Shared Pain Charm again, if that becomes the case." Stepping into the tub, Russel gave her a pointed, sardonic look. Hermione frowned softly. He looked vaguely familiar when he did that. The fleeting sensation of *deja vu* faded as he smoothed his expression into a wry smile, sinking into the tub across from her. Their knees and calves bumped, one of his feet nudging the underside of her rump as he tried to stretch out his legs. The smile he flashed her as she squeaked was a lascivious one. "Oh, I'm sorry...did I tickle you?"

"Er, no," Hermione half-lied.

"Pity. I shall just have to try harder, I suppose."

--"Don't you dare!" she warned him as his foot wiggled again, and he laughed at her quick defensiveness. She splashed him with some of the bubbles, and he mock-glared and splashed her back. Aware of her exposed breasts--Russel kept glancing at them--Hermione tried sinking lower in the water, which was helping ease the soreness in her groin. But that put her toes under his own thighs.

Reaching down under the water, he caught one of her feet. She squeaked and tried to free it, but he drew it into his lap, his long, deft finger massaging the sole. Hermione ceased resisting: *melting* was the proper response to such hedonistic pleasure.

She melted until she'd sagged far enough against the sloped back to rest her head on the rim and lift both of her legs so that her feet were up near his sternum, her knees lifted out of the water in order to give herself adequate room. A soft, sensual moan escaped her when he stroked the top of her left foot, encouraging it to rest against his chest while his hands stroked and kneaded her right foot; it escaped a second time as she felt his thin, wiry pectoral muscle twitching and bunching as he worked.

Water swirled, bubbles shifted, and Hermione suddenly found herself with a foot prodding one of her breasts. "Tit for tat, Jane dear. Put those heavenly hands of yours to good use."

Eyes closed to mere slits, she shifted her hands out of the hot water, wrapping them around his narrow, long foot. An unbidden smirk curved her mouth. *Nice to know the length of his hands, nose, and feet correspond to what I saw of his...penis, prick, tallywacker, todger, schlong? God, what does a mature woman call the ruddy thing? Prick, I suppose... Penis just sounds too clinical...oh, god...I can feel that all the way up to my clit!*

Never had she realized how ruddy sensual, and sexual, a foot-rub could become. Closing her eyes, her own hands working on his foot, trying to copy his every move, Hermione bravely made up her mind to find some physically achievable position where he could thrust into her and massage her feet at the same bloody time... Shivers rippled through her as the exquisite pleasure built, turning into shudders. Unable to help herself, she tipped her head back further, moaning loudly from the sensuality of it. He drew out a second moan, and a third that was even louder...and stopped. Just stopped.

"Bastard," she whispered, unable to stop herself. She'd been so close to a non-genital orgasm, she was sure of it!

"Up." The sharp-voiced command sounded shiveringly, disturbing and vaguely familiar, like a nightmare she couldn't quite remember. Eyes snapping open, she lifted her head, looking at him. His face twisted into a coaxing, nervous look. "Sorry, didn't mean to snap like that. I'm just...overwrought. Could you please stand, Jane?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Do I have to?"

"Yes. I don't want to break my back trying to lift you." Standing himself, he picked up both of their wands, and when she stood, swept her hair up onto her head and fixed both shafts through the mass, like overgrown hairpins. Then he swept her up into his arms and stepped very carefully out of the tub, ignoring the dripping of water and the slow slide of bubbles. "Grab a pair of towels," Russel ordered her, pausing near the rack fastened to the wall by the tub.

She complied, holding them as he carried her through to the bedroom. Setting her on her feet by the table, he quickly shoved the game to the far end, flipped out the towels onto the surface, one over the other, then lifted her onto them, seating her at the edge of the table. Stooping, he caught her ankles, lifting them high. That forced her to lie back abruptly. Startled, Hermione braced herself on her elbows, eyeing him quizzically. It took her a few moments to realize he was hard again. Hard, and grasping himself, aiming for her nether-lips.

Her inner muscles clenched at the thought. Moisture seeped from her depths, distinctly different from the sudsy water drying on her skin. Watching his efforts with a shuttered, intense look, Russel rubbed the tip of his penis against her folds, slicking it with her own juices as he teased her clitoris, then centered himself and pushed in about an inch. The stretching sensation stung, but no more so than it had earlier. Releasing himself, he grabbed her left ankle again, lifting her foot to his shoulder so that it rested there. Catching the right one, he lifted it into a relatively comfortable position, and began massaging the heel, working his way slowly up the length of her foot in little kneading touches.

Hermione's head thudded onto the towel-padded table. Her elbows had given out, along with her resistance. It didn't take long for her moans to resume. When they did, he gently rocked himself deeper into her body. Her wordless groans became verbose as soon as he bottomed out in her depths, and added that extra little grinding bit that pressed against her desire-swollen clitoris. The twisting, rolling, stroking pleasure of his fingers manipulating her foot from heel to toes only added to the surreal sensuality enveloping her. "Oh, god... Oh, god! *Oh god!*"

Abruptly aware of how loud she was getting, Hermione bit her lower lip, struggling to confine her moans to harsh, deep, nasal-flaring breaths. The chuckling sound of Russel's sensual voice only added to her ecstasy. "Yell as loudly as you like, my dear wife. I remembered to ward this place against any possible noise, as well as detection and attack."

Resting her right ankle on his shoulder, her whole leg quivering with aching, unfulfilled pleasure, Russel pulled down her left foot and renewed his attack on that bit of neglected flesh. As he did so, he withdrew, thrusting back inside a moment later. The table creaked. Her lip escaped her teeth with a desire-wrung cry as he did it again, loud and unabashed. Suffering the delirious, sweet torture as he surged into her body and kneaded her flesh, Hermione let herself crumble into an ongoing orgasm, surrendering to absolute pleasure.

And then the delicious, naked bastard lifted her foot a little higher, and suckled her toes...

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XI.

Hermione woke abruptly, warm and sweaty from the jumbled images and sensations of the most erotic dream she'd ever had. Her body ached with unfulfilled need, and for a moment, she thought that everything *had* been a dream, some parts just far more lucid than others. But her eyes fastened on the metal disc of a pop-down fire-sprinkler, and dark-patterned curtains hanging from ceiling to floor in a muted red, hiding the patio door, and her ears pricked at the soft sounds of breathing nearby. Cautiously turning her head, she found herself staring at the back of Russel's head.

He lay on his side, angled away from her, and the drape of the bedsheets showed a small strip of his spine and shoulder-blade below the tangled mess of his light brown hair. It wasn't a dream. They'd really made love, gotten magically married by it, and were now husband and wife. That was a thought almost enough to kill her ardor. But then he rolled onto his back with a sigh, lashes resting against his cheeks, and he just looked so...*manly*, that she couldn't regret too much of it, though her inability to come up with a better word made her want to snort.

Refraining, Hermione remembered how those thin lips had suckled her toes until she'd screamed herself hoarse with her unsuspected foot-fetish. How he'd plundered her body until she was sore, then had cleaned them both with a flick of his wand, pulled from her hair. She'd been carried to this bed, limp and exhausted, and he'd pulled her close and held her in the curve of his arm as she'd drifted off to sleep. Not exactly cuddling her, but holding her, yes.

Now she wanted him again. It wasn't fair; he was resting like a tanned...well, not a tanned angel; the man was more like a tanned incubus-in-training. She'd never quite believed those smutty books when they'd all but proclaimed the hero a sex-god. The fact that someone actually was that good in the sack astounded and aroused her.

Staring at her husband, Hermione faced facts. She might love Ron more, but even if she were released from this marriage, she knew she wouldn't go back to him. There just wasn't enough desire between the two of them. Now that she knew what passion really was, she just couldn't give it up that easily. Maybe that made her shallow, but she could at least be honest with herself about it.

And honesty demanded she admit she wanted Russel now. Wanted to feel the warmth of his skin, the flex of his muscles, the weight of his flesh...the thrust of his body. A glance down his body showed a lump under the covers. It could've been a wrinkle in the bedding, but Hermione flushed with the hope it was a morning erection. Needing to look but not want to wake him just yet, she shifted her hand stealthily towards the edge of the covers slanting across his chest.

His hand snapped up, catching her forearm in a bruising grip. Hermione sucked in a pained breath, glancing at his face. Those short, dark lashes had slitted open just far enough to catch a gleam of his grey eyes. His grip gentled just enough so that it didn't hurt, but his fingers remained locked around her wrist like a living manacle. "...What were you doing?"

Mind blank in shock at how quickly he'd moved, Hermione gave him the truth, unable to think of anything less embarrassing. "Um...I wanted...to see if you...you know...had a...a morning--" she swallowed, "--stiffy."

His eyes squeezed shut, a pained look quirking his brows. "A morning...stiffy."

"Well...yes."

"Dare I ask why?"

Flustered, too embarrassed to admit she'd been having unbearably hot dreams about being with him, Hermione tried to tug her hand free. He held on for a moment, then released her. And shocked her by whipping back the covers from both of them with a sweep of his arm, twisting onto his side so that his erection jutted unmistakably at her hip.

"Is this proof enough, wife?" Russel growled, his left hand shifting to cup one of her breasts. His forefinger and thumb lightly pinched her nipple, then spread out as he slid his hand down her ribs, along her stomach, and over the crisp curls of her mound. A questing finger slipped down between her nether-lips. His hand stilled, his eyes widening in disbelief. Grey eyes piercing brown, he studied her, and moved his finger. Delving deeper. His lips parted, his tongue came out to lick them, and he dragged in a ragged breath. "Up. On your hands and knees. Now."

His tone was gentle, but his words were commanding. Hermione twisted over onto her stomach, pushing up onto all fours as her lover shifted quickly to his knees. Moving behind her, Russel gripped her hips for a moment, then removed one hand with a sliding caress. She found out why, as she felt him rubbing the tip of his penis against her drenched folds. In a rush of renewing desire, the disjointed, lusty images from her dreams returned to her. When he finally pushed into her, she was so wet, her body offered no resistance other than its natural tightness.

Again, it stung to have his thickness stretching her flesh. But it felt so good, she couldn't help the groan that escaped as he rubbed against that spot she'd thought he could only reach with the heel of his hand. Russel pushed in that last little bit, seating himself so fully, she could feel him pressing against her back wall, deep inside. That made her bite her lip and moan.

"...Jane?" he asked, concerned.

Caught up in the eroticism of the moment, Hermione forgot delicacy, let alone caution. "Fuck me! Oh, god, fuck me!"

Breath hissed out of him, at that. Fingers tightening on her hips, he rocked back and plunged in, hard. That rubbed him against that one spot on the way in, and knocked him against the limit of her vaginal depths. She groaned hoarsely. Both sensations were weird, but undeniably stimulating--one, the urge to pee; the other, a pain that was a

pleasure. Bracing herself, Hermione rocked back against him as he went still, probably thinking that he was hurting her. But he wasn't, unless it was in the 'hurts so *good*' category.

"Don't stop!" she gasped, wriggling in his grip.

Once again his hands clenched, then he seemed to make up his mind that she really wanted this. Not only that she wanted it, but that she wanted it hard. Thrusting into her, he let his thighs slap against her buttocks, grunting with each stroke. The sounds and sensations made Hermione feverish. She clutched at the bedding, grabbing a pillow and balling it under her chest for added support. Then clutched at the sheets, half burying her mouth in them to muffle her grunts and groans.

He was turning her into an animal, a cat in heat, interested only in rutting and quenching the fire within her blood. Unfortunately, he didn't last long enough. Almost, almost he made it, rousing her to the edge of a sharp peak--and stiffened, stabbing into her with a hoarse cry of, "Jane!-- *Jane!* Oh, god, *yesssss!*"

Frustrated, she bit the pillow, muffling her sobbing cry of incompleteness. The fluttering, tickling sensation only added to her misery as he slowed, then stopped, breathing heavily. A whimper escaped her. One of his hands caressed her spine, stroked her flanks, and she whimpered again, squirming her hips in the attempt to rock back into him. For a moment, Russel was still, then he bent over her, hooking his arms under her breasts. Lifting her upright on her knees, he eased her back over him, letting her sink a little more onto his slowly softening shaft.

Right hand lifting, he brushed her hair back from her shoulder enough that he could kiss the muscles there, then glided his fingers down over her breast, pausing to twist and pluck at her nipple. Hermione whimpered again, her head dropping back onto his shoulder. That hand teased its way down to her navel, circling the dimple of flesh. Two fingers quested down through her nether-lips, slotting to either side of her sensitive clitoris. Rubbing both it and the base of his prick, he teased her until she was whimpering with each breath, thrusting subtly until he had to stop, too replete to re-harden so soon.

Withdrawing, he ignored her high-pitched, wordless, frustrated whinge, easing her onto the bed on her side, then onto her back. Ignoring her clutching hands, he slipped down between her wide-parted thighs, licked her juices from his fingers, then gently inserted them into her body. As Russel probed upward, he lowered his head to her mound, and started licking. And pressing. And sucking. And rubbing. And...and she couldn't think anymore; the pleasure mounted right along with the cries of her voice, from quiet, needy whimpering to loud, demanding cries.

It was a slow, steady rise. A tiny corner of Hermione's brain observed dryly that, if this was the way Death Eaters tortured female prisoners into converting, it was a very effective method. She was quite ready to do anything he wanted, sink to any sexual depravity, if he'd only finish the bloody thing! And then, at the highest point of her sexual ache, when she thought she'd go mad, he stopped, scrambling up the length of her body. She floated in a sort of frustrated free-fall for a second or two, then he grabbed her by the knees, threw her calves over his back, and thrust into her.

That set her off. Screaming from the force of her long-delayed release, Hermione clawed at his back, bucking uncontrollably. Her whole body convulsed, nearly dislodging him with the forceful spasms. Stars blinded her vision, and blackness crowded in after them. But her convulsions eased with the draining of all that built-up pressure, until they were shudders, then shivers, then limp-muscled twitches as he finished pumping with another grunt of her name and a trembling slump of his body over hers for a hot sweaty moment. Shifting to the bed at her side, he groaned into her shoulder, one arm and one leg still draped over her curves.

After that, nothing broke the silence in the room but the faint rumbling of the heater unit in the corner of the room, and the huffing of their unsteady breathing. Until her stomach rumbled. Loudly. She hadn't eaten or drunk anything other than water since her lunch yesterday, and it was probably well after breakfast by now. Unfortunately, Hermione couldn't bestir enough energy to turn her head to look at the digital clock, let alone rise and find something in the kitchenette area. Letting her eyelids shut, she drifted off, not caring at that moment if she starved.

An unknown time later, the scent and sounds of something frying deliciously woke her from her lethargic, repleted slumber. Her stomach rumbled again, louder, and her mouth tasted fuzzy, in need of a good scrubbing. But she had enough energy to sit up--albeit with a barely suppressed grunt of effort and a near-groan of sexually strained muscles--and peer over at the kitchenette area. Part of it was obscured by the corner of the bathroom wall, but she could see Russel moving about the kitchen. He flipped what looked like pancakes with a graceful flick of the wrist lifting the pan, used a spatula in another pan to stir what smelled like scrambled eggs with cheese and other things, and went back to what looked like hand-mashing orange halves to extract their juice, twisting his wrist with efficient grace.

And he did so, the gorgeous bastard, while wearing nothing more than that kilt of his. A shirtless, lean, bare-footed, perfectly tanned Russel Fawkeson--or whatever their last name might be--was a sight guaranteed to wake up any red-blooded woman, heterosexual or not. She was most assuredly heterosexual, enthusiastically so after the last twenty-four hours...and her blood definitely ran red in her arteries. In fact, it positively raced, pumped by her fast-beating heart.

She made a noise, a grunting sound, and he spun, seeking her position on the bed with a smile. She'd clutched the sheet to her breasts instinctively, a sheet he must've pulled over her body to protect her modesty while she slept. Either that, or he'd pulled it into place to protect himself from a resurgence of overactive libido between the two of them.

"Good morning," he offered, accompanying it with the sort of smile a man might give a woman the morning after he'd pleased her very well.

Hermione managed a mumbled reply, still not fully awake. Her stomach rumbled again, embarrassing her. He took it as part of her reply, thankfully.

"I've made scrambled eggs, pancakes, hashed potatoes, and opened a tin of fruit-cup. Do you like orange juice?"

"Love it," she managed to mumble somewhat coherently. Her bladder had woken up at last, and though it wasn't rumbling or anything, its internal complaints were almost as loud as her stomach. Stiff and sore as she was, she needed to use the lavatory. She didn't have anything to wear, however, not without donning yesterday's clothes. Looking around, she spotted her things neatly stacked on a nearby chair. They'd been tossed on the floor, last time she could remember.

Russel followed her gaze. "I spell-washed our clothes. Unfortunately, kidnapping you for three days of wild, mind-altering passion with only a few hours' notice doesn't exactly leave one time to pack properly. But I did Transfigure you a bathrobe, if you like."

Following the direction of his gesture, she found a white dressing robe draped over the bedding and the bench-seat at the foot of the bed. Snagging it, she slipped out of the bed and shrugged into the terrycloth robe. It was short, just reaching the tops of her knees. On his longer frame, it would've hit mid-thigh, and been shorter than that kilt of his. Of course, it would've also covered up his chest...

He distracted her with that chest, padding over to her, muscles flexing subtly. They flexed even more when he slipped one arm around her waist, pulling her snugly against him. The other arm lifted, fingers spearing through her tousled hair to toy with some of her curls. Hermione clutched at his biceps, enjoying the feel of his warm, naked skin under her hands. Smiling lazily, he nuzzled his lips against hers, then claimed them in an open kiss. She returned it with equal enthusiasm, lifting her hands to his hair to keep him from ending the kiss too soon. But it did have to end, and she still had to visit the bathroom. He released her with a last, chaste, close-mouthed kiss and a not-so-chaste squeeze of one buttock, before returning to the kitchenette area.

Feeling rather warm and liquid-y, Hermione snagged her clothing and sequestered herself in the bathroom. The sight of a large, reddish hickey on the side of her neck made her clamp her hand over it protectively, reflexively. Blushing, she spent a little bit of time charming and combing the snarls out of her curls after using the facilities, though she did more combing than charming, mindful of his warning yesterday about not using magic excessively. A bit of artful arranging of her curls, and they mostly covered the mark on her skin. Putting on her clothes, she padded back out in her socks, leaving off her shoes for the time being. Russel, she noted, hadn't donned his shirt. Instead, he was still setting the table in nothing but his kilt. Hermione felt oddly overdressed, seeing him still mostly naked.

Apparently he thought so, too, for after setting the second plate down, he came over to her with a mock-frown and a wagging finger. "You are overdressed, wife. This is our honeymoon breakfast, and informal wear is a *must*." His fingers began unbuttoning her blouse, brushing away her own hands. "You may retain your underthings...for the time being...but you cannot wear your shirt or pants."

"It's not overly warm in here, Russel," Hermione pointed out pragmatically. It was mid-October, after all.

"You can wear the bathrobe," he conceded, sliding her blouse from her shoulders. He kissed from the side of her throat to partway down her upper arm, tickling her with the soft fall of his hair. Nibbling his way back up again, he did something with her shirt, then started unsnapping the waistband of her jeans. "And since I'm only wearing one article of clothing, you should only be wearing one...so your underthings have to go, too."

He slid his hands around her hips and down over her buttocks as he said this, fingers delving under the waistband of her knickers. His mouth captured hers, quelling any protest she might've made. Not that she felt much like protesting, sliding her hands up the naked length of that naturally bronzed torso. No, this wasn't anything like her affection for Ron. Affection, but not passion. Realizing she needed both in her life lifted some of the burden of guilt from her shoulders, permitting her to wrap his chest-length hair in her fingers, tugging his head back so that she could kiss her way down his throat. Some of the guilt remained; she was beginning to like Russel, and that meant feeling affection for him, but she'd only just met him a short while ago, even counting from the moment she'd received his letter back in June.

As Hermione suckled on his throat, wanting to leave a mark on his tanned skin, she thought about her situation; it wasn't easy, concentrating through the wonderful kneading of those talented hands on her spine, but she was used to multi-tasking. In one of the smutty romance novels she'd been reading this summer, researching lovemaking, she'd read a puzzling line of advice given to the heroine: *Some people fall in love and get married; others get married and fall in love.*

It had seemed silly to her, at the time. One should fall in love, and then get married. That was the logical progression of things. Wasn't it? But here she was, married but not yet in love. And yet, she felt like she was falling...just like the denim of her jeans to the floor. And the cotton of her knickers...and her bra. She'd moved back to kissing his mouth at some point, or maybe he'd coaxed her; she wasn't really sure. Their embrace was all gliding hands, clutching fingers, nipping mouths and tented wool.

Pulling back from her, he drew his wand from the waistband of his kilt, flicking it silently. The terrycloth robe came winging out of the bathroom, and as he exchanged soft little kisses with her every few seconds, Russel helped her into the dressing gown. A tug of the sash, an adjustment of the lapels, and he had it arranged to his satisfaction, with a deep vee of exposed cleavage, practically to her navel. She moved to tug it together, and he pulled it back. Frowning softly, Hermione started to tug it closed again. Catching her hands, he kissed her knuckles, and urged her to take a seat at the table.

"Eat, wife, before it gets cold."

Actually, it wasn't losing heat; he'd wrapped each plate in a subtle warming charm. Picking up a slice of buttered toast, Hermione eyed it warily. Russel, seating himself at an angle to her, arched a brow in silent enquiry.

"It's...warm."

"Of course it is. Toast is supposed to be warm. That's how you get the butter to melt."

She gave him a bemused look. "You haven't lived in England very long, have you? Toast is supposed to be cold."

"Longer than you'd think," he corrected her. "I told you I was a Slytherin. And toast is supposed to be hot."

"Have you ever actually been to London, Ontario?" Hermione asked, curious. "And it's supposed to be cold."

"Hot, and yes, I have visited Canada in the past. How do you think I got the accent down?"

"I was thinking by your translation pendant. Cold."

"Hot!"

It was an absurd argument, and she knew it was absurd, but Hermione felt like testing the waters of his temperament over something trivial. "Cold!"

"Hot!" A gesture with his fork at her food and Russel argued, "--And if you don't hurry up and eat, the rest of it will be cold, too!"

Smiling, she set the triangle back down on the edge of her plate. "I'll just wait 'til my toast gets cold, and eat the rest while it's hot."

"You do that," he muttered, before taking a bite of his pancakes, pre-slathered in syrup. "Though you're missing out on a real treat."

The eggs, she discovered, were not only fluffy and cooked to perfection, but lightly seasoned with garlic, pepper, and cheese. The pancakes had been soaked with real maple syrup, and the hashed potatoes were also flavoured with garlic. The fruit cup was a fruit cup, but the orange juice was fresh and perfect for thirst-quenching. It was almost orgasmic, not having to drink pumpkin juice for breakfast.

By the time she got to the toast, she discovered it was still warm, thanks to the charm on her plate. Shooting him a suspicious look and seeing him focused on savouring the last of his potato hash, not secretly waiting to gloat, she nibbled on the toast. And discovered the flavour was more intense than usual. *Drat him! It did taste good, this way.* She started to take a second bite, muttering under her breath, "Damned Yankee..."

"Canuck, Jane. A Yankee's an American."

Swallowing her food, she stuck out her tongue, and took a huge third bite. That made him laugh and salute her with his orange juice. They finished breakfast at roughly the same time, both sitting back with sated sighs. Hermione eyed the dishes with a wince. "I suppose, since you cooked, I have to scrub up?"

His grin was the definition of smugly unrepentant. And damnably sexy, seen over the rim of his glass. "Why do you think I cooked, eh?"

"Can I use magic? Or would that be too much for the defences on this place?"

"Might be better to not risk it. But I'll wipe and put away, if you'll wash and rinse," he offered chivalrously.

"Thank you." She eyed the tableware again, then contemplated her stuffed belly. "...Do I have to move immediately?"

He smiled. "No. But I'll take it as a compliment to the chef."

"It was delicious, yes," she agreed, adding a belated, "Thank you."

"Well, it was either feed your starving belly, or rodger you to death, and since I do like you, I thought it'd be prudent to make sure you lived."

"You had no trouble cooking the Muggle way?" she asked. "You said you were half-blood, if I remember right."

"Yes. My Muggle parent insisted I learn how to do everything the Muggle way, and my magical parent insisted I learn how to do everything the magical way. It was unpleasant at times, being caught in a tug-of-war between the two worlds," Russel muttered, staring across the room at the unopened cabinet hiding the telly. "I chose the Wizarding world as soon as I could. I saw no point in doing things the Muggle way for the longest time--I was a fool, for rejecting my heritage. There's value in the Muggle ways."

Hermione knew that, being fully Muggle-born, but she arched her brow, encouraging him silently to continue.

"Karkaroff--I think you met him at the Triwizard Tournament?" he reminded her. "He managed to hide for quite some time, by turning completely Muggle and not using his magic, beyond the initial amount used to disappear and construct an identity and some funds. They found him, of course, after he was forced to use his magic at one point. But he was Pureblood, and couldn't cope with Muggle life. He just didn't have the tools."

"Viktor--Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker," Hermione added as he gave her an enquiring look, "--once told me that they didn't teach Muggle Studies at Durmstrang past the fifth year level. No Advanced classes in it."

"Yes, I've heard they consider it a poor-taste joke, for an academic subject. Most Purebloods and wizarding-world-raised half-bloods cling stubbornly to the magical world. Which is a good thing, as far as the war is concerned; that means a large portion of the Dark Lord's followers are ignorant of many aspects of Muggle life, and Muggle ingenuity. They reject the Muggle realm as soon as they're adults, and don't keep abreast of new developments."

"If I said 'internet' to one of them, they likely wouldn't know what I meant," Russel stated, flicking his fingers expressively. He really had graceful hands. "But though that's an advantage for our side in some ways, there are some half-bloods who do actually know what the Muggle realm is like, and who can ape its culture sufficiently well enough to blend in and survive for quite some time unnoticed...or who can use their knowledge of the Muggle world to wreak havoc that appears to be Muggle in nature, allowing them to commit atrocities that even the wizarding world would flinch from, upon hearing what happened."

The downward turn of the conversation didn't sit too well with her full belly. Hermione sighed and shook her head. "As fascinating as this is, hearing the war from a more wizarding perspective--"

He snorted and interjected, "--That's a polite way to put it."

"Would you have preferred 'from a more asinine perspective'?" she quipped back. "As I was saying, as fascinating as this is, it's a bit heavy for right after a really good meal."

"What should we discuss, then? Nothing that would take too long, I trust," he warned her lightly. "You shouldn't let the breakfast dishes sit too long with bits of egg upon them; if it dries, it will be a pain in the kilt to scrub clean."

The game from last night had been put away, when he'd tidied the table for breakfast. Her gaze fell on the stacks of boxes and books. The paperback at the very top caught and held her attention. "...Why don't we read something together? You've a lovely voice, you know."

"The Hobbit, then?"

Reaching for the stack of books, she snagged the paperback. "I was thinking this one, rather. *Captain of My Heart*" she read off the cover, and flipped it over, reciting the words of the back-cover blurb. "*Captain Jeremy Raider, scion of a powerful free-merchanter clan, wasn't expecting trouble when he picked up a cargo on Tarseti V..*"

"Your own voice is quite pleasant. But you'll only get one chapter out of me," Russel warned her, tugging the book out of her grip. "Then you'll have to do the dishes, since I cooked. And if I remember right, the odd-numbered chapters are from the good captain's point-of-view; the even ones are from...ah, yes, *'the mysterious, alluring Vivian Onidine, secret agent of the deadly Secarius...'*" he quoted, reading the blurb even as he rose from his seat. "So it's only fair that you read the even-chapters, if I read the odd, eh?"

"I suppose that's fair," Hermione agreed, accepting the hand he held out to her. Together, they moved to the love-seat, where Russel stretched out one leg on the cushions and pulled her down into his body, turning her so that she could put both of her legs up and lean back against his chest. It wasn't every day that a man was willing to read a romance novel, after all. Sighing, Hermione settled back against her living chair to listen to him begin the science-fiction romance. It was rather enjoyable, actually, as Russel spoke in a soft but compelling voice, holding the book in front of both of them and turning the pages with gliding flicks of his long, tanned fingers...

...

"...*Oh God, yessss!*" Sweating, panting heavily, Hermione slumped forward as Russel finished shuddering up into her. "Ohhh, yesss... Oh god, Russel...oh god, yessss..."

She was going to have bruises on her hips, but it was worth it. His hands relaxed their grip, then stroked up to her ribs and back, caressing her as he, too, struggled for air. Since her weight was mostly on her elbows and knees, Hermione didn't think she was suffocating him, but she couldn't be sure. Shifting to move off of him, she found him pulling her back down. "No...stay," he murmured. "For a moment more."

Resting her cheek on his collarbone, Hermione obeyed. She didn't want to move, but both of them knew this was the afternoon of day three of her 'kidnapping'. She would have to go back soon. Exhaling, she nuzzled his throat a little. "When exactly do I have to go back?"

A twist of his dark blond head allowed him to peer at the glowing numerals on the alarm clock. "Anytime... In an hour or two. No rush, but no real need to delay, either."

Inhaling to suggest a time closer to evening than mid-afternoon, Hermione caught a whiff of the two of them. Sweat and musk, male and female, the distinctive odors of passion and intercourse coated them. Her mind ticked over the evidence. *If I go back smelling--reeking--of sex, Ron's bound to notice. And he'll go ballistic.* "Mind if I shower, first?"

"Mind if I play with you in the shower?"

Her cheeks grew hot. "Um...I was hoping to be tactful upon my return, and *not* smell like I'd...like we'd been...you know. Shagging. To within an inch of our lives."

A sigh heaved out of him, half-mocking in its drama level. "I suppose... But I'll have to mark my territory on you some other way."

That made her bolt upright and clamp her hand over her neck, where he'd left that huge suction-mark from their first time. It had finally faded to a little yellow bruise with a judicious bit of wand-waving. "Not another hickey!"

Chuckling, Russel pulled her back down over him. One of his hands played with her curls as he murmured in her ear. "No, I meant the ring-guardian. Now that you're my wife, I can set its protection spells to specific parameters."

No one should be able to say 'specific parameters' and have it sound so damnably sexy Hermione thought, distracted by the feel of his softened erection slipping from her depths. Unable to resist, she twisted and pressed her lips to his jaw-line, nibbling along his slightly stubbled skin. He stopped her with a slight tightening of the fingers in her hair, preventing her from reaching his sensitive ear.

"Careful. I'd love to go another round, but I'll need to recover, first. And by then, you really should be headed home."

"They'll be worried over me. Being out of touch for three days, and all," she added, murmuring the words against his throat. The black velvet band of his amulet tickled her lips. "I know it was necessary, but..."

"I'm sorry," he apologized, twisting his head just enough to kiss her temple. "But it's necessary. And I'll have to kidnap you in the future, too, though hopefully for only an evening at a time. We'll have to arrange through the rings when I can come upon you when you're out and about, without it seeming like I can communicate with you."

"It would almost be easier if you could just Apparate into Headquarters, and steal me from there," Hermione muttered.

"I don't ever want to know where the Order's Headquarters are located. I especially don't want to know who your new Secret Keeper is," he asserted. "The less I know, the less can be extracted from me."

She couldn't fault him for that. "It was just a thought..."

"I know." He stroked her hair for a moment, then nudged her. "Time to deal with the dragon."

"Shouldn't we shower and dress, first?" Hermione asked as she shifted to move off of him.

His arms wrapped around her, keeping her in place. "I think it will be more effective if the guardian has tangible proof of our marital status."

She arched a brow skeptically, at that.

"...Alright. I don't want to let go of you, until I absolutely have to," Russel amended. Hermione smiled and dipped down, dropping a kiss on the tip of his nose. Grey eyes blinked and studied her for a moment, then he smiled wryly. "Here goes..."

"Sigurd! You are summoned!"

The sharp bellow made Hermione wince twice. Once, for the volume at point-blank range, and twice for the results of the sudden surging of golden sparks out of both of their rings. The glittering cloud coalesced into the dragon, which filled the chamber, crouching over the two of them and their bed. Floorboards creaking, the dragon puffed a reply, making Hermione shiver from the warm, damp, but otherwise scentless wind.

"MASSSTER."

Hermione unsquinted herself somewhat from her third wince. "--Can you do something about the volume, while we're at it?"

"Sigurd. We are both now your master and mistress," Russel informed the dragon looming over both of them. "You will size yourself appropriately to the danger of a given situation, and speak in tones appropriately to that same situation, and do so for all future situations, when summoned directly or indirectly."

The dragon shrank, placing its paws upon the mattress beside them as it diminished down to the size and shape of a cat, if a cat had molten gold scales instead of fur, bat-like wings, and an extra long neck and tail. "Yesssss, Massster."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak. Russel covered it with his fingertips, his attention mostly on the dragon seating itself much like a cat next to them, tail wrapping around its haunches. Apparently he didn't want her interfering with his parameter-setting. Keeping quiet, she listened as he continued.

"You will continue to defend my wife, but with the following caveats: when a threat comes to her from one of her friends, you will seek first to warn them, and you will not kill them, nor maim them, nor cause permanent harm; if circumstances demand that you must do more than merely defend her from any harm willfully or accidentally instigated by her friends, you will instead seek to Portkey her to a safe location. You will also obey her commands in these circumstances, and her intentions."

"Yessss, Massster."

"If she is attacked by her sworn enemies, those who intend to do her grievous harm, such as maiming, raping, or even killing her--including those among the Death Eaters who are merely following the Dark Lord's will and would not otherwise seek to harm her--you will defend her to the absolute end of your means." Russel paused, eyed her, then added, "And if she so commands, you will secondarily do what you must to protect her friends, following her directives and so forth, so long as they do not conflict with your primary task of defending her life and her sanctity as my wife."

The cat-sized dragon bowed its head. "Yessss, Masssster."

"For all others, those who are merely acquaintances or who are of a mostly neutral stance as strangers or unconcerned citizens, you will focus on defence more than attack, and you will aim more towards warning than harming, and harming more than maiming or death, when and where possible, the same as you will do for her friends. You will also follow her directives and intentions in how to act, as you would when dealing with her friends."

"Yesssss, Massster."

"For the defence of our children, you may be more aggressive in the area of harm in these three categories of friends, neutral acquaintances and enemies, but you will also focus mostly on removing either the child or the threat from the vicinity of the other, again heeding my wife's commands on how to behave. These things you will do, Sigurd, as I have outlined them to you."

"Yesssss, Masssster," Sigurd agreed, again bowing its head.

"And lastly...my wife has a cat. You will get along with this cat, and with any other familiars or pets that may occupy her place of residence, wherever that may be, unless that creature turns hostile towards you, her, myself, or our children. In which case you are to ignore it by preference, warn it secondarily, and chase it off tertiarily. Only if it attacks to maim and kill her, our children, or myself may you attack to hurt, maim or kill, depending upon the severity of the threat-level to your charges."

"Yesssss, Massster."

"Excellent. Sigurd--" Russel paused, a thoughtful look creasing his brow for a moment. "...If my wife is unconscious, paralyzed, or otherwise unable to respond or give you directions, your primary duty is to protect her, as stated...but you may obey directions delivered by her friends at your discretion, provided they do not conflict with your primary concern of ensuring her safety. And for the purpose of defining 'friends', that is to include the members of her immediate family as well as her close friends, and the members of the Order of the Phoenix as well."

"Yesssss, Masssster."

"Sigurd, you are dismissed," he finished.

A bow of that scaly neck, and the dragon vanished in a glittering stream of gold.

Hermione moved Russel's fingers from her mouth. Kissing the tip of his longish nose, she smiled down at him. "That was a nice thing you did, adding my friends and all into the rest."

He shrugged, looking a little uncomfortable at the praise. "They're our allies, and I know they don't mean you harm. Why shouldn't they be included?"

Hermione studied the man under her. She didn't know who he was, but she was beginning to understand what he was. Again, she dipped her head and pressed a kiss to the tip of his nose. "Thank you, Cupid."

The warmth that seeped into his grey eyes at the use of the nickname mesmerized her. His hand slide from her ribs to her hair, brushing it back from her face. "You're welcome, Psyche...but we do need to shower, now. And I should take you back to your parents' home. You've been gone long enough."

She did and yet didn't want to leave. Sighing, Hermione slipped off of him, and sat on the edge of the bed. A mirthless laugh escaped her, short and soft. "Well, you've succeeded in seducing me. That should make your master happy."

"He's not my master." Rising, Russel held out his hand to her. "Up. We'll shower, and dress, and I'll take you back to where I found you, to make sure it's safe for you there. You'll be able to Apparate from there safely back to Headquarters, right?"

Accepting his hand, Hermione nodded as he pulled her upright. "I'll be surprised if Harry isn't waiting for me. At least he'll have had plenty of time to get to know my...*our* parents."

"As soon as word of *that* gets back to the Dark Lord, they'll be in danger," he reminded her, still holding her hand as they padded into the bathroom together. At a pointed

look from her, Russel amended, "Even greater danger."

"I know. And Harry knows. And Mum and Dad know...more or less," Hermione returned, twisting the tap to start the shower. "We'll just have to be extra-vigilant, that's all."

...

With a compressive *bang*, they reappeared in the Grangers' parlour. Hermione, opening her eyes, watched in surprise as several figures in the room bolted up out of their seats. One had dark, tousled hair, one had vivid red hair, one had lurid blue hair, and one had sandy blond hair touched with grey. Harry, Ron, Tonks and Remus? Behind her, she felt Russel jerk, then tense, but didn't hear him vanish, even though he released her.

Harry approached, wand lifted but not quite aimed at the wizard behind his blood-bound sister. "The house has been warded; you can Apparate in, but not out, at the moment. We wanted to have a few words with you, 'Rorik', and why you kidnapped her like that."

"It's Russel, not 'Rorik'," Russel corrected calmly, not touching Hermione but not moving out from behind her, either.

"You *did* it, didn't you?" Ron added, his blue eyes anguished as he started at Hermione and Russel both. "You completed it. The two of you!"

Noise behind them made Hermione glance over her shoulder. Russel's shoulder half obscured the view, but she could see her parents in the archway leading to the hall. Daphne and Jeffrey eyed her and her kilted companion with relief and worry.

"Hermione! Where have you been? And who is this man?" her mother demanded. "Harry's been refusing to tell us what's been going on, until your return."

"I'll tell you what's happened," Ron stated bluntly. "Mr. and Mrs. Granger, meet Rorik Ferguson. Your son-in-law."

Jeffrey Granger's eyes widened. "Our...*what*?"

"It's been seventy-two hours," Ron continued, holding Russel's gaze over Hermione's head. "Before seventy-two hours have passed from the point of...completion, most betrothal ring marriages can be annulled, under the right conditions. Which is why you waited full three days to return her, isn't it?"

"Wrong," Russel stated calmly, as Hermione tensed with apprehension--there was a way to have ended their betrothal? He continued, pushing her towards Ron. "It's only been seventy hours, not seventy-two...and our marriage cannot be broken by annulment."

"You stole her seventy-two hours and thirteen minutes ago!" Ron growled, fists tightening at his sides.

"Ron--" Hermione tried to interject, and felt Russel touching her shoulder.

"It's alright, Jane. Perhaps he doesn't realize how indecorous this subject is, when discussed in front of your family. And I don't need to Apparate to leave."

Hermione glanced back at him again, just in time to see him nodding courteously to her parents.

"Mr. and Mrs. Granger. I regret not having the luxury of time, else I would stay and converse with you." A glance at Hermione and he continued, facing her parents. "Rest assured, I leave her well-protected."

His hand glided down her spine from her shoulder down to the waistband of her jeans and the top of the book tucked into her back pocket, leaving a trail of goose-spots in its wake through the cotton of her blouse. His other hand opened the flap on his sporran, reached inside...and he vanished, with that streaking blur that Hermione associated with Portkey travel, as opposed to the squeezing pop of Apparation.

"Hermione, what is going on?" Daphne Granger demanded.

"What did *he* mean by 'son-in-law'?" Jeffrey added, staring at his daughter.

"An' where did he go?" Tonks added.

Hermione rubbed at her forehead for a moment. Russel might've left her in Sigurd's protection, but that would only be useful if someone tried to snog her. It did nothing to help save her from all the questions that lay ahead. She wanted to ignore the matter, to beg that everyone just leave her alone...but she was an adult now, and had to play by adult rules. Which meant pulling on the gardening gloves and shoveling the fertilizer that had been dumped at her feet. "If we could all sit down, and be quiet, I will explain. *I will explain*," she added as Ron drew a breath to speak. "In my own words, in my own way. Got that, Ron?"

His mouth compressed, but he nodded stiffly. Since there weren't any spare seats with her parents, Ron, Harry, Remus and Tonks in the room, Hermione Summoned a padded chair from the dining table in the next room, and placed it between her parents on the loveseat and Harry, Tonks and Remus on the sofa. Ron sat in the easy chair across from her, the length of the coffee table providing enough distance between them that she didn't feel overwhelmed by his upset emotions.

When everyone had settled and she'd cleared her mind with two deep breaths, she began. "The ring you see on my finger, Mum, Dad, is a magical betrothal ring. There's all kinds, in the wizarding world, though they're relics from long before the Suffragette movement, and so they're thankfully out of fashion these days. They're, um...they're designed to protect the chastity of a betrothed," she continued, clearing her throat a little at having to admit that much. "Most of them provide some sort of protection for the witch who dons them. And this weekend... I was kidnapped and threatened with violence of an indelicate sort. So I donned the ring before it could happen, and the ring protected me.

"But it caused problems," Hermione continued. She paused, trying to find a way to explain, then shrugged. "It conjures a dragon that protects me. But while I was merely engaged to the owner of the ring--that's Russel--I couldn't control the dragon. It nearly attacked Ron, and some others. Russel realized I'd donned the ring, knew that the guardian-dragon would threaten and possibly even harm my otherwise well-meaning friends, and so he came to get me and deal with the problem."

Ron snorted; Hermione sent him a quelling look before continuing.

"There's a bit more to it than that, but it's better if you don't know all the details. Suffice to say, the only way to control the dragon was to...to go through with the purpose of the ring. To...complete...the magical marriage." She didn't know if she was blushing; the topic was difficult enough without adding visible embarrassment to the equation. "It's indissoluble. And I'd really appreciate it if all of you left off arguing on the matter."

"Violence...of an 'indelicate' sort?" her father asked faintly. "Just how 'indelicate'?"

"Enough to prefer a forced marriage to one over a rape by many," Ron stated bluntly. *That* made Hermione's face burn, as her mother's hands flew up to cover her mouth. She drew a swift breath to castigate him, but he held up his hand, stopping his friend. "--I've had time to come to terms with it. And I'm sorry I've been such an arse over the matter. It's just...I wanted to be the one to give you that sort of ring. And if the marriage cannot be annulled...I'm hurt," he admitted, "and I don't deny that, but *you* didn't hurt me; these damned circumstances did. And I'll try not to hate him for it, or blame you for it. I'm just...I'm not happy.

"I'm not happy at all," the freckled wizard finished, slouching a little in his chair.

What does he expect me to say to him? Hermione wondered. That I'm not happy, either? I'm not exactly upset with my situation, is the problem. Does he expect me to wish it was him in that hotel room with me? Not after having tasted passion in Russel's arms. Does he think I'd annul the marriage in the, what, hour-plus we have left?

I could not do that to Russel, she decided, even if it were possible. I won't leave him in a bad position in the enemy camp.

"So, where did he go?" Tonks asked Hermione.

"Where do you think?" she returned sharply. Tonks was a member of the Order; she'd heard about Russel's position as a spy. Hermione just didn't want to drag her parents into that part of this mess. "Look, there's nothing that can be done. I made my decision on how to save myself, I took a risk in doing so, and this is how it turned out: I'm married. End of subject--I'm *sorry* if it doesn't play to anyone's expectations."

Rising from her chair, she turned around and hooked her arm through the unpadded back, taking it with her physically back into the dining room. Her mother followed her, as the others murmured amongst themselves. "Hermione, dear... I'm still trying to wrap my head around what happened. You were attacked, you put on this ring...and somehow that made you married?"

"More or less."

"Is that how wizarding weddings work?" Daphne asked her daughter, following her into the kitchen. Hermione wanted to get away, but her mother wasn't letting her retreat. Turning, she faced the older woman with a sigh.

"That's how they *used* to work. These sorts of rings are very old-fashioned," Hermione corrected. "With Bill and Fleur's wedding--that's Ron's oldest brother and his wife--it was just a normal Anglican ceremony. About the only thing magical in their rings were the way how they automatically sized themselves to their owner's fingers." She looked at her hand. "Then again, a model like this was bound to have been very expensive to make. It's not the sort of thing the average witch or wizard could afford, nowadays."

"Well, at least it's an heirloom, and not some cheap piece of plastic-gilt," her mother tried to joke. "Erm...what's this about a dragon? I've never seen a real dragon. It's not going to appear and try to burn down our house, or something, is it?"

"Sigurd, you are summoned," Hermione stated in lieu of a response. Gold sparkled out of the ring gracing her hand, gold that coiled itself around her folded arms and swirled up onto her shoulder. It solidified with actual weight a moment later, forming the long-necked, long-tailed, cat-bodied creature from before. Sigurd's head rested on her shoulder, his body sloping down the length of her arm, and his tail wrapped around her other arm, providing him with a secure perch.

"Oh! How adorable! But, that cannot possibly be a guardian-creature," her mother pointed out. "He's far too small for that."

"Sigurd, without actually harming anything, assume the size necessary to deal appropriately with a threat to my person," Hermione instructed the creature. He glittered, ghosted over her shoulder, and filled most of the kitchen with his wings and his tail, and the hunching bulk of his body, the upper half perched on the butcher's block in the center of the kitchen. It was sort of like having a polished brass gargoyle in one's kitchen, save that this gargoyle blinked calmly at the two females. And that it out-massed them by at least four times their combined bodyweight.

Daphne Granger's eyes widened. "Oh, my..."

Hermione heard someone approaching and murmured, "Sigurd, restore."

Gilded light flowed over her shoulder, the gargoyle-dragon re-solidifying into the monkey-like clinging of a much smaller dragonette. Harry entered the kitchen, Ron at his heels. Daphne eyed the flushed face of the taller, freckled wizard, and cleared her throat. "Well, let me know if it needs to eat anything..."

Harry shifted forward. Cautiously, he lifted his hand to the dragonette. Sigurd sniffed, then thrust his head under Harry's fingers, seeking a scratching, almost exactly like Crookshanks would've done. That reminded Hermione of her pet. "How's Crooks? Is he alright?"

"He got into a snarl with another of Mrs. Figg's cats," Harry offered. "I tested one of those Healing Charms we studied on him, and he's good as new. The other cat's got a torn ear, but at least it's healed."

"Hermione..." Ron started, then trailed off, apparently unsure what to say. She gave him a neutral look, not hostile, but not exactly warm, either. He looked increasingly miserable as the silence stretched between them, until the youngest male Weasley finally blurted, "--I hope you'll be...happy."

The platitude certainly didn't make Ron look happy. Harry stepped into the awkward silence, daring to ask what no one else had asked, yet. His enquiry was quietly voiced, at least, barely reaching her own ears. "Hermione, he didn't...force you, did he?"

"No, he didn't."

"You mean you actually *liked* it?" Ron hissed, distress creasing his face. "But, you didn't like it when--"

"That's enough, Ron," Hermione warned him.

"But--"

"Don't even go there," she ordered. "That's none of your business."

"As your *boyfriend*--" he spat in an undertone, "I think it is!"

Hermione knew what he meant, even though he wasn't her boyfriend anymore. Rather than getting angry, she gave him a sad look; had their roles been reversed, Hermione knew she would be feeling just as frustrated and shut-out as he was. But the adult thing, the mature thing to do, was to deal with the situation as it was, not how one wanted it to be.

"Not any more, it isn't. All we can be now is friends, Ron...and as close of friends as you and I are, I'm not going to discuss those sorts of things with you. With either of you," she added, glancing at Harry, who had stopped scratching Sigurd's head. "Just...I wasn't forced, I wasn't hurt, I wasn't enchanted or drugged or Imperio'd. That's all you need to know. Now, can we *please* change the topic?"

Ron's mouth tightened for a moment, then he complied. "The Order's in an uproar over your kidnapping. They don't know whether to trust the fellow. I can't say as I'm inclined, either. He could've warned us."

"He didn't know if he'd be stealing me away in public," Hermione returned. She and Russel had discussed some of this during their three days together. "The object was to make Rorik Ferguson seem like a dashing fellow, swooping in and hauling me off like some romance-novel hero to, er, seduce me into thinking that being his wife was a great idea, and thus blind me to who he really is and what he's really up to," she explained, conscious of the half-read paperback tucked into the back pocket of her jeans. "It's a double-blind maneuver. Something to throw our side off, and something to throw their side off."

"Cause he can't afford to let anyone know he's really on our side," Harry agreed. "But, how do we know he's not going to pull a Snape?"

"You mean, aside from the way he told me through the truth-enforcement of the ring that he wants to destroy the Dark Lord?" Hermione responded pointedly.

"There are spells to get around that aspect," Ron told her. "Harry and I researched them, waiting for you to return."

Hermione hadn't known that. Doubt crept in at his words, but the deed was done: she was Mrs. Russel Whoever, now. "If you can't take the word of the ring as the truth of

his intentions, then we *don't* know. Either I'm married to a man who honestly wants Voldiebutt dead, or I'm married to a man who is going to betray us all. I hope you don't mind if I *prefer* to cling to the more optimistic version of his character, since there's no way to annul this marriage."

"So he says," Ron stated. "Look--there's a way to get it annulled, if it's that sort of ring. All you have to do is say the Unbinding Spell in front of the man you love and who loves you, and repudiate your so-called husband with all your heart."

Sigurd tensed in her arms. He didn't hiss, but he did show enough sentiency to crane his head up towards hers. Hermione held Ron's gaze steadily, knowing he expected himself to be that man, to have her love, and answered from her heart. "I'm *not* going to do that, Ron. I choose, of my own free will, to believe in Russel. I will have faith in him, and I will do nothing to jeopardize his position."

"He's a double agent!" Ron protested. "Just like Snape!"

"He's saved *lives*," Hermione countered. "They may just be pawns on a chessboard in this war, Ron, less important than the lives of Order members and such who are the rooks and the knights, but they're still *lives*. People who would be dead, or under the Imperius Curse, if he hadn't acted to save them. Or do Colin and Dennis mean nothing to you?"

He lowered his gaze, flushing.

"I *don't* think they mean nothing to you, Ron," Hermione pointed out before he could protest defensively. "But you've got to let go of me, romantically. This war is demanding sacrifices of all of us, and frankly, this is the *least* little thing you've had to give up. You've lost a brother, in Percy's defection to the enslavement of politics. You nearly lost another one, in Bill. Your family home has been threatened, your father's life was threatened two Christmases ago, all three of us have been threatened time and again ourselves... You're losing a briefly-held girlfriend, yes. But you're *not* losing your best friend. There's nothing that Russel could do or say that would turn me against you. Only *you* could do that, by your own words and actions."

Ron exhaled heavily, lifting and running his hands through his carrot-red hair. Hermione fell silent, and Harry stayed silent, giving their lanky, freckled friend the time to think. His shoulders slowly slumped. Finally, he shifted forward and cautiously lifted his hand to the dragonette in her arms. Sigurd extended his neck, sniffed, and huffed, but didn't bite, and didn't retreat. Daringly, Ron stroked the scaly top of his head, scratching behind the horns and the ear-fans.

When Sigurd permitted it, Hermione knew Ron had accepted her fate. Uncoiling one limb from the golden guardian-serpent, she shifted forward herself, pulling him into a brief, one-armed hug. "I've been your friend, Ron, a lot longer than I've been a wife. And I hope to continue to be your friend for a lot longer."

A mirthless laugh left him. "Yeah. I could always get lucky. The prat could end up dead, by the end of the war."

Sigurd hissed, but it was Hermione who attacked, whapping him on the back of his head with her hand. "You're the prat, Ron, for that comment. I'm not going to wish anyone dead just because I'm married to him."

"Yeah, but what if you were married to Moldiedork?" Ron shot back, lifting his head to look at her.

"In that case, I'd be wishing him dead because he was Voldiemutt, not just because he was my husband--and let's *not* joke about that possibility," Hermione added with a shiver, releasing her friend. "That's too horrifying to even contemplate."

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (**HBP SPOILERS**)

XII.

So, how did they take it?

Hermione's lips twisted wryly as she pressed the tablet to her vanity-desk in her room at Grimmauld Place. **About as well as I'd hoped. Ron was a bit of a prat after you left, but he accepted it. How did it go on your end of things?**

I'm alive, and unharmed. I'm playing up the lost-ring-at-exhibition, seduced-woman-to-save-her-friends-from-the-dragon angle in front of the others, Russel wrote back. He now expects me to insinuate myself into your life, and thereby into the Order. So far, word hasn't leaked back from your side that your friends know about me. We've got to move fast to damage-control that aspect. I'm going to say that I can communicate through the ring. Not that it enforces the truth, but that I can communicate by it. It's a big risk, but I think it will reap bigger benefits.

Why? Hermione returned, wondering what he had in mind.

I'm going to present myself to you as a sympathizer to the Order's cause. That way, if anyone lets slip that they know me, it won't be taken in the correct context.

Hermione shook her head. **And if someone lets slip that you're spying for the Order in his encampment? No...skate as closely to the truth as you can.**

That's even more dangerous, Jane. You must realize that the Order is already skeptical about me as a spy, given what the bastard traitor did. I'd be doing that all over again, in the eyes of both parties.

Ah, but he won't know that the ring enforces the truth. Or if he does, Hermione added carefully, **you can always tell him you've cast one of those spells that allows you to lie anyway, despite its restrictions.**

...You know about those spells?

Yes.

The page stayed blank for a moment.

...And you still trust me?

Yes. She did have a smidgen of doubt, but only a smidgen, the same as anyone might have. The rest of her chose to believe in him. The ring would ensure that her response was the truth. Still, she had to add, **But if you betray me, Russel, you will wish you'd betrayed the Dark Lord, and were in his clutches instead.**

Forgive me, but you're not as scary as he is.

I'm your wife. I'm infinitely scarier.

...You're turning me on. What are you wearing?

She laughed, caught off guard by that. **The same clothes you left me in. I haven't undressed for bed, yet. What are you wearing? Still clad in your kilt?**

Alas, no. I'm back to wearing wizarding robes, though at the moment, I'm in my bedsheets. My cold, lonely, single-bed sheets. Naked and thinking of you. I miss you.

I miss you, too, Hermione found herself writing. **I was in the middle of reading that book when you called, but it's not the same as hearing the naughty captain's perspective via your voice and inflections. When do you think you'll be putting your plan into motion?**

Soon. But I'll have to consider carefully just how far I'll go in approaching the Order, whether as merely a sympathizer or offering my services as a double-spy--the treachery that was perpetrated by your main spy has truly complicated my life. Goodnight, wife.

Goodnight, husband. A little surprised that he didn't resume enquiring about her attire, or asking for another bout of letter-sex, Hermione watched the page disappear. *Then again, it could just be that someone was coming into the room, or his roommate was threatening to wake up...*

The ring reheated, and she pressed the smooth surface to the next page on the tablet.

Don't forget to work on that combination of the Protean and Forging Charms! ~RUSSEL

The words faded, leaving her with a reminder of their conversation on that subject. She hadn't done much in the way of research, but with the wand exhibition out of the way, she could focus on handling that aspect, now. Except she didn't know why he wanted an enchantment that could cause several similar objects to burn red-hot within a set radius of himself.

...

"So, let's see what we've got left," Harry stated his two friends as they settled themselves around one of the tables in the Hogwarts library. Hermione had cast a Disillusionment Charm, and Harry a Distraction Charm, to ensure they wouldn't be discovered by Filch or one of the other teachers while on their rounds. They usually took turns doing that, whenever they came into the library, now that school was back in session. "There was the diary, the locket, the ring and the wand, all gone. That leaves us with Nagini, the cup, and the bastard himself. We know where to find the two snakes--though that's an insult to herpetology--and we can't go after either Nagini or Voldie until we've attacked the cup."

"We have to find it, and we have to figure out how to destroy the soul within it," Ron stated. "I'm glad the Ravenclaw wand survived, and I'd like to see the Hufflepuff cup make it, too, if we can. After all, we've got the Slytherin locket and ring. As much as I don't like most Slytherins, or their attitudes, or what their House Founder stood for, they do deserve to have a bit of their House history to cling to, an heirloom to care about, if they have none of their own."

"Yeah; it's a good thing Godric's sword was lost inside the hat, then locked inside Dumbledore's office after I pulled it out," Harry observed, "or we might've had to deal with *that* as a Horcrux-holder, too."

Hermione knew instinctively that Ron was talking as much about his own lack of an heirloom as anything. He wouldn't get to inherit his mother's clock--most likely Bill, or maybe Ginny, would inherit it--and the Weasleys certainly didn't have any spare betrothal rings lying around. Still, she had to commend him for his open-mindedness. Harry continued, recapturing their attention.

"Now, we don't know what else the Basilisk Snogger did while he was plumbing the depths of Dark Magic, and we really don't have a way of finding out. It takes a lot of time, a lot of legwork, and a lot of contacts that we just don't have to uncover that sort of information. Dumbledore had the contacts, but we don't. We have the legwork, but we don't exactly have scads and loads of time.

"Which brings us to you," he stated, looking at Hermione. "Or rather, it brings us to Russel. Does he know what we're looking for?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm pretty sure that he doesn't. Just that we're looking for objects and places of past significance to the Dark Lord."

"Good. I don't want him to know what we're looking for, but I do want you to get as much information out of him as you safely can." Harry paused, and had the grace to look a little ashamed. "I'm sorry you have to use him like that, but you know what's at stake."

Putting it like that, saying that she was using Russel, did leave her feeling a little uncomfortable, but Hermione knew it was necessary. And nothing less than what he was doing with her, and the rings binding them together. She nodded. "...I think I can do that. He's already under orders from Brian--from Dumbledore--to do exactly that, and he's told me so. So it won't be odd for me to ask him about it. And it won't really be using him."

"Yeah, but you're going to have to use him to find out where Moldie-arse is hiding," Ron pointed out. "The Order hasn't been able to find any particular hideout."

"That's because they're using..." But she couldn't say 'Riddle Manor'. Hermione changed her sentence after only a moment's struggle. "They're, um, using the Fidelius Charm, themselves."

Ron's and Harry's brows both used. "Really?" Ron asked. "When did you find that out?"

"Some time ago," she confessed. "But since it's the Fidelius Charm, I didn't think much of it, since we wouldn't be able to get inside without being informed by the Secret Keeper."

"Hermione," Harry asked, studying Hermione with a touch of grim sobriety, "do you know who their Secret Keeper is?"

"Yes...but you're not going to like it," she prefaced. "In fact, I think you'd rather kill this particular person on sight than interrogate him about the Dark Lord's headquarters."

"...*Snake*," Harry growled. If he'd had a pencil in his hands at that moment, Hermione suspected he would've broken it. Or badly mangled a quill. Thankfully, his hands were empty.

"Russel said that Snape is now second only to Voldemort himself," Hermione added, hoping Harry wasn't so mad he wasn't paying attention to her words. "In fact, since he's wanted by everyone for Dumbledore's death, I'd be surprised if he was ever let out of that place. The last thing the Dark Lord would want would be his top lieutenant and Secret Keeper falling into enemy hands. Like it or not, we're rather dependent on whatever information Russel can get to us."

"I'll bet he has to be very discreet about it, too," Ron muttered, surprising Hermione by his thoughtfulness. Especially given the topic. "If he is playing straight with us, he'll

have to play it very conservatively. Even if he's not, he'll still have to tread carefully. Somehow, since he hasn't told his followers what he's done, I don't think Voldie is interested in anyone on any side of this war finding out how he's managed to make himself near-immortal."

"Anyway, as much as we'll have to rely upon him," Harry continued, explaining his idea to Hermione, "we cannot afford to rely *solely* upon him. Now, I was thinking, if a Protean Charm like the ones on the DA coins could link similar objects, why can't we use a Protean Charm, modified, to *find* similar objects? Like sets of search parameters on a computer--that's a Muggle thingy," he added to Ron. "We set the Charm to search for artifacts that used to belong to Helga Hufflepuff, and maybe enchant a couple compasses to point the direction in which they lie, and then triangulate upon their position! We'd have to enchant the compasses to point to the same object at the same time, of course..."

Hermione, astounded that his proposed line of research slotted neatly beside the work Russel had asked of her, grabbed quill and paper and began sketching out notes. With their help, she might even be able to do her side of the research all the faster. But she wouldn't tell them that Russel needed his own spell. Not until she knew why he needed it. Having researched some similar topics in the past, Hermione knew where to start looking, at least. "Ron, take down these book titles. We're going to need *The Missing Link: Bridging Charms Together, Spell-Bound, Finding the Lost...*"

...

The text in the book she was reading swirled into a tangle at the edges of the page she was holding down, startling Hermione. It took her a second to realize what was happening. Snatching a blank sheet from the stack between her and Harry, she smacked her hand down on it as the words reformed themselves in *The Missing Link*. Her ring clunked onto the surface of the table, making the other two glance up at her.

Ink spilled across the parchment, as she had thought it might.

Where are you, right now? Headquarters, or the school?

Dipping her quill into her ink jar, Hermione scrawled back, **School. Why do you ask?**

I tried to Port to you half an hour ago, but the ring couldn't do it. When will you be out of there?

Another hour or two, Hermione wrote back, as Harry peered over her arm. She fought the urge to hide the ring-exchanged words from him. This was an innocuous conversation, after all. **And we'll be going by Floo back to Headquarters.**

We'll need to meet, soon. Any plans on going out, tomorrow? To Hogsmeade, perhaps?

Not that I'm aware of, she returned, listening to Harry murmuring to Ron, telling him what she was writing. **Hang on, I'll ask the others.**

Others?

Harry and Ron. Hermione looked up at her two friends. "So...if I'm to start pumping the well of Russel's information, I'm going to need to be out in the open so he can snatch me, again."

"I'd rather he didn't," Ron muttered. He held up a hand as Hermione drew in a breath to scold him. "I'm not talking about *that*. I'm thinking it would be better if he started hanging around, so we could interrogate him. Not about our quest, but about his intentions and stuff. We need to have him seen with us, if he's to appear believable in worming his way into your life, Hermione."

That was the chess-master in him speaking. Hermione realized with a touch of awe. Somehow, Ron had managed to set his feelings on the matter aside. For the moment, at least; she knew the stubbornness of a Weasley, and knew he would take a little longer in getting his feelings about this whole situation out of his system. But for now, Ron was thinking with the right brain, instead of the wrong one.

"Have him join us at Fortescue's in Diagon Alley." Ron flashed the other member at the table a sly grin. "Harry can treat us to a couple hot fudge sundaes. And this Russel fellow can explain why he did what he did...under the guise of having dropped his ring, realized the dragon would attack, and finalized the betrothal, and all. In a public setting," he added under his breath, losing the smile. "Where I cannot hex him half to death for stealing my girlfriend..."

Afraid he was more than half serious, Hermione eyed Harry, who shrugged at her. "It sounds like a plan to me."

"It sounds like layers upon layers of deception, to me," she retorted. A sigh, and she started writing. "We're turning ourselves into ruddy Slytherins, at this rate...though I suppose it would take one to catch one." **...Meet us at Florean Fortescue's in Diagon Alley, tomorrow. Um...one o'clock. We'll all sit down and have a nice bit of ice cream while Harry and Ron interrogate you. We'll stick to the whole 'oops I dropped my ring; let me take care of that nasty dragon problem for you while snogging you silly' scenario.**

...We did a bit more than snogging, Jane.

Harry's been reading some of this over my shoulder, she wrote quickly, even though her blood-bound brother technically wasn't at that moment.

I'll be the soul of discretion, he promised her. **But understand that I will be stealing you away after our 'interview'. And don't bother telling them to wait for us. You'll come home again when we're good and ready.**

She shivered at the promise in those dictated words. The page flared under her hand, vanishing. Nodding, she looked at the others. "Fortescue's, one o'clock tomorrow."

They nodded, and bent their heads back over their research. Hermione carefully didn't tell them about Russel's parting comment. Even if Ron was coming to grips with her married status, there would be no point rubbing the proverbial salt of it into his wound.

...

Despite the threats to the wizarding world, or perhaps because of them, Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour was rather crowded, the next day. Florean had been rescued by the Aurors some months before, and had spent some time in St. Mungo's, recovering from his injuries and neglect, but his passion was crafting ice cream and other sweet confections, and the best therapy for him had been returning to work. Because of his capture and subsequent rescuing, his shop was more popular than ever, and today was no exception.

Of course, the rain soaking the street outside probably had something to do with that, but rain usually chased people away from ice cream. Given that it was a quarter to one, the lunchtime crowd was only just beginning to thin. Using the advantage of his height, Ron spotted an empty table. Providentially, it was in front of one of the large, square-paned windows. Meaning that if any Death Eaters lurked outside under the eaves of a shop across the street, they'd be seen meeting and chatting with Russel. Hopefully Ron's jealousy would interject some realistic moments of visual 'doubt' into such a scene. They couldn't let him be accepted too easily, too quickly.

"Oy, I'll save us that table, by that window," Ron told Harry and Hermione, pointing its way. "You go get the sundaes."

"Okay," Harry agreed. "What will you want?"

"I'll have an Apple Pie in the Sky."

"Got it." Harry and Hermione waded through the crowd to the queue in front of the counter. For all it was crowded, the wait wasn't too long, and they passed it studying the

slateboard lists of ice cream combinations and other sweet treats that were being touted for that day. Harry smiled at Hermione. "Remember my third year, when I ran away from home and came here?"

Hermione nodded, debating between a Fudge Frolic and a Dark Chocolate Delight. Both sounded scrumptious from their descriptions on the boards. "I was rather worried about you, that summer. Any summer that you went home to your so-called family, really."

"When I stayed at the Leaky Cauldron, I'd come here every afternoon to read my schoolbooks and work on my summer assignments, and Mr. Fortescue would give me free sundaes and tell me what he remembered from his own History classes. I always wondered why he did it. If it was the scar, or whatever."

That made her smile at him. "He probably did it because you were a sweet boy who needed a kindly uncle-figure to look after him on a summer's afternoon. Not everyone's interested in your fame, Harry. That might've made him notice you all the sooner, but it's your own personality that made him give you free sundaes day after day. If it had been Malfoy, you can bet there would've only been one ice cream on the house. After that, Draco's personality would've probably soured the deal."

"Spoilt child, spoilt ice cream," Harry muttered. The last customer cleared the queue and he stepped up to the counter with her. Florean himself was the clerk to take their order, as his two assistants worked with other customers.

"Harry! Has it been so long already, that you're now out of school? I could've sworn you had another year left to go! How did those history papers turn out?" the shopkeeper asked him.

Harry blushed. "They, er, did well enough, when I turned them in to Professor Binns."

"Well, I'll bet you're not here to learn about Infamous Iphigenia and her Iguana Incident," Mr. Fortescue chuckled. "What'll you have, young man?"

"Ron wants an Apple Pie in the Sky, and I'll have a Banana Fountain. What do you want, Hermione?" Harry asked her, turning to glance at her.

"--We'll both have a Dark as Mid-Nut," a baritone voice interjected as Harry stiffened. A tanned arm in a royal blue jumper held out a handful of sickles. "My treat, for all of us," Russel added as his other arm slipped around Hermione's waist. His breath warmed her ear through her curls. "I do know how much you love dark chocolate and nuts, Jane. At least, how much you love my dark chocolate...and my nuts."

The innuendo made Hermione blush. She wasn't so ignorant of North American slang that she didn't know what he meant by that. It was worsened by the fact that he'd murmured those words in front of Harry, and held her so intimately close. At least it wasn't in front of Ron.

Harry's mouth tightened into a grim line. "You've got a lot of nerve, waltzing in here and saying you'll pay for our ice cream."

"Yes, well, I've come to apologize," Russel offered, his Canadian accent sounding stranger than usual, surrounded as they were by the babble of English voices. "And to offer my explanations. Consider the ice cream a peace offering...and perhaps a thank you for your efforts during the exhibition, this last weekend."

Harry said nothing, but didn't proffer his own money as Mr. Fortescue handed Russel his change and began crafting the four orders. Hermione couldn't say anything. Not when most of her attention was taken up by the need to *not* melt into the man behind her. He smelled somewhat spicy today, contrasting with the stronger, sweeter scents of Fortescue's shop. Spicy, and masculine.

The treats were handed over the counter, requiring Russel to release her so that he could accept the two dark chocolate ones. Harry, giving the older wizard a mistrustful glance, took his and Ron's orders. One had sauces oozing from the trio of bananas upended in the ice cream scoops, sort of a wizarding version of a banana split, while the other actually hovered over its dish by two inches, dotted with chunks of apple, pie-crust, and walnuts, and drizzled in caramel. Harry nodded at the dark-chocolate mounds in the bowls Russel accepted. "If that's not what you want, Hermione, I'll buy you something else."

Hermione's brain felt like it had dribbled out of the ear that Russel had breathed upon. Shaking her head, she gathered her scattered wits. "It's alright. I was actually going to order that, myself."

Turning away from the counter, they wove through the tables, Russel following Hermione, who followed Harry. Ron, spotting their approach, stood up. Hermione fancied he didn't want to face his rival--a successful rival, since Russel had won Hermione, not him--while sitting down. Of course, the moment his gaze slid down Russel's frame and spotted the navy blue utili-kilt the other man was wearing, contempt pinched the freckled wizard's brow.

The moment was tense with simmering hostility; no one moved, until Russel set down the sundae treats on one side of the short, rectangular table, faced Ron, and stated bluntly, "I owe you an apology. For stealing away your right to court her. I am sorry...but I had no other choice, given the circumstances. For what it's worth," Russel added with a smile-like twist to his lips as Ron stared stonily at him and Hermione and Harry glanced worriedly between the two, "I'm glad the dragon didn't eat you, Ron. Not when she speaks so highly of you."

Ron gave him a disgusted look. "You are an absolute suck-up."

Russel's face hardened slightly, mostly around the eyes. Around the mouth he was still smiling politely, but not in the tension of his grey eyes. Harry flicked out his wand at the edge of Hermione's vision, but he didn't point it at anyone standing around the table. From the silent mouthing of his lips, she guessed he was casting a distraction spell, so that their conversation couldn't be overheard in the crowded shop.

"You are my wife's best friend," Russel stated calmly. "I wouldn't get very far if I tried to forbid her to see you, or interfered in your long-standing friendship. In fact, it would cause me a great deal of trouble if I ever tried. Thus the logical thing to do is to suck *it* up, and deal with it." His hand came up to Hermione's shoulders in a light but pointed touch. "Conversely, she is now my wife, and that is not something you will ever be able to derail."

"So I suggest you set your own animosity aside, and deal with it. Privately," he added as Hermione tensed. "If we forget ourselves and bicker in public, or even just in front of her, it will only put her in the middle of our arguments, and tear her to pieces. I don't care if you don't have any respect for me or my feelings in this matter. You *will* have respect for her and hers, and not force her to choose sides. This situation is not some childhood game, and she is not a prize to squabble over."

Silence followed his words, not counting the bustle of the shop around them. Finally, Harry cleared his throat. "The ice cream's melting."

Ron gripped the back of his chair, then sighed and sat down. Russel released Hermione's shoulder with a subtle caress and pulled out a chair for her, across from Ron. Harry took the chair that faced the window, leaving Russel to sit next to Hermione, across from Ron. Russel spoke quietly as he sat down, his dark blond hair swinging forward far enough to half-conceal his face. "Mind what you say. We are in public, after all. It wouldn't do to provide the wrong sort of people with the wrong sort of gossip."

"I've cast a distraction charm," Harry reassured him.

Picking up her spoon, Hermione focused on her ice cream, glad he'd warned Ron against putting her in the middle of their upset feelings and male posturings. The frozen confection before her was a hand-mixed treat of rich chocolate ice cream, walnuts, almonds, hazelnuts, cashews and peanuts, with little dark chocolate chunks scattered throughout. On her third bite, she felt a hand settling on her denim-clad thigh. Russel's of course; he was seated to her right. The heel of his palm rested on her leg at about the midpoint, and the fingers traced little circles over the fabric. Gradually, they worked their way toward the inside of her thigh.

"So, what do we call you?" Harry asked between bites of his own treat.

"Rorik. We are in public, after all."

"When do you go back to Canada, 'Rorik'?" Ron asked him pointedly. Hermione gave him a dirty look for his veiled rudeness.

"I'm staying for a while, actually," Russel replied, trailing the tip of his spoon through his sundae. "I must say, things are certainly more exciting here than back home. That was a rather interesting scuffle, at the exhibition. I've never seen a giant go down quite like that, before."

Harry grinned as he scooped up a bit of banana and pineapple. "Yeah. It was definitely not a move found in the usual sort of chess rulebook."

"It was a good move, on Yorsen's part," Ron agreed. "Nothing else was taking him down, that was for certain."

"How come you didn't attack?" Harry enquired, glancing at Russel. He tensed. So did Hermione and Ron, waiting for his answer. It sounded like Harry was asking why Russel hadn't attacked the giant, but all four of them knew he meant, why hadn't Russel attacked the innocents in the room.

"I was too busy dodging curses and trying to figure out what you were doing, at first. Then I realized Jane was in danger. Since she dances so divinely, I thought it would be a pity to let her soul be sucked from her body," Russel replied calmly, sliding a spoonful of nut-filled ice cream into his mouth.

Ron frowned, glancing between him and Hermione. "Wait a minute--when did you dance with him, Hermione?"

"It was during your second chess game," she answered. As Ron started to scowl, she added honestly, "He got fresh with me by the end of it, and that's when I told him I was your girlfriend, not his."

"--She did do that," Russel agreed, nodding. The hand on Hermione's thigh shifted subtly closer to her pelvis, then slid further down the inside of her thigh, playing with the ridge of her inseam. The caress sent prickles of awareness through her body. Hermione carefully continued to eat her ice cream as if nothing was amiss.

Ron subsided, but not without shooting the pair of them a suspicious look over his partially eaten, still-hovering desert. Harry filled the silence, speaking between bites. "So...what do we do with you now?"

"You get to know me," Russel informed him. "However little I'll be able to impart. We'll meet and have a few more conversations, I'll offer to help out the good guys against You-Know-Who, you'll debate the point and mutter amongst yourselves while you're out in public, doubting whether or not you can trust me, and then eventually I'll show up at some location where the bad guys are attacking, and with a bit of wand-work, help the good guys save the day, thereby proving my worth and my loyalty publicly."

"--But in the meantime," Ron interjected, clearing his mouth quickly, "you'll probable have pre-coordinated the attack with your fellow Death Eaters, including who you'll hit and with what. They'll escape, of course, and while the casualties will have been minimized, it will actually be a lesser victory, because we'll have only postponed our next encounter with them, rather than stopping some of them from being able to come back."

Hermione glanced at Russel to gauge his reaction. He was looking at Ron thoughtfully. "The bastard traitor called you thick-headed, slow-witted, and an utter waste of Pureblooded genetics--multiplied just because you were a Weasley blood-traitor, according to him. I'm very pleased to say he was utterly wrong," the tanned wizard continued as the freckled one across from him tensed. "But I won't tell him that. The more the other side underestimates you, the better-off you'll be when you need a decisive victory."

"Will you be helping us, on the day of that decisive victory?" Harry asked him.

"In my own way. But not until the last confrontation," Russel pointed out. His hand slid further up the inside of Hermione's thigh, pressing lightly into her denim-covered mound under the shelter of the table. "And even then, it might be more advantageous for me to stay in the background."

"Don't want to give up your position?" Ron asked pointedly. "Enjoying lurking in the darkness of the other side, too much?"

"Ron!" Hermione protested.

Russel leveled an impatient look at the wizard across from him. "If we cannot catch his followers--and do not say the Dark Lord's name in my presence, if you please--then someone will still need to be on the inside, so that their post-war hiding places can be more easily found. I'd think that a chess-player like you would know that you always plan for several moves past your point of victory, even if that victory seems assured at the time. No victory is *ever* that assured. Lay your strategies for the long-term, and save your tactics for the short-term. It's no use running around putting out one fire after the next, unless you're also trying to figure out how those fires are getting started, and how to prevent them from happening again."

"I didn't come here to be lectured at by some foreigner," Ron disparaged.

"Then consider it friendly advice. You've got a brain. Use it, and think things through. Not just to their end, but to the what-happens-now, after you've won or lost, in any endeavor. For that matter, hide what you're thinking," Russel added, looking at Harry. "The bastard traitor's gloated to me a couple of times about your shoddy Occlumency. If you ever want to get one up on him, you're going to have to work on keeping your spells silent, and your mind closed to all onlookers. If you can't hold your own against a fighter like Snape, you won't stand a chance against your real enemy."

Harry bristled at the name of their former teacher. "*Snape*. I'll kill him, for what he did!"

"Control your temper, Harry," Russel warned him coolly. "You cannot get to him. He's hidden at their Headquarters, which are obscured exactly like yours are, behind the Fidelius Charm. Do you really think his master is going to let him out where our side could get at him? You're not the only wizard in Britain who wants to kill him for what he's done. Focus on what you're supposed to be doing: fighting the Dark Lord. You don't kill the snake by stepping on its tail. You kill it by pinning it down by the head and crushing its skull."

"Which brings me to some information I have for you," Russel continued, pausing long enough to scoop some ice cream into his mouth. His other hand had wormed itself tighter against the groin of the witch on his left.

"What information?" Ron asked. Hermione was trying not to twitch under the rubbing stimulation Russel was applying to her flesh. It was just easier to let the boys do all the talking.

"...Brian asked me to keep an eye and an ear open for any unusual interests, requests, obsessions, objects, or information about his past, or items Marvolo may have stolen, or people he may have murdered. Shortly before I came here, he sent two of his agents--one of them that slimy rat--on a quest to some cave. Possibly on the coast, since I overheard them talking about how to use a boat. And something about a necklace. Unfortunately, I didn't get to hear the location, nor what the importance of the necklace was, just that they were to ensure that it was still there."

The trio exchanged quick glances. Harry's hand had crept halfway to his chest, before detouring abruptly. He picked up his spoon instead, clearing his throat. "That's definitely something different. You'll need to get back there as soon as possible, to hear what'll happen upon their return."

"It sounded like they were going someplace else, first, and that they would wait to enter the cave tonight, under cover of darkness. I have a little time, I think. And I can't return too early, myself."

"Why not?" Ron asked.

"Because I'm supposed to be infiltrating your good graces, among other things." Russel's left hand was now pressing rhythmically into Hermione's mound, while his right hand scooped up more of his dessert. The movement of his left arm was subtle, just a flexing of his fingers and forearm, both concealed below the edge of the age-worn, polished oak of the table.

"Considering you're being rather straightforward with us, that isn't taking very long," Harry pointed out. "What are the other things you have to do?"

"The none-of-your-business sort of things," Russel retorted as soon as his mouth was clear. Hermione put her own spoon into her dish, done with her dessert. Wiping her mouth on a paper napkin, she dropped her hands to her lap, covertly covering the Canadian wizard's hand. Not to stop him, though she didn't exactly encourage him. It was nerve-wracking, being physical seduced like this in front of her two best friends, one of them her old boyfriend, the other her newly made brother. Nerve-wracking, but titillating, too.

"Oy, if you expect us to trust you, you can't just say it's none of our business!" Ron protested as he scooped the last bit of his apple-and-caramel ice cream out of the air above its dish. "What do you have to do?"

Russel licked chocolate ice cream from his spoon, smiling. "...You don't want to know what I have to do, trust me. You won't like hearing it."

"Yes, I do," Ron repeated stubbornly. "Tell us!"

"As you wish... After I'm done ingratiating myself into your little circle, I am supposed to abscond with my wife and continue with my seduction of her. And don't say I didn't warn you," Russel grinned mockingly as Ron's jaw tightened with a wince. "I told you that you wouldn't like hearing it. Perhaps you should try trusting me just a little bit more."

Hermione trapped his hand against her mound. "Stop it, both of you! I'm not something to be fought over, like a bone tossed in front of two dogs! ...And I'll hear no more of *that* particular topic out of either of you, especially in a public setting," she warned both men. "It's not appropriate for the two of you to be bickering over *my* love-life, when I have not given either of you permission to do so!"

Harry looked like he was biting back the urge to cheer her on. Ron looked embarrassed at being chastised, but somewhat sullen as well. Russel merely studied her a long moment, then spoke softly. "I apologize. That was inconsiderate of me, and inappropriate."

His promptness and quiet sincerity mollified her. Releasing his hand, she rested her forearms on the table. "You're forgiven." A glance at Ron and she prompted, "...Well?"

"Well, what?" he asked defensively.

Hermione almost demanded that he apologize, too, but Russel's fingers shifted and tightened on her thigh. It was a warning to not press the younger wizard, for pressing him would only make him dig in his heels stubbornly, defensively. Letting out a sigh, she shook her head. If Ron couldn't think for himself that an apology was necessary, then her telling him to do so wasn't going to help the matter; he had to figure out for himself that it was the mature thing to do, as Russel had shown. "...Never mind, Ron."

There were some situations where a more mature man was preferable.

"Are you finished, Jane?" Russel asked her lightly. When she nodded, he stood and helped shift her seat back. Nodding to the others, he tucked Hermione's hand around his elbow. "Then we'll go. Don't bother waiting for us, gentlemen. She'll return home when we're through."

Ron's face twisted with disgust, and even Harry winced.

"--Get that perving thought out of your heads, you hosers!" Russel chided them, wrinkling his nose. "We have an unfinished game of Factoid Folly waiting for us. Not *all* seduction attempts involve a bed, you know... See you later."

"Have a good day," Hermione added over her shoulder as he guided her out of Fortescue's shop.

Russel didn't wait to step from under the eaves into the rain. He Disapparated both of them as soon as they were clear of the door. Squeezing free of the awful sensation of traveling that way, they Apparated into the same hotel room as before. Nothing had changed, other than a bit of tidying. Even the same books and games were still stacked on a corner of the dining table.

"Did you re-rent this place?" Hermione asked, curious.

"No. It's being considered 'under renovation' at the moment, as a part of the deal I worked out with the hotel manager. It's my refuge to come back to, whenever I want. No one but the two of us know exactly where it is."

"...Except that I don't actually know where we are," Hermione pointed out pragmatically, "other than in some Muggle hotel."

"And you're wisest to continue not knowing, for as long as possible." Crossing to the nightstand, Russel turned on the alarm clock, which was also a radio. A bit of fiddling with the tuning knob, and he had it set on a station playing slow, sultry music. Returning to her, he held out his hands. "Shall we dance?"

"I thought we had a game of Factoid Folly to continue," she countered, stepping into his arms.

"I'd rather dance, right now. I have an urge to hold you in my arms," Russel murmured, tucking her against him as he moved them gently into a two-step. "I never get the chance to dance, really. When you're in Slytherin House, *everyone* learns how to dance, but I was always a bit of a bookworm, and of course I was the ugliest troll to tromp through the halls. Not even the homeliest of the girls wanted to be asked out by me. Nor would they have asked me, even if it were Sadie Hawkins Day."

"So you never got to dance while you were in school?" Hermione asked him, curious.

"Only with an assigned partner during lessons, for most of my time there. Naturally I grew tired of my inept reputation with the opposite sex. In my sixth year, I saved all of the pin-money my mother had given me for snacks, and in the summer before my seventh year, visited...well, a certain establishment in Knockturn Alley that provides lessons in how to treat a woman, for a price. When I came back to school, I was a lot more confident, and from the gossip churning in the rumor-mill, a lot more competent than my contemporaries...but it still took quite a lot of finagling to get a girl into my arms.

"...You don't mind me telling you about this?" Russel added, leaning back to look down at her. "Any twinges of discomfort? I can't exactly expect twinges of jealousy, I know, but I thought you'd appreciate learning something about me."

"I don't mind. I'm feeling a few tiny twinges, but it's not a big deal," Hermione admitted, shrugging as he gathered her close again. They were swaying more than two-stepping, but she didn't really care. His arms were warm, his scent wonderfully male, and he was telling her something about his past. "Besides, how can I object, when it's clear to me you learnt your lessons well?"

He chuckled, at that. "I didn't even hope you'd look at it that way, but it's true. And the money I spent was well-invested, I'd say, if you're enjoying my expertise."

"Maybe I should get some lessons, too," Hermione joked--and found the urge to laugh squeezed out of her as he stopped swaying in favour of holding her breathlessly tight.

His jaw left her temple, his head sliding down next to hers. When he spoke, Russel's voice was deceptively quiet. Dangerously soft. "You will not seek out another man for such things, Jane. Not unless you wish to see Sigurd eating your would-be paramour. I don't care who he is, friend or foe; I will not be cuckolded. Do I make myself clear?"

Fear shivered down her spine. Up until now, Russel had seemed somewhat harmless. Friendly, for a man who'd joined the Death Eaters. Now Hermione wasn't so sure about him...or her situation. Knowing he was awaiting her reply, she muttered, "Very."

His grip eased slightly. One palm traveled down the tense line of her spine, the other slid up toward her hair. She shivered again, wondering what he was going to do to her, if she would need to go for her wand, or her bracelet.

"I've scared you," Russel murmured into her ear. "I'm sorry if I did...but I have very strong feelings about fidelity. My father cheated on my mother. When she couldn't stop his womanizing, she turned around and cheated on him. They broke my sense of home and family, and shattered my faith and trust. Thus I will not tolerate infidelity between us. I don't care if it's with a female instead of a male; you will not cheat on me."

Hermione shivered again, this time with pity for his childhood, and sympathy for his angst over the matter. The thought of her own parents cheating on each other was almost inconceivable, and she could only imagine how horrid his childhood must have been. His hands shifted to her upper arms, rubbing them slowly, soothingly. Pulling back slightly, he met her gaze, his grey eyes solemn and sincere as he rested his forehead against hers.

"I will be the only lover you will ever need, Jane, and your guide into the art of passion," he promised, looking into her eyes as their noses bumped and slid together. A twist of his head, and his lips pressed briefly to hers. "Whatever you want to try," he breathed between kissing her softly again, and again, "whatever you want to learn...we will learn it together...experiment...passion...playfulness...naughty secretary...disciplinarian boss..."

Hermione flushed with the memory. "Only if *I* get to be the boss, next time."

His eyes snapped wide, giving her a perfect view of his irises. Unlike most she'd seen, his weren't darker around the outer rims, just a uniform level of pewter grey broken only by natural striations. Mouth curving into a grin, he snatched her off her feet and whirled her around, squeezing the breath out of her a second time as he held her by her ribs and laughed. Setting her down again, Russel slanted his mouth over hers, devouring her startled gasp. His hands roamed all over her body, softly stroking here, clutching impatiently there.

Before she knew it, he'd backed her to the bed, sans blouse. To be fair, he placed her hands on the hem of his blue jumper, encouraging her to pull it over his head. That gave her a view of his tanned chest, with light brown hairs dusted lightly around his nipples and gathered in a faint treasure-line down to the waistband of his pocket-covered utili-kilt. His fingers tickled her spine as he pinched and released the hooks of her bra.

Turning even as he pulled the garment down, he sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her onto his lap so that she straddled him. From there, it was a delicious rub of her breasts against his sparsely furred chest, a wet, tongue-tangled mating of their mouths, and a surreptitious toeing of his boots from his feet. It wasn't as easy for her to slip her trainers from her feet, but she got them off, and only protested a little when he rolled them onto the bed with a muscular twist.

Of course, the way he rolled them ended up with their stocking-clad feet on the duvet-covered pillows, their heads down by the foot of the bed. That made Hermione laugh when she realized it. Breaking their kiss, Russel lifted himself up enough to frown down at her in puzzlement. She struggled to reply through her giddy sense of humor.

"We're...we're upside down! On the bed!"

Looking down the length of her body, he took in the position of their feet at the head of the mattress. A moment later, he chuckled. "I guess we are 'upside-down', aren't we?"

"Almost--there!" she gasped, grabbing and flipping the hem of his navy utili-kilt, so that it bared his white-cotton covered rump. "Now we're upside-down! Wheeeeeee!"

He stiffened over her, his face shuttering. Hermione, not sure why he wasn't laughing anymore, tickled his ribs. Russel spasmed. Sensing a weakness, she attacked him again, tickling her way up to his armpits. Cursing, he rolled off of her, clamping his upper arms to his sides. Hermione followed, determined to vanquish her prey. Grey eyes narrowing as she reared over him, he snapped his hands up and started tickling her back. Squealing, Hermione quickly found herself writhing on her back as he reversed their positions, stimulating her ruthlessly until she couldn't breathe.

His wand appeared in his hand, flicking over her body as she tried to protect herself from his remaining hand. Her jeans unsnapped and unzipped themselves, slithering off of her legs, taking her underthings with them. His kilt and his own undergarments removed themselves at the same time, even their socks joining the pile of clothing skittering to the bench at the foot of the bed. Kneeling beside her, Russel resumed tickling her, brushing aside her hands as she tried to tickle him back.

The need to protect herself had her curling up in a ball on her back--and that was when he attacked. Shuffling to position himself beyond her rump, he leaned over her, tickled her until she tried to push him away with her legs, then grabbed her knees, parted her legs, and slotted himself with breath-stealing accuracy in her core. A withdrawl and a plunge of his erection shattered Hermione. Head arching back, she cried out at the blissful, aching pleasure peaking through her overwrought nerves. He pushed strongly through her climax, pumping steadily into her body, riding through her shockwaves with single-minded concentration.

Drifting down from her bliss, Hermione was aware that he hadn't traveled up there with her. With his weight braced on his arms and his knees, however, he was vulnerable to her own attack. So, with re-gathering, she slid her fingertips up his arms to his biceps--and stole in to his ribs, tickling them and his armpits. He bucked into her; a harsh breath escaped him, a hissing, choking, ambushed laugh as his body thrust with involuntary strength. Biting back a moan, Hermione tickled him again, avoiding the way his arms tried to clamp her fingers in place by tormenting his nipples, next.

His head lowered with a growl--and she grabbed him by the back of the neck, lifting her mouth to his ear. An obscenity escaped him as his concentration broke. She had just enough strength to hold his head in place so she could suck on his earlobe; the rest of him bucked like a bull-ride. It was rough, it was wild, and it was accompanied by the sexiest growls she'd ever heard. Earlobe-sucking apparently drove him wild, and a Russel who had been driven wild drove her wild, for he grabbed her hands--freeing his head--and pinned her to the mattress.

It was his turn to suckle her earlobe, his breath puffing hot and harsh against the side of her head. Dragging her wrists together, he gripped them together with those long, strong fingers, and used the other hand to grip her hair, dragging her head back with scalp-prickling but not quite painful force. Still driving into her with implacable force, he bit and sucked her throat, not quite drawing blood, but definitely drawing moans from her vocal chords. There was no denying that she wanted this; not with her legs wrapped around her waist, her hips flexing to meet his own, nor when she spasmed from the grinding of the base of his prick against her clitoris as he bottomed out on each stroke.

This wasn't tender lovemaking; this was fucking, and it was glorious. Hands squirming free, Hermione dragged her arms down, raking her nails over his shoulders as she shuddered in his arms a second time. Growling her name, he pressed himself as deeply as he could, shuddering with the force of his ejaculation. Rather than collapsing onto her as the last of his orgasm was dragged from his flesh, he sagged slowly, veering slightly to the side so that he ended up covering only part of her body with his limp, sated weight.

Sated and limp, but not still. One hand stroked her sweat-dampened skin. Fingers moulding to her curves, he caressed her in a gentle, tender contrast to the roughness of before. Her own hands moving with equal lassitude, Hermione returned the touches with gentle strokes of her own. Neither of them said anything, just listened to the calming of their hearts, and the soft music playing on the clock-radio, and the whispering of palms against cooling skin.

It took a little while, but their caresses turned more purposeful than soothing. It was a gradual thing, until it felt natural to be exchanging soft kisses as well as soft touches. And not too long after that, his hands urged her into place over him, positioning his re-aroused flesh so that she could sink onto him. This time, their coupling wasn't nearly as heated, but it wasn't tepid, either. This time, she came by the circling of her hips as she rode him, and the gentle touch of his fingers on either side of her swollen, sensitive clitoris.

He hadn't climaxed yet. Climbing off of him, Hermione did something very daring. Pushing him back down when he started to rise and roll over her, she kissed her way down his chest to his turgid flesh. It was slick with their combined essences, and fragrant with the scents of their lusts. Swirling her tongue over his flesh, Hermione licked Russel's erection. Taking it into her mouth after a few moments, she started stroking with one hand in counterpoint to the bobbing and sucking of her lips.

It wasn't easy, trying not to scrape him with her teeth, but she managed for the most part. And it didn't take long to taste her reward, as he grunted and spurted his salty-musky jism into her mouth. As soon as she had licked the last seeping trickles from his flesh, Hermione crawled back up the length of his body. His fingers speared into her curls, pulling her mouth to his.

Again, his tongue swept past her lips, seeking to share the flavour of his own essence on her lips. Distractedly, Hermione made a mental note to suckle but not swallow,

the next time. As it was, their passionate play had sapped much of the energy from her body. Draping herself along his side, she sagged into him when the kiss ended, content to rest her head on his shoulder, since the pillows were still at the wrong of the bed from them.

A stretch, and he grabbed the wand that had ended up on the bench beyond their heads, along with their clothes. A flick, and their bodies floated up, rotating slowly around as the bedcovers slithered this way and that. As soon as they were oriented correctly, they settled onto the sheets, and the blankets drew themselves up over their bodies. Russel stretched again and placed his wand on the nearer of the two nightstands, then stroked her hair. "Rest, wife. We have a few more hours, before either of us has to leave..."

His words reminded her of what was due to happen tonight, when Dolohov and Pettigrew reached the cave that Harry and Dumbledore had visited, that fateful, dreadful night. Hermione knew Harry and Ron weren't going to admit to Russel that they had the locket, and that it had been destroyed. She wanted to confess to him, to confide in him...but she really didn't know if he'd be able to keep this information secret from the Dark Lord. Protestations of Occlumency aside, she just couldn't take that risk.

It felt wrong to keep this secret from him. Guilt-inducing, and uncomfortable. They were married, however strangely it had come about; Hermione had always believed husbands and wives strengthened a marriage by sharing things, and weakened it by holding back secrets. But the war was forcing this upon her, and even their marriage had been forced into existence by circumstances. He hadn't been forced to give her the ring, but he had done so anyway; it was his means of communicating with someone in the Order, and he'd sent it to her. She might've been able to save herself without donning the ring, but it would've been very difficult, so she had taken the easier path.

They'd made their bed, and now they had to lie in it, wrinkles, mismatched sheets, and all. At least the sex was good. Breathtakingly good. The cuddling was nice, too, she decided, enjoying the reflexive tightening of his arm as she snuggled closer under the covers. No, the information about the locket, which would lead to the whole mess with Voldemort's Horcruxes, she'd be wiser to keep to herself right now.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (**HBP SPOILERS**)

Obligatory mid-story disclaimer: All of my fanfic stories are parodies, and are not written for profit.

Flitwick's always gotten the wrong end of the stick, in fanfics--just because he's short and old doesn't mean he's not sharp as the proverbial tack! He's the Head of Ravenclaw, for crying out loud! So, here's his chance to shine. ~Lotm

XIII.

Ron took one look at her when she entered the parlour late that evening, hair still damp from her shower and face still glowing from what she and Russel had done in that shower, and stomped out of the room. The freckled wizard slammed the door behind him, too, causing one of the few portraits not stuck to the walls with a Permanent Sticking Charm to fall to the floor, cracking the glass over the photograph of a young, sardonic-looking Sirius Black. Harry rose from his seat at the table where he'd been playing a game of chess with his friend, crossed to the fallen portrait, and picked it up.

His hand touched the undamaged portion of the glass for a moment. Hermione knew he was thinking of Sirius. She'd liked the man, herself, but not as much as Harry had. It wouldn't have been prudent to tell Harry why she hadn't liked Sirius as much; the man had been reckless and irresponsible, immature on several levels. She didn't hate him or anything, but Hermione had wished Sirius could've been a better influence on Harry, in the past. But that was the past, and there was nothing she could do to change his disappearance from the realm of the living.

Rising, she moved to stand next to her brother, and drew her wand. "*Vitrium reparo.*"

The glazing in the frame repaired itself. "That's a good charm," Harry praised her quietly, re-hanging his godfather's portrait. "You're very good with them."

"--Good or not," Mrs. Figg's voice interjected from her chair by the fireplace, where she was crocheting something in a shade of blue close to the colour of Alastor Moody's eye, "both of you have been neglecting your chores. I realize this is your house, young Harry, and that Hermione as your sister is technically the lady of the house, since you don't have a wife, but I am the one stuck here, day in and day out, unable to leave. I am not going to do all of the chores by myself. Certainly not when I don't have the magic to speed things along. I am the de facto general of this house, by virtue of my being stuck here night and day."

Hermione and Harry exchanged glances, but didn't protest. They were in the land of adulthood, now. That meant shouldering even the littlest of responsibilities. Hermione answered for both of them. "What would you like us to do, Mrs. Figg?"

"Harry, the floors down here need sweeping, and the kitchen floor in particular needs a good scrubbing. Hermione, you need to do the dishes. That Charms professor of yours should've taught you the necessary basic household cleaning spells...and if not, you both come from Muggle backgrounds. I'd appreciate it if you did your chores before bed," Arabella Figg added. "Whenever that might be."

Her tone wasn't quite exasperated to the point of chiding, but the two of them got the point: keeping odd hours was not a worthy enough excuse to get out of pulling their weight around here.

"I'll sweep and scrub the kitchen last," Harry told Hermione. She nodded and headed for the kitchen.

The pile of dishes waiting to be cleaned shocked her, until she realized there must've been a post-Order-meeting supper, the sort often planned by Molly Weasley. It wasn't like Molly to just leave the dishes. A closer look at the double sink showed one full of soapy, somewhat dirty water, the other with rinse-water. There were a couple dishes in each sink, and a damp drying towel lay on the counter. Hermione filled in the rest, mentally. Ron had come storming in here, upset with the fact that Hermione couldn't help looking satisfactorily shagged, to use crude terminology. His mother, seeing him upset, would've followed him, perhaps upstairs to his room, to have a talk with him.

Indeed, the back stairs creaked and Mrs. Weasley came back into view. She froze for a moment at the sight of Hermione, flushing, then headed for the sink. "I realize you can't help your circumstances, dearie," Molly told her in a weary voice. "And that you're just...just trying to take whatever small enjoyment you can out of them..."

"It's alright, Mrs. Weasley. I'll do the dishes," Hermione interjected, changing the subject. "You look like you've had a long day."

"The...the Pardgeters were attacked," Molly admitted, looking more weary than ever. She seemed lost for a moment, until Hermione took her gently by the elbow and led her to a chair at the kitchen table. "I was only a year behind Louisa. She was in Hufflepuff. A good Chaser. Five children. They're all grown and were out of the house, thankfully, but...how can I tell them that their mother is gone? And...in such a fashion?" Hazel eyes staring bleakly at the stacks of dishes, Molly shuddered. "All I could think was, that could've been me. That could've been *you*--that was *almost* you, what they did to her..."

Hermione realized with a twinge of discomfort what the older woman was talking about. Mrs. Pardgeter had been brutalized before being killed. Just like she'd nearly been. She wanted to go find Russel and demand why hadn't he known, why hadn't he told her, why hadn't he given her a chance to stop the attack...but she knew why. He'd been with her, for one. And...painful though it was to admit the necessity...even if he had known about the attacks in advance, a savvy spy didn't cast suspicion upon himself by trying to thwart every attack he overheard. Most likely, in fact, Russel was only passing along the information when there were one to three other wizards who also heard or overheard the same news, to spread the suspicion and blame.

It wasn't even Halloween, but Hermione wanted this whole masquerade of evil to be exposed and destroyed for good, as soon as possible. Because it could've been herself who had been brutalized, probably even raped as well as tortured, and in the end killed by a bunch of psychotic, asinine, bigoted megalomaniacs. Moving to the sink, Hermione drained the water from both basins and refilled them with fresh hot water, pouring dish soap into one, and a splash of vinegar into the other, the way her mother had taught her. The vinegar would help remove the last bits of grease, and disinfect the dishes. And right now, she wanted to scrub those dishes the non-magical way, to give her hands something to do.

Eventually, she heard Molly leave, no doubt in search of Arthur and the comfort of his arms. Pulling the plate she was working on out of the water, she started to wipe it with the tea-towel. It took her a moment to realize the pattern of the ring had altered. Russel was trying to contact her. Hastily setting down the plate she eyed the ring to see what the short message might be, but it was already turning back to scales.

"No...no, no, no," Hermione breathed, dismayed that she'd missed the message.

What if it was another Louisa Pardgeter? She hadn't noticed the heating of the ring because her hands had been immersed in hot, soapy water, and now her negligence was going to cost some family their lives! *If only there was some way to recall whatever he'd sent! Some sort of message-taking system...*

Her right hand, still damp, cupped her forehead. The cut of the scales gleamed up at her. Blinking, Hermione clutched desperately at the only thing she could think of that might work. Holding up her left hand, she commanded, "Sigurd, you are summoned!"

The dragonette glittered into existence, wrapping himself around her arm; his golden eyes stared into her amber brown as he waited for her command.

"Sigurd...can you recall any of the messages Russel and I have exchanged through the rings?"

His horned, cat-like head bobbed. "Yessssss, Misssstresssss."

"--You can?" Hermione blinked. "That's great! What was the message that he just sent?"

Sigurd craned his head and looked at his scaled back. The scales rippled and rearranged themselves into neat script.

Locket missing, owner furious, trio suspected of theft, wand destruction, do not leave Headquarters!

Leaving the sink, Hermione hurried up the back stairs. She knocked upon Harry and Ron's door, a flurry of blows that continued until Harry jerked open the door. Hermione was relieved to see Ron sitting on the edge of his bed, scowling in her direction, and not out wandering somewhere. Calming herself, she nodded at the room. "I just got a message. Can I come in?"

Harry opened the door, stepping back so she could enter. Closing it, he warded it against noise.

"Let me guess," Ron muttered angrily, glaring at the dragonette still curled on her shoulder. "*Now* he's written to tell you about the Pardgeters? It's a bit late for that."

"Don't be an arse, Ron," Hermione snapped. "We can't rescue everyone, no matter how much *all* of us might wish it! No, he just told me that Voldemort's spies came back. He knows that the locket is missing, and Russel says that he thinks *we* had something to do with the theft, and with the reported destruction of the Ravenclaw wand. He's onto us. Russel couldn't say much about his orders, but from the sounds of it, stepping outside tonight would be a very bad idea, for any of us--"

Sigurd vanished abruptly as the ring heated. Hermione lifted her hand, and read the letters scrawling themselves out of the scales on its surface. She gasped at what she saw.

The Grangers.

"Shite--Mum and Dad! Harry, help me!" Hermione shouted, and closed her eyes, concentrating through her panic. It was possible to Disapparate *out* of Headquarters, though it was very difficult to Apparate *into* Headquarters, thanks to all the protective spells on it, and the nature of the Fidelius Charm. But she could leave, in a hurry. A squeezing *pop*, and she appeared in the first-floor hall. She heard a *pop* a moment later from down the stairs, and then another one.

"--Hermione?"

Hermione didn't bother answering Harry's shout. Not when she had one of her own to make. It was roughly the Grangers' usual bedtime, but if they'd decided to catch a movie... "Mum! Dad!"

Her father opened his bedroom door, his shirt halfway unbuttoned. "Hermione? Harry? What are you shouting about?"

"Where's Mum?" Hermione asked, pushing past him. She heard two sets of footsteps charging up the stairs after her, but didn't stop to look back. Her mother appeared in the doorway of their private bath, her face smeared with make-up remover, her shoulders draped with a towel. She'd removed her blouse, but not her trousers. Glass crashed somewhere downstairs, making her parents flinch.

"What's going on?" Jeffrey Granger demanded as Harry and Ron burst into the bedroom.

"We're taking you to Headquarters," Harry asserted, wrapping his arm around the older male.

"--Harry, we *can't*!" Hermione hissed at him. She flung her wand-hand at the bedroom door, slamming it shut with an unspoken spell. "We're not the Secret Keeper!"

"Right." Pushing his new father close to his mother, Harry hissed at both of them, "The residence of the Weasleys is the Burrow, three miles east south-east of Ottery-St. Catchpole! Remember that!" A wrap of his arms around Jeffrey Granger, and both males vanished with a *pop*. Ron looked at Hermione, who nodded.

The door shuddered, making her mother squeak in fright. Hermione wrapped her arms around her mother and hissed, "Don't struggle!"

The door burst open in a shower of orange sparks even as they squeezed out of the room, and the last view Hermione had of her parents' home was the sight of a trio of Death Eaters invading her parents' sanctum, and Ron slashing his wand wordlessly through the air. A breathless moment later, they *popped* back into existence in the middle of the Weasley's yard. The night air was frosty, the start-strewn sky only partially covered in clouds, and her mother clutched at the towel draped over her brassiere, shivering. A scary two heartbeats after their arrival, Ron Apparated into view. Deeply relieved, Hermione hustled her mother into the ramshackle house that was the Burrow.

Bill was still a little wide-eyed at the sudden sight of them, but Fleur was showing her mettle once again, conjuring warm dressing gowns and fuzzy slippers, since the Grangers had already removed their shoes for the night. Hermione caught her father staring wide-eyed at the beautiful quarter-Veela, and elbowed him. "Dad, this is Bill Weasley's wife, Fleur Weasley, and of course Bill Weasley. He's Arthur and Molly's eldest son. Bill, Fleur, these are Jeffrey and Daphne Granger, my parents. Mine and Harry's, now."

"Right...right. Sorry for the imposition, but we, uh...seem to have been evicted from our home," Jeffrey finished lamely, as Daphne drew the edges of her borrowed dressing gown tight across her blouse-less chest. Hermione's father turned to face her, Harry and Ron. "What happened?"

"I'll go get Mum and Dad, and let the others know what's happened," Ron murmured, touching Harry's shoulder. Disapparating back to Headquarters with a crack, he left the six of them alone in the kitchen.

Harry explained. "Russel--the fellow with the rings--sent a message to Hermione, stating that you were about to be attacked by the Death Eaters. So we raced over there and snatched you out, just as they started their attack. They'll, erm, probably smash up the house a bit, since they couldn't get to you. And it'll be dangerous for you to go back for a while."

"But...our practice!" Daphne protested, touching her husband's arm. "I've got an eight o'clock root canal!"

Bill and Fleur blinked, unfamiliar with the Muggle terminology.

"Mum, Dad," Harry stated, stumbling only a little over the honorifics, "your lives are more important than your dentistry practice. We could put the Fidelius Charm on your house, and you'd be safe there, but only at home. We can't put it on your office. Not if you want your patients to find the place."

"Well, I'm not going to be chased out of my own home, and certainly not my own employment!" Daphne snapped, indignant. "Your father and I worked hard to put that practice together, and I'm not about to let a bunch of nasty arse-wipes scare me out of my livelihood!"

--Daphne!" Jeffrey gasped, staring at his wife as if she'd grown a second creme-covered head.

"I'm not! I'm tired of living in fear! I'm tired of worry about our daughter--and now we have a son to fret over! When is this stupid war going to end?" she demanded, and burst into tears. Her hands came up to cover her face. They encountered the goop on her skin, dragging a disgusted, frustrated groan out of her. Yanking her towel free, Mrs. Granger scrubbed her face with it, letting the worn terrycloth muffle her sobs.

Her husband took her into his arms, giving what little comfort he could to her. Glancing up, Jeffrey spotted Harry and Hermione, and held out his hand to the two of them. Hermione pushed Harry forward when he hesitated, then circled around to her mother's other side, helping the two men wrap their arms around the woman in the middle.

A few moments later, Molly and Arthur Weasley hurried into their kitchen, Charlie and Ron at their heels, exclaiming and fussing over their shaken visitors. It didn't take long before they were all settled in the parlour with hot cups of tea, Hermione and Harry squeezed into the sofa on either side of their parents, and the resident clutch of Weasleys gathered in the chairs and loveseat grouped around them. But brainstorming a safe way for the Grangers to return to their home and their livelihood came up against the one stumbling block the whole Order suffered: a serious shortage of manpower.

Hermione wanted to guard her parents, but she had other things she had to do, more important things, hard as it was to admit even to herself. Sitting in her parent's office all day as they worked was a waste of her time, the same with Harry and Ron. There was just no one to spare to watch them, yet there was no telling how long the war would drag on; the Grangers might be professionals, and dentistry might be relatively lucrative, but their bank balances were finite. They had to work to support themselves. And if they were gone too long, they'd lose their roster of patients to other dentists; once the war was over, their practice would have to be rebuilt from practically nothing, if they went into hiding.

"...If only they could use magic," Ron muttered ruefully, dropping his head to his chest as he rubbed at the back of his neck. "A wand, a talisman, *anything* that could make them safe or get them out of there, if they're attacked..."

"A pity they can't use a Portkey," Harry muttered.

Arthur sat up in his arm chair. "Why can't they use a Portkey, Harry? They can't *make* a Portkey, but they could certainly use it!"

Hermione and Harry glanced up at him.

"Don't you remember? I told you this, when we went to the World Quidditch Cup," Mr. Weasley reminded them. "That's why we made all those Portkeys to look like an object too manky and nasty for the average Muggle to even think of picking up. Anyone touching a Portkey when it's activated will get transported. Doesn't matter if they're Muggle, Wizard or Squib, one touch at the wrong moment, and they're gone!"

--Dad's right," Charlie offered, sitting up himself. "I've heard they can even be activated by a phrase, or an action. They don't have to be timed. If we can get our hands on the right spellbook, we could make the Grangers a couple of pendants that they could wear all the time, and if they're attacked, the amulets can be set to Port them here, where they'll be safe until the attack is over!"

"Ruddy brilliant!" Ron agreed, his exhaustion visibly easing as excitement took its place. "I know we can't save everyone this way, but there's a few key Muggles and Squibs we could make Portkey Amulets for, too!"

"What's a Squib?" Jeffrey asked the youngest redhead.

"Well, they're sort of like when you have a wizard or a witch born into a Muggle family," Arthur explained, "only it's the other way around. It's someone who can't do magic who's born into a wizarding family."

"No magic, at all?" Daphne asked. "How curious. And how awkward, if they can't see the things that Hermione says only wizards and witches can see."

"Well, that's not entirely true," Harry interjected. "Squibs can *see* magical creatures and things like that, like a wizard can, but they can't *use* magic, in the sense that a wizard can. No spell-casting, no potion-making, nothing like that. But they can see the things the Muggles can't see. Mrs. Figg saw the Dementors that attacked me, two summers ago, but she couldn't have wielded a wand to save her life, never mind my own."

"Mrs. Figg?" Daphne asked her adopted son.

"She's a Squib that used to live near my aunt and uncle's place," Harry explained. "She had to relocate because of the war, but she had already retired, so it wasn't as severe a problem to uproot herself as it would be for you. But I really think the Portkey amulets will work, and you'll be able to go back to your dentistry practice."

"How soon can you get them made?" Daphne asked him. "I don't want to put off that root-canal; it's a nasty one."

"We'll see what we can do," Hermione promised. "A Portkey's a tricky spell to cast to begin with, and modifying it so that it takes a vocal trigger rather than a temporal one... Can you do it, Mr. Weasley?"

"Erm...no, unfortunately. I do have a minor talent for Artificing, but that's more in the line of a Charm. Charlie, Bill? Fleur?" All three of them shook their heads. Arthur sighed. "Alastor could do it, but he's off on an assignment, and won't be back for a while."

"Then I'll have to consult with Professor Flitwick," Hermione decided. "I can cast a Portkey, and I'm pretty sure I can make the necessary adjustments to the Charms--I'm really good at improvising Charms," she admitted with a little blush as her parents eyed her in wonder, "but I want to get this one right, and that means consulting with an

expert. With luck, I should be able to get back to you before dawn with the amulets. Harry, I'll need your Cloak."

"We'll go with you," Ron stated.

Hermione shook her head. "Both of you need to get some sleep, and be well-rested. If the professor and I can't get the Portkeys made before morning, you might as well accompany Mum and Dad to their practice. It's a bit late to be canceling appointments now, unless we want some of their patients to be caught in the crossfire. And this way, only one of us loses sleep, tonight."

"My Cloak's in my room, back at Headquarters," Harry reminded her as she leaned in and kissed her mother on the cheek. "I'll stay here with them."

"Mum, Dad," Hermione murmured apologetically as she rose to her feet, "I'm really sorry this is happening. We're all doing what we can to stop it, but it's going to take time, and it's only going to get worse, before the end."

"How much worse?" her father asked quietly.

Helpless to explain just how much worse, Hermione looked at the Weasleys. She didn't want to have to tell her mother that she could end up like poor Mrs. Pardgeter. But it wasn't up to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley to explain the facts of war. Sighing roughly, she admitted, "Worse than what almost happened to me. These are not sane people, though they may justify to themselves what they're doing. We'll do what we can to protect you."

"It's an insane world, where it's the child that has to protect the parent," Jeffrey Granger muttered. "I know you're of-age--both of you--but I would rather be the one protecting you. And it's very frustrating, even frightening, to realize that your mother and I can't do that for you."

"I know, Dad. You protected and sheltered me for as long as you could. Now it's my turn to do the same for you, and hope that what you taught me, and what I learnt at the school, can help protect you. I'll see you as soon as I can," Hermione promised, stepping back so that she was clear of obstructions. A last, throat-tight look at her shaken, unhappy parents, and she Disapparated from the Weasleys's living room.

Some parts of growing-up weren't very fun at all.

...

Taking a deep breath, Hermione clutched the envelope she had enchanted, and intoned, "Polka-dotted plaid!"

Her stomach lurched sideways. So did the rest of her body. Unsquinting her eyes, Hermione nervously checked her body to make sure nothing had been left behind. Not that she'd have far to go to reunite the two, since she'd only enchanted the Portkey envelope to take her across Filius Flitwick's sitting room, but it was a relief to see she'd gotten the spell correct.

"Mah--aaaah!--rvelous, Miss Granger!" Filius praised her, hastily covering his mouth with his hand. "Pardon me, but it is awfully late, you know..."

A glance at the clock on the mantel made her feel guilty for keeping him up, since it was now past two in the morning. "I really appreciate this, Professor. Do you think I've managed it?"

"Third successful Porting in a row? I'd say you have. *Finite Incantatem*," he added, flicking his wand at the envelope in her hands. "Now...let's discuss the subject of payment."

Hermione stiffened. She hadn't expected him to say that. "...Payment?"

"An exchange of information," the Head of Ravenclaw explained, gesturing for her to sit in the chair next to his, where he had first indicated she should sit after letting her into his quarters.

Setting the envelope on the table between them, Hermione did so, glad that the chair was broad enough for someone of her size, even if the legs had been cut short enough for someone of his own size. Picking up the teapot on the coffee table, she refreshed her cup.

The Head of Ravenclaw nodded. "...Good. After that fiasco at the exhibition, I began thinking about what happened, and wondering what was going on. And, despite the confusion, I noticed two very peculiar things."

Oh dear god, here it comes Hermione thought, quelling the urge to flinch as she sipped her tea.

"You, Ron and Harry seemed to know what was going on...and you and Harry definitely knew what that tiny speck of light was," Filius told her, eyeing her shrewdly. "In fact, I'll hazard a guess that you already knew it would come out of my House-Founder's wand, in advance...which meant you *knew* the Dementor would pounce upon it, and devour it, which is why the two of you did what you did, coordinating your efforts. And the only thing a Dementor eats, aside from ambient joy and happiness...is a soul.

"Yet I find it impossible to believe that Rowena Ravenclaw, the smartest witch of her own and most other ages, would split her soul into the abomination of a Horcrux--do not look innocently at me, young lady," Filius ordered Hermione, who was trying to do that very thing. "You know what a Horcrux is, just as I do. I will not ask where you got this terrible information, but you *knew* it was a Horcrux! The question is," Professor Flitwick sighed unhappily, "the Horcrux of who?"

Horton Hears A Who. She couldn't help thinking of that, and choked on a snorted laugh. Covering her mouth with one hand, balancing her teacup on its saucer with the other, she blushed as the diminutive professor frowned. A wave of her hand staved off whatever chiding remark he might have made. "--Sorry, sorry. You just...um, said something that sounded like something else on a completely different topic, and it made me laugh. I know it's a very serious subject, but...I'll take any sort of laugh I can get, right now."

"With your parents' lives in danger, I'm not surprised," Filius stated, flicking his wand to tilt the teapot into his own cup, refilling it. "Let me put my Ravenclaw mind to work... Your parents lives were endangered shortly after the soul in the wand was destroyed. The wand exhibition was attacked by agents of the Dark Lord. May I presume that the unprintable sot is rather upset because that was the missing chunk of his own soul?"

Hermione lowered her teacup, swallowing. She stared into the amber depths contained in the delicate porcelain. She couldn't risk trusting him, even though she longed to do so.

"There's something more that you're not telling me," Filius squeaked. "Isn't there?"

She wished she could answer in the negative, that there wasn't anything else to the problem. But Hermione respected Professor Flitwick. If she'd had to pick a course of independent study, it would've been in either Charms or Transfiguration. Potions was just a matter of following the recipe and getting it right or not. Runes was assembling the right combination of symbology, and Arithmancy was calculating and predicting magical effects. Charms and Transfiguration, however, were much more fluid, and much more fascinating. She had a knack for transforming one object into another, and a knack for learning and moulding and improvising Charms. Lying to Professor Flitwick almost felt like she would be slapping him in the face, despite all that he'd taught her, all that he'd given her.

She just couldn't do it.

"Let us talk about the other odd thing that happened that weekend, shall we? Ronald Weasley, the Other Boy Who Lived," Filius stated, making her stomach twist. "I've seen the Killing Curse cast in the past, to my horror and regret. And, though I wasn't there and didn't see young Harry survive the curse that gave him his famous forehead scar...it seems to me that it would be highly unlikely that a second survival case would be so vastly different from the first.

"For one," he outlined in his squeaky voice, "Molly Weasley didn't sacrifice her life for her son's. Not because she wouldn't have, since I know she would've in a heartbeat for any of her children. She just wasn't there, and neither was Arthur. No one was there to sacrifice themselves, and invoke the ancient magic that Lily Potter infused into her son. For another, there was no backlash upon the caster, as there was in the infant Harry's case. And for a third curious thing, there was no scar. No injury, beyond a few bumps and bruises when Ronald fell. And yet the curse seemed to knock him over, without harming him."

Hermione sipped at her tea, silently trying to figure out a way to explain, or avoid explaining, any of this.

"And yet the only thing that could stop the curse is the Killing Curse actually terminating a life. Yes, I know about the silly rumors that the Curse hit a fly or something, but I'm not stupid. Even in Harry's case, the curse merely rebounded upon its caster, killing him...though now that I know of his Horcrux, I can finally understand how he could be brought back to life, as he apparently was just a few years ago," Filius reminded her. "So, Miss Granger...I am at a loss to understand how your other extraordinary young friend could've survived such a lethal attack without a proverbial scratch, unlike the Boy Who Lived."

She stayed carefully silent.

"Miss Granger...Hermione, *I want to help*," the miniature, aging wizard pleaded. "I foolishly thought that I was too old to fight, that I could remain safe behind these walls, until the end of last school year. But between what happened then, and what happened this last weekend, I realize I cannot let the excuse of my age retire me from the resumption of this war. And I may be too old to fight safely...Merlin knows my joints pain me terribly, even with Madam Pomfrey's potions...but I'm not too old to help someone else, to coach them in how to fight.

"It would be my honor to teach you, to help you prepare for whatever you must do. Even if it means staying up most of the night," he added dryly, glancing at the mantel clock again. "Hopefully not every night, but... My dueling days are numbered, but yours have just begun. Tell me what must be done, and I will help you. I pledge this to you."

Torn with indecision, Hermione bit her lower lip. *To tell, or not to tell, that is the question...and the Bard, I think, would forgive me for mangling his poetry... Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to stay silent and struggle on alone, or to take up his assistance, and in doing so, perhaps finding the means to oppose our enemy...*

She had to take the chance. Sipping at her cooling tea, Hermione cleared her throat. "The Dark Lord is...*less*...than half the man he should be."

"Eh?" Professor Flitwick asked her, puzzled by her comment.

"In fact, at one point, he was one eighth the man that he should've been. But he's lost some of what he should've been, since then."

Flitwick's eyes widened under his bushy white brows. "*Oh--*"

Her finger burned, making her hand twitch and rattle the teacup on its saucer. Glancing down at her left hand, Hermione saw the etched lines of the scales rearranging themselves into words. Lots of words. A conversation. Hastily setting down her tea, she scrambled through her pockets, snatching out her ball-point pen and tablet. But it was too hard to read the words on her finger, as they wrapped all the way around. The conversation came to an end before she could make sense of more than half of what was being said, and scrawl out maybe a tenth of it. "Damn it--Sigurd, you are summoned!"

Flitwick gasped as golden sparks spilled into the shape of a dragonette across her lap. A dragonette whose scales formed the words of the conversation being relayed. Hermione ignored her former professor. Whatever this message was, Russel had gone to a great deal of trouble to relay it as it had happened, meaning it was of a very timely importance.

"Sigurd, replay."

Obediently, the scales along his flank rearranged themselves into lettering.

...May have had something to do with what happened at the exhibition, Master, but I am not yet ensconced deeply enough in her good graces to find out the truth. Not subtly, at any rate.

A pity. But subtlety is needed, in your endeavor. Seduce and use the girl.

I will do my best, Master.

I know you will.

Do you have any further need for me, my Master? I must get back to my work.

You are dismissed, Dolohov, and you as well... As I was saying, Severus, I have a very important task for you. I want you to go to the Clover Street Orphanage, and look into the display cases in the entry hall. You should see a small, golden cup with two handles, and engraved with a very familiar mark, given your years of service. Make sure the cup is in the case, but do not touch it.

What would happen if I touched it, Master?

You would die, most painfully and horridly.

I do not understand. Why would this cup still be in a Muggle curio cabinet, if it kills whoever touches it? Surely some Muggle brat would've dropped dead by now, after having to dust the cabinet's contents?

It is enspelled so that no wizard or witch will survive, if they attempt to touch it or move it, but no Muggle-born can see it, nor touch it, nor be affected by its protections. There is a way around this stricture, but you do not need to know what that is. You are also to trap the cabinet, so that if anyone of magic comes within five feet of it, I will be alerted. I trust you will be able to follow through on my instructions. That silver-handed imbecile deserves what he suffered in the cave. Do be discreet; make sure no one is watching the place when you enter...

The scrawling words ended, and Sigurd's scales resumed their shape.

Orphanage--the orphanage where Tom Riddle grew up! And that description sounds like Helga Hufflepuff's cup! I've got to get to that orphanage first--but I daren't touch the cup--

"--Orran's Dilemma!" the white-whiskered wizard next to her exclaimed, making Hermione jump. She'd actually forgotten about Professor Flitwick. He turned to her with a gleam in his eyes. "I now have a million questions to ask you, young lady, but you haven't much time. Orran's Dilemma was about a wizard who was faced with a powerful piece of Dark Magic, a spell enchanted onto the item he needed to save himself, an item which he could not touch with his magical hands, but which a Muggle could not even see. His sister was a Squib, and so *she* could both see and yet still touch the object! She helped him when he cast the Displurum Charm by substituting a Transfigured copy of the original item into the physical location of the original, while he held the spell suspended in place, dimensionally--give me your pen and paper, girl!"

Bemused, Hermione handed them over. He scribbled something on the notepad, then shoved pen and tablet back to her. Glancing down, she saw a looping line, and a pair of words: *Incanto Displaro*.

"The wrist action is the mirror opposite of the Locomotor Charm," Filius instructed her, hopping off his chair and hurrying to the Floo. "I can't help you find a Squib to handle the cup--and I certainly wouldn't recommend Argus Filch; I don't trust the man one whit, given how much he hovered around Snape--but for whatever reason You-Know-

Who wants that cup to be in that place, you can bet I don't want him to have it! Take my tea-cup; you're good enough to Transfigure it into a replacement, and I won't miss it. Here's the Floo-pot--and for Merlin's sake, don't get caught! Snape is a very dangerous wizard!"

"I'll be careful," Hermione promised, dumping the tea out of the cup and scooping up the dragonette with one arm under his ribs with her other arm, as if he were Crookshanks. Scooping a cupful of Floo from the powder in the knee-high stand, Hermione cast some of it into the fireplace, mind racing. "Madam Pince's office!" Whirling through, she stumbled out of the broad hearth, oriented herself, and cast the rest of the powder from the teacup onto the coals. She couldn't have called out the Floo address she wanted while Flitwick was within hearing range, but this location would do for a waypoint. "Order of the Phoenix Headquarters!"

Another dizzying, bright green whirl, and she staggered free of the kitchen's large hearth, coughing from the soot. Dismissing Sigurd back into the ring, she hurried up the back stairs, drawing and swinging her wand, first to cleanse the teacup, then to practice. It wasn't easy, mirror-reversing the movements for the Locomotor Charm, but if she didn't practice, she wouldn't be able to get it right when she needed to cast the spell. Arabella Figg's room was the first door on the first floor. Banging on the aged oak panel, she flinched at the loudness of her knuckles, wondering how many people were sleeping at Headquarters tonight...but she had no choice. Mrs. Figg was the only Squib she knew she could call upon.

She banged harder, then flicked her wrist. "Accio Harry's Cloak!"

A door on the second floor banged open. A moment later, Mrs. Figg's door opened. So did a door down the hall, as Alastor Moody poked his head out into the hall. "What is going on, Granger?"

"I need Mrs. Figg! It's an emergency!" Catching the Invisibility Cloak as it soared down the back stairs, Hermione flung it over both her and the startled old woman. "Hold this around us, and make sure it covers all of us." Pointing her wand at the teacup, Hermione calmed her mind forcefully, focused on exactly where she wanted to go, and enchanted, "*Portus*."

Cupping the porcelain, she pushed it against the older woman's hand, took a firm grip on Mrs. Figg's waist and the folds of the Cloak, and held on as the Portkey activated. Arabella shrieked in surprise, then cut the sound off as the world streaked around them. They landed with a bump and a ruffle of the Cloak, which Hermione hastily pulled around them, peering through its gossamer weave at their surroundings.

By the light of a tiny bulb plugged into the wall not far away, serving as a nightlight, she read lettering on one of the plaques in the trophy-case. *Clover Hill Orphanage*. This was the right place. Glancing rapidly through the shelves, Hermione looked for what they needed, praying it wasn't on a top shelf. A cup with two handles, small, golden, marked with the sigil of a badger--*there!* It was on the bottom shelf. Convenient.

"Mrs. Figg," Hermione whispered, pointing under the Cloak. "Do you see that gold cup there, with the two handles? The one with the badger on the front?"

"Yes, yes, I do--why are we here?" Arabella hissed back. "You know I'm not supposed to leave the house!"

Hermione tapped the teacup with her wand, focusing her magic. Three taps, and it Transfigured into as exact a replica as she could manage. Another tap, and she refocused the purpose of the Portkey spell still infusing it. Now it was a trap; once the cup was set inside the case and left alone for five minutes, the next Squib who touched it would find themselves Ported to Hogsmeade. It was a fairly safe location, in her estimation; if it was an enemy, they'd be in the midst of wizards and witches, and wouldn't be able to do anything harmful without repercussions; if they were a friend, they'd be in the midst of wizards and witches, and would be able to find protection and assistance.

"Take this cup," she instructed the older woman. "When I tell you to, replace that cup with this one, as carefully and exactly as you can, but be quick about it. There's a spell on that cup, and it's deadly to wizards, but not to Squibs, so I'm going to transfer that spell from that cup to this one, when you switch them in place. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but...no...but..."

"Mrs. Figg, we don't have much time!"

Nodding shakily, Mrs. Figg gripped the cup. Hermione reached up and tapped the lock on the case, silently casting the Unlocking Charm. Easing the door open, she shifted positions with the older woman, then angled her wand-arm into the case, hooking it around the aluminium frame. One practice swish, two...on three, she cast the spell.

"*Incanto Displaro!*"

Black sparkles, with a sickly greenish undertone to them, seeped out of the cup, covering it like a shifting chenille fuzz. It was hard to hold the spell suspended, requiring most of Hermione's concentration. A nod of her head, and Mrs. Figg held her breath and carefully switched the cups, flinching as she touched the one in the case through the uplifted spell. A little bit of nudging, and the grey-haired Squib had the replacement buried inside the blackness. Waiting until her partner withdrew her arms, Hermione ended the displacement spell with the mirror-opposite flick that she'd have used for the Locomotor Charm, and watched with relief as the black-and-green fuzziness seeped back into the cup, turning it innocuous again.

Something down the hall *clicked*. Withdrawing her arm hastily, Hermione shut the case and tapped it silently, enchanting it to relocate itself. Drawing the Cloak over both of them, she poked it with her wand, focusing hard on silently turning the fabric into a Portkey that would whisk them out of there without a betraying bang like an Apparation would do. Arabella's breath caught. Glancing down the corridor, Hermione saw a pallid, long-nosed face and equally sallow hands easing into the corridor. The owner's dark hair and dark clothes blended with the shadows at that end of the hall.

Snape. Bastard traitor. A shiver raced down her spine at the sight of her former teacher, making her heart race. He moved toward them with that familiar, cat-like grace from the classroom, wand gripped in his hand, his stygian-black gaze silently perusing the contents of the display cases. Hermione had gone about it the smart way; she'd enchanted the Portkey teacup to take her to the exact case in which Helga Hufflepuff's cup resided, even if she herself didn't know where that was. But then, she'd had Filius Flitwick lecturing her on the variations of the Portus Charm. Smart as he was, she doubted Snape had ever consulted with his fellow professor on the subject of 'foolish wand-waving'. At least, not in recent years.

A glance down showed they were covered on that side by the Cloak. Grateful, Hermione activated the Portkeyed cloth, letting it hurl them away from the scene of their hasty crime. Landing back in the hallway on the first floor of the house at Grimmauld Place, Hermione disenchanting the Portkey spell on the Cloak and pulled it from their bodies. Her hand hovered over the double-handled cup in Arabella's hands for a moment of indecision, then she touched it, trusting in her spell-casting abilities.

Nothing happened. She'd displaced the original spell correctly. Shoulders slumping in relief, Hermione took the cup, grateful it had worked. "Please do not speak to *anyone* on what we have just done, Mrs. Figg. Especially do not discuss what this thing is," she cautioned the older woman. "That goes for you, too, Alastor," Hermione added, turning to face the ex-Auror. "Not one word, not one hint, not one description of anything to anyone."

"Why?" the scarred wizard demanded, pinning her with his brown and magical blue eyes. "You put our Secret Keeper at risk, taking her elsewhere!"

"Because it's helping to defeat the Dark Lord, and if he finds out about this, then all that has gone on before will look like a child's tea party, for he will not stop until we are dead, and our quest to destroy him is shattered. Now, not one word out of either of you. I have to report to Harry."

Cloak bundled under her arm, Hermione turned and headed back down to the kitchen to use the Floo. While she was at the Burrow, she'd ask Mrs. Weasley for two objects she could Transfigure into amulets for her parents to wear, perhaps necklaces they could keep tucked under their clothes, against their skin. Mind busy with deciding what the trigger would be, a complex combination of an uncommon phrase if they could speak, or a situation, if they were bound or harmed by a spell cast by an enemy, she grabbed Floo powder from the pot and tossed it on the coals, making them flare with emerald light.

Tonight had been a very busy night.

...

The golden, double-handled cup of Helga Hufflepuff sat on the library table between the three of them. They hadn't needed the modified Protean Charm to try and triangulate on it, after all. But they did need the school library to try and figure out a way to extract the soul within and snuff it out.

Ron rested his cheek in his hand. Harry had his chin on his crossed forearms. Hermione sat with her forehead braced in her palms. She'd cast the necessary charm, verifying that a piece of Lord Voldemort's very ugly soul resided within the cup. They'd brainstormed, trying to think of ways to destroy the soul without destroying the cup.

For two weeks, they'd brainstormed ideas. Harry had even lost his temper last night and, to the horror of his two best friends, had attempted the Killing Curse on the thing. Not a single speck of green had shot from his wand, and when she'd tested it with the soul-scanning charm, the soul was still lodged firmly inside. Hermione had been relieved. It was like Professor Moody had said, back in their fourth year--even if he'd really been Barty Crouch Junior at the time. One had to have the necessary feeling, desire and need backing the curse, a true desire to *kill* someone, to make it work. Harry wasn't a killer, at heart. But it had been scary for both her and Ron to watch him try.

Now they were at an end. Other than smashing the thing, which they were reluctant to do, and which they had no proof would be effective, they had reached a dead end. So the cup sat on the Hogwarts library table between the three of them, mocking their efforts silently.

Ron frowned, shifting in his seat. Folding his arms, he braced them on the table. "Something's bothering me..."

Hermione and Harry both lifted their brows in silent enquiry.

"You said the cup had been enchanted to kill any wizard or witch who touched it. And yet, there's a bit of a wizard trapped inside. How did that bit-of-wizard survive the spell?"

"Because it was only a piece of a soul, and not an actual wizard?" Harry offered blankly.

Hermione lifted her head from her palms, her fingers sliding down her curls. Eyes wide, she stared at her blood-brother. "Hang on, I think you're on to something, there... What if that spell on the cup had been designed to...to sort of poison a body, and thereby kill it? Without a body, the soul is virtually invulnerable to that sort of thing."

"Then what we need is some sort of spell or something that will destroy a soul, but not necessarily a body," Ron decided. "It's not like we can conjure up a Killing-Curse-flinging Death Eater at will, or whistle a Dementor down out of the sky, assuming it could suck a soul out of an inanimate object."

"It might be nice if we could," Harry joked wearily. He glanced at the stacks and sighed. "Right. Another late night of searching through the Restricted Section...since I doubt the standard texts would discuss how to destroy a soul."

"I'm not sure it'll be found in this library at all," Hermione muttered. "That's Dark Magic, however you look at it."

"We don't exactly have a lot of options," Ron reminded her. "The Black family library was rather small, book-wise, and we've been through all of those texts."

"I'll bet Snape has a huge library of Dark texts," Harry muttered.

Hermione bit her lip, wanting to chastise him for his anger. He'd been mad at her for going off without him on her cup-stealing quest, but in truth, she hadn't had the time to fetch him, and she hadn't had the inclination. Knowing that they might encounter Snape, she hadn't wanted to bring him along anyway. She had explained it to Harry by reminding him that if he'd been along, his anger at their former instructor would've caused him to attack the man. This way, by exchanging the cups in stealth, Voldemort still thought the cup was there, intact and untouched. Even Ron might've been tempted to hex the man, but Hermione's mind had been strictly on the job at hand.

Sometimes it paid to be a non-confrontational girl. *Well, mostly non-confrontational... Mind back on your business*, Hermione chided herself as she copied Harry's stance, dropping her chin to her folded arms. *Figuring out a way to extract and destroy that thing...*

Her ring burned. A glance at it showed the scales shifting shape.

Meet me at our room. Bring a healing text. Or three.

Alarm coursed through her, jolting her upright; the other two glanced at her in curiosity.

"Russel's in trouble," Hermione related, standing and stuffing her research materials into her bookbag. "I've got to go."

"What kind of trouble?" Harry asked her.

"He's injured. I don't know anything more than that," she admitted. "But I have to go. He's not the sort to ask for help, unless he really needs it."

Ron wrinkled his nose, but offered, "...Do you need help?"

Hermione paused to look at him before putting her ink jar into her bag. He looked sincere. Smiling, she demurred, "I should be fine. I've considered a career in mediwitchery, you know. But thank you for offering; it means a lot to me."

The redhead shrugged. "Nothing I can do will change it, so why should I whinge?"

Hermione felt she could live with that philosophy, if it kept him from snapping at her and her circumstances.

"Be careful," Harry cautioned her. "Hey--take my Cloak, and go nick a few things from Madam Pomfrey's stores. We'll make it up to her, somehow."

"Thanks, Harry." Stealing from the school nurse made her a little uncomfortable, but Hermione didn't exactly have access to a potions lab anymore. But she held off on going to the Infirmary. Her first job was to assess the patient. Hurrying into Madam Pince's office, she cast Floo powder onto the embers and spun through to Headquarters.

From there, it was just a matter of concentrating carefully enough to Apparate to the hotel room in question. It was a debate as to whether being yanked along by a Portkey, being spun dizzily around by Floo powder, or being squeezed through the blackness of Apparation was the worst means of travel, but if Hermione had to pick a fourth choice, she'd take any of those three over broom-travel. Orienting herself as soon as she popped through to normality, she looked for Russel.

He lay on the bed, naked but for the black, ribbon-strung amulet wrapping around his throat. Naked, but for the blood and dirt crusting his hide. Shocked, Hermione choked back a cry behind her hand, hurrying to his side. The damage was even worse, up close. Cuts streaked his hide from scalp to soles, sparing nothing, not even his groin. Most of them were chillingly uniform, as if someone had deliberately cut him in three-inch slashes.

Bruises mottled his skin, and his wand-arm didn't quite sit at a natural angle, up at the shoulder. White-knuckled fingers clutched his wand in one hand, and a small object in the other. A series of scrapes along his left shoulder, forearm and hip suggested he'd been thrown across a rough surface, perhaps paving concrete...and there were more injuries on his back, from the blood staining the bedding.

Worst of all, he was awake, panting shallowly from what looked like an incredible amount of pain.

Stepping back, holding her breath to keep from being ill at the sight of such brutality, Hermione concentrated carefully. Disapparating from the hotel room, she returned to

Headquarters, cast Floo into the kitchen hearth, and stepped out in Madam Pince's office. That, and Headmistress McGonagall's office, were the only two Floo connections linked to Headquarters. But the school librarian's office was connected to the school nurse's office, and it took her only a moment to cast more Floo into the fire and whirl into the mediwitch's sanctum. Facing the door that led to the supply room, Hermione focused through her dizziness, working to take down the protective wards on the door.

The other door opened and Madam Pomfrey stepped through, a tray of supplies levitating in her wake. She turned, spotted Hermione, and gasped, "--Miss Granger! What are you doing in here?"

Hermione stopped trying to unravel the other woman's locking spells. "I have an injured patient who cannot go to St. Mungo's, and who cannot come onto the school grounds. I'm here to get supplies for him. He has scores of still-bleeding lacerations, contusions, abrasions, I think a dislocated shoulder, possible broken bones, and is losing a lot of blood, the longer we stand here chatting about it."

Her terse recital prodded the other witch into action. A flick of her wand set the tray on her desk, and another flick lowered the wards on the doors. "Any signs of magical injuries?" Poppy Pomfrey asked her, stepping into the next room. "Curses, hexes, jinxes?"

"Not that I could tell; I'm a bit more concerned about blood-loss at the moment."

"Here, Transfigure this blanket into a basket," Poppy ordered, thrusting folds of wool in her direction. Hermione hastily complied. "You'll need Blood Replenisher, Skin Salve, Bruise Balm, a pain-reliever--here's a pamphlet with a list of common diagnostic charms. Do bring that back," she admonished the younger witch, tossing things into the basket. "Oh, that's where I put my pamphlet on how to do that Muggle CPR thing; I was wondering where that had got to, this last summer... Bandages for the deeper injuries, Stitching Solution in case any of the lacerations are too deep to stay closed on their own--there's a brush stuck through the cork of the bottle, just paint each wound with it and hold the edges together for a count of five--this is a bottle of Boneset for broken bones, but the label scrolls off into an instruction sheet--see?--and it does have a section on diagnosing and resetting dislocated joints towards the end.

"Watch for signs of a fever, too; depending upon the combinations of these medicines, that could be a side-effect. Give small doses, even if you think you know how much is needed; better to be short of a goal than to overdose a patient. That will also limit the possibility of a high fever. If he does pick up one, you'll need to bathe the patient with a cool, damp cloth, and watch him to make sure he doesn't develop a chill after it breaks, as it's best to just let the fever burn itself out, but mostly you don't want his body temperature to get too hot."

"I'll be careful. You're being very helpful," Hermione returned. "And I'm very grateful for it."

The other woman treated her statement like a question, and answered it. "Minerva said that you and your two friends might show up one day, in need of medical aid. She instructed that I should give you whatever aid I could. I'd go with you myself," Madam Pomfrey sighed, "but there was an accident in the Potions lab yesterday, and I cannot leave my own patients for very long. But contact me if there's anything you're hesitant about. You've a good head on your shoulders, young lady; you'd make an excellent mediwitch, nurse or Healer."

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey," Hermione breathed, clutching the handle of the basket to her chest.

"This war's a cursed business for us all," the mediwitch muttered, motioning for her to hurry on her way.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XIV.

It wasn't until Hermione was bathing him from the mild fever he'd developed that she realized Russel had scars. The Stitching Solution and Skin Salve she'd applied had healed most of his wounds, leaving only faint, pink lines that hopefully would heal seamlessly whole, but there were older scars marring his skin, scars she knew she hadn't seen before. Hermione had certainly seen, felt, and fondled nearly every single inch of her husband's skin since their marriage had been consummated.

The colour of the scars was unusual; they were the exact same shade as the rest of his hide. Only the smoother texture divulged their outline. There was a somewhat jagged cut right next to the black lines of his Dark Mark, as if he'd tried to cut the Mark out of his skin in his youth; a semi-circle of dimpled scrapes on his calf that looked like his leg had been caught in something; a long, straight incision over where his appendix should've been--it blended into the other, fresher diagonal cuts from his newest injuries, suggesting an emergency appendectomy in his childhood, perhaps--and five long scars clustered along his back, possibly from a whipping.

His hands, once she'd washed and straightened the broken bones, had dozens of little old scars, the kind of little cuts and burns associated with a man who worked mostly with his hands, perhaps as an Artificer. Hermione had once thought that class would be like the magical equivalent of wood-shop, and had decided to not take it. Now she wished she had; the Hufflepuff cup reputedly had magical powers, and it would've been nice to be able to discern what they were, to see if any of them could help her and the boys extract and destroy that piece of Voldemort's soul.

Russel had been dozing on and off, after she'd fixed most of his wounds and dosed him with the pain reliever. He hadn't cried out, though his whole face had been pinched with pain, muscles flinching when she'd rolled him over to deal with his back. Cleaning the bedding as well as his body had stretched her knowledge of laundry spells, but she'd gotten the blood out of the duvet and the dirt out of his wounds. But when her fingers gently traced the scars on his hands, he opened his eyes.

He'd been very touchy about anything she'd done near his neck and his disguise-pendant, but now was not the time to coax him into revealing himself to her. Lying on her side next to him, though not underneath the blanket she'd restored from the basket and draped over him, Hermione stroked his dark blond hair back from his healed brow. From the feel of his forehead, his medication-induced fever had broken; unfortunately, his tan not only hid his scars, it also hid the flushed state of his skin, unless she looked closely.

Hermione looked closely, now. She was glad she'd fixed the wounds on his face well enough that there shouldn't be any scars. Whatever he'd said about being troll-ugly underneath the glamour, she didn't want to add to his self-image burdens. Marshalling her thoughts, she decided to do what Albus Dumbledore would've done, or at least what she thought he might've done.

It was a bit late to ask the late Headmaster how to mentor his last surviving spy, after all.

"Tell me what happened," she murmured. "You need to talk about it, and I need to know."

His short, thick lashes fluttered shut, but not in an imitation of sleep. Brow pinching slightly, he gave her what he could. "I went on a raid, with a couple others. We failed. I was injured, and almost captured. Two others *were* captured...and some of the other side died. When we got back...he...started punishing us. Sigurd...reacted badly to that."

Eyes widening, she stared down at him. Hermione hadn't realized the dragon-guardian would protect *him*, as well as her. The thought of the Dark Lord's fury frightened her. She watched to clutch him tight to her, but knew his flesh was still healing. Instead, she settled for stroking his face gently, soothingly. "What happened?"

"I...ordered Sigurd to stop," he admitted roughly, licking his lips. Hermione reached for the cup she'd set on the nightstand, one filled with ice-chips from the freezer, and offered him one. He sucked on it, eyes still closed. When he had swallowed, he continued, brows furrowing even more. "I... I don't want to talk about..."

"You *need* to tell me," Hermione murmured, cupping his cheek. His eyes opened and she stared down into their pained, pewter depths. "You know Brian would make you talk about it, and I'm no different. Bottling it up inside is only going to slowly kill you from the inside out. You ordered Sigurd to stop. Then what happened?"

"I...I flung myself on his so-called *mercy*," Russel admitted roughly, eyes closing again. His hand came up, clutching at the arm that had gone back to soothing his hair from his face. "And...I crawled to him as he...tortured me...and I kissed his feet... The others...I don't..."

"Tell me," Hermione soothed him, sickened by what she was hearing. Not just the torments, but the way he was struggling to keep his voice, his composure, from breaking.

"They wanted to ra...to...bring me l-low. I said I was *his* toy, not theirs... One of them t-tried to...Sigurd flung him away...and I *kissed* the bastard's feet as he c-continued to c-cut m-me..."

The last of his words escaped in a broken sob. Scooting closer, Hermione urged him onto his side, rolling him against her so she could cradle him. She stroked his back, murmuring soft, wordless sounds. There was no way she was going to make any false promises to him that it was never going to happen again, that everything would get better. They both knew different.

With his face buried in the curve of her throat, cooling her skin as they dried, she held him as he cried. He didn't cry loudly. In the quiet of the hotel room, she had to strain to hear his broken, whispered pleas, his battered frame shaking with each word.

"I don't want to go back...please...please don't make me go back...I can't do this anymore...I can't...don't make me go back...I can't take this...I can't...please..."

Crooning to him, soothing him, Hermione held Russel as his heart-achingly quiet grief spent itself. After an arm-numbing while--his head was pillowed on her right shoulder and bicep, squashing her circulation--she thought he was finally asleep. Shifting to ease herself away, she felt his arm tightening around her ribs, discovering otherwise. He didn't say anything for a while, but she didn't think he would. Hermione might've been young, but she had two best friends who were male, and knew better than to be the first one to speak after Russel's emotional breakdown. He'd view that moment as a weakness, and not thank her for drawing attention to it before he was ready to handle it.

She could, however, adjust their position, if he was awake enough to hold her. Rolling carefully onto her back, she eased him over so that he half sprawled on her. That made him shift enough to get his head off of her arm and onto her shoulder; in exchange, he drew his leg over hers a little, pinning her in place. A nuzzle of his cheek into her shoulder made her brush her lips against his forehead. He relaxed when she did it again, warm, limp, and heavy. Her hand, once the feeling came back to her arm, stroked his back through the blanket draped over his healing frame.

They hadn't made love, the last time she was here with him; it had been the wrong time of the month for her, and Hermione had felt too miserable with her menses to even try. Russel had said he was taking care of the contraception, and it had been a relief to see that his measures were working, but a disappointment all the same that they couldn't do anything. In just a relatively short period of time, he had taught her to revel in her sexuality, not shy from it.

Instead, they'd cuddled on the couch, reading *The Hobbit* in turns, and then Hermione had requested a 'fellatio practice session', which had made him laugh, but she'd wanted to do something nice for him to make up for the fact that she wasn't in the mood. They'd had an enjoyable time of it, too; by the end of it, Hermione had rendered him speechless, though definitely vocal. She'd even managed to quip that it was the closest she'd get to fulfilling her 'Head Girl' duties, startling him into helpless laughter.

He was helpless now, but not with laughter, unfortunately. Minutes passed. A deep breath let her know he was still awake, though she was growing sleepy. His voice rumbled softly from his throat, his breath warming her throat above the collar of her jumper, as Russel resumed his tale without prompting.

"Afterwards, he told everyone he trusted me more than he trusted the rest of them, because of what I'd done, subjugating myself to his sadism. He asked me...he asked me why I'd done it..." Russel stopped speaking for a long moment. Hermione waited patiently for him to reveal what he'd said. Finally, he continued. "I told him I craved the immortality that he'd gained, that I wanted to learn whatever he could teach me. That he was my fucking role-model." A dry sound escaped him, not quite a laugh. "Not quite in those words, of course..."

"He told me to clean myself up. I told him I'd drag myself off to my wife, and use my injuries to rouse her soft-hearted compassion and worm myself deeper into her trust and affection, and thus worm myself deeper into the secrets of the other side. He told me that, when I'd healed, I was to come back and take my place at his right hand."

"Supplanting Snape," Hermione observed quietly, ignoring the ache in her chest that said he'd succeeded in his invasion of her heart, tonight. There were times when she wondered what his motives really were, even when he was being blunt about what he was supposedly doing to her. "That's quite a *coup*, for you."

Again, that dry sound escaped him. "I'm now in an even better place than that bastard traitor ever dreamed. Marvolo trusts no one completely, but he believes I worship the very ground he fouls. If I'm careful, I might even learn how he managed to keep himself alive, when he should've been thoroughly dead."

Hermione carefully blanked her mind as she said, "Whatever it is, I'm sure it's very dangerous to know, especially if he doesn't want you to know. I don't want to be a widow before this war is over."

A twist of his head, and he pressed his lips to her throat. "You won't be, if I can help it. Not until the war is over."

That was an odd thing for him to say. But before she could do more than frown thoughtfully, let alone comment on it, he shifted higher on the bed with a groan of injury-taxed muscles, and sought her mouth with his own. One of his hands tugged impatiently at the hem of her jumper, pulling it free of her jeans. Pushing it up out of his way, he cupped her bra-covered breast, massaging her flesh.

"Russel...your injuries," Hermione managed to say as his lips nibbled along her jaw-line, heading for her ear. "They're still healing..."

"I *need* you," he growled. "More than I need healing. Out of your clothes, now!"

He didn't normally growl orders at her, but he had instilled in her a Pavlovian response to his touch, to his kisses, to the scent and the feel and the taste of him. It had been too long since their last encounter. She could feel how wet she was growing...how wet, if she were honest with herself, she had been since the last of his injuries had sealed and been cleansed, leaving her with the naked sight of him. Squirming out from under her husband, Hermione stood by the side of the bed and wriggled out of her clothes. His hand touched her, brushing against her stomach, stroking the curve of her hip as she undressed, palming a breast when she bent over to remove her jeans and knickers. Once naked, she pushed him back from the edge of the mattress.

"Lie on your back," Hermione instructed him.

Russel complied, tucking one hand behind his head. The blanket had fallen far enough askew that his penis jutted in full view, thick and red, waiting for her. His other hand feathered over his scrotum, then ghosted up onto his shaft. The delicate touch made his flesh twitch. Climbing onto the bed as she watched him, Hermione supplanted his

fingers with her tongue and mouth. Where he touched lightly, she devoured firmly. But not for very long; all she wanted to do was get him damp, and gauge his excitement. From the salty seeping at the tip of his prick, he was quite ready.

Rearing up, she straddled him carefully, letting him adjust himself so that he aimed into her quim. Balancing on the balls of her feet, she sank onto him. A sigh of satisfaction escaped her; the sick, serpentine bastard who had tortured him had not spared her lover's genitals, but neither had the damage been irreparable. Her position was awkward, and would play ruddy hell with her knees after a while, but she didn't want to put any pressure on his injuries. Just because the skin was intact and all his bones were in place didn't mean the flesh under the surface wasn't still tender. If only she were light enough...

Wincing, Hermione slipped off of him, ignoring his surprised grunt and his grasping hands. Rummaging through her clothes, she grabbed her wand and brought it back with her. There wasn't an exact Charm for what she wanted, not that she knew of, but she was fairly certain she could alter one of the spells she knew to suit her needs.

"...Semobilim!"

She lifted off of the bed in response to the sizzle of energy that raced over her flesh. Smiling, Hermione drifted over his body, then held herself in place as she crossed her legs. Russel stared up at her, surprised by her magical maneuver. Bending over, holding her ankles, she concentrated until she lowered into place. No fool, he quickly repositioned himself, and sighed as she sank onto him.

Hermione, however, moaned. She'd read in one of her more recent romance novels about this position, though the woman had been on her back with her hips partially in the air. It was everything the book promised it would be, for the curling of her body, the tilt of her hips, it placed her vagina at a sharp angle to his penis, ensuring that he rubbed against her grafenberg-spot. A slow assertion of her mind, and she rose up and down, letting him cage her hips with his hands so that she didn't rise too high. Losing contact would not have been nearly as much fun as this.

After a while, she gave up directing the rise and fall of her body, and just concentrated on letting him pull her down onto him at the rate and force he wanted, rising up with each rebound. She bit her lower lip, not wanting to cry out and obscure any of the sounds he was making, by it. There wasn't any sexier series of sounds in that moment than the panting little grunts and whimpers of him bucking up into her slick, tight flesh, the thumping of his groin against her buttocks and thighs, and the wet suckling of her body tightening around his shaft in pleasure as he withdrew and plunged again.

There was no pressure on his body, save that of his own pleasure. There was plenty of pressure on hers, but it was all either the angle, the grip of his hands, or the mental stress of *not* guiding her hovering body into slamming into his. Tight keening sounds escaped her throat with each stroke as he pulled her down.

Unable to stand it anymore, Hermione shifted her position, dislodging his arms as she dropped her legs to the bed on either side of his frame. Canceling the spell with a gasp, she rode him on hands and knees. His hands swept over her sweating skin, and his voice over her nerves.

"Yes, yes...ride me...fuck me...ride me! Harder!" Fingers bruising her hips and thighs with remarkable strength, he thrust up into her downstrokes. Freeing one hand, he slotted his fingers to either side of her clitoris, and pinched. Hermione yelled as her orgasm crashed through her, dragging a groan from him. "Mmmh, good...mmmh, good! Yes--yes--come for me! Come--oh, god, Jane, Jane, Jane!"

Gasping her name rhythmically, he pulsed inside of her, warm and wet and shuddering with the force of his own climax. Trembling, Hermione sank over him, careful to brace most of her weight on her elbows and knees, letting only her loins press down around the twitchings of his, her breasts rubbing gently against his chest, and resting her forehead as lightly as she could on his shoulder. His hands stroked her back heavily, sweeping down and up, clutching now and then before resuming each stroke.

Fingers delved into her curls, lifting and turning her head. The kiss was unskilled, just a mashing of lips, a nipping of teeth, a puffing of breath, but with it came a ragged whisper. "I'm alive...I'm still alive..."

He kissed her again, calming down enough that their lips could tease and play with a little more sensuality and grace. It wasn't a prelude to more, but rather an extension of what had happened. When Hermione shifted off of him and lay down by his side, he turned to face her, still kissing her, exchanging soft, soothing touches with her. But it wasn't arousing. It was comforting.

Finally, he slumped back into the pillows with a groan, ending their after-play. "I think...I need more Bruise Balm...and more painkiller wouldn't be amiss."

Nodding, Hermione drew the blanket over his body, then padded around the bed to the side that had the nightstand with the bottles cluttering its surface. Russel caught her wrist as she sat on the bed to study the labels. Glancing down at him, she found his grey eyes staring into hers with a strange expression, not quite lost, not quite thoughtful, and not quite shuttered.

"Thank you."

Somehow, she didn't think he meant the shag. But since drawing attention to it might send him into a masculine shell of defensive reticence, she merely nodded and picked out what she needed, measuring a small dose of each potion. He drank from the spoon, and grimaced. Aware that he was awake and no longer fevered, Hermione gave him a couple ice-chips to suck on to clear the sour taste of the Bruise Balm and the bitter flavour of the painkiller.

"Do you think you're up to eating something?" she asked him. "You need to replenish what you've lost."

Russel smiled at her, his grey eyes gleaming with amusement. "Are you offering to cook for me?"

"Well, you've done all the cooking so far; I've only done the cleaning-up," she pointed out.

"Ah! You just want to get out of having to set the table and wash the dishes." A sigh heavy enough to be mocking, and he lolled his head on the pillows. One arm lifted and drooped the back of his wrist over his forehead. "I suppose I could eat something...if what you fix won't poison me..."

"--I owe you a whapping with a pillow for that," Hermione scolded him as he laughed silently. "If you weren't still injured, I *would*." Removing herself to the kitchen nook, she started rummaging through the cupboards, seeing what was available. "I'll have you know I'm quite good at cooking things. If you don't mind them cooked the Muggle way. I'm slowly learning Molly Weasley's ungodly number of magically made meals, which she sometimes cooks when there's an Order meeting, but she also cooks for far too many at one time, and it's not always easy to cut down large recipes for just two people. Are there any cookbooks in here?"

"No; I tend to just throw things together, based on what's available," he replied. She heard him grunt and peered past the bathroom corner in time to see him stuffing pillows behind his back. Glad he wasn't hurting himself with anything more strenuous, Hermione turned back to her perusal of the cupboards.

"I prefer cookbook recipes, myself. It's just like Potions-making, that way. Follow the instructions to the letter, and you come out with a consistent product every time. Though it only matters for presentation and texture in most cases, if you dice the potato, or grate it..."

She was pulling vegetables out of the refrigerator half of the icebox and setting them on the chopping board when he spoke again. "I advise you to not let the bastard traitor hear you saying that about his 'art'."

A glance showed his hands lowering, no doubt from the act of making air-quotes. "What, that Potions is like cooking? Or cooking is like Potions?"

"That it's just following a bunch of instructions," he corrected her as she took out a pot and set it on the stove, turning it on and putting a small dollop of butter in the bottom. "Do you really take everything you read in a book at face value, with no deviations whatsoever?"

She shrugged and started peeling the onion she had selected. "Mum says that, in baking, you have to be precise because it's very much like chemistry; you have to get the proportions just right to get the muffins or the loaf to rise. Otherwise it might collapse, or be leaden, or rock-hard. Like Hagrid's tea-cakes," she shuddered delicately. "I do

like Rubeus Hagrid, and I consider him my friend, but I don't like his cooking. As for the rest of it...I suppose that, once you've mastered the basics and the essential knowledges, knowing how something might react when combined with something else, you can start experimenting.

"But potion-making is far more dangerous than making, say, a stir-fry," she offered as she worked. "A stir fry has a basic format, a bunch of chopped vegetables thrown into a hot pan with a little oil, cooked until tender, and seasoned with asian flavours, such as coriander, curry, soy sauce, teriyaki, and so forth. And of course, some meat. But the most dangerous part of it is not cooking the meat thoroughly, or not trimming out the bad spots in the vegetables. And there are hundreds of variations you can make in a stir-fry. A potion is far more volatile!

"And..." She hated having to confess this part, but Hermione made herself go through with it as she began mincing the onion. "And, frankly, I have more of a knack for cooking than I do for potion-making. I read a little bit of Professor Snape's sixth-year Potions textbook. I didn't want to admit it at the time, but the man was a genius at figuring out really good alternatives to textbook methods. Some of them were short-cuts, some of them were safer techniques...

"I don't like what he did, and I cannot condone it...but I wish sometimes he was still a teacher." Hermione paused, then added as she dumped the onion bits into the pot so they could start sauteeing, and started peeling cloves of garlic, "But only if he got a personality transplant, first. Potions is dangerous, yes. Take two of any of a wide number of ingredients and put them together in the wrong way, and you'll have an explosion, meltdown, burn, toxic cloud, or some other form of disaster or injury. Safety needs to be dented into the heads of the students, over and over. But Professor Slughorn managed to do that *and* keep a genial personality going."

With the garlic finished, she starting next on the carrots, peeling and slicing them.

"I suppose his hatred of Muggle-borns, and of Gryffindors, and the stress of being trapped in his situation, having to lie to his employer, lie to his colleagues, even lie to himself, all of that could've made anyone bitter, even sour. And dealing with spoilt, idiotic children whose minds were more on Quidditch or their girlfriends or boyfriends, or on wanting to goof off and play would've taken its toll on any teacher after so many years. But it would've been far more effective for him to have toadied not only to the Slytherins, but to the other Houses as well. Merlin! If you could see *Slughorn* doing it!" she exclaimed, moving on to the broccoli head, slicing off the florets and dropping them into the pot with the onion, garlic and carrots. A brief stir of the pot, and she continued paring bits of greenery into the mix. "He collects people like Professor Flitwick collects wands! And he sits like a fat spider in the midst of a web-work of connections.

"At first I was kind of wary of what he was doing; he ignored Ron mostly because of Ron's poverty and lack of family connections, and didn't even stop to think that Ron's got a sharp mind when he bothers to use it. And he wanted to get Harry into his web-work, too, because he's the ruddy Boy Who Lived, but Harry doesn't really have that many connections outside of the Order, if you think about it. At first, I went back to see if Slughorn was trying to use the people around him for nefarious means, but no, he just likes being a busybody, or rather, an I-know-somebody. And after a while, I realized that I might be able to use his connections, too, so I kept going back.

"Unfortunately, that put me in the path of Mr. Ornery Octopus, Zacharias Smith," she rambled, adding cauliflower florettes to the sizzling mix. "At first his attention was flattering; he was the first boy who'd paid any attention to me since Viktor Krum's visit, but the kisses kept getting demanding, and he'd grab me when I wanted to stop, and I didn't like that. I don't like being grabbed."

"I'll keep that in mind," Russel offered as she moved to get out the summer sausage she'd seen in the fridge.

"I'm sorry. I'm babbling all over the place, aren't I?" Hermione apologized. "It's just...in the summer, I'm used to helping my mother and father make dinner, and we'd talk about all sorts of stuff while doing so. It was our way of catching up, after being apart for so long each school year."

"Go on; I am paying attention," he soothed her. She leaned past the corner of the bathroom far enough to give him a smile, then stirred the pot. His voice floated to her, light with curiosity. "What are you making anyway, a stir-fry?"

"Nope. Soup. Vegetable."

"If you plan on adding chicken, the only kind I'm aware of in this place is a couple tins of chicken meat on one of the shelves. I don't really like tinned chicken. I prefer fresh."

"Then why did you stock the cupboards with tinned chicken?" she countered, cutting off a thick section of the summer sausage.

"I thought you might like it."

"Actually, we're having summer sausage and vegetable soup. Diced and fried with the vegetables to impart flavour and seasoning, since I didn't see many herb-jars in the cupboards."

"Well, it's not like it's my own kitchen," he muttered.

"Do you have a nice kitchen?"

"I'm living in Riddle bloody Manor, at the moment. The place was all but abandoned for many years Well, there was a caretaker, but Marvolo the Magnificently Stupid went and killed the poor sod. Substandard Muggle appliances, grime and neglect--oh, and Wormtail's cooking--urgh!"

She glanced over her shoulder in time to see him shuddering. "I'm surprised you aren't having the bastard traitor do all the cooking."

"It's 'beneath' him," Russel mock-sneered. "Though it would be a far sight better than boiled everything. That, and I don't think Marvolo would trust a Potions Master of the bastard's caliber in his kitchen, preparing his food. Of course, *he* gets fine foods catered from his followers' house-elf-run kitchens. The rest of us get stuck with bubble'n'squeak."

Hermione wrinkled her nose in sympathy, dumping in the last of the sausage and giving everything a good stir. "The sausages aren't too bad, but I hate the smell of cooked cabbage. Mrs...uh, Weasley cooks with it, sometimes." *Way to go, Hermione, you almost mentioned Mrs. Figg...* "Not too frequently, thankfully, but there are nights when I'm tempted to Apparate out to the nearest fast-food restaurant."

"Fast-food may be fast, but it isn't food. That stuff's not healthy for anyone."

"It smells slightly better than cooked cabbage," she pointed out.

"Cabbage shouldn't smell or taste bad, if it's been cooked right," Russel informed her. "Unfortunately, most people overcook it, and that's when the sulfides come out and ruin the flavour. But that smells delicious..."

"Well, it'll be a few more minutes before I pour in the water, and a few more after that to bring everything to a boil for a minute or two," she told him, taking a bag of frozen peas out of the freezer half of the icebox. Pouring some in, she stirred again, listening to the sizzle and smelling the meaty aroma as the sausage browned. "No potatoes, no noodles...any crackers in the cupboards? I didn't see any."

"None. There's bread in the fridge," he pointed out.

"I'll make toast, then."

"Warm, if you please."

That reminded her of their toast-argument, that first meal together in this room. "It's supposed to be cold."

"Warm."

"Cold."

"I'm an invalid!" he mock-decried, drooping his wrist over his forehead again. "You're supposed to coddle an invalid! Nice, warm toast would make me feel so much better, I just know I'd heal quickly..."

Unable to help herself, Hermione laughed. "Alright, alright! Nice *warm* toast to go with your soup. Mind if I actually put water in the pot first, so that it'll *be* soup?"

"Well, if you absolutely *must*," he mock-fussed, making her laugh again. Russel's warm baritone caressed her from the far side of the studio suite. "I like making you laugh. I don't know why, but I do."

"Thank you. For making me laugh," she amended. "And I like it when I make you laugh, too. There's not enough laughter in the world, right now. I think that makes it all the more special."

"I think that's the main reason why I like doing it, too," he agreed, and smiled at her when she glanced back at him.

...

The golden, double-handled cup of Helga Hufflepuff sat on the library table between Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Once again the three of them were stuck. October had turned into November, and now November was threatening to turn into December. The search for a spell to destroy a soul had taken them through the entire Restricted Section, to no avail. As feared, there just weren't any spells Dark enough to do the necessary deed. Not in the books found in the Hogwarts library, at any rate.

This time, however, they weren't alone. Seated on a stack of textbooks so that he was more or less at the same height as the others, Filius Flitwick, Professor of Charms and Head of Ravenclaw House, also sat with them. Hermione had convinced the others to let him in on their planning sessions after the third fruitless week had passed, in the hopes that he would be able to contribute to their quandry. So they had met every third night with him, since his other duties and his need for sleep had to be taken into consideration. Flitwick's silver-bearded chin was propped in his hand, echoing Ron's stance, though his expression was more thoughtful than glum. Harry and Hermione echoed each other on opposite sides of the table, with their chins on their forearms, slouched down so that they were essentially eye-level with the cup.

"...I'm out of options," Filius finally sighed. "I made some discreet enquiries with the new Defence teacher, but he's strictly defence, not offence, and hadn't any suggestions."

"I heard the previous one had a whole bunch of Dark Arts texts," Ron muttered gloomily. "But I'll bet the Ministry confiscated all of Snape's things, after he ran out of here."

"Actually no. They couldn't find his quarters," Professor Flitwick informed him. That lifted all three ex-students' heads.

"They couldn't find his quarters?" Hermione repeated, dumbfounded. "But...didn't anyone know where those quarters were, while he was still here?"

"No. I suspect they were placed under some rather powerful yet subtle deflection charms. Possibly even the Fidelius Charm," Filius offered. "If you'll think about it, have any of you *ever* heard of a student breaking into Professor Snape's quarters to pull some prank on him? Remember, this was a man hated by most everyone outside of his own House. You'd think someone would've attacked his sanctum in retaliation for his nastiness, but not a single whisper of it ever reached my ears--and I've been a teacher at this school for more than twice as long as he ever was."

"You're right," Ron admitted with a thoughtful frown. Harry, shifting his cheek into his hand, eyed him as Ron continued. "Not even Fred and George ever claimed they'd broken into his quarters. And they did admit to...um...that is..."

Professor Flitwick chuckled. "Oh, go ahead, Ronald; the Weasley twins are beyond the reach of my jurisdiction, now. Whose quarters did they break into, and what did they do?"

"Professor McGonagall's, to see if she, um...wore tartan-plaid knickers," Ron mumbled, red-faced.

"And did...no, no, I don't want to know that. I don't *need* to know that. That witch is intimidating enough as my employer," Filius muttered, shaking his head.

"I didn't want to know, and the prats went and told me anyway," Ron complained.

Harry lifted his head from his palm. "You never told *me* that!"

Ron shuddered delicately. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

"But now I'm curious--"

"No, Harry. You do *not* want to know."

With that flat yet emphatic rebuttal, the conversation was closed. Hermione dragged it back to the topic at hand, which was still resting between them on the polished, age-darkened table. "Well. We're back at square one. We can't get into Snape's quarters if..."

Her voice trailed out as a memory crossed her mind. Something Russel had said to her. *Something about, if I needed more books to research the Protean-Forging Charm idea, he would find a way to sneak me into Snape's home... Did he mean here at the school? How would he know where it was, or how to get into it? How could he get into it right now, with the whole school protected by an unknown Secret-Keeper? And yet, he mentioned it to me in our writings through the rings, so it has to be true...*

"Hermione?" Harry asked her. "Are you alright?"

"Just thinking," she dismissed, not wanting to reveal what those thoughts were. It was awkward at times, keeping so many different secrets from so many different people. If it were the same secret, or the same person, it would be so much easier, but it wasn't. *I think I understand why Russel is so up-front about what he's supposed to be doing with me. It's so much easier to tell the truth, when you know the person hearing it can handle it. Or at least, forgive it.*

Sighing roughly, Harry picked up the cup. "I wish this weren't a Hufflepuff artifact. Then I could just crush it without a second thought. What I desire more than anything else right now is to put an end to the piece of soul that lies within this thing," he muttered grimly, "yet Hermione could be right, that crushing the cup won't actually destroy the soul that lies within, and if that is the case, then I'd be ruining this artifact and robbing the House of the Badger of a valuable keepsake. It's sort of a 'to be or not to be' situation, isn't it?"

With another sigh, he set down the cup.

Ron's hand shifted, touching Harry's shoulder before his fingers left the nearest handle. "Hang on," the freckled redhead offered. "You said, the thing you desire most is... Wasn't there that mirror--you know, the one that showed me as Head Boy, and with the Quidditch cup, and outshining all of my brothers? And you said you saw your family in it?"

"Yes!" Hermione interjected, excitement growing in her. "You said, Harry, that you got the Philosopher's Stone out of the Mirror of Erised because you desired most of all to find it, but *did not* want to use it! And that was how Professor Dumbledore had hidden the thing--that it would only come out of the mirror to the one who wanted to find it, but not use it." She looked at Filius, seated beside her, and explained, "If we could find the Mirror of Erised, and wished with all our hearts to find the best way to destroy all

of the Horcruxes, then we just might see what we desire!"

"You'd have to concentrate very hard," Filius Flitwick squeaked in warning. "If that isn't your absolute deepest desire, you're not going to see what you think you want to see."

"But we *could* see it, if we did desire it," Harry emphasized. "All we have to do is find it!"

"Ah. There's 'the rub', in our 'to be or not to be' moment," the Head of Ravenclaw pointed out. He shrugged as the other three looked at him, folding his arms and rubbing his bearded chin. "I have no idea where Albus hid it. That was five and a half years ago, after all. It could've been moved since then."

"Would the Headmistress know?" Hermione asked.

"Doubtful. Possible. I don't know. I *do* know she went to bed in a foul mood, tonight. That pushy Minister of Magic was trying to nose his way onto the school grounds again. She finally blew up in his face and said that she had no way of knowing that he was the real deal or not, and stormed out of the Three Broomsticks muttering something about politicians and torture implements. She's a bit more volatile than Albus ever was, but she does care about this school. And she's an able administrator...and I wouldn't want to be the fool who woke her up for something like this."

"What...what about Dumbledore's portrait?" Harry asked reluctantly. "In the Headmas...in the Headmistress' office? Wouldn't he know?"

"It is true that, when a headmaster or headmistress leaves the school, through death or retirement, their portrait will know everything that they knew, right up to the moment that they left...but I'd wait for morning, for this request."

"Professor, we can't wait for morning," Harry reminded him. "Professor McGonagall specifically asked us to not wander the halls of the school during daylight hours. We're only allowed to be here after curfew, so that no one knows we're using the library for our research."

"Oh. Well, I suppose that is a consideration. Well, come along then, and put on that Cloak of yours."

Hermione looked at him askance. "Why?"

"Well, to hide yourselves in the corridors, like you did that night you ran into me!" Filius returned.

"I meant, why, when we can just Floo from Madam Pince's office to the Headmistress' study?"

"Oh! Well, I suppose so, though I get dreadfully dizzy, spinning around in the fireplace like that... Right, then. Ronald, put the books away, if you please. And don't, for the love of Merlin, tell Irma that I was sitting on them."

Ron bit his lip to hold in his laughter as the Charms Professor hopped down from his chair.

It didn't take long for them to whirl through to Minerva McGonagall's study. It had been tidied a bit from when Albus had occupied it, but not too much had changed. The only notable addition was the portrait of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, with the dates of his birth, the years he had been headmaster, and his death inscribed on the plaque at the bottom of the frame.

He was sleeping, of course, or perhaps sham-sleeping, as many of the portraits tended to do. Filius waited only until Ron had stepped through as the last of them, and aimed his wand at the painting. A tiny blue spark spat from his wand with just a flick of his wrist, impacting on the frame and giving it a good shake.

"Huh--what?" Jolted awake, for it seemed he had really been asleep, the image of the former headmaster peered down at them. A single candle illuminated the chamber, not providing much in the way of light. "Who's there? Show yourselves!"

"*Ceraluma*." Filius' charm lit the tapers in a pair of wrought iron candlestands that flanked the fireplace. That provided a bit more in the way of light. "Hello, Albus," he asserted as firmly yet genially as his squeaky voice would allow. "We're here to ask you about the Mirror of Erised."

"What do you want with that old thing?" the portrait wizard retorted, frowning at them. His gaze fixed on Harry. "You're not planning on wasting your lives away in front of it, are you?"

"No, sir," Harry returned. "We need it to see if we can find the last of the Horcruxes, and exactly how to destroy them."

"The last of the Horcruxes, you say? Haven't had much luck in finding any of them, have you?"

"Haven't had much luck?" Filius snorted. "You did the ring, and Harry did the diary, and now they'd done the locket and the wand--my precious Rowena Ravenclaw wand, which was almost destroyed! And now they've found Helga's golden cup, but none of us want to destroy the cup and whatever magic it's supposed to hold, just the soul trapped inside of it."

"Only there's no spells to be found in any of the Hogwarts books that'll destroy just a piece of a soul, and not a whole item," Ron pointed out. "So we thought we'd peer into the Mirror and see if we could see what we desired most: the way to put an end to the Dark Lord."

"Hm. Clever. Unfortunately, I put several spells on the Mirror of Erised, concealing its location. I cannot tell you where it is. But I *can* tell you that you need only desire what you require, and the way to it will be shown."

All four of them eyed Dumbledore's portrait askance.

He flipped a painted hand at them. "Now, go on! Minerva was in an awful temper when she retired, and it won't cool down until she's had a good, uninterrupted night's sleep. Remember: desire what you require, and the way to it will be shown."

With that, he snuggled back in his chair, closed his eyes and relaxed, by all appearances going back to sleep.

"'Desire what you require.' What a crock," Ron muttered, grabbing a handful of Floo powder. "Even his painting's barmy...Madam Pince's office!"

Hermione wasn't so sure. She hung back, gesturing for the others to go first. When Harry vanished after Flitwick, she didn't reach for the Floo Powder. Instead, she looked up at Professor Dumbledore's image.

"...Sir?"

He cracked open an eyelid, peering down at her. "Did you need something more, Miss Granger?"

"About your riddle--"

"I have said all I can say." He closed his eyes again.

Hermione lifted her hand to her hair, pushing it back from her forehead with a sigh. She had something else she wanted to ask, so she switched subjects. "About Russel, Professor..."

"Who?"

"Russel," Hermione repeated, and felt her stomach sink as he gave her a blank look. "Russel Fawkeson? ...Rorik Ferguson? Oh, please tell me you've heard of him! He's your spy, your *other* spy! The only one who was left, after Prof...after Snape...did what he did, sir," she finished awkwardly. "Surely you know him?"

"Hm. I can't say the name is familiar, but I do know all of my spies. I think I know the man to whom you refer. Describe him, if you please."

She bit her lower lip. "Um, well...he wears a glamour-pendant, which he's never taken off. But...he's about this high," she gestured, holding her hand level over her head, "and he has light brown hair down to about here...and an all-over tan, grey eyes, longish nose... Oh, he has scars. Those I think are real, though I don't think the tan or anything else is. A cut next to his Dark Mark, scrapes on his right leg, nicks and burns on his hands--"

"--Yes, I know him," the painting of Albus admitted, dropping the earlier charade of confusion. "What of him?"

"Is he really on our side?" Hermione asked, heart thudding in her chest. Lifting her hand, she showed him the ring. "He gave me this to communicate. It's a betrothal ring. I wasn't supposed to put it on, but...circumstances forced me into it, and now we're, um, married."

Dumbledore's brows shot right up, and more than one of the headmasters and mistresses around him snorted with surprise in their supposed sleep. Apparently they had awoken earlier but had feigned disinterest so that they could eavesdrop. Clearing his throat, he asked her, "Married, you say? Happily, unhappily, indifferently...?"

She blushed, thinking of the way Russel made her feel. "Happily, more or less. I mean, we like...um, playing board games, and reading books, and...things..."

"I'm not so old I don't remember how pleasant 'things' could be, Hermione," the portrait of the wizard on the wall offered, clearing his throat. "Do you like him?"

"Yes. He's very intelligent, and he can be quite charming, when he lets himself go." She wasn't quite sure why she put it like that, but Albus was nodding, agreeing with her. "So...anyway, he said that communicating through these rings forced each of us to tell the truth, but Ron says there are spells to get around that sort of thing, and I don't know what to think, or how much to trust him, or even if I can."

The fire flared green, and a moment later a red-tousled head poked through it. "--Oy, Hermione, aren't you coming?"

She blushed. "In a moment, Ron. I'm almost done, here."

He gave her a dubious look, but withdrew his head. The flames died down, ceasing their greenish glow. She looked up at the former headmaster again. Albus regarded her soberly. "You want to know if you can trust him."

"Yes, sir."

"Let me see the ring."

Hermione hesitated, then moved close to the wall, standing on tiptoe and stretching up her arm. "I can't take it off; he says it's stuck on there permanently."

The portrait of Albus Dumbledore peered at her finger for a long moment before replying. "Hm. Is that what he told you?"

"Er, yes," Hermione admitted, sinking back onto her heels. She stepped back so that she could look up at him comfortably again. "Is there a way to get it off?"

"Aside from death? I cannot say for certain. *If* that ring is the one I think it is," Dumbledore added. "Tell me, does it conjure a guardian when you're in trouble?"

"Yes!"

"Is that guardian a dragon that can talk, and is named...Sigmund...Siglund..."

"Sigurd?"

"Yes, Sigurd!--I *do* know that ring, Hermione," Albus told her, asserting his confirmed knowledge. "In fact, I knew it and its match long ago, for I knew the last couple to wear it. Mind you, I know Russel by a different name than his current alias, but then I knew his great-grandparents, back when I was much, much younger. Rickart, and Claire. Those were their names..."

"That ring," he asserted, shifting forward in his painted chair, "is a very special ring, one of a fairly unique pair. It and its match were forged in the heat of dragon-fire, as well as by tool and spell. Both were forged at the same time, originally crafted from the same broad band, then split in twain...and at every step along the way, or so Rickart told me, the rings were quenched, not in water, but in Veritaserum. There is absolutely no way for anyone to completely and successfully lie, if they communicate through rings that were quenched in Veritaserum. Or so Rickart boasted to me. And I never heard differently, when I researched the matter."

"Assuming these rings were indeed the ones quenched in Truth Potion, you only have to get a straight answer out of your husband via the rings, and you will know whether it's a truth or a lie. Of course, the truth can be bent and bowed and knotted to quite some degree of complexity, and thus wielded indirectly to some degree," he cautioned her, "since it's not the same as three drops of Veritaserum laid upon the tongue. But you can guarantee there will be *some* kernel of truth in whatever he imparts to you through that ring. It might have a bit of a spin on it, but it'll still be some variation of the truth."

"Now, if you don't mind, Ms. Granger, it is late, and I am not mindful to risk waking Minerva anytime soon." Shutting his eyes, he leaned back in his chair, looking quite stubborn in his determination to pretend to go back to sleep. Until he cracked open one eye and added, "Congratulations on your marriage, by the way. I do hope you find a way to keep both of you alive, survive the aftermath of the war, and have the sort of happy family life both of you deserve."

"Thank you, Professor."

He closed his eyes again. "Don't forget to have someone tell me when Lord Voldemort is dead. Someone who witnessed it personally, if you please. I wouldn't want to miss hearing such big news by hearing it from someone who wasn't actually there."

Nodding, Hermione pinched some of the Floo Powder from the pot on the mantel and cast it into the flames. There were still some tiny doubts in her mind, but they were now reduced to the meager size of, '...is Dumbledore lying to me?', and were therefore dismissable. With her trust cemented in Russel, Hermione Floo'd back to the others. It was time to start discussing how to bring him into the arms of the Order.

If something ever happened to her, she wanted him to be able to call upon the others, and not feel quite so alone.

...

"'Desire what you require, and the way to it will be shown.' That is the single most stupid clue I have ever heard," Ron muttered. Professor Flitwick had gone to bed after an hour of cogitating on the riddle, leaving them alone in the library once more.

"A pity the Maurader's Map doesn't show objects, only people and chambers," Harry muttered.

"It doesn't always show chambers," Ron reminded him. "Remember last year, and your obsession with Malfoy's disappearances? It never showed...*Merlin's purple undershorts!*" he exclaimed, startling both of his friends. Hands slapping to his forehead, Ron pushed back his red hair, staring at the cup Harry had put back on the table

between all of them. "*Require!*The Room of *Requirement!* If we go to the Room of Requirement, and *desire* a...a corridor that leads to the room where the Mirror of Erised is located--!"

Harry snatched the cup off the table, stuffing it into his bookbag and pulling out his Invisibility Cloak in its place. "Let's go!"

"The Cloak doesn't really fit all three of us," Hermione warned them. "Not anymore."

"Well, we can't leave anyone behind," Ron reminded her pointedly. "If we all go, that's three chances to stand in front of the mirror and get it right, trying to desire a vision of how to kill the Horcrux in that thing."

"Here, give me a moment," Hermione countered, pulling a sheet of paper out of her own bag. A few taps of her wand squared the sheet, and enchanted it to fold itself. When it had finished moving, it was a paper crane. Another tap of her wand, and it glowed blue. "*Portus...* There. Now it'll take us to the seventh-floor corridor. Harry, check your Map. We don't want to run into Mr. Filch."

"Right." Digging it out of his bag, Harry tapped the complex folds with his wand. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

Ink spread across the sheets, reminding her of her communications with Russel. Hermione made a mental note to talk to the other wizard about getting her hands on Snape's library of Dark books, if this didn't work. Checking the map, Harry nodded.

"All clear. Filch is on the second floor, under the Astronomy Tower. Ready?"

They all took hold of the crane, and Hermione spoke the triggering phrase she had silently imbued into the Portkey spell. "Requiring desire!"

They yanked sideways and up, the rooms of the school blurring around them. A jolt and they landed in the corridor. Exchanging looks, the three started pacing, focusing as hard as they could on requiring a room that would connect them to the location of the Mirror of Erised. On the third pass, Harry spotted the door.

"Hey--here it is."

Ron nodded for him to open it. Harry turned the knob, pushing the door open. A short corridor lay beyond, and an age-worn door lay beyond that. Nodding, the scarred wizard entered first, leaving the others to follow. Hermione closed the door behind them, following Ron, who lit his wand with a silent flick of his wrist. Hesitating only a moment, Harry gripped the second knob and turned it, too. The room beyond, illuminated by braziers that sprung to fiery life overhead, was a cluttered mess.

"I know this room!" Harry looked back at them. "This is where I hid my sixth-year Potions book. Or rather, Snape's book."

Hermione's attitude towards that book had changed, recently. Then, she'd had the attitude that it was dangerous, like Riddle's diary. Now, she realized it was a way to peer into the mind of one of their enemies. "Show me where you hid it."

"Hello, we're here to find the Mirror of Erised," Ron reminded her.

"Yes, well, I want to see the book, too. Harry, where is it?" she repeated.

"Now you think the book is valuable?" Harry asked, raising his brows. "You didn't want me to have anything to do with it, earlier!"

"Oh, stuff it, Harry. That was then, and this is now, and I'm a lot less of an idiot now than I was then."

"I heard that!" Ron quipped, and hastily dodged the back of her hand.

"I need to see the book, Harry."

"Alright, but only because we'll have to go exploring for the Mirror, anyway," he agreed. "Assuming that book's even in this version of the room. If we'd gotten in here the regular way, I'd know for sure, but this was probably the only way we could get into the right version for the Mirror of Erised... Um...this way," Harry directed her, heading into the towering piles of broken furniture and discarded objects. "Look for a stuffed troll."

"Urgh," Ron muttered. "They're ugly enough *before* taxidermy. Why would anyone want a stuffed one?"

"There it is!" Hermione exclaimed, pointing through the debris. The ugly mug of a troll had been imprinted on her memory her very first Halloween at this school. The very day Ron had insulted her, sending her into the girls' bathroom to cry, only to be attacked by a mountain troll, and the very night the two boys had become her best friends, helping to rescue her from the monster. She could spot a troll from a thousand paces on a foggy day, practically.

They had to backtrack twice through the maze of junk to find the right spot, then Harry turned, oriented himself, and hurried down a side-path. Stopping in front of a freestanding cupboard with a blistered look to its scarred, burnt wood, he opened one drawer, then another, and finally reached behind a cage with a half-mummified skeleton in it, extracting a familiar textbook. Handing it to her, he jerked his head at the rest of the room.

"There, you have the book. Now, let's find what we came here for," he ordered her and Ron. "It'll go faster if we split up."

"Red sparks for trouble, green if you find the Mirror. Merlin alone knows what's hidden in here," Ron muttered, eyeing what looked like a piece of carapace from a blast-ended skrewt perched on a broken desk not far away.

Reaching the juncture by the stuffed troll, they oriented themselves, chose three different directions, and started picking their way through the narrow, twisting pathways winding through the debris.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

Those who do not believe it is possible to consciously direct the manifestation of one's ultimate desire have practiced neither self-control nor self-belief. These two things are the mark of a mature heart and mind.

Thbbbbbt! ~Lotm

XV.

One wouldn't think it would take that long to find a tall, rectangular, age-worn mirror. But the junkyard room they had entered was the size of a cathedral, and *not* a small one. Of course, it was a sanctuary for the discarded refuse of centuries, and not a sanctuary for worship. Unless one worshipped cracked chairs, torn cloaks, rusted owl-cages and the like. Hermione could almost have called it the garbage-heap of Hogwarts, but at least there weren't any moldy potato-peelings or used facial tissues. A small pile of crumpled handkerchiefs that she found pinned down by a rusting bronze astrolabe of a size Hagrid might be able to use, but no wadded, ranky tissues.

By treating the mess like a labyrinth, and sticking to the left-hand rule, she simply followed the left 'wall' of junk and debris, always turning to the left. With the stuffed troll as her starting point, she ended up heading far from Harry and Ron. Occasional glances across the room showed a tuft of reddish hair moving this way and that, and once she caught the gleam of Harry's spectacles, moving between two towering stacks of mismatched boxes. But after a while, she lost sight of both of them, and praised Ron for the foresight of the same rule of thumb Hagrid had taught them to use when looking through a dangerous place. Not that any of them sent up sparks as the minutes passed, slowly becoming an hour, then two, but it would be the only way to locate each other.

One of her finds took her breath away. Someone had created a cave out of a stack of chairs, desks, wrought candlestands, and some huge, mangy animal hide, something that looked like it had once belonged to a woolly mammoth, perhaps. Underneath the raised roof of the hide was a pasha's palace. Thick velvety cushions had been scattered over several layers of threadbare, faded carpets, interspersed with chests overflowing with rings, bracelets, necklaces, even a tiara. She wasn't sure how much of the jewelry was real, though some of it was clearly paste, and much of it broken or damaged in some way.

What really made it a treasure trove were the books. These were school texts, the sort that had been written on, torn, stained, even had pages missing...but someone had constructed a set of makeshift shelves underneath the stacked tables and chairs forming the walls of the yurt-like enclosure. They were grouped by category, by subject, by author, as neatly organized as any library. What puzzled Hermione was that there were often several different copies of the same book at hand. Curious, she pulled one out, opened it, and under the glow of her wand--since it was gloomy under the mammoth-hide--opened to a random page and studied what she saw.

Notes. Someone had scribbled notes all over the margins. It reminded her rather strongly of the Potions textbook of the Half-Blood Prince, though this was a book of Arithmancy. But it wasn't just one set of handwriting; there were two sets, here, one angular and masculine-looking, the other narrow and loopy, the gender indeterminate, but something made her think feminine. Pulling down the next, identical text, she opened it. Broad loops, very feminine, and the same narrow ones from before. The notes in the margin for the broad loopy hand were different from the angular ones in the previous book, but something in the narrow loops referred back to the other text.

Randomly grabbing another book, she found spiky handwriting in that one, and the narrow loops. Hermione suspected this was the private crib-note library of some past Hogwarts student, possibly a girl, someone who had taken the time to gather up all the old books tossed into this place to study the notes made in the margins. These weren't comments about boyfriends or girlfriends or how boring a class was, either; they were notes about the theories being discussed, or linkages to other magical disciplines, some cryptically short, others with impressive detail.

She longed to study more of these things, but aware of the passage of time, Hermione reluctantly re-shelved the books. *I will come back, though*, she promised herself. *I'll come back, and pick the minds of all these past students, to see if they have anything useful to say...* She looked around one last time, then turned to crawl back out of the tent-like space. And spotted a photograph in a frame near the entrance. Crawling over to it on hands and knees, she extended her wand towards it, peering at the image.

It was a girl, maybe sixteen or so, with dark, straight hair, dark eyes, and a longish nose. Her school uniform was a bit old-fashioned in its cut, but then the wavy edge of the black-and-white photo suggested the picture had been taken in the fifties. The girl sat on the steps of some broad stairwell somewhere, her longish skirt tucked demurely over her knees, and her hands clasped in her lap. Her posture was good, too, and though her expression was a bit superior, there was a hint of a smile about her mouth.

Every once in a while, she lifted her hand and waved, just a quick little pass of her hand, then she went back to her demure pose, as if she was accustomed to the idea of self-control. Written on the corner of the photograph were the words, *Daddy's Little Princess*. Unfortunately, being a black-and-white photograph, it was impossible to tell what colour her school tie was, and there was no House badge visible, just a prefect's badge...but Hermione liked her. She seemed studious, perhaps a Ravenclaw; or maybe ambitious, a Slytherin. Whoever she was, Hermione wished her well.

Unfortunately, though this makeshift treasure trove was fascinating, it wasn't helping her to find the Mirror of Erised. Crawling out, Hermione oriented herself and followed the left-hand stacks of junk. A faint sizzling sound in the distance made her look up. Craning her head, she turned around, and spotted the last few bits of green sparks fading in the distance. Someone had found the Mirror. The sparks shot up again over in the far left-hand corner. Golden sparks shot up from somewhere nearer and to the right. Raising her own wand, Hermione conjured a stream of golden sparks to indicate that she, too, had seen the message.

Unfortunately, she was very close to the back right corner. There was an awful lot of maze between her and the far end of the almost Westminster-sized chamber. After getting lost one, twice, three times trying to backtrack her way by instinct, Hermione wished fervently to find a functional broom. Especially when she heard Ron's voice bellowing in the distance, "--*Hermione! Where are you?*"

"Coming, Ron!" she shouted back, frustrated by a fourth dead-end. *If only I could fly!* But there weren't any brooms or carpets or Muggle Ford Anglias conveniently on hand...

"*Do you need us to come find you?*" That was Harry's voice.

"I'm coming!" There was a Charm for walking on the tops of bushes and trees that Professor Flitwick had once mentioned in passing; if this had been that hedge-maze from the Triwizard Tournament, she could've just climbed to the tops of the hedges and raced along the top, where she could see the best path. But these were uneven stacks of things that were too precariously perched to clamber over. If only she *could* fly, or at least levitate--Hermione smacked her forehead, drew her wand, and cast the charm she had made up when Russel had been injured. What was the point of being a witch who could make up her own Charms, if she didn't ruddy well use them? "*Semobilum!*"

Her body lifted into the air by about a foot. Tamping down her fear of unsupported heights--at least a broom was something to cling to, however insubstantial when compared to a thestral or an aeroplane, and this was not even that--she firmed her will and lifted herself higher, over the nearest piles and columns of junk. Now she could see where she was going. In fact, now she had no real obstacles, just a few taller piles to dodge around. Well, no obstacles but her own fear.

The sight of a marlin on a large rectangular plaque caught her eye. The swordfish had that glassy-eyed look of taxidermy, but it made her think of fish, of water, of swimming. Her mind inverted itself--she loved snorkeling and reef-diving; she wasn't flying, she was swimming! The moment she looked at it that way, Hermione's fears faded. A push of her mind sent her forward horizontally, as if she were swimming. She even wriggled her feet, as if she had on Muggle swim-fins.

The only drawback was the urge to hold her breath, or to breathe through her mouth, as if through a snorkel. But it was considerably faster than following the twisting maze of paths below her. Arching a little higher, she looked for Harry and Ron, but couldn't see them. She knew they were in the far corner, but hadn't a clue as to where, exactly.

"Ron! Send up your sparks again!"

Green shot into the air, and she added more speed, finally spotting Ron's distinct red hair. Now her feet didn't feel the need to kick at the air, which was probably a good thing. Hermione could only imagine how silly she looked. As it was, Harry was the first one to spot her, and he gaped up at her. Ron eyed him, looked up to follow his line of sight, and dropped his jaw, too. Righting herself as she closed the last few yards, Hermione guided herself down beside them, touched down on the bit of stone floor next to

them that was free of debris, and cut off the spell with a little flick of her wand.

"...What?"

"You...you... How did you *do* that? You weren't using a wand, or a rug, or...or *anything!*" the youngest male Weasley exclaimed. "Did you find some flying brooch, buried in all of this junk?"

"No. I just made up a spell."

"Bloody brilliant," Harry breathed, impressed. "You came up with that just right now?"

"No, it was a few weeks ago," Hermione admitted with a shrug, "but it's only the second time I've used it. And it's a little scary, but very safe, if you've a disciplined mind. You have to *think* about moving, otherwise you just float in place. It takes a bit of effort, but I'm sure the two of you could learn."

"You'd *better* teach us," Ron warned her lightly. Turning, he gestured at what they had come here for. "It's a bit grungy-looking, but the inscription's right. I haven't looked into it, yet. I wanted all of us here, first. We might need to get ourselves into the right mindset, otherwise we'll be seeing the wrong things. I figured we could help each other do that."

"Right," Harry agreed, eyeing the Mirror. "We need to desire, with all our hearts, to find the way to destroy the Hufflepuff Horcrux, without destroying the cup. The way to destroy the pieces of Lord Voldemort's twisted, fragmented soul. We need to find some spell or other means of eradicating his life-force, without resorting to the Killing Curse...and if I couldn't cast it, with all the anger bottled up inside of me, I doubt either of the two of you could."

Hermione and Ron exchanged looks. It was the first time Harry had admitted he had a little too much of that anger bottled inside of him. Neither commented on it, however; they didn't want Harry to feel the need to defend himself, and thus perhaps cling all the harder to his temperament problem.

Of the three of them, Hermione was the only one who hadn't personally encountered the Mirror, though she'd heard the descriptions from Ron and Harry both. It was very tall, at least twelve feet high, and had a gilded, claw-footed frame. It was buried in the midst of a canyon of tall objects, wardrobes stacked on dressers, tapestries draped from columns, boxes on crates on barrels, which was probably why they hadn't seen it from a distance. Back from it a short distance as they were, the mirror looked clouded, blackened a little, with only blurry images for its reflection. Across the top ran the message Harry had once tried to describe to her:

Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.

"I'll go first," Harry stated, drawing her attention.

Taking a deep, bracing breath, he muttered to himself about Horcruxes, and stepped right up to the mirror, stopping when he was only two feet away at most. His eyes widened, he leaned in towards the mirror...and then his body stiffened and anger reddened his cheeks. Growling, he tore himself away, cursing under his breath.

"Damnit, damnit, damnit! ...Sorry," Harry apologized a moment later, catching sight of Ron and Hermione's astonishment. He wasn't normally the sort to curse, and it had surprised them. "Sorry. I had it, for a moment... I saw a book, with handwriting that looked familiar. I thought it was Snape's handwriting. And then all I could see was an image of myself smashing him and Voldemort to the ground, destroying both of them. I can't look into it again until I've calmed down...because what I desire most right now is not a pretty thing to admit to wanting, let alone actually see."

Ron touched his shoulder. "At least you tried, Harry. And now we know that the greasy git has the book with the spell that we need. All we need to do is find it. My turn, I think. Unless you want a crack at it, Hermione?"

"No, you go first," she directed him. She needed time to get her thoughts pulled away from the graphic image Harry had related.

Stepping into the spot Harry had vacated, Ron peered into the murky glass. His eyes widened, and his freckled cheeks tinted red. He, too, swayed toward the Mirror a little-then shook his head abruptly, squeezing his eyes shut. Pressing the heels of his palms to his eyes, he stood like that for almost a minute. Slowly, the tension in his shoulders eased. Hermione saw his lips moving, but couldn't hear what he was muttering. Lowering his hands, he sighed roughly, drew a shoulder-squaring breath, and stared into the looking-glass again.

This time, his cheeks paled. Averting his head, Ron stepped away from the mirror, moving so that his back was to both Harry and Hermione. "Your turn."

Carefully not thinking about what her ex-boyfriend might've desired most that would distress him so much, Hermione moved up to the mirror. Stepping into place, Hermione glanced up before looking into the glass. She read the message again. Something about it was strangely familiar, and not in a *deja-vu* sense; something about it compelled her to read it again, and again. It was on the fifth read that she realized what it was. The message wasn't: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi* it was: *I show not your face but your hearts desire.*

It wasn't some magical language; it was simply written backwards! As soon as she realized it, Hermione felt as if her mind had been jolted, like a table being bumped in passing. Almost as if the mirror itself had whispered into her mind, Hermione suddenly realized how the ruddy thing worked--it was just like guiding herself with her new Self-Levitation Charm, or just like directed dreaming! *Why didn't anybody ever tell me it was that easy?* Not easy in the sense that it would be a breeze to focus her mind on a specific desire so strongly that it was the only one shown, but easy in the sense that she now knew she *could* switch the subject of her intense focus, if her mind strayed.

All those lessons in mental discipline for the mastering of Occlumency were about to pay off in a whole new way...

Lowering her gaze to the mirror, she focused her mind upon the Horcruxes as her starting point. *Show me Lord Voldemort's Horcruxes. All of them,* she ordered the Mirror, staring firmly into its pewter depths. For a moment, her attention started to wander to the same shade of Russel's eyes, but she dragged her attention firmly back onto the right path. She was going to concentrate on the Horcruxes, and she was going to find out what each and every last one of them was, and she was going to learn how to destroy them.

The ring showed itself first; it was on an age-withered hand, and that hand plunged itself through some thick surface, like a potion, only vertical. The ring flared into a ball of fire, and the hand withdrew, blackened and withered from the destructive magic, the stone cracked. Next came the diary, and she saw a young hand stabbing a pointed, yellow-white object into its pages, which spurted dark blood. *Yes, show me more! Show me all of the Horcruxes, and show me how to defeat each one!*

The wand was next; it faced off against another, one, and golden light shot and pulsed, beaded, and disgorged prior charms. Hermione resisted the temptation to impatiently urge the images onward; she didn't want to miss anything. Then came the locket, and she watched as it was dragged in front of a streak of green. Firming her mind, she concentrated, watching the emerald fire suck itself into the locket, destroying the soul it contained. *Yes, more!*

Now came...a bar of iron? Hermione almost lost the image. Narrowing her eyes, she studied the object. It looked like a fire-poker, for it rested in a bed of coals. Until a hand drew it out, and she squinted at a blazing shape wrought in metal at the end of the shaft...the shape of a skull with a serpent for its tongue.

The image shattered, from shock. Reeling back, Hermione pressed her hands to her eyes, dizzy from the effort she'd expended, and from the meaning of what she had seen. A hand touched her shoulder, and Harry's voice spoke in her ear. "Hermione, are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Just a little shaken."

"I'd better try, then."

"No! No, I was seeing it... I saw the ring, and the locket, and...and something new. I just...I just have to figure out what it means. Give me a second," she told him, keeping her eyes buried in her palms. "I'll look again in a moment."

Releasing her shoulder, he stepped back, giving her room to think.

A branding iron. The branding iron for the Dark Mark. But why would Voldemort put a piece of his soul into a branding iron? Unless... An image swam into focus, the visage of that silly wizard from her Apparation class. Twycross, that was his name. His lessons had been a lot of touchy-feeling twaddle, in regards to teaching the students how to Apparate, with even less substance to them than one of Professor Trelawney's Divinations speeches. Yet one of the things he had said came back to the surface of Hermione's memory now. *Only sentient beings can learn how to Apparate, because it is only through the consciousness of the mind, the willfulness of the soul, that we can yearn to be in a specific place...*

What little she knew of how the Dark Mark worked was that, by concentrating on it, a wizard or witch would be able to Apparate to a place they did not themselves know, because it would tug them straight to the Dark Lord's location. Voldemort himself had told Harry that, during his resurrection at the disastrous end of the Triwizard Tournament. And Twycross had also said, *Side-Along Apparation is possible, because the guiding wizard or witch is doing the longing for their passenger, thus you must long twice as hard, when you take someone with you...*

It made sense, in a very twisted sort of way. They weren't Apparating to their master's location; they were Side-Along Apparating. And the only way they could do that was if the Dark Mark was linked to a piece of Voldemort's ugly soul, via the magic-imbued brand that connected all of the Death Eaters to their lord. Fighting down her astonishment--and a twinge of very reluctant admiration for the pure genius of the idea behind whatever spell or spells made it all possible--Hermione marshaled her thoughts. She had to see how to destroy the branding iron. Lowering her hands, she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and focused on Horcruxes again.

Show me the remaining Horcruxes, starting with the branding iron, and how to destroy the souls contained within each of them.

The thought-command, as sharp and clear as a polished diamond, cut through the misty grey surface of the Mirror of Erised. The brand swam back into view. She focused on watching it, burning-hot, and mentally demanded to see how the soul within it could most easily and quickly be destroyed. It wasn't an artifact of history, after all. A book swam into view...a familiar book, but only familiar because she'd gone ahead and bought it: her seventh-year Charms book.

Concentrating through her shock, she forced her mind to stay fastened on the goal. Pages flipped open, she caught the title of a spell, *Liquis Nitrogus*, and the trigger-word, *Frangelu*, then saw a wand flicking a white-blue streak of magic at the brand just as it touched a cloaked and cowed figure on the forearm. The dark, glowing metal turned frost white, the kneeling figure screamed, and the brand shattered. Robed and masked figures in the background clamped their hands over their arms, and the image faded.

The timing of the brand striking an arm she suspected to be very important; whatever it might do, it would clearly affect all the others who bore the Dark Mark, at that moment. Voldemort was bound to notice something was up, with that attack. Consigning it to the last Horcrux attacked, she focused again. *Show me the rest, and how to destroy them...*

Something diamond-patterned undulated into view. It wasn't the Hufflepuff cup. Uneasy, Hermione clung to her desire to see what it was and how it could be destroyed. She couldn't prevent the slight gasp that escaped, when she realized it was a large, unfamiliar, but poisonous-looking snake. *This must be Nagini*, she thought, and watched it slither up to its master and rub sinuously against the Dark Lord's ankle, almost as if it were a cat. The image of the Basilisk-Snogger faded away, and she concentrated on how to take out the soul within the beast. A bit of text from another book, and the word *Sectumsempra* branded itself on her eyes; a wand of holly slashed through the air, and she tore her eyes from the image, unhappy at seeing Harry killing the snake. She knew it had to be done, but it distressed her all the same.

Ron was looking at her. Breathing unsteadily, Hermione stared into his blue eyes for a long moment, taking comfort in his concern, then swallowed and looked back at the mirror again. *How many Horcruxes does Voldemort have?*

...7...

She blinked, and the black-painted number rippled; she was losing focus. Firming her thoughts, Hermione demanded, *So show me the last!* The Mirror, prodded by a mind honed from far too many hours of disciplined, scheduled studying, dissolved from pewter to gold. At last, Helga Hufflepuff's cup came into view. *Good...now show me how to destroy the soul that resides within it, without destroying any of the other properties of that cup!*

A book replaced the cup. She squinted at the faded lettering on the black leather; it was hard to see, because it was silver-gilt, and the gilt had blackened with age. *Diario ex Bruja...Lucrezia*. What language was that? The tome opened itself, the pages flicking past. They finally settled open at the title of a spell, *Infusio di Anima Te*. Italian? Marshalling her attention, she looked at what lay under the title. Not a spell, she realized, but a potion. And she could only tell that because of the neat list of what looked like Italian names for various ingredients. She saw a cauldron, and hands compiling a complex brew. A very complex brew.

In the background, the moon passed through its phases once, twice...thrice, and a bit more. At least three months to brew whatever it was, if not more. And then, the potion was boiled down to a flaky powder, which looked like tea leaves, but she knew wasn't. It was scraped from the cauldron by gloved hands, and measured into a teapot; the tea was steeped, and poured into the cup...and light burned through the cup in the ugly shades of Voldemort's soul, blazingly bright, then dimmer, dimmer...night turned to day, and day turned to night, and the light winked out, leaving an innocuous, clear, amber-hued liquid that was poured back into a cauldron over a veritable mountain of bezoars.

The liquid hissed and fizzled and turned the mess of the poisonous tea into a foamy, opaque green mess that evaporated, leaving a tiny pile of half-dissolved bezoar stones in the bottom of a now highly polished and visibly thinned iron cauldron. Another bezoar was ground into powder and used to dry-scrub the teapot and cup, polishing them with less visible ill-effect than the iron cauldron had suffered. Lastly, the dragon-hide gloves were scrubbed with more bezoar powder.

Hermione winced at the thought of that. Bezoar stones weren't terribly common, which meant a cauldron's worth was going to cut into their budget. Returning her attention to the task at hand, she asked the mirror, not allowing her mind to stray one iota from her task, *So where do I find the Diario ex Bruja Lucrezia?*

A tall chimney from some dilapidated industrial building faded into view. It presided over an equally run-down neighborhood of squarish brick structures that might've once called themselves homes, but which were now too depressing to think of anyone living in them for long. But when she tried to focus on which one she should be looking at, a grey mist ate at the heart of the image. Wherever the book was being held, she couldn't look at it directly.

So show me how I can look at it directly, she ordered the mirror impatiently. A face swam into view. A familiar face, with familiar grey eyes. But not dark blond hair; this wasn't Russel's face she saw. This was the face of a scared, unhappy Draco Malfoy. Draco's lips moved, and his head filled the spot in the brick housing development, but his lips were misty-grey.

He was the Secret Keeper for that place. It was the only logical deduction. She had to find Draco Malfoy, Death Eater, and convince him to reveal the secret of the location of the potion book she needed...without getting herself killed. Her day was just getting better and better, with that.

Is that all of the Horcruxes? Hermione demanded of the mirror, returning her mind to the heart of her task. Images filled the screen at her command. A ring, a locket, a diary, a branding iron, a snake, a wand, and a cup. Nothing more appeared on the other side of the glass. Relieved, Hermione closed her eyes and stepped back from the looking-glass.

She stumbled as she did so. Harry caught her, steadying her. "Are you alright? You're not addicted, are you?"

Opening her eyes, Hermione looked at the mirror. *I show not your face but your heart's desire.* She had the key to using it, now. Her head hurt, her eyes smarted, and her knees ached. "No, I don't think I'll ever be addicted to watching this thing."

Ron snorted. "You were staring at it for over three hours."

"--I was?" That was news to her. Blinking, Hermione looked up at the tall, narrow windows above the peaks and ridges of abandoned junk. They were no longer dark with night, but were turning grey with predawn. Her leg joints ached again, making her wince. "No wonder it played ruddy cob with my knees, when I stepped back. I'm surprised my eyes aren't watering, too. And I think I'm getting a migraine from all the concentrating I did."

"If you hadn't been frowning and blinking and looking like you do when you're studying really hard," Harry told her, "we would've pulled you away, out of fear you were becoming addicted to that thing."

"Hardly," she snorted. "It was just really hard to concentrate with all my might on what I wanted to see. Like moving through mental treacle. And frankly, I'm exhausted."

"You can collapse to pieces later, Hermione," Ron ordered her. "What did you *see*?"

"Well, we've got three more Horcruxes," Hermione told them. "And I'll tell you about them, if you'll find me a place to sit. My knees don't like me very much, at the moment."

"What do you mean, three?" Harry interjected as Ron moved down the path a little ways and started clearing stuff from a medium-sized chest. "I thought it was just the Hufflepuff cup and one other, Nagini. I could be wrong about the snake, but Dumbledore suggested it was possible, given he's a Parselmouth."

"Oh, the snake's one of them," she reassured him, and gratefully sank onto the chest as Ron brought it over and set it down next to her. "Thanks, Ron. No, the cup, the snake, and the thing we have to destroy last, before taking on Voldie-butt. And the snake, well, it's a snake, and you just...you know. Kill it. The Mirror suggested *Sectumsempra*."

"So, what is it?" Harry prompted her. "What's the extra Horcrux?"

"The branding iron he uses to make new Death Eaters--think back to Apparation class," she coached them as both young men gave her puzzled looks. "You need something that can think, to control an Apparation, but the Dark Mark controls the destination...and what they do is a form of Side-Along Apparation, isn't it?"

"Sweet Merlin's arse! That Basilisk-Snogging Bastard is a bloody genius!" Ron breathed, then quickly backtracked. "--Not that I condone it, or anything. I mean, I *know* creating a Horcrux requires a murder, but no one has ever been able to create an object that could cause an Apparation, only Portkeys! And it's not the same thing; apparition's a lot easier to manage than creating a Portkey, which is why so many more people do it."

Hermione got the conversation back on track. "Anyway, there's a spell in our seventh year Charms book that'll destroy the thing, and the Mirror suggested using it the next time they induct someone into their group. I'm not sure why, but it looked like it'll affect all of the Death Eaters somehow, if we get the timing just right."

"Why would Voldemort create seven Horcruxes?" Ron asked, frowning. "His original intent was to have seven pieces including himself, but that makes eight. Ring, cup, locket, wand, diary, brand, diary, snake. Seven is the power-number, not eight."

"I'd like to hear what destroys the soul in that cup, first," Harry reminded him. "We can debate motive and philosophy later. Hermione, did you see it?"

"Yes. But...well, we need to brew something poisonous, from a book entitled *Diario ex Bruja Lucrezia*, but I've never heard of it, and the place where it's kept, I think it's hidden by the Fidelius Charm," Hermione said.

"*Diario ex Bruja Lucrezia*?" Ron asked, staring at her in dismay. "We have to cook something up from Lucrezia Borgia's *diary*? Oh, man... She was the most evil Potions Mistress of all time! Dad once told me there was even a motion to strip her of her rank as a Potions Mistress, but there was a rash of illness that left the Brewer's Council without a quorum, but they couldn't prove that she was behind it. She would've been a total Slytherin, if she'd gone to Hogwarts."

Hermione eyed him askance. "How do you know all of this?"

"Um...we're related to the Borgias. On Mum's side," he admitted sheepishly, tucking one hand behind his neck. "Bill knows more than I do, though."

"Right. Well, getting back on track," Harry reminded them. "Hermione, are you sure of where the diary is located, that it's behind the Fidelius Charm?"

She shrugged helplessly. "I saw a neighborhood somewhere, possibly in London, possibly in Birmingham, or some other industrial area, I'm not sure...and a grey spot at the center of it. And filling that grey spot was an image of a person, whom I can only surmise is the Secret Keeper who can tell me the exact location we'll need to search."

"Who?" Harry asked.

"Erm...you're not going to like it," Hermione warned her new brother. "The person we have to find and get the location from...is Draco Malfoy."

Harry stared at her. "You're right. I don't like it. Because unless we can successfully Obliviate him, he'll spill the fact that we're searching for something in a Death Eater controlled location to Voldemort. Even if he doesn't want to, Voldemort will pick it out of his mind."

"Hang on," Ron interjected. "Why don't we just have Russel get it? He's a fellow Death Eater; Draco would have more cause to trust him than one of us."

"Actually, I think that's a good idea," Hermione returned slowly, thoughtfully. "He could even just tell Malfoy that it's on the Dark Lord's orders, a secret mission or something, and Malfoy wouldn't even be able to protest."

"Then that's what we'll do," Harry agreed. "We'll get the book, brew the potion, and go after the snake, the brand, and Voldemort himself. The war will be over by Christmas!"

"Er...not exactly," Hermione hedged. Both wizards looked at her. "If the vision I saw is correct, the thing we have to brew will take about three and a half months to make. And there's some serious safety steps we'll have to take while brewing it, and to dispose of it afterwards. Lots of bezoars, for one. But it'll destroy the soul in the cup without harming the cup or its normal magical properties. I was quite specific in seeking that information, in the Mirror. We'll have to let the tea or whatever it is sit in the cup for two nights, too. It's not a quick fix, Harry."

"I wish it were. If we could guarantee that smashing it would destroy it..." Pressing his fingers to his eyes underneath his spectacles, Harry stood there, shoulders slumped as he thought. A weary sigh escaped him, and he shifted his hands, taking off his glasses. Rubbing the bridge of his nose made him look older and more tired than his seventeen years. "We'll do it the Mirror-suggested way. As much as I want this over with *now*...moving hastily might get us into serious trouble. I want to do it right, to end the war so that Voldemort and his ilk can never come back into power and ruin the wizarding world again."

Rising from the chest, Hermione wrapped her arms around him, hugging her blood-bound brother. "And that's why you're a good guy, Harry."

"Oy, what about me?" Ron joked.

Rolling her eyes, she held out one of her arms, including him in the hug. Her finger tingled after a moment, and a sudden weight clung to her back. A golden head peered past her right shoulder at Ron. Sigurd didn't hiss or anything, but he did stare at Ron in silent, low-key warning.

"Right, right...hands-off, I get the bloody idea," Ron muttered, releasing her and stepping back.

He flipped the dragonette a rude gesture as soon as Hermione turned her head away, but she caught it out of the corner of her eye and rolled her eyes at him. Sigurd didn't even blink, but he did vanish after a few more seconds. Rumpling his hair with his hands, Ron sighed and returned to the topic at hand.

"...Well. All we can do now is wait for Russel to contact Hermione, and for her to get him to meet with Draco, find out where that place is that she saw, and steal the right book for us. And then set about brewing a three-ruddy-month potion to destroy another arse-ugly chunk of Moldiebutt's soul."

"*First*, we have to find our way back to the door out of this mess," Harry pointed out ruefully, staring at the stacks of abandoned belongings collecting dust about them.

Hermione thought about offering to teach them her new Charm, but knowing it took the boys--the young men--a bit of practice to master a new spell, she didn't want to watch them crashing on top of vases and bookends and chaise lounges. "Let's get going, then."

It did take a bit of back-tracking to find their way out, but they made it to the door. The same short corridor from before waited for them, and Harry grabbed the door, closing it from the junk-room. Relieved to be out of there, Hermione grabbed the outer doorknob, opened the panel, and stepped out--

"--*Oof!*" Grabbing the body she'd smacked into, Hermione felt her heart pounding. She'd stupidly forgotten she wasn't a student anymore, and that it was daylight. A shock of straight red hair was her only relief: she'd run into Ginny Weasley. Wide-eyed, she looked up and down the corridor. No one else was in sight, thankfully.

"...Hermione?" Ginny gasped as soon as she'd caught her balance and her breath. She peered over the older witch's shoulder. "Ron?--*Harry?*"

Wishing very hard, with the same concentration she'd used on the Mirror of Erised, Hermione pulled Ginny into the short corridor and shut the door as quickly but as quietly as she could. Only it wasn't a corridor anymore; it was now a sitting room. Ron blinked and shook his head, looking around himself in surprise. Harry didn't seem to notice the sudden change in the room. He only had eyes for Ginevra Weasley.

Releasing the younger witch's arm, Hermione turned and watched Ginny slowly walk towards the dark-haired male. She couldn't see Ginny's face any more, but she could see the anguish and longing on Harry's, and felt her hearth thump again, this time for the pain of their separation. With a lurch, Ginny flung herself into Harry's arms. Snatching her close, Harry just held her for a long, long moment, and then they were kissing. Impatiently, he shoved off his glasses, and that was when Hermione had to turn away. She met Ron's stunned gaze, raised her brows, and pursed her lips, letting out a sigh.

Digging in her bookbag, she extracted a sheet, enchanted it to stick to the door, and marked on it with her pen. **...Harry, this sheet of paper is your Portkey back to Headquarters. Just say 'Home Sweet Home', and it'll take you there. Don't have too much fun, but don't have too little. And remember to be reasonably responsible, when all is said and done. ~Hermione.** A second tap of her wand enchanted the sheet. She drew out the paper crane she had made earlier, re-enchanted it, and offered it to Ron, who was looking anywhere but at the sight of his sister groping with his best friend.

"C'mon, Ron," she whispered to him. "Let's go back, and leave them alone for now."

Sighing roughly, Ron grasped the wing of the crane. Hermione could sympathize with him over the sight of his sister--still technically underage--snogging so enthusiastically, but she herself was willing to look the other way, this one time. Harry didn't have much in the way of happiness in his life, and being parted from Ginny just after they'd gotten together had taken its toll. Hopefully, a little private time with his would-be girlfriend would make him feel a little better, give him something to fight for, besides the proddings of his anger and thirst for revenge.

She had strongly and firmly required a room where they wouldn't be discovered by anyone else, taking a note out of Malfoy's manual in doing so; the door wouldn't reappear until one of them left. That would take care of Harry's fear of anyone finding out about the two of them, provided she and Ron didn't talk. She doubted the redhead would, though. Muttering the trigger-phrase, she yanked them out of there, giving the other two some privacy and trusting that they wouldn't entirely lose their heads once they were alone.

...

Harry returned some two hours latter, looking a little rumpled, and very glum. Porting into the middle of the parlour, he moved to the sofa where Hermione sat curled up in one corner, reading the crib-notes scribbled in the sixth-year textbook he had fetched for her. He dropped onto the other end of the cushions. A rough sigh, and he braced his elbows on his knees, rumpling his black locks with his hands.

"...She sneaks into the Room of Requirement every time she has a prefect patrol on that floor, and summons a mirror that shows her what I'm doing at that moment. Whatever I'm doing. Sleeping, eating, talking, reading...even--" his face flushed, "--showering. I shouldn't have touched her. Shouldn't have held her, or kissed her."

Hermione kicked him with her heel. Luckily for him, she wasn't wearing her shoes, but she did kick him hard, making him yelp and glare at her. Fixing him with a hard look, Hermione admonished, "Stop that, Harry. This instant. You have *every* right to snatch at a moment or two of happiness--what do you think we're fighting this *war* for, if not to hold our loved ones in our arms? Stop being motivated by anger and vengeance! Be motivated by *love*. It's as plain as the nose on my face that you love her, Harry, so let that love strengthen your commitment to see our task through."

"But if she dies because of me--!" Harry protested.

"It's a risk we *all* have to take," Hermione pointed out. She hadn't been able to go to bed like Ron, because her mind had been whirling through these very thoughts for the last two hours. The book in her hands had distracted her somewhat, but not enough to guess what Harry would think or do. "Do you really think Molly and Arthur *haven't* thought of the odds, where themselves and their children are concerned? They are *going* to lose one or more of their children. It's a cold, hard, numerical fact.

"They almost lost Bill, already. Percy's exiled himself like a ruddy prat. Ron nearly got hit by the Killing Curse! If I hadn't been able to interfere, he would be *dead*. Ginny is just as much a valid target because she's a Weasley, a blood-traitor, and a powerful witch from a powerful family. It would devastate the rest of the Weasleys if anything happened to her, weakening them with grief and the need for vengeance," Hermione reminded her brother tartly. "As would the death of any of them. And yet Molly and Arthur are still in the Order, and their children are still in the Order.

"Do you know how they're coping with it? They're *loving* each other...with the exception of the prat," Hermione muttered. "But if he came back, they'd take him back. Because they draw strength from their familial love. Draw strength from your love of Ginny, Harry. You should be fighting for a world where you can finally hold her in your arms without worrying about anyone seeing you. *That* is a far more worthy goal to strive for than just wanting to destroy the bloody arseholes who created the mess of this war. Fight for love, not for hate."

He stared at her, absorbing her words. Hermione kept her mouth shut, letting him think as much as he needed. Sometimes letting Harry think too much wasn't a good idea, but in this case, she hoped fervently he was thinking too much of the *right* sort of thoughts. She returned her attention to Snape's book, going over the notes he'd written in the margins as a sixth-year student.

"Ron loves you," Harry stated after a long span of silence. "But he can't have you. What strength can he find in that?"

It was a very perceptive question, and a very uncomfortable one. Turning a page, Hermione answered without looking up. "That is a question that only Ron will be able to answer, Harry. For myself, I hope he realizes that his perfect love is still out there. In the meantime, he can cling to his love for his family, and his love for you, and even his love for me, so long as he realized I'm never going to be more than a best friend to him."

"Even if Russel dies?" Harry pressed her. "If something happens to him, would you go back to Ron? Not that I'm saying I *want* him to die or anything, but...would there be

hope for Ron, then?"

That question was too perceptive. Marking her page with the crane she'd used as a Portkey earlier, Hermione closed the book in her lap. Given the seriousness of the topic, and her need to make him understand, she knew she owed him a serious answer, delivered with all of her attention. *But how to make him understand, without undermining the relationships between the three of us?*

All she could do was try. "Adult relationships are more complicated than youthful ones, Harry. I've discovered that, embroiled in the situation that I am. It wasn't a painless discovery, either. I love Ron. I thought I wanted him, as a woman wants a man. But I realize now I don't love him in that way enough to *be* with him as a woman with a man. I *do* love him deeply, but as a friend."

"Like a sister," Harry rephrased.

"No...like a friend. I don't think of him as a brother. I think of *you* as a brother," Hermione reminded him, "but not Ron. It's a different sort of love. He's attractive, and charming at times, he can be smart, and funny, and he's finally getting his confidence in his own skills, after having been overshadowed by the rest of his family for so long. But...while he's very attractive, I'm just not attracted enough to make a go of it. Even if Russel dies, I'll only ever be Ron's friend...and whatever you may think, that does upset me.

"I *want* to be attracted to him, but now that I know the difference, I can't help but feel the way that I feel. There's nothing that either of us can do to change that." She shrugged helplessly. "It could hardly be true love, if it's not felt strongly on both sides. Ron ignored me for the longest of times, and then, just after he noticed me and had me, I was snatched away. That's going to create a longing within him for what he can no longer have, and until he accepts that it's over between us, he's going to want to cling to his affection for me. It would be better for him to accept the fact that we'll only be friends, so that he can move on and find someone to love who can love him back in the same way. He *deserves* to find someone who can love him back in the way he deserves to be loved, and I hope he finds that woman soon. He needs a love worth fighting for, too."

"What about you?" Harry asked her. "Have you fallen in love with Russel?"

Hermione thought of the things she'd done with Russel, and blushed. It wasn't just the scads of fantastic lovemaking; it was the way he'd enjoy reading with her, or debating magical theory, or playing silly board games, though a good debate over a jigsaw puzzle was his favourite pastime, outside of the games that could be played in that hotel room bed. She enjoyed spending time with him. She could even envision a life with him beyond the war, now that she'd gotten to know him and seen how well their two lives could mesh together.

"...I think I have. I once heard that there are two types of people: those who fall in love and get married, and those who get married and fall in love. I didn't exactly have a chance for the first one," she reminded him, "but I think I've done the second one, by now."

Harry digested that silently for a moment, then asked, "Have you told him?"

Her cheeks flushed hot and red. "Erm...no. Not yet. I'm not quite ready for such a big step. Though I should be. Listen--when I lingered in the study, talking to Dumbledore's portrait, he told me he recognized my ring. When the two of them were forged, they were quenched in Veritaserum. There's no way to lie through these rings, no spell that can get around them. So, um...I'm throwing in my lot with Russel," Hermione confessed. "I really believe he's on our side, that he truly wants to destroy Lord Voldemort. I think that's what allowed me to admit that I've gone and fallen for him.

"I don't know if it's true love or not--it's clear that he likes me, but I don't know if he loves me," she qualified, "--but I do know I can finally see myself still being his wife after this war is over. I've still got lots of questions, though, about what he normally does for a living and the like, but everything's so up in the air right now, I don't even know what *I* will be doing for a living." Hermione followed that line of thought, switching the topic off of herself and her essentially arranged marriage. "For that matter, do you know what you'll be doing? Are you still planning on being an Auror?"

"Hermione, I'm not going to be able to pass the required N.E.W.T.s," Harry reminded her.

She gave him a pointed look. "Harry, like it or not, you're going to be the Man Who Offed Voldiebutt."

A laugh escaped him, at that. "That'll make a better headliner than 'Boy Who Lives Kills Lord Thingy', except I'm not sure the paper would want to print the word 'butt' in a headline."

"I cannot see the Aurors turning you down, after that accomplishment. And if you're worried about the N.E.W.T.s, then we can just use some of your money to hire tutors, and *study* for them! We can all do that, after the war is over, then sit for the Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests, and pass them, even if we're into our twenties by then, and then we can all get good jobs! We have to have our options ready for when we win the war, because we're going to be feeling awfully lost-at-sea if we don't know what to do with ourselves, afterwards. We need to have some positive reason why we want to win the war--your love for Ginny, for example," she reminded him, "--and something to look forward to doing, after the war."

"You mean, things worth living for?" Harry asked her dryly.

"Exactly. Stop living in a doom-and-gloom funk, Harry," Hermione ordered him bluntly. "You *are* allowed to find happiness, but you'll only find it if you go looking for it. If all you're looking for is the negatives in a situation, that's all you will find. And *I*, for one, refuse to live my life under a cloud of doom-and-gloom." She paused a beat, then added sanctimoniously, "...It blocks my reading light!"

That made him laugh, as she'd intended. Uncurling from her side of the sofa, she pulled him into a one-armed hug. Harry returned it, leaning his head against her shoulder. "Sometimes I feel like there's nothing left but doom-and-gloom. And then, this morning happened...er, you're not going to ask me what happened, are you? I mean, with that note and all..."

"So long as you were responsible, and consensual, it is none of my business what you do with Ginny Weasley," Hermione stated, giving his shoulders a little squeeze. "Just as what I do with Russel is none of your business, so long as it's responsible and consensual."

"You aren't going to, um, you know...get pregnant or anything, are you?" Harry asked, face colouring with the topic.

"It's been taken care of," she returned, feeling her own skin warming.

"Do you...like it?" he asked her next, his tone stiff and hesitant, but curious.

"With the right person, it's very...um...nice. If you overlook the fact that 'nice' is a bit too insipid a word to use for it," she amended. "It helps that I'm attracted to him, otherwise it would probably be just regular-nice..."

An awkward silence descended for several seconds, then Harry nudged her. "A few months out of school, and already your vocabulary is going downhill, Hermione. What would Professor McGonagall think of that?"

"She'd probably try to dock me House points, for letting her down," Hermione joked back. A yawn crept up on her, making her cover her mouth hastily. "...Come on; off to bed with both of us. We may be young, but these late-night research sessions still take their toll."

"We weren't exactly studying," Harry muttered, levering himself off the couch.

"It counts, if you consider it anatomical research," she teased, and watched his face colour with embarrassment. He drew a breath to speak, and she interjected quickly, "-- Now hang on, Harry; I'm your sister, and it's my solemn duty to thoroughly tea--*eeeeek!*"

Dodging his swiping hands with a shriek and a giggle, she raced out of the parlour, Harry hot on her heels and swearing he was going to turn her into a frog, for that.

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Somehow, Hermione managed to get a hand between their lips. Disheveled from Russel's roaming hands, panting from their breathless kisses, she stilled him with her touch and turned her head to the side, to further thwart her own urges. She felt his lips purse against her fingers, kissing them, then he pulled his head back, though his arms still held her close.

"...What's wrong?"

"We, erm, need to talk. And I want to get it out of the way before we, you know, get to the rest of the fun bits," she confessed. Russel released her, stepping back. Hermione felt disappointed at the loss of his touch. Looking at him, she found him studying her with a wary, thoughtful gaze.

"Is this going to be one of those 'we need to talk' relationship discussions? Or something else?"

"Something else," Hermione stated, wondering if she was blushing. Turning, she gestured at the loveseat in front of the unused telly cabinet. Nodding, Russel sat, holding out his hand to her. She let him take it, but resisted being drawn up against him. Somehow, she didn't feel comfortable with the thought of lounging in his arms while asking about another male. Settling in the opposite corner, their knees brushing together, she cleared her throat. "As you know, Harry, Ron and I are on a quest to destroy the Dark Lord. Well, as a part of that quest, we needed to find a particular spell, but we didn't know *which* spell...so we hunted down the Mirror of Erised. That's an enchanted mirror that shows you what you most desire."

"I've heard of it," Russel nodded. "Did you find it?"

"Yes. And it showed me the book that holds the spell we need...but when I desired to see the location, it showed me a neighborhood...but the center of that neighborhood was indiscernible. Greyed-out, and blank. And then I saw a face, and I think that means this location is Secret-Kept, and that the person I saw is the Secret-Keeper...and I need you to help me set up some sort of meeting with this person so that I can learn its location, find the book, use the spell, and move our quest that much further to defeating our mutual enemy."

Russel's grey eyes narrowed warily. "...Do you know the identity of this person?"

Hermione nodded unhappily. "Yes. It's Draco Malfoy. I'd know the prat's face anywhere."

"I see. And could you describe this neighborhood that you saw?"

She shrugged. "Brick houses, and a factory with a tall smokestack chimney. It wasn't the most well-kept of neighborhoods, but beyond that, I couldn't tell you if it was in Bath or Birmingham, London or Lincoln. You wouldn't happen to know where it is, would you?"

"I do, but as you said, Draco's the Secret Keeper for it, not I, so I cannot say. I can tell you, however, that it's the house of the bastard traitor, the one he uses every summer."

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed, startled. Foolishly, she hadn't really considered what sort of home Severus Snape might have, let alone that he'd retire to it each summer, between school years. "Then I can look for some books to help me finalize that hybrid Protean-Forging Charm you wanted!"

"Only if neither of them catch you there. It will take some time to set up," Russel added with a pensive frown. "First, to arrange things so that Draco doesn't realize who he's telling the secret to, and then to ensure that the bastard traitor doesn't get wind of it. I think, if you're wearing Death Eater robes at the time... And then you'll have to wait until I can tell you a time when Snape and Draco are busy with other things, when you'll have enough uninterrupted time to search the bastard traitor's home. I'm told his library is quite extensive; you might have to go back twice or more to find what you want. I'd do it myself, but I cannot risk being found in his house. His position is still quite high among the Dark Lord's followers."

Hermione, remembering the state he'd been in when she'd been summoned to heal him, leaned forward and touched his face. The scars from his torturing had healed almost tracelessly, save for those spots where they'd crossed his older injuries. Those had added fresh marks to his skin. But when he'd summoned her again, his glamour had gone back to hiding them, leaving her with the image of a smooth-skinned lover.

His hand came up to cover hers, cupping her flesh to his jaw. A twist of his head and he kissed the tender skin of her palm for a moment. Shifting off the sofa, he stood, drawing her to her feet. "I'm not in the mood to read, but I'll give you your choice: a jigsaw puzzle and a conversation at the table, or lovemaking in the bed?"

Nibbling on her lower lip, looking into Russel's grey eyes, Hermione thought of her conversation with Harry a couple days ago. She dithered for a long moment, then blurted, "--I think I've fallen in love with you."

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

Warning: This chapter contains some anal play. If you're squeamish or easily squicked, I'm not forcing you to read this thing, so don't complain! ~Lotm

XVI.

Russel's eyes widened, his lips parting on an arrested breath. For the longest moment he just stared at her, as if dumbfounded. But then he blinked, and licked his lips, and lifted his hands, cradling her face in his palms with the lightest touch. "Good," he breathed, and traced the fingers of one hand over her brow, stroking her skin. "Good... I think I fell for you some time ago, myself."

Hermione looked at him, uncertainty mingling with hope. "You...you love me?"

His hand glided down her nose, then returned to her forehead and stroked along the outside to her cheek. The expression in his eyes was tender, thoughtful. "Yes. I do. I could've settled for a marriage of circumstance with you; you're smart, and charming, and very beautiful. But it's more than that, isn't it?" His fingertip traced the outline of her lips, making her lick them from the ticklish sensation. He smiled gently. "Our minds have meshed, haven't they? All the interests we share, intellectual pursuits, senses of humor...the passion within you that is a match for my own sensuality... Yes, I feel I have fallen in love with you, Jane...and I am deeply grateful to learn that you love me, too."

"Russel," Hermione breathed, overcome with feeling. Cupping his own face, she dragged his mouth down to hers, kissing him. Warm lips, sweet breath, tongues that tangled and slid together...it wasn't enough. She needed more. She felt the strange need to claim him, to mark him as her territory: Property of Hermione Jane Whatever. With an aggressiveness she hadn't known she could feel, she pushed him back from her, breaking their kiss. He gave her a puzzled look.

"...Jane?"

"Bed. Now." A push on his chest got him to move back, then around the arm of the loveseat sofa. He blinked but allowed her to push him again, this time in the direction of the neatly made bed. When he reached the side of the bed, she caught him by his shirt and spun him to face her, ordering, "Strip."

His eyes narrowed for a moment, but not in anger; instead, it was speculation that curved his mouth into a smirk. An elegant shrug of his shoulders and he lifted his hands to his shirt, this time a rich amethyst. He unbuttoned it, tugging the shirttails free of his red-and-blue plaid kilt, either a commercial plaid, or from some Clan she didn't know. Leaving the shirt to drape open over his chest, he sat and removed his black shoes, then his purple knee-socks.

Another smirk, and he stood, reaching up under the pleated folds of his kilt. A bit of wriggling, and he stooped, still smiling, tugging his clean white undershorts down his legs. Like a girl who was teasingly removing her knickers to show to the boys, he carefully didn't expose any part of himself higher than mid-thigh with the maneuver. A twirl of his finger, and the undergarment flung free.

A grasp of his shirt lapels, and he turned his back to her, giving her a sultry look over his shoulder. Rolling the joint, he peeled his shirt down on that side. Then peered over his other shoulder and did the same in a silent strip-tease with his other shoulder. Turning to face her, he let the amethyst material drape over his elbows while he played his hands over his chest, caressing himself as she watched his movements avidly. Indeed, Hermione couldn't tear her eyes away from his fingers as they slid down over the ridges of his tightened stomach muscles. Not even when he caressed the wool covering his subtly gyrating hips and thighs did she stop staring at him.

A release of the pin at his thighs, a flick of the belt tongue, and his kilt slipped free, parting over his erection and puddling at his feet. Dropping the belt as well, he resumed caressing his skin. Her eyes followed his fingers until they slid all the way up into his hair, pushing the chest-length, honey-coloured strands back from his face. A lick of his lips, and Russel commanded quietly, "Strip for me."

It would be churlish of her to refuse. Hermione, however, had no intention of complying. The symbol of house Gryffindor was a lion, and her inner lioness was ready to roar, and roar very naughtily. "No. Get on the bed. Now. On your hands and knees."

That arched his brow at her, but he turned and complied, crawling onto the bed. Hermione admired his backside...he had a magnificent male arse, just the right size and tautness; it was a pity he hid it under the loose folds of a kilt...and ran her hands along his flank, over his thigh and rump. Drawing her wand, she flicked it over the cleft of his buttocks.

"*Rectumundirenu!*"

Russel sucked in a sharp breath, his body flinching. Hermione, glad she'd studied the medical charm, tucked her wand away, grasped the globes of his backside, and lowered her mouth to the nearest curve of muscle. Warm skin met her lips; she felt him shiver, and dusted kisses from one side to the other. Her fingers caressed his flesh, stroking down onto his thighs, gliding up for a feather-light pass over his lightly furred scrotum.

A moan escaped him, in the shape of her name. "Jane..."

"Russel," Hermione purred, gripping and kneading his gluteal muscles. He moaned again. Pleased with his enjoyment, she daringly dipped her head, brushing her lips over his backside again. He smelled clean, thankfully, but then that was the purpose of her spell. Gathering her courage, reminding herself that there were lots of texts discussing how pleasurable this was for a man, she traced the crease between his buttocks with the tip of her tongue.

The groan that tore from his chest gratified her, as did the way he strained back into her touch. She licked him again, this time from testicles to tailbone. Sucking on one finger, she teased the edges of his puckered anus, then gently eased her finger inside, feeling his muscles clenching around her. This was the absolute most daring thing she had ever done, and a few weeks ago Hermione wouldn't have even thought of it, but right now... Right now, she wanted to give Russel exquisite pleasure, and all the literature she'd read in recent weeks suggested that massaging a man's prostate through the rectum...if she could find it...would do just that.

He gasped, as her finger sank as far as it could go. The charm she'd used was one designed to clean internally as well as externally, so all she could feel were soft tissues. Experimentally, she wriggled the tip of her finger. He gasped again, fingers clenching in the flowered duvet. She'd found the right spot, but there were other things she wanted to do to him, and this position wasn't the best. Withdrawing her finger, she caressed his hip, then smacked him lightly. That earned her a frown over his shoulder.

"On your back, middle of the bed," Hermione ordered, feeling a thrill of feminine power when he complied, crawling into position and twisting over. His erection jutted up from his stomach, liquid seeping from the tip. Knees drawn up and splayed to either side, he was a temptingly wanton sight, if a man could be wanton.

"Strip for me," Russel ordered her as she toed off her trainers and moved onto the bed. Hermione arched brow at him, stopping mid-crawl. *She* was in control today, and it would be best if he remembered that. When she didn't move, he licked his lips and asked politely, "...Please?"

Leaning forward, Hermione licked the inside of his thigh, then purred, "Ask *nicely*."

His brows rose. "Is *that* the sort of game you want to play?"

A twist of her head, and she bit the inner muscles of his thigh. "Mine!"

His breath caught in his throat, his eyes gleaming with arousal. Russel's voice emerged deeper and huskier than normal. "...Do you mean that?"

Doing her best to imitate the stalk of a lioness, Hermione crawled up his body until her denim-clad thighs were slotted underneath his naked ones, her fists bracing her weight over his torso. "You are *mine*, Russel Fawkeson. However long you live, wherever you may go...whoever you might be...you...are...*mine*." That arched his brow at her, but she wasn't done. "You handed your very life into my control, when you gave me that ring. When you met me in the flesh. When you exchanged all of those secrets with me. You put yourself into this situation just as much as I did, when I donned my ring. You *belong* to me."

This was a side of herself Hermione didn't even know she'd had, until now. She had known she was bossy, but she hadn't realized she had a dominant streak. Today, it was possible to show it to her husband because he had given her the best reason to trust him: he loved her.

Rocking back onto her heels, Hermione slid her hands down his stomach, veering around his groin. She tickled the fronts of his thighs, then caressed her own breasts. Unbuttoning the cardigan she was wearing, she stripped it off with an approximation of the same seductive shoulder-rolls he'd used earlier. Tugging her blouse free of her jeans, she removed that, too, then traced the edges of her bra-line with her fingertips, licking her lips as she stared down at him.

His hand shifted to his penis, stroking it in a feather-light touch. Hermione caught his wrist, pulling it away from his flesh. "*Mine*."

He complied, pewter gaze following her every movement as she twisted her arms behind her back, jutting her breasts forward as she worked to free the hooks of her bra. Shifting forward to hold the cups in place, she shrugged out of the straps, then leaned forward and dropped her bra on his shaft. It twitched at the contact of the satiny, intimate material. While he watched, she slid her hands over her curves, playing with the underside of her breasts, tugging gently on her nipples.

A faint rocking motion drew her attention back down to his hips. The brassiere had fallen in such a way that, with a slight movement, he could rub his shaft against the material, stimulating himself without using his hands. Hermione thought about removing the bra, of finding some way of punishing him for playing with himself before she was good and ready. But it was an erotic sight, watching him masturbate subtly via her bra.

Licking another finger, she lowered it to his anus, gently circling the puckered flesh, then probing inside. She heard him inhale sharply, but her attention was on burrowing deeply enough to feel that spongy spot she had found before. The moment he gasped, then groaned, head arching back, Hermione exulted silently, *That's the spot... Now, to stimulate the rest of him.*

Squirming backwards, finger buried in his depths, she hunkered down, and drew the bra with agonizing slowness off of his shaft. She took care to drag the material over his hardened flesh, stimulating it, and rubbed the tip of her finger against his prostate again. That made him groan again, this time with words.

"Oh god, yesss..."

Tossing the garment aside, she brought her left hand back, wrapping her fingers around his erection. His stomach muscles tightened, and his hand flew up to cover her own. Together, their hands completely enclosed his shaft, and together, they stroked his precum-dampened flesh. Masturbating him with his more knowledgeable assistance was turning her on, but Hermione had a problem. She was still fully dressed, on her lower half.

Reluctantly, she withdrew her hands, pushing his own away from his prick. As he breathed unsteadily, watching her from beneath slitted lashes, she leaned back and tugged off her socks as gracefully as she could, given the awkwardness of her position. His hand came up to stroke his shaft again; Hermione quickly pushed it away, giving him a stern look.

"Do that again, and you'll be in trouble, young man."

He smirked at being called a young man, but dutifully tucked both hands behind his neck. The position made his stomach muscles tense, which defined his abdomen quite nicely. Deciding to reward him, Hermione carefully stood on the mattress and began rotating her hips slowly, subtly. Her hands splayed over her stomach, fingers dipping into the waistband of her jeans, then down over the pockets. Scraping her nails up the placket of the zipper, she popped the button at the top.

Eyes gleaming with interest, he watched her pause to fondle her breasts, then lower them again to tug the zipper down. Another caress of her curves, a shimmy of her hips, and the jeans started slouching their way down her hips. It felt silly to strip for him, and sexy at the same time. She wasn't wearing anything spectacular, just cream cotton bikinis to sort of match her cream coloured bra, but when they came into view, desire burned in Russel's eyes as sharply as if they'd been a thong, or a g-string. Turning, she shimmied again, and the denim of her jeans dropped even further, baring her bottom.

Bending over carefully, balancing herself, Hermione dragged the garment down her legs. Stepping out of the material, she cast her jeans aside, and looked between her legs at him. He was stroking himself, against orders. Rather than correcting the situation immediately, Hermione straightened up slowly, gliding her palms up the insides of her thighs. She knew he was watching her, and it thrilled her. Teasing herself with circling touches against her cotton-covered crotch, she listened to him moan, then slid her hands up to her hipbones.

A hard brush of her palms caused the waistband of the panties to buckle, rolling the material down. She rolled the garment down until it rested just under the curve of her buttocks, then bent over and slipped a hand inside, so that he could see the bulge of her knuckles. Another groan escaped him as she played with herself, until she dropped her head down and peered between her legs again. Russel was now blatantly stroking his erection, swirling his palm over the moisture seeping at the tip for a lubricant. Pushing the undergarment all the way off, she stepped out of it, picked it up, turned, and knelt, pressing the front of her thighs to the back of his.

"I told you not to play with yourself," she drawled. "Hold out your hands."

He smirked, continuing to stroke himself. Hermione pounced, snatching her fingers around his scrotum. He stilled, shock widening his eyes. She hadn't hurt him, but the move had definitely startled him. It was also a warning that she *could* hurt him, if he didn't obey. Slowly, he released his hardened shaft. Just as slowly, he stretched both arms towards her, wrists almost touching. Grabbing one hand, Hermione wrapped one leg-hole from her knickers around his wrist. She had to double it up to make it fit snugly, though not overly tight. Catching the other hand, grateful he complied, she manacled that one in soft cream cotton, too.

"Now, put your hands behind your head, and leave them there," Hermione ordered her husband. "Hopefully that will remind you to not touch yourself until I say you can."

His mouth quirked up on one side as he complied. He wasn't supermodel handsome, but in that moment, he looked like the sexiest man alive. "Kinky."

"You haven't seen anything, yet," she boasted daringly. Then bit her lip, wondering what in Merlin's name she'd do next. They hadn't been together for more than a couple of months at most, visiting maybe twice a week; that wasn't much time in which to gain sexual experience. The twitching of his prick drew her attention downward, and she smiled. She'd just play with his prostate again, and experiment to see what gave him the most pleasure.

Lowering herself to the bed, she started licking his right knee. He wasn't a hairy man, but his calves and lower thighs were a little furrer than the rest of him. Hermione let the texture tickle her palms, nose and cheeks as she caressed and nibbled his leg. Aiming for a two-location attack, she stroked the front of his shin as she ate her way in little nips and licks down the inside of his glamour-tanned thigh, and by the time she was stroking the top of his foot, she was tonguing the inner crease of his pelvis. Shifting to his left knee, she started the sensual torment all over again.

She was gratified to hear Russel humming in pleasure, as she massaged the top of his foot and licked the joint of his hip and thigh. His leg nudged her head to the left, bumping her nose and lips against his scrotum. Apparently, he wanted her to lick and nuzzle that, instead. Obliging for a moment, Hermione licked his scrotum, then pulled back and blew warm air on it. The lightly furred skin shriveled and tightened, and his penis twitched. She smiled and licked his shaft, then huffed hot air along that, too.

"Oh god, yes...lick me, like that," he breathed as she did it again.

A quick glance up the length of his body showed his abdomen tight, his biceps flexing as he carefully kept his knicker-tied hands behind his head. Wanting to reward him, Hermione tickled the skin underneath his bollocks, then teased in a spiraling touch around the rosebud of his rectum. When his breath sucked in through his teeth, she moistened her finger and pushed it inside with a gentle, rocking rhythm. Once again, she was invading his body very intimately, and once again, he wasn't minding in the least.

Rubbing gently with her finger, probing for and brushing up against the soft lump of his prostate now and again, Hermione nuzzled his scrotum. The clean but still somewhat musky scent of him filled her lungs whenever she inhaled. Kissing her way slowly up his shaft as his hips flexed restlessly, Hermione looked up at his face when she heard a muffled moan. Russel had brought his loosely bound hands in front of his mouth...and had gagged himself with the crotch of her knickers. He looked like he was in agony, hips rocking, erection seeping, suckling the fabric that was muffling his whimpers of need. Fabric which had been a little damp when it had left her body.

He needed rewarding for such a wanton display of need. Reaching the top of his shaft, Hermione swirled her tongue around the weeping tip, gathering the salty-sweet flavour. A wriggle of her body, and she was in the perfect position to suck him into her mouth as deeply as she could, while swirling her fingertip over his prostate gland. A muffled expletive escaped him; she felt his shaft twitching under her lips, and hastily caught and held the semen spurting into her mouth, riding the flexing of his hips as he whispered the chant of her middle name.

As soon as he was done, she sucked her mouth off of him, trying to avoid swallowing. Extracting her finger made him twitch and moan. She had something else in mind. Crawling up his body, she pushed his knicker-twisted wrists up over his head and claimed his mouth with hers, sharing his jism. He jerked in surprise, groaned with enthusiasm...and the next thing Hermione knew, she was being pinned to the bed on her back in a devouring kiss, her thighs spread by his knees, and her depths being

probed by an erection that should've flagged by now, but clearly hadn't.

Growling passionately, Russel ate her mouth in a consuming kiss, pumping into her depths with gentle ruthlessness. He was stronger than her, and held her pinned on the bed underneath him. It wasn't quite scary, but it was thrilling to know he could hold her prisoner. Hermione chose to be confident that his feelings for her wouldn't allow him to hurt her. Still, when he slowed, then pulled out, and ordered her in a husky murmur to get on her hands and knees, she decided to remind him who was supposed to be the boss, this time around.

Smack.

Grey eyes widening in surprise, Russel stared at Hermione. She spanked him again, a firm, stinging blow of her palm to his buttock, arching her brow. "Get on your back! You were supposed to keep your hands bound and behind your head. I don't recall giving you permission to do otherwise, you know!"

Something darkened his gaze for a moment, but he merely smiled and twisted onto his back. His hands helped her straddle and position him, and he kept smiling as she sank down and began rocking on him. A shiver of pleasure caught her by surprise as he clasped his wrists willingly behind his head, submitting to her desires. Moaning, Hermione rode him with a slow-rolling buck of her hips. Being the one with the power, being the one in control, was unbelievably heady.

With the resolve to be in control a little more often...though with the mental concession that he should be allowed his own 'dominant play-time', too...Hermione rode him until she climaxed. Slumping to his chest, she panted, resting. He murmured into her curls, making her shiver anew as she felt his chest vibrating with his baritone voice under her ear.

"...Mistress, may I come, too?"

"Mmm, yes. Do as you like," she directed him lazily. His hands came down to her hips. Gripping them, he thrust up into her, pulling her down into each upward stroke. She thought about nibbling on his earlobe, but refrained; she loved the way he came undone when she did that, but didn't want to spoil the effect by using it too often.

It wasn't long before he was muttering her name. The restrained fervor in his tone, the feel of him grinding into her, the growled chanting in her ear, made Hermione climax, too. Slowly, they both relaxed, content to hold each other. Finally, Hermione turned her head just far enough to nuzzle the base of his throat. "I love you, Russel."

"I love you too," he returned, wrapping his arms around her as she started to shift her weight. She'd been worried that her pleasure-sated body was too heavy, but clearly he didn't want her to move. Content, Hermione closed her eyes and reveled in the soothing pleasure of being held by the man she loved.

...

For the first time, when Hermione Apparated into their hotel room, Russel wasn't wearing a kilt. Well, maybe he was underneath his robe, but it was hard to tell, given how he was covered from throat to floor in stark black. She didn't like the colour on him; it made him look cold and hard, even with the wry curve of his lips on one side. Lifting one arm, he held out another bundle of black cloth to her. It was another cowed robe.

"I'm afraid we won't be having any fun for a few moments. It's time to meet Draco. All three of us will be masked," he added as Hermione shrugged into the cloak. "He won't know your identity, and you're not supposed to know his. It would be best if you didn't speak, either, just in case he could recognize your voice."

Hermione nodded in agreement as she fastened the clasps on the cloak-like robe. Scraping her hair back, she twisted it into a knot and fixed it in place with a spell. "Just a quick in-and-out, then?"

"Ideally, yes. You're not going to be foolish and attack him, are you?" he asked her.

"No. I'm not Harry. Besides, Harry told me Draco couldn't go through with it. Killing Dumbledore," she added in clarification. "Draco Malfoy is an arrogant prat, even an arsehole, but I think he now realizes that what he's gotten himself into is not nearly so glamorous as he originally thought. Somewhere, deep inside, I think he's wishing he could undo the mistake that he made in joining the Death Eaters. Though he's probably having to swallow it down and hide it deep inside, to avoid the Dark Lord's twisted displeasure."

"He is not the only one to regret his foolish decision," Russel murmured. Drawing two silvery objects from a pocket in the folds of his robes, he handed one of the masks to her. "Put this on; I'll Apparate us to the rendez-vous site as soon as you're properly disguised."

Hermione shivered as she complied. There was no strap, so she just lifted it to her face and pressed it to her skin. As suspected, a spell tingled across her flesh, and the mask clung of its own volition. The eyeholes weren't easy to see out of, though not as bad as one might fear; mostly it was cold and hard and uncomfortable, and seeing Russel donning his unnerved her.

"Remember, you're a Death Eater. You fear no one and nothing, save for the Dark Lord. But he won't be there, where we're going." Touching her arm with his left hand, Russel drew his wand. "Wand out, but don't hex anything unless it's attacking."

"Right."

A squeezing surge of magic, and they popped out of the artificially lit kitchenette suite into the darkness of a forest. It took Hermione a few moments to let her eyesight adjust, and by then, Russel was already greeting someone; he'd Apparated both of them so that she faced one way and he faced the other. If they'd entered an ambush, it would've given them a slight edge in defending themselves. As it was, she had to search the shadows under the trees for a few moments more before being satisfied that there was no one in her field of view.

A squeeze of her forearm made Hermione turn around. A silver-masked figure met her stare, most of his lean frame blending into the shadows cast by the branches of the forest canopy. Her heart pounding in her chest, she leaned forward, letting Draco Malfoy murmur in her ear.

"Severus Snape's home is Number 42 Spinner's End, London."

Nodding curtly, Hermione leaned back. Draco's gaze slipped to Russel's masked face, but he didn't say anything, just stepped back. A moment later, he vanished with a pop. Russel tightened his grip, and they, too, vanished from the tiny clearing.

The moment they were back in the hotel room, Russel pulled the mask from his face and yanked the robes from his body, revealing a wine-red shirt and the blue-red kilt from her previous visit. Wadding the two items together, he tossed them from him with a grimace. Hermione removed hers more slowly. The mask had to be tugged off of the face, to get its magical bonds to release. Setting it on the table, she unfastened the black cloak, but her eyes were on her husband's tense figure, standing in profile to her.

He'd scraped his hair back from his face in a tight grip, his eyes closed and his brow pinched in a frown. His voice, when he spoke, was rough with emotion. "I *hate* my life... Draco had so much potential, and he wasted it on a fallacy! Now he's stuck in a situation he fears...and rightfully so!...where he's near the bottom of the rungs most of the time, and with no hope in sight of ever getting free. And here I am, stuck playing one role to his face, another to the Dark Lord's, a third to yours..." He stopped and cleared his throat, body tense. "That is to say, I'm trying to be the man I think you'd want me to be. The man I'd rather be, if I ever have the chance to be... I just buggered that up, didn't I? Admitting I'm acting, around you."

Hermione wasn't overly surprised by his inadvertent confession. Draping the robe over the mask on the table, she moved to his side and tucked herself against him, wrapping her arms around his waist. She was just short enough to fit her shoulder comfortably under his arm, and rested her cheek against his pectoral muscle. "I didn't think you acted this way all of the time, Russel. You have to be convincing, to be a spy. And yet I don't think all of it is an act, when you're around me."

"Most of it isn't," he muttered, turning and wrapping both of his arms around her in turn. "Well, having to be nice all of the time; I have a bit of a temper, but then I'm in a

stressful situation, so it's understandable. But I'm trying very hard to not snap at you. You're not the source of my greatest troubles."

"I believe that a man or a woman *can* change, if they conscientiously strive to change," Hermione offered. "Even Draco, if he's given the chance."

"Without Occlumency, he doesn't have a chance. Not unless he acts spontaneously, or out of trusting ignorance. I'm slowly befriending him, under the guise of teaching him how to be a proper, respectful Death Eater." He paused, then muttered roughly, "I hate my life... To save a boy who made a deadly, foolish mistake, I have to teach him how to hide his true feelings while he's being cruel and callous towards others."

She felt his mouth brush her curls as he cradled her close, and hugged him tighter in response.

"...The only solace I have from the monster I have to be when I'm being a Death Eater is when I'm here with you, as your husband. You give me ample reason to want to be a better man, Jane, but I can only be one when I'm here in your arms." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I don't want to go back... That a sinner like me has a chance to know heaven, just standing here in your arms, it makes it all the more hellish to have to go back."

There was a strange parallel between him and Harry. Hermione drew upon it for comparison. "Then I'll tell you what I told my blood-brother. Find something positive worth living for, and a goal of what to do with your life, once this war is through. It isn't enough to live only for the thought of bringing the Basilisk Bastard down. You have to know what's worth fighting for, after he's gone. For me, that's living in a world with you, and Harry, and the Weasleys all alive and happy and healthy, able to stride through the world without fear shadowing their every step."

"And your career goals?" Russel asked her, relaxing a little in her arms.

"I'm not sure, yet. I thought about being an Auror, but I'm not really interested in confrontations. I thought about being a mediwitch, too, but I'd be more interested in the research side of things than the actual caring for someone. I'd do it for you, and maybe my friends, but not as a career, I think. What about you? Will you go back to your previous profession, whatever it was?"

"No. I cannot go back. I burnt too many bridges." He held her for a moment, then stated, "Research might be good, though. The only problem is coming up with the funds to do private research; I'm not sure if anyone would be willing to hire an ex-Death-Eater... Speaking of funds, I need you to do something for me."

Hermione pulled back far enough to look up at him. "What? Go to Gringotts for you?"

He smiled. "Smart as ever, I see. Yes. My vault might be monitored, the same as other suspected or known Death Eaters. You have one of your own, right?"

"Yes, though there's not much in it," she warned him.

"I'll give you my key. Visit both vaults, withdraw some of your money, and put it into the same sack that you put mine, to disguise how much you withdrew. If anyone asks, you just found the key."

"How much will you need?" Hermione asked him.

"I'm not sure. At least sixty Galleons, forty of it converted to Muggle pounds. A lot of my basic needs have been taken care of, and I can Transfigure some of the rest," he admitted with a shrug, "but there are certain things that are best bought, not made, or made-do-without."

"I'll go tomorrow," she promised Russel. "When do you think it'll be safe for me to visit Snape's house?"

"I'm not sure. It will probably be spur-of-the-moment, and quite possibly late at night. Actually," Russel corrected himself, "Don't just take the money out of my vault. If anything happens to me, if I'm caught before the war is over, and my efforts aren't uncovered, the Ministry will try to confiscate my funds, everything I own. Transfer two-thirds of my vault into your own."

"I couldn't do that!" Hermione protested, leaning back in his arms with a frown. "That money is yours, not my own!"

He smiled at her. "Jane, beloved, you're *my wife*. That means all that I have is now also yours. Just as all that you have is now also mine. Though I'll refrain from trying on your bras, I think."

His silliness made her laugh. Shaking her head, Hermione snuggled against his chest again. "I don't want to take your money from you."

"It's not taking it from me; it's keeping it safe for both of us. Besides, you're a Gryffindor, eh?" he teased, tickling her ribs with a wriggle of his fingers, making her squirm briefly in his arms. "That means you'll be honor-bound to give it back to me. Or at least, not spend it all."

"You're placing an awful lot of trust in me," Hermione muttered into his throat, grateful for it even as she warned him.

"Who else can I trust, if not my most beloved wife?" Tilting her head up, Russel sealed his question with a kiss.

...

Floo to Spinner's End now. You have 1.5 hours.

Hermione, disengaged from the rapid exchange of harmless curses and counter-curses that Harry, Ron, Tonks and herself had been exchanging in the parlour of Grimmauld Place, nodded to herself as she lowered her left hand. It was about as much time as she'd expected. More, really. Looking up, she caught Tonks' eye. The green-haired Auror held up her hand, cutting off the spark-flung volleys of the other two.

"Wotcher, what's up?"

"I've got to go to...the place that I need to go to," Hermione stumbled, forgetting for a moment that she couldn't say the name of the location, Secret-Kept as it was. She gave Harry and Ron a pointed look. "You know, to find the book that I'm looking for. I should be back in an hour and a half."

"Be careful," Ron ordered her.

Nodding, she snagged her bookbag, emptied most of its contents onto a side-table, and left the parlour. Pushing open the door to the kitchen, she was halfway inside before she realized she'd walked in on two people sharing a clinch by the aga stove. It was who was in that clinch, snogging each other, that startled her the most. Alastor Moody, and Arabella Figg. After a moment, he jerked and released her, twisting his head to scowl at Hermione with his normal brown eye, and the magical one that was blue.

"...What are *you* looking at?"

"A...very happy couple?" Hermione offered as Mrs. Figg blushed and fussed with her hair.

"What did you want, Hermione dear?" Arabella asked, clearing her throat.

"I need to use the Floo. In private," she added. A hesitation, the Hermione boldly added, "Um...if you don't want to be like Remus and Tonks, might I suggest retiring upstairs, next time?"

Moody frowned at her. "What happened with those two?"

"They, um...well, they were in the library at the time, and they weren't reading books," Hermione hedged. "If you please, I've got a very narrow window of opportunity, and I need to use the Floo. Privately."

"Where are you going?" Moody asked. His natural suspicion was giving her a headache.

She lost her patience. "To a Secret-Kept place. That means I can't tell you. Now kindly get out."

"You're going alone?" he challenged her. "Why isn't Harry or Ron going with you?"

"...Alastor Moody, if you do not get out of here, I'm going to hex you into a girl!" Hermione snapped. "Sorry, Mrs. Figg, but would you drag him off and snog him somewhere else, so I don't have to?"

"Come along, Alastor," Arabella ordered him, pushing the ex-Auror towards the back stairs. "*Now!*"

Giving her a doubtful look, Mad-Eye Moody allowed himself to be pushed up the stairs. As soon as she was alone, Hermione drew her wand and cast Floo powder on the hearth. Ready for anything, she stepped into the swirling green flames. "42 Spinner's End."

An emerald whirl, and she found herself spat out onto an aging carpet. Coughing on soot, she smelled musty, stale air as well as traces of smoke from the vanishing fire. Footsteps had her snapping up her wand, looking wildly around the book-lined room for the source of the noise.

"Professor Snape, is that..." Grey eyes met amber brown, both sets wide with shock. "...*You!*"

The only thing that saved her was that Hermione had her wand out first. She cast a silent spell even as he grabbed for his own, slung at his hip in a wand-sheath. Silvery ribbons snaked out and pinned his arms to his sides. Another silent, wordless command, and she Summoned his wand from his grip, snatching it out of the air as it hurtled her way.

Bound from shoulders to ankles, Draco wobbled, trying to keep his balance, his face a twisted mess of anger and fear. "Damn you, Granger! *You're* the witch I spoke to! Why are you here? What are you going to do with me? Turn me in?"

That was a good question. A very good question. He wobbled too far, unable to compensate with his feet bound together. Flicking her wand, she caught him with *mobiliicorpus*. That lifted him off his feet, horizontally. The fear increased on his face. Hermione felt a stab of pity for him. She sincerely doubted Russel knew he was here, but her husband would've been absolutely sure of his whereabouts...or at least his *stated* whereabouts...before sending her here. Which meant Draco had lied to everyone.

A lie about where he was probably meant that he was using this house as a sort of refuge, a place that probably only he, Russel, Snape, and now she knew about. She thought about turning him in, she really did...but the Ministry was still holding Stan Shunpike without a trial, and *he* was innocent. Merlin alone knew what they'd do to Draco, who was responsible for the attack on Hogwarts. Pity alone wanted to stay her hand.

There was another reason to not turn him over to the Aurors. If he was handed over, the other Death Eaters would realize it. Snape would know that someone had betrayed the secret of his house, and he would doubt it was Draco's doing. That meant Russel could be in serious trouble. Hermione made up her mind, guiding the hovering Slytherin's body over to the sagging, faded fabric of the sofa.

"I'll let you go when I'm done with you, Draco. Harry told me you didn't want to kill Dumbledore, and I think you just got yourself in over your head out of stupid arrogance, and following the teachings of your father blindly, without thought. I'll bet you've been doing a lot of thinking now, though," she added, releasing the spell that kept him afloat. He bounced a little on the cushions, but otherwise looked comfortable enough. Setting his wand on the narrow table behind the couch, she started perusing the shelves. "And rethinking..."

"You probably thought it would be grand to be feared as a Death Eater, but you never really thought about what you'd have to do, and the consequences thereof, in order to *be* feared as a Death Eater. And then there's the fact that your father failed his master and was captured, which put you and your mother's lives in danger from the Dark Lord's wrath. And your mother's life was put in further jeopardy when you were set the task of helping the others invade the school. Having Harry for an enemy probably didn't help, either.

"Now you're stuck in an enslavement you don't want, to a madman you fear, and no way of shielding your thoughts from him...so you're forced to do whatever he tells you to do, with almost no one that you can turn to, because you can trust almost no one. Not exactly the glamorous life you expected, is it? You're not top dog anymore, Draco, and you're not happy, are you?"

A book title caught her eye. *The Word And the Will: Mastering Wandless Magic*. That would be a good book to take and study. Tucking it into her bookbag, she perused the shelves. If he wasn't such a cold-hearted bastard, Hermione could've admired the man for his broad-ranging tastes. There were literally hundreds, possibly thousands of leather-bound books crammed onto these shelves that she itched to read. It was going to take some time to sift through the titles alone, just to find the Diary, and any books that might pertain to the Protean-Forging Charm she was attempting to create. *The Word and the Will* would help; if the object was to be held in a pair of gloved hands, it wasn't likely the wizard or witch using the Charm would be able to wield a wand at the same time, after all.

"So, what?" Draco challenged her sullenly. "Do you pity me? Is that it?"

"A little. You did make your own bed, and now you have to lie in it, as the saying goes. But one day, you'll have a chance to come out from under the covers. Even if that means confronting the very real monster lurking under your bed. You'll have a choice that day," Hermione cautioned him, moving further along the shelves. "Either you will find the courage to fight, and free yourself, or you will give in to your cowardice, and join the monsters under the bed."

"What would be worth going against the Dark Lord? They'll just throw me into Azkaban!" he sneered behind her back as she read title after title.

"It doesn't matter where you go, Draco. The one thing you cannot escape from is your conscience. Even in the heart of the Dark Lord's army, you cannot escape the fact that you could not bring yourself to kill Albus Dumbledore. You've been a bully and an arrogant prat, but you're not a killer, and you know it." She found a book that looked like it might have information on combining disparate charms, and pulled it off the shelf to flick through its pages. "If you fight the monsters under the bed, your conscience will give you rest. If you join them, it will torment you until you are left a broken, inhumane wreck. Like your Aunt Bellatrix, foaming at the mouth like a rabid dog, only good for tearing and rending and killing things. That's hardly the sort of son your mother and father would be proud of, I think. And if there's one thing I know about you, Draco Malfoy, you're proud of being a Malfoy.

"If you crawl under the bed with the rest of the monsters, you'll be dragging the Malfoy name down there with you." Shutting the book in her hands, she returned it to the shelf. It didn't contain what she was looking for. Another one higher on the shelves did. *Expanding Enchantments*. That sounded like something she could study to figure out how to expand the requested Charm into as broad a range of effect as possible.

"What do you care, Mudblood?"

She couldn't quite reach the book in question. Turning her head, she looked for a chair or a stool, and saw movement out of the corner of her eye. Draco had managed to quietly squirm himself upright, and was even now scrabbling his wand off the table behind the sofa. She snatched at her own wand as he fell back out of sight, thumping onto the coffee table.

"Finite argencustoda!"

"Stupefy!"

"Protego!"

The two bolts of energy hit each other and scattered sparks over the furniture between them. Draco had scrambled to his knees, and was using the back of the sofa for cover. Hermione watched him warily, wanting for Russel's sake to get through to him. "What do I care, Draco? You were a *good* student! You had so much potential, it hurt to see you wasting it. You aimed your ambitions at the wrong place.

"But you made the right decision, and you know it, even though it's landed you in the hell that you're in, right now," Hermione told him, inching carefully towards a nearby doorway that looked like it led to the kitchen. Almost there, almost... "And I believe you'll make the right decision again, down the road."

"Not if I turn you over to the Dark Lord!"

"...Stupefy!" She couldn't let him Apparate out of here and bring back reinforcements.

"Protego! Expelliarmus!"

"Proteg...ahhh!" Shite, she was too slow. Diving into the kitchen after her wand, Hermione heard him shouting another curse, and felt her ring tingling. Magic spattered against Sigurd's chest, but she couldn't see what the spell was, given that he completely filled the doorway between Draco and her. Scrambling for her wand, Hermione remembered what the dragon had done to the last Death Eater who'd threatened her, and thought as hard as she could, *Don't kill him, don't kill him, don't kill him!*

Sigurd roared and charged halfway into the room. Draco yelped, and furniture crashed. Hermione dodged around his hindquarters, aiming her wand under one upraised wing. Draco had knocked over an end-table and landed on his back, wincing as he clutched the back of his skull.

"Stupefy!"

The reddish bolt smacked him in the chest even as he struggled to protect himself from the dragon's jaws. Draco slumped, stunned by the spell. Sigurd *hrrmphed* a puff of smoke-scented breath, and vanished. Hermione hurried to the fallen wizard, checking his pulse, and the back of his head. He had a lump from his initial fall, but she didn't think his skull had been cracked, and he was otherwise unharmed.

Taking his wand from him, she recast the Binding Spell, then tucked her own wand away. The Stunning Charm would wear off, eventually. She hoped to be gone before then, but if necessary, she'd recast the spell on him, then remove his bonds before she left. She might even leave him his wand, but not before she was ready to depart. *It only goes to show I was stupid enough to think he was helpless, bound like that. Only if I'd bound him directly to the couch, maybe...and even then, I shouldn't ever turn my back on an enemy wizard again...*

Knowing her time was running out, Hermione grabbed her bookbag from where she'd dropped it in the kitchen door. Making sure her first two choices were still inside, she turned to look for the last place she'd examined on the shelves, determined to find the diary. It was a few feet over from her position...

Pop.

"...Expelliarmus! Accio wand!"

Hermione slammed into the bookcase, Draco's wand ripping from her fingers as the unexpected impact stunned her. Twisting, she blinked to clear her vision, and froze at the sight of the scowling, long-haired, black-clad frame of Severus Snape, ex-professor. Fear drained the blood from her face, despite the lurching pounding of her heart as he advanced on her. She was dead; she was so dead! If he wouldn't balk at killing Albus Dumbledore, he wouldn't balk at killing her, and she didn't know if Sigurd was capable of blocking the Killing Curse. Somehow, she doubted it.

The tip of his wand pressed into her throat. Black eyes boring with stygian fury into her frightened brown, he curled up his lip in a sneer. "Well, Miss Granger...it seems an unlucky fly has invited itself into the nasty spider's parlour. However did you manage *that* little trick?" he demanded, digging the tip of his wand painfully into her neck. "Tell me!"

Carefully not thinking about the way her right hand was inching toward the pocket of her jeans, Hermione admitted the truth as reluctantly as she could. "I...tricked Malfoy...sir."

"Always so *polite*," Snape hissed, sneering with a frightening level of anger and disdain for her as he pressed her into the bookcase with the weight of his body as well as the prodding of his wand. "Always the bloody know-it-all, always waving that hand in the air...always poking your nose into other people's business!"

She eased her wand from her pocket. "Yeah, well, at least I didn't kill my friend and employer!"

He hissed, hauling his wand-arm back. She snapped up her own...and his left hand slammed it wrist-first into the books behind her. "...Did you think I wasn't aware that first one wasn't your wand? I taught you for six years, *girl*! You cannot outwit me!"

Hermione glanced at her hand; he was too strong for her to break free, and now the tip of his wand was digging into her throat again. Sigurd hadn't appeared, yet; that meant he wasn't about to kill her, though the possibility of what he *did* want with her frightened her. She did know that she didn't want to lose her wand again...and his wrist was clamped halfway over her bracelet. If she could get *him* to twist the inner band, she might have enough time to get free with the unimpeded use of her left hand...

...*ex Bruj...ezia* The faded lettering on the spine of the book under her trapped knuckles caught her eye. The Diary. She'd found the Diary! Not even having to think about it, Hermione thumped the tip of her wand into the spine, enchanting silently as she stared at her salvation. The wizard pinning her to the bookshelves hissed, tightening his hold on her wrist, but it was too late. Even as he drew back his wand to hit her with a spell, the book under her knuckles jerked her forcefully out of his grasp, Porting her away.

She landed with a jarring thump that sent her sprawling painfully to the thinly carpeted floor. The book landed next to her, pages askew, its aged, old-fashioned cover looking decidedly out of place in such a modern setting. Panting, Hermione rested on the floor, slumping not unlike Draco had done after she'd Stunned him. Her wrist hurt where it had been torn from his long fingers, and her neck ached where his wand-tip had dug into her flesh...but she was alive.

Snape. My god, I faced and got away from Snape! Now Hermione understood what Russel had meant when he'd said, *I'm alive...I'm still alive...* The bastard who had turned traitor and murdered the best of them could have so easily done the same to her...

Lying on the floor, staring at the plain, fire-sprinkler studded ceiling, Hermione frowned. *But he wasn't going to, was he? If he'd intended to harm me, surely Sigurd would've bitten his head off? Sigurd didn't show for the first altercation between Draco and me, but then I don't think Draco's heart was in harming me. Not until that last curse. Then Sigurd showed up to defend me. What was it Russel said? To those who are neutral towards me...*

Post-battle reaction set in with a giggle. Hermione covered her mouth, but another one escaped. *I guess being his best student for so many years finally paid off. If I had been Neville, invading his home, I would probably be dead by now...unless he just doesn't really give a damn about his students, one way or another. Though maybe he'd*

off Neville just from the sheer memory of all those Potions accidents...

It was useless speculating about the man; he was too complicated to understand. She'd read all of the crib-notes the sixth-year Snape had made. There had been a lot of anger, a lot of hurt feelings, a lot of ambition, and a lot of genius in those cramped, margin-scribbled ideas. No, whatever the adult Snape had wanted with her, it was something complex. Something complicated. Probably, it involved interrogating her, stripping her mind open with his Legilimency, and possibly handing her over to his master, though possibly placing her under the Imperius Curse and sending her back to her friends.

The urge to tremble from her adrenaline-pumped fear had faded, as had the post-shock weakness that had followed it. With some of her energy restored, Hermione pushed up onto her elbow, and remembered the books. Her bag had sprawled to one side, and the Diary to the other. Leaving the bag for the moment, she rose onto her knees and gently picked up the tome.

It wasn't paving-stone sized, or even half a paving-stone, as a number of the older wizarding texts tended to be. It was actually just a little smaller than a standard Muggle notebook, a little narrower in width. The pages were smooth, undamaged by their rumpled landing. But when she leafed through them, they were blank. Guessing there was some sort of spell on them, Hermione turned to the front end-leaf, and saw an inscription written within a series of runes scribed in several rings.

The runes began to spin. Startled, Hermione tried to shut the book, but it stayed open. Lines and symbols glowing, the rings spun this way, some spun that way...and they locked into place, one after the other. Letters formed in the center of the now motionless disk: **Avete l'occhio. Non avete la mano. Vedete tutto, ma non fate niente!**

Her Italian was rusty, to say the least...she was far more proficient at French, and that was mostly tourist stuff...but there were translation spells in her seventh-year Charms book, back at Headquarters. Rising, noting with relief the spine was no longer holding itself stiffly open, she closed the book and set it on the table, then scooped her book bag off the floor. *Expanding Enchantments* and *The Will and the Word* were extracted and set to one side. She'd read them later, during the simmering stages of the Anima Te.

Expanding Enchantments would hopefully be useful. So far, all she'd been able to draft out with her Arithmancy calculations was a twenty foot radius area of effect, and she suspected that wouldn't be good enough for whatever Russel had in mind. It wasn't so much what he wanted anymore that really intrigued her, as it was combining two totally disparate Charms under challenging circumstances...wandless, with a radius effect of likeness to likeness. It would be helpful, of course, to know exactly what object was being affected in advance, which could tailor the spell even further... Yes, she could definitely see herself going into research, if she could find the necessary funds...

The soft bang of an Apparation made her jump, not expecting it. A smile curved her lips as she turned to greet Russel, but the scowl pinching his face made her take a step back in shock. She'd never seen him this angry, before. In fact, he didn't even greet her.

"...Where is the book?" the utili-kilt clad wizard demanded.

"What book?"

"The Lucrezia book! Have you opened it?" he snapped, grabbing her upper arm tightly.

"Yes. You're kind of hurting me," Hermione added. "Could you let go?"

"I *ought* to turn you over my knee!" He leaned down and squinted into her eyes, making her want to lean back. "You're not blinded. Obviously it didn't react to you like it did me. Where is it?"

"It's on the table...and you're still hurting me!" Hermione returned sharply, lifting her hand to pry his fingers from her arm. He released her roughly and looked at the table. His grey gaze skimmed over the other two tomes and alighted on the Diary. It was almost as if she wasn't there, except that he was insulting her under his breath.

"You total hoser! You could've been *killed*. I'll have to put this back...what made you choose *this* book to use as a Portkey?" he asked, gripping the edges of it.

"Because *that* is the book I was looking for!" Hermione told him. "It was a piece of luck I spotted it just as I needed to leave! I take it Snape reported back to Death Eater Central that I'd invaded and stolen something of his? Or did Draco?"

"Draco wasn't where he was supposed to be. And *I* had to modify some memories, so that he...they...wouldn't remember your being there! If anyone finds out what I've done..." He released the book, turning to scowl at her. "*Why* do you need this book? Do you have any idea how dangerous this is? When *I* tried reading it, I was rendered blind for a week!"

"Well, when I first opened it, the pages were blank, then on the flyleaf, some rune-warding came up with a message in Italian that I haven't had a chance to translate, yet." Hermione reached for the book. Russel's hand clamped over her wrist, his fingers digging in painfully around the curve of her bracelet.

"Do *not* open that book in my presence!" he snarled, dragging her away from the table so that he was between her and the tome.

"I wasn't *going* to! I was going to take it into the bathroom to read it again, then come back and ask you to translate what it said! And would you stop *grabbing* me?" Hermione demanded, yanking on her arm. She yanked again when he didn't release her, hard enough to make him sway, and heard a faint double-click. "You're not acting like yourself! Let go!"

He didn't reply, and didn't release her. She drew in a breath to demand it again, and realized his hair was caught mid-sway. The tight grip of his hand on her arm had activated her bracelet. He was stuck in time, a minute or two at most. Hermione looked from her bracelet to his face. Realizing the opportunity before her, she quickly reached up with her left hand, feathering her fingertips over the back of his neck. She'd seen the hook-and-loop clasp of the amulet he wore; it was just a matter of pinching it, like...so...

Peeling the ribbon away, she looked at him, searching for signs of any difference. Glamours were instantaneous changes, after all; she could put the ribbon and its pendant back on him before he knew what she'd done, and finally get the chance to see what he really looked like. There was one problem, however: he wasn't changing. Well, that wasn't true; she realized after staring at his green-shirted arms that the little scars were visible on his hands, but nothing else about his appearance had changed. Confused, Hermione reached up to put the ribbon back into place. She couldn't quite manage it with one hand, and reached for his fingers, attempting to pry them from her arm.

Her bracelet clicked.

The wrong way.

Shite!

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

Author's Notes: This chapter contains non-consensual acts which may be upsetting to more sensitive readers. Before you flame me, know that I was molested as a child, so don't even think about lighting that torch in your hand unless you've suffered similarly, too. Know also that there are different levels of severity in situations like this, and this is by comparison to most of them not very severe.

Trust in me, and my writing. That's all I ask. I wouldn't put it in if it wasn't an integral part of the storyline. ~Lotm

XVII.

Faster than she thought possible, his free right hand whipped out his wand, blasting her backward. At least she landed on the bed, though she bounced roughly from the impact. Winded, Hermione tried grabbing for her wand, but a sizzle of magic snapped her arms and legs out to the corners of the queen-sized mattress.

"You shouldn't have done that."

His voice didn't sound right. Blinking, Hermione peered at her bonds, a variation of the same silvery ribbons she'd used on Draco. "This isn't funny, Russel. Let me go."

"No, I'm afraid I cannot do that," he murmured, moving up beside the bed, into her field of view. Clad in a green shirt and the navy utili-kilt, he looked normal, but he didn't sound normal. "It takes a full minute for the transformation to complete itself, and I cannot interrupt the process. I *could* leave," he murmured mock-thoughtfully, "and hide my identity...but you've obviously gone to a *lot* of trouble to learn some sort of time-acceleration spell. It would be rude of me to not show you who I really am, after unmasking me."

Transformation? Hermione thought, tugging at her bonds. They didn't give her more than an inch or two of slack. *But he's not changing! He looks exactly the same...*

His hand touched his stomach, then his fingers flew down his chest, unbuttoning his shirt. Tugging it free, he pulled the cotton wide. Not to remove it, but to display himself to her. Hermione stared at his stomach, and saw it happening. The all-over tan of his body was withdrawing from his skin, leaving it alabaster pale, marred only by the faint-pink and aged-white remnants of his scars. The colour swirled up through his chest, and that was when Hermione realized the light brown dusting of hairs were drawing in some of that tanned colouring, darkening themselves to black.

Apprehension curdled her stomach, as more and more dark golden tan was replaced by sallow skin. She shook her head, wanting to deny what she was seeing. But she couldn't deny it. All this time, she should've known, and she couldn't deny it, try as she might. "No...no..."

"Yes...yes..." the wizard she knew as Russel mocked back, letting the edges of his shirt hang open as he braced a hand next to her ribs, leaning over her. His ash-blond hair had darkened to a deep brunette, and as the last of the colouring drained from his arms and his face, his locks finished deepening to a plain, straight black. His Canadian accent had vanished, leaving a plain, ordinary British one. "Psyche dared to look at her Cupid's face...and found she'd married a *monster* in his place."

Hermione whimpered, looking at her ex-teacher's face. Severus Snape. She'd married--and slept with--Severus Snape! Even the black had bled its way back into his once-grey eyes. There was no denying his identity. She'd made love to this...this *murderer*!

One of his brows arched sardonically. "What, no loving greeting for your *husband*?"

"*Bastard!*" Hermione hissed, feeling ill. Feeling kicked in the stomach, and physically ill. She tugged at her wrists again, but the magical bonds held.

"Tut tut, Miss Granger...sorry, *Mrs. Snape*," he corrected himself. "Such language. You have only yourself to blame, though; I told you not to seek my true identity. And I told you not to don the ring. Yet you did both," he whispered, leaning closer. She squeezed her eyes shut, flinching from his nearness. His breath smelled like tea, incongruously cozy in the face of her revulsion. The lips she'd been looking forward to kissing when she'd first heard him arrive now grazed her brow in a parody of a soothing kiss. "I suppose, now that my identity is revealed, I should bare all of my secrets to you. All that I can, of course..."

The ticklish touch of his lips drifting down to her cheekbone made her flinch and try to twist her head away. Strong fingers caught her by the chin, holding her head still. Warm breath puffed against her skin, tickling her hairline and the curves of her ear.

"I'm sure you'll not be surprised to learn that I've lied to you, *wife*. You see, *you* cannot take off your ring to end this marriage...but I can."

That snapped her eyes open. Peering out of their corners, she stared at him, startled by the revelation. His mouth curved in a cruel smirk. Cruel because of the way he confirmed her wild hope.

"Oh, yes...all I have to do is declare our marriage null and void, and draw the ring from my finger of my own free will, and we're through. Divorced of each other. But there's the catch," he purred into her ear. Hermione squirmed against the grip of her hand, feeling the tickling at her ear stimulating nerves halfway down her body in a very unwanted manner. "Even if you sullied your *noble* self by placing me under the Imperius Curse, the ring would not come off. It has to be by my own free will...and I will *never* divorce you."

Confusion raced through her, prompting her to speak. "But...but *why*? Why tie yourself to me? You hate me!"

"Hmm, yes...well, I was leery of the possibility of you donning the ring...but I wasn't your teacher anymore," he murmured, sending shudders down her spine, "and you are an attractive, nubile young witch. It amused me to seduce you, when you didn't know my identity...and it worked out so well, didn't it, my love?"

Hermione thrashed against her bonds, revulsion lending her strength. All she managed to do was bruise her wrists, however. The bonds didn't budge, and didn't loosen. She felt his hand cupping her breast and gasped in desperation, "--Sigurd! Sigurd, help me!"

The dragon didn't appear, not even in dragonette size. All she earned from her efforts was an amused chuckle, and a massaging squeeze of her breast through her blouse. "He won't save you. Our wedding rings were created in an era when husbands owned their wives. I could beat you to death, and he would not lift a single gilded claw in your defense. Scream all you like, love. This suite is too well-warded for anyone else to hear and help you."

"Stop saying that!" Hermione ordered him desperately.

"What, 'love'?" Severus Snape mocked. "But you just confessed your love for me, and I for you! And you were so *happy* to love me, and to have *my* love--how does it feel to know you fell for the seduction of the man who killed Albus Dumbledore?"

"If I had anything in my stomach, I'd vomit it on you!" she snapped, tugging uselessly on her bonds again.

"So full of fire and passion," he murmured, caressing her other breast. She tried to shake him off, but he only resumed his stroking when she stopped moving, face red from her fruitless efforts. "No, I don't think I'll give up the prize of such a beautiful, blushing bride."

His head dipped to hers, his mouth angling over her lips. Growling, Hermione snapped her teeth, catching his bottom lip. He pulled it free with a hiss of pain, and touched the blood welling from the small wound she'd made. Eyes narrowing, he stared down at her. A lick of his tongue soothed the injury while his dark eyes calculated with a cold fury that only increased her fear. *Shite, Hermione, that was fucking brilliant of you!*

Voice dipping lower than before, he muttered thoughtfully, "...I wonder how long it will take to bend you to my will. An hour? Two? Perhaps a whole day? More?"

"You'll be in Azkaban, before then!" Hermione retorted, thinking of the warning she'd given her friends, that she would be done in an hour and a half. He caught her chin, forcing her to look at him.

"Do you really think you'll be able to get free, and capture me?"

She stared back at him defiantly, but said nothing; all she had to do was wait, and eventually Harry and Ron would come looking for her...

He gave her a wary, thoughtful look. "You're too confident..." The hand on her breast shifted to her waist, making her shrink from his touch. Drawing her wand, he flicked at her. "*Legilimens!*"

Magic impacted in her brain. Hermione struggled to reflect it back at him, to make her mind and her memories nothing more than a tranquil lake. She felt him shifting over her, did her best to ignore his presence, focusing firmly on an image she had of the lake next to the school; she'd seen it on a perfectly still spring day, once, unruffled by wind or wave--

"--Ow!"

The bastard had pinched her nipple! She fell into darkness as her mental composure shattered, only to emerge in a memory of a time when she'd been nipped by the neighbor's dog at the age of six; the retriever hadn't broken the skin of her hand, but he'd frightened her with the bite. It morphed into a memory of her reading a card her parents had sent her for her sixteenth birthday. Hermione fought the spell, trying to return to the lake, but his hand was mauling her breast, and she could only get as far as the day Hagrid had told them about Buckbeak's impending execution.

And then she felt him tugging her jeans open, felt his hand sliding down inside, over her mound, and she couldn't stop the memory that spilled through her in despairing, repulsed hope, ...*You know, to find the book that I'm looking for. I should be back in an hour and a half...* Hermione groaned in despair as she felt him molesting the memory, and unearthing her certainty that her two friends would come looking for her once she was gone too long.

He withdrew his hand roughly, as the world fell back into place. Hermione's eyes refocused just in time to see him inhaling the scent from her fingertips, and realized with a painful, embarrassed shame that she was....wet. She shouldn't be wet! There was no reason for it--she was *afraid* of him, not bloody well aroused!

...Wasn't she?

Pushing off of the bed, he sneered down at her, "It seems I have yet more damage-control to perform, today. You've given me far too much trouble, my dear *wife*. As I don't want your two bumbling idiot friends to interrupt us, I shall have to intercept them and tell them that you faced off against 'the bastard traitor'," he mocked, "and were injured. That you'll need a few days of rest in my *tender* care while you recover, and that you'll return to them when you're feeling *better*. That should buy me the time I need to bend you to my will."

"Why don't you just cast Imperius, and have done with it?" Hermione snapped, outwardly fierce but inwardly terrified.

"And risk you breaking through my control? No," the half-clad bastard murmured, staring down at her. His mouth curved up on one side in a playful smile reminiscent of Russel, yet too cruel to be anything but Snape. "Besides, what I have planned for you will be far more fun. For me, at least. Oh, and before you get any ideas...you won't be needing *this* anymore."

Lifting her wand, he grasped it by the ends, and snapped it in half. Magic spat from the break, then the vinewood shaft was quiescent again. Despair prickled her eyes with tears. Hermione could barely see him through the blurring of her vision, but the drawing of his own wand was unmistakable. She braced herself for the pain of Cruciatus, or worse.

"*Stupefy!*"

The fiery red bolt that erupted from his wand knocked her into darkness.

...

Hermione roused slowly from the depths of slumber. Hands were kneading her back, talented hands that squeezed and soothed the knotted muscles underneath her shoulder blades. They were working their way up to her shoulders, and in her sleep-hazed state, she was content to let them work their Muggle magic on her flesh. A sound of contentment escaped her chest as they stroked up the column of her neck, then started to work their way back down the length of her spine.

It was a relaxing feeling, invoking a blissful lassitude she hadn't known was possible. For a long time, Hermione just let her mind drift, not quite asleep but not quite awake, either. If she were a cat, she would've purred in pleasure, she decided. That thought eventually made her think of Crookshanks, and that in turn made her think of Grimmauld Place, Harry and Ron--the book, the confrontation--Snape!

Gasping, she yanked herself free of the hands kneading her buttocks, craning her head, frantic to see who was touching her. A tanned, light-haired face met her gaze, grey eyes puzzled. Russel, kneeling on the bed beside her, clad in his blue-and-green Ferguson kilt. "Are you alright?"

"Get away from me!" Hermione kicked at him. He yelped and grabbed her arms as she tried to hit him; they ended up with him covering her naked body with his half-clad one.

"--What has gotten into you, Jane?" he demanded in his Canadian accent as she tried to budge him, and failed. "Are you hallucinating? Is that what that book did to you?"

"Wh-what?" Hermione stammered, staring up at him. Damn her body, but the feel of him pinning her down was reminding her flesh of a few other times that he'd pinned her down, times when the only thing either of them had been wearing had been his kilt...and nothing underneath it. She didn't know if he was wearing anything underneath

the scratchy wool, but she knew she was naked, and it was disconcerting her.

"The book--I came here, and you had collapsed, and were suffering from some nightmare. Are you alright?"

"...Nightmare?" she asked, stunned. *Had it been just a nightmare? An hallucination, brought on by the magic in the Diary?* Oh, the thought appealed to her...but now that she knew what to look for, his tanned skin, grey eyes and lightened hair didn't fool her. The searching, concerned look in those eyes almost did...but she knew the contours of his face. "You--*liar!*" She struggled to push him off of her. "You're Severus Snape! I can see it in your face!"

"I am not!"

"You *look* like him, and you're *lying* like him! Get off of me!" she demanded, shoving futilely. He was just too heavy, too strong for her to move, even with such a lean frame.

"--You think I look like him?" Russel grunted as she tried to thump him in the leg with her knee. Unfortunately, he was now lying with his legs between hers; the only thing keeping them from being even more intimately pressed together was the fabric of his kilt. His voice took on a lighter tone. "Well, I didn't want to tell you, but I *am* related to him..."

Oh, he infuriated her! Baring her teeth, Hermione yelled, "*Stop lying to me, Severus Snape!*"

He stilled over her. With his face hardened, no longer charming, she couldn't see him as Russel anymore. Just an oddly coloured Severus Snape. "...Very well. Remember that you demanded this of me, *wife. Modusepara!*"

Her arms and legs jerked outward again. A glance at her nearest wrist showed it wrapped in a black velvet band; a crane of her head showed her right ankle was bound in black velvet, too. "Let me go!"

"No. I had hoped to spare your delicate sensibilities, but it seems you'd rather do this the hard way."

Sitting up on his knees, he reached behind his neck and unfastened the ribbon holding up the raven-carved amulet. Lobbing it at the nightstand, he unfastened his kilt. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, but that made it instantly worse; now she didn't know what he was going to do, couldn't anticipate the next touch. Her imagination would become his ally, increasing her fear. Opening her eyes to slits, she studied him warily. Already the colour of his tan, the melanin that coloured his skin, was draining up over his knees, heading for the hairs of his body.

"Lesson One. Hermione belongs to Severus. That means Severus can touch Hermione whenever he damned well pleases. *Wherever* he pleases," he added in third-person, speaking once again with no trace of an accent.

Baring his groin, he tossed the blue-and-green plaid aside. Fear held her in a breathless paralysis, until she realized he wasn't erect. *Thank god for small mercies...* But his words weren't reassuring. Shifting out from between her legs, he spoke another wandless spellword.

"*Moduprono!*"

Hermione yelped as she found her arms jerked over her head, and her body flipped prone on the sheets. He'd stripped back the bedding at some point, leaving her on clean white sheets. Shock made her yelp again when she felt his hands cupping her buttocks.

"I believe I was here, before we were interrupted."

Hermione had enough leeway to turn her face to the side; her arms were now stretched to either side, and her legs splayed apart, half of her face pressed into a pillow. The bed shifted as he moved to kneel between her knees. Uncomfortably aware of how vulnerable her naked body was in this position, she felt a whimper rising in her throat. Fear tingled through her nerves, especially down at her groin. At least her breasts were hidden from his gaze, but she couldn't close her legs, couldn't protect her femininity.

His hands shifted, kneading the tense muscles of her bum. Thumbs grazed the crease of her flesh intermittently as he worked his way down to the tops of her thighs. She tried to tense her body, tried to keep him out, but his thumbs rubbed in leisurely circles between her inner thighs...and that was when her humiliation completed itself, when his thumbs brushed against her nether-lips.

She was wet.

Worse, she felt more moisture seeping out of her flesh as his hands stilled. He knew it, too. Betrayed by her flesh, Hermione felt her face burning with shame. *How can I feel aroused by this? Oh, god, what did I do to deserve this? Kill me quickly, please...*

His thumbs massaged the sides of her labia, stroking her own moisture over her flesh, then they withdrew as he kneaded her hamstring muscles. Any hope she had of him being a gentleman on the matter died a withered, embarrassed death as he murmured, "I'm pleased to see this won't be quite as difficult as I'd thought..."

Merlin, rise from the grave and kill me now! Lockhart, Oblivate me with Ron's broken wand--anyone, have mercy on me!

"You have lovely thighs. Pale and perfect," he murmured, his baritone pouring over her raw senses like motor oil, dark and slick. He stroked lightly over the backs of her knees. Twitching from the ticklish sensation didn't do anything but make her leg spasm; the velvet bands acting like manacles prevented her from moving very far. Fingers manipulating her calves, her captor continued. "I meant to re-seduce you in a form you seemed to like, to make things easier on you, psychologically. But you're too stubborn, aren't you?"

He reached her ankles, and her feet twitched in anticipation. Not from ticklish sensations, but because he--as Russel, that was--had used the sensitivity of her feet to enhance her orgasms in the past. The thought of Severus Snape tormenting her with the ecstasy of a foot-rub was humiliating. Perverted.

His fingertips eased over the edges of her heels.

"Please--don't!"

Stilling his hands, he contemplated her blurted request. "...Sensitive? Ticklish, perhaps? Or are you afraid I will use your own desire against you?"

Yes, yes, I'm afraid of that! I'm terrified of what you're making my body feel! She ground her teeth together to keep from blurting those words, too. When she stayed silent, his hands slipped down her soles, massaging them firmly, but not painfully. It was more soothing than stimulating, but her body didn't know any differently. Hermione could feel her nipples tightening, and her body moistening itself even further. A whimper escaped her throat. *I don't want to feel this way!*

"Tut tut, Mrs. Snape," her ex-professor admonished her, sliding his hands back up to her calves. "All that work I did on your body has just gone to waste. You're far too tense, again."

Abandoning her right calf, he massaged the left one, slowly working his way up her leg; as he kneaded, he spoke.

"You wanted the truth. I suppose I should tell you. Perhaps then you will understand just what sort of situation ensnares you. Where to begin... Where else, but at the beginning?" he answered rhetorically. "The Dark Lord has known all along about my plan to communicate with you through the rings."

Hermione winced, biting her lower lip. She was very, very glad she hadn't yet had the chance to ask the Order to let him in on the Fidelius-kept secret of their Headquarters. He continued lightly, stroking the tension from the back of her left leg. It didn't help that his touch made her flinch, the closer he got to the inner top of her thigh.

"He doesn't know that the rings do not allow me to lie to you, but he knew everything else."

A startled sound escaped her.

"Oh, yes," Severus Snape answered, as if her gasp had been a question. "The rings do force their wielders to communicate the truth, and only the truth, through them. I could call myself 'that bastard traitor' in third-person because I *am* one, a bastard in the metaphorical sense, and a traitor. I can even get away with calling Wormtail a bastard traitor, because he was one to his friends...but you couldn't lie to me about *Potter* now being your brother," he sneered, Harry's surname all but spitting from him. "...But let us not discuss *him*."

"No, Marvolo knows everything but the fact that the rings enforce some version of the truth. Any communication tool forged with Veritaserum infused into its very being will ensure no lies can be transmitted through it. Veritaserum is used as the base of the potion infusing the anti-cheating quills at the school, for instance, and these rings were forged by the great wizard John Dee during the first Elizabeth's reign, forged in dragonfire, infused with protective magics, and quenched in Truth Serum."

"So yes, I *am* working to bring down the Dark Lord, to destroy him and dance upon his grave. My methods, however, are not exactly *orthodox*," he sneered, rubbing high enough on her inner thigh to encounter her wetness again. Stilling his hand, the other one still massaging in circles along her outer hip, he added, "As you may have noticed."

His hand shifted, and one finger plunged into her body, making her stiffen. "--No! Don't!"

He pulled out...and thrust two of his long digits into her depths. Hermione held her breath, body tense with shame. A twisting, a bit of fluttering, and she gasped, pleasure arcing through her nerves like miniature lightning. Dammit, this wasn't right! He shouldn't know where to touch her to arouse her body! Straining through the war of conflicted emotions and sensations, she focused on what he had said. Torture her if he must, she wasn't going to let him break her!

"I wouldn't call it *orthodox*, when you *murdered* Professor Dumbledore!"

His thumb pinched her clitoris, with the help of his remaining two fingers. She bit back a groan, but was unable to quell the tremor the agile move instilled in her involuntarily aroused flesh. "I don't appreciate your tone of voice, Mrs. Snape."

"--Stop calling me that!" Hermione gasped as his fingers pumped into her a little. "Stop it!"

His hand left her body. She heard wet, suckling sounds as the bastard savoured her juices, then felt the heat and brush of his body leaning over hers, the depression of the mattress sagging as he braced his weight by her ribs. His left hand came into her field of view, his thumb touching the band. "Hermione Jane Snape...you *are* my wife, and I will call you whatever I want and touch you wherever I will."

Her finger heated, but his hand was in the way, and her own hand lay too far from her face for her to have read the words anyway. Removing the warmth of his body, he resumed his position on his knees between her spread legs, and began massaging her right calf. For a moment, her treacherous mind had to admit that he had the hands of an angel, when it came to massaging someone. *But he killed Professor Dumbledore!* she reminded herself firmly...and all she knew was a heavy confusion. "Why did you do it? Why did you kill him? Or is that where your honesty ends?"

"I took an Unbreakable Vow, to either help young Mr. Malfoy complete his tasks--repairing the cabinet and killing Albus Dumbledore--or to complete those tasks myself, should he failed. He succeeded at the first. When I saw him starting to lower his wand that night, I knew he had failed with the second. Either I had to kill Dumbledore, or I would drop dead myself from a broken Vow. Obviously, I wasn't the one who dropped dead."

"You're no better than Pettigrew!" Hermione snapped, remembering a night in her third year when Sirius Black had shouted that he'd rather have died than betrayed his friends, unlike Peter Pettigrew, who had betrayed James and Lily Potter to the Dark Lord.

Severus Snape struck like a serpent, pinning her back with his warm weight. One of his hands fisted painfully in her hair, holding her head in place. "--*Never* compare me to that odious little worm! You *will* rue such careless words, *wife*." Releasing her roughly, he backed up, and confused her by resuming his methodical, careful massage of her thigh. Still, it took him until he was massaging her backside before he spoke, his voice calm once again. "...Albus was visibly weak, that night. He'd been caught by Draco Malfoy, of all people. I did what was needed. It gained me the highest esteem in Marvolo's eyes. He now thinks I am one of his pet serpents, an asp he can summon with a whisper to do whatever he wills."

"More like an *arse*," Hermione muttered. She winced when he kneaded her buttocks a little harder.

"Such language from a young *lady*... Nearly everything I have done with you, the Dark Lord knows about. He'll probably even learn about this moment, too. I have succeeded because I tell him the truth. Just as I told it to Albus...and just as I am telling it now to you." His fingers worked their way up the small of her back in muscle-soothing circles. "The truth can be just as misleading as a lie, when told in the appropriate manner. We'll call that Lesson Number Three."

"You missed Lesson Two," Hermione muttered.

"No, I just haven't taught that one to you, yet."

"How do I know you're even telling me some twisted version of the truth, never mind the full truth?" Hermione asked. As far as torture sessions went, this wasn't too bad; he really did have the perfect hands for a masseur... *What am I thinking? These are the hands that wielded the Killing Curse!*

He leaned over her again, and she felt the probing hardness of an erection nudging against her inner thigh, making her shudder. It was too close to her vagina for her mental comfort. His hands braced themselves to either side of her ribs, denting the mattress at the level of her breasts. "Well, that is just something you will have to take on *faith*."

A shift of his hips, and the tip of his prick nudged at her opening. Hermione flinched. "Please, don't!"

"Lesson One, wife. I will touch you whenever, wherever, and *however* I like." Sinking into her slowly, he murmured in her ear, "You will learn to accept my conjugal rights. Even the greasy git of the dungeon has *needs*...and you asked me to swear to not cheat on our marriage with anyone else. You can't have it both ways, my dear Jane."

"I would *rather* you--ahh!"

His hand had fisted roughly in her hair, gripping her curls painfully hard. "Do *not* rescind that vow!" Severus growled in her ear. "While I am bound by it, I am *ineligible* for the gang-rapes of the Death Eaters' victims. That is something I have never been interested in doing, but in the high position I am in, it would be expected of me, had I not demonstrated how the rings enforce monogamy on both sides of this marriage. And that is only possible on my half because *you* asked me to swear to it on our wedding-rings."

"Rescind that vow, and something far worse than *this*," he punctuated the word with a thrust, rubbing against her g-spot, "will be the fate of the females I run across. You, at least, are receiving pleasure in this act." Buried deep inside her, he rotated his hips in a subtle, sensual grind. "Remove my vow, and you will be just as responsible for

what I will do to them."

"You don't *have* to do it!" Hermione protested.

"Like I *didn't have* to kill Albus?"

She twisted her head to the other side, but there was no way to avoid his voice, no way to avoid his touch.

"I will maintain my position among the Death Eaters by any means possible, so that I may stay in the most useful position for spying as possible. That doesn't mean I have to *like* what I must do...except for *this*," he murmured, nuzzling her neck through her curls as he rocked into her again in emphasis. "I *like* this..."

"Well, I don't!"

"...Liar." Brushing her hair from her neck and shoulder, he kissed the curve of muscle hidden there.

She shivered. Timing his thrust, he withdrew, then bit her delicately on the next surge inward, a nip of his teeth. He'd done this to her before, as Russel, and knew how her body reacted to the love-bite. Now, as then, it sent a shiver of pleasure racing between spine and groin, forcing Hermione to bite her lip, quelling the urge to moan. It wasn't fair that he knew how to arouse her so well. It just wasn't fair!

"Mmmh," the bastard moaned, scraping her skin with his lips as well as his teeth, before releasing her from both. "I can *feel* how wet you got, just now. I suspect you *love* being disciplined--you were wet when I bound you to this bed, and you were wet when I fondled you ruthlessly, and you were wet when I bit you, when I dominated you. It shames you, but you *like* it. I wonder..."

Withdrawing, he pushed away from her body, and shifted to kneel beside her hip. Just as Hermione started to turn her head to that side, to see what he was doing, she felt and heard a sharp-burning *crack*, and yelped. "--*Ow!* You spanked me!"

"You have a bad habit of stating the obvious." His hand smacked onto the same spot on her right buttock, making her flinch and yelp again. It wasn't bruisingly hard, but it was stingingly hard.

"Bastard!"

"Any time, any place, any *how*. I think you will like this," he murmured, disgusting her with the humor lacing his tone. "In the end, that is..."

With that as her only warning, the bastard spanked her arse ruthlessly, raining the slapping blows on one cheek, then the other, then both in random patterns. Several times he paused and she flinched automatically, expecting a blow--and *then* he struck, just as she relaxed in the painless aftermath. She squirmed on the bed, but couldn't avoid the blows; her arms and legs wouldn't let her move far. She bit her lip, but couldn't stop the pain from dragging itself vocally from her throat.

And then he stopped, but only long enough to slice his fingertips between her nether-lips. That was when Hermione learned her body had betrayed her again: she was incredibly wet. Her backside was burning from the fierce blush raised by his blows, and she was literally dripping wet; she could feel the damp puddle on the bedsheet directly beneath her groin. It was inconceivable, and yet undeniable: her body was aroused by being spanked. Yet one more streaking thought to add to the whirling vortex of confusion inside her mind.

He started again, but this time his blows struck between her legs, smacking into her mound in stinging slaps that weren't quite as strong as the ones applied to her bum, but still managed to make her flinch with each impact. How long he kept it up, she didn't know; long enough to make her loins hot with the rushing blood, at least. But he did finish. A muttered, "*Modusupina*," flipped her over, and another word, "*Moducrusa*," released her lower limbs from their invisible bonds, though her arms were still pinned flat to either side. Hooking his arms under her knees, he lifted her pelvis as he positioned himself between her legs. A prodding of his erection, and he slid inside, hard and fast.

She was too wet; her body offered no resistance, save for the clenching of her muscles. That, she discovered, not only did nothing to keep him out, it was quite pleasurable. Despairing, she closed her eyes, but that only magnified the sensations in her loins. All of the blood that had rushed down there from the stinging slaps he had delivered only served to heighten her stimulated nerves. Each deep thrust mashed his pubic mound into her clitoris, slapped his scrotum against her flesh.

The arm under her left knee forced her leg further back, doubling her thigh toward her breast. A moment later, her eyes snapped open as she felt wet warmth enclosing her toes. With his own eyes closed, with a look of sensual absorption she'd only see on Russel's face in moments like this, she watched Severus Snape sucking on her toes.

This was the same man who'd sucked on her toes before. This was the same man who had made her incoherent with pleasure. This *was* the same man as Russel Fawkeson...and he was sucking on her toes and making her bloody incoherent once again. Shivers of ecstasy rippled up through her belly.

Giving up on trying to make sense of anything, Hermione let herself sink into the sensuality of the moment. He would have to answer to her for his lies, and for binding her, and for touching her when she'd said no...but in that moment, Hermione was tired of trying to make sense of the world. And, in letting go, discovered not only a wash of pleasure that tore a moan from her throat, but a startling sense of freedom, too; he was in control, for the moment, and it felt good to let him plunder from her this strange sensuality found in being bound and spanked and ridden until she was soaked with sweat from her climax.

This wasn't by her consent, but whatever this was, it wasn't the terror and pain of a true rape; given what she could've suffered at his colleague's hands--moments of pulled hair aside--he was really being very considerate....

Bastard.

Snape quickly sensed the change in her, his hips stilling for a moment, his dark eyes opening and meeting hers. Releasing her foot, he leaned down between her legs. The moment she wrapped them around his hips, he stiffened warily again, then cautiously closed the last bit of distance between them. Aware of the true, fallow-skinned identity of her lover, Hermione didn't bite him when he kissed her. She was hesitant in returning the kiss, but then they both were being cautious. But sliding lips led to licking tongues, led to moving hips as he rocked into her again. And, scars and skin-colour aside, Severus proved himself every bit as considerate as Russel, slipping one hand between them so that he could stimulate her clitoris between his fingers.

Incongruously, as her head arched back and his mouth nibbled over her chin and down onto her neck, Hermione's mind filled with the thought of Severus Snape in an all-black ensemble of poet shirt and pleated kilt. That made him look like a ruddy Scottish pirate, in her imagination. A moment later, he bit and suckled her pulse-point, and another orgasm boiled through her nerves and emerged as a bliss-ambushed cry, stimulated by his touch. The sharp upward buck of her hips seemed to undo him, for he spasmed and pounded roughly into her, wet and warm as he spilled himself in his own climax.

"Jane, Jane, Jane--!"

That irritated her out of her post-coital bliss. At least, it did once some of the lassitude wore off a minute or so later, when his breath warmed the skin just below her left ear, his face buried in her tangled curls. The rest of her sexual contentment evaporated as Hermione frowned. "Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Mmmh...what, 'Jane'? That is your name," Snape murmured in her ear. He was considerably keeping some of his weight on his elbows and knees, though most of it was pinning her in place sufficiently enough, he probably didn't need the spell keeping her arms flat on the bedsheet.

"My name is Hermione," she reminded him.

"Yes," he agreed, nipping at the unbruised side of her throat with each word. "Hermione...Jane...Snape. I just happen to think 'Hermione' is a ridiculous mouthful."

"Oh, like 'Severus' isn't? Is that why you chose your middle name as your alias?" she asked him tartly as he shifted, pulling his limp shaft from her body in favor of kissing his way down to her breasts. Her question made him lift his longish-haired head with a smug smile, amusement glittering in his black eyes.

"'Russel' isn't my middle name."

That confused Hermione. "What, is it your first name?"

"No."

"But, the rings--you used it with the rings! If they enforce the truth...?"

"Have you forgotten Lesson Three so quickly, my dear wife?" her former teacher prodded her verbally. "The truth can be twisted out of its natural shape, until it implies something entirely different, yet still seem perfectly valid." He smirked, and drew out the sibilants in his confession, his lips skimming over the valley between her breasts. "My name is Severus...Selenius...Snape. I wrote the first four and last five letters of my given and middle names in the air over the page, and only committed the R U S and S E L to paper, when I wrote to you. Thus I wrote the truth, in a way that made it seem like a lie."

That was disgustingly clever of him. "A pity you can't do the same with your true personality, leaving certain bits and pieces behind..."

He bit the side of her breast, making her yelp. The sharp nip was accompanied a moment later by the curling of his tongue around the same nipple; it tickled. Hermione tugged at her arms, but they were still pressed to the bed, though her legs were free to move. With his long, dark hair spilled over her skin, his lips nibbling between words, he murmured, "You will learn to accept all of me, *love*. Including my many flaws."

"At least you admit you have them. And stop calling me that!" Hermione ordered him. Just because she was tied down and unable to stop the ticklish torture of his tongue flicking her nipple didn't mean she had to be a bloody doormat. With the illusion of Russel Fawkeson shattered and broken, she didn't trust him any further than she could throw him at the moment, and she did not like his use of endearments.

"Stop calling you what, love?"

Oh, the bastard knew what he was doing! She flinched at the caress of his voice; she'd fallen in love with Russel, but Russel was nothing but a lie, and she didn't love Severus. How could she? Hermione didn't even know him. Six years as her teacher, seeing him working for the Order, had taught her almost nothing of this man--and the events of last spring had shown she knew nothing of what motivated him. She did know that he wasn't motivated by love. Lies, yes; love, no. "Stop using endearments!"

He licked along the underside of her breasts, shifting to torment the other one with a sweet, sensual fire at utter odds with the topic at hand. "Why?"

"Because you make a mockery of them!"

Abandoning her breast, he reared over her, bracing his torso on his elbows. "And how did you come to this brilliant conclusion?"

"Because you don't really love me," Hermione accused, jutting up her chin. "And to call me by an endearment under such circumstances renders it as meaningless as most of your other lies and so-called promises."

"...Really? And how did *you* become an expert on love?" he challenged her, arching a brow. "Or are you just upset that you gave your heart to an illusion you'd perfected in your head? Oh, yes, you are *equally* responsible for the illusion of Russel Fawkeson. You wanted a charming man. I gave you one. You wanted a spectacular lover. I gave you one. You wanted someone to love. I gave you one! *You* know nothing of love!"

"I loved Ron!" Hermione retorted, tugging at her bound arms. She wanted to push him off of her, but couldn't move her wrists from the bed. "I would've stayed with *him*, if it weren't for you! *I*, at least, have been in love before!"

A soundless snarl twisted his sallow face. Gripping her hair with his hand, he growled into her ear. "I *wanted* Narcissa Black! Our seventh year, I would've walked on broken glass for her. I even begged my grandmother to give me the rings that you and I now wear, so I could ask Cissy to marry me as soon as we graduated, since she wanted to remain pure until her marriage. But she told me she couldn't marry me; I wasn't *romantic* enough for her. I didn't *love* her enough! That I was a penniless half-blood, and that her parents had already arranged for her to marry an older wizard from a rich, pureblooded family...and he was *handsome*, and *charming*, so she went to him *happily*, treading on the shards of my heart, and leaving me the one bleeding from it.

"Do *not* tell me I do not know what love is!" he snarled into the shell of her ear. "The woman I have taken as my wife lies here under me, telling me she loves another wizard, and mocking my knowledge of what love is? Love is *pain*! You live in a fantasy world, if you think otherwise!" Pulling back slightly, he gave Hermione a tight little smile. His obsidian eyes glinted with bitterness, cruelty, and amusement. It was not a pleasant combination. "You don't want me to use endearments, my *beloved* wife? You don't want me to speak of emotions? Then I shall be a polite, *accommodating* husband, and refrain from burdening you with the lies and the truths of my feelings...save for one last time. One last torment, since you'll never know whether it was a truth or a lie. But then, why should you care? You seem to think I can manufacture feelings on a whim, a superb actor without compare. Allow me to indulge your *faith* in me."

Dropping his cheek so that it pressed against the left side of her face, he held up his left hand within her field of view, and touched his thumb to the ring girding the base of his third finger.

"Hermione Jane Snape...*I love you*."

Her ring finger burned. His head blocked her view; the message was short enough, she might've been able to read it on the scaled surface at arm-length, but his black-haired head stayed in the way until the heat of the ring eased and faded. He stayed with his cheek pressed to hers, his face hidden from view, for another minute or so, then finally moved. The tight little smile from before was still curling his lips in a sneer.

"Let that burn in your conscience, *wife*. Am I telling the truth, or am I telling a lie? Am I playing games with your heart, or games with your mind?" He dipped his head close enough that the tips of their noses brushed, and his warm breath gusted over her lower face. "You will never know. But know you this: I have *plans* for you. Regardless of how either of us *feel*. Resign yourself to being my wife."

Shifting down her body, he pressed her thighs apart and licked her flesh in a broad, slow lap. Hermione shivered, disconcerted by the contrast of pleasurable touch and hurtful tone. He suckled her flesh, arousing her nerves...and then stopped. Withdrawing from the bed, he stood and began donning his Russel-clothes with the same sort of methodical neatness she imagined him donning his black professorial robes. The colours and the unwizardish kilt made him look softer than she knew he was, made him into a strange amalgamation of Russel and Severus. It also reminded her of her own naked state.

"What are you doing?" she asked him as he finished tucking his shirttails into the plaid waistband.

"What does it *look* like I'm doing?" he mocked. "Or have you lost your wits along with your illusions?"

"*Beyond* that," Hermione retorted, rolling her eyes briefly. "Are you leaving?"

"Yes."

"You're not just going to leave me here, bound to this bed, are you?"

He smirked at her. "A tempting thought." Opening his sporran, he drew something from its depths. Hermione's eyes widened as she recognized the carved vinewood shaft of her old wand. He twirled it idly in his fingertips. "No, you'll be set free. You'll probably go running to your friends to tell them all about the nasty fiend that Russel turned out to be...but will you be honest enough to tell them how you wrapped your legs around the naked hips of the greasy git of the dungeons, and screamed in ecstasy? And if I send you information about an impending Death Eater attack, will you believe me and send someone to the victims' rescue, or stay your hand, and risk innocent lives suffering and dying because it was a warning sent by a cold-blooded murderer who could be laying a trap for the Aurors and the Order?"

Setting her wand on the dining table, he picked up the Diary.

"You can have the other books. You still have a Charm to finish composing for me. This one, however, is too dangerous for an amateur like you. Not unless you wish to be blinded by the Dark Magic it contains, in your foolish, stubborn insistence that you can handle anything that comes your way." Tucking the black leather volume under his arm, he sneered at her. "If you wish to protest, I suggest you take a second, long look at exactly who and what you married.

"You have only yourself to blame. I warned you not to don that ring." Drawing his wand, he flicked it at her. The velvet bands vanished from her arms and legs with faint *pops*. A moment later, he Disapparated from the room.

Drawing her arms into her chest, Hermione winced as her joints protested. Moisture seeped from her core, making her wince from that as well; he'd ridden her hard, ejaculated his seed into her womb and coated her breasts with his saliva, and left her without even the courtesy of draping a sheet over her ravished body. And the bastard had the temerity to make her *enjoy* it, too.

Curling onto her side, thighs clamped together, Hermione hugged herself. She could still feel the same sexually sated energy thrumming through her blood that she'd enjoyed in previous encounters with her husband. *Husband*, she repeated silently in the confusion of her mind. *Severus Snape is my husband... Russel is Severus is my husband...*

Her head and her heart and her body ached. Her mind whirled with confusion, her emotions felt battered, and her body...well, aside from her aching shoulders, and a lingering heat in her bum from being spanked, her body felt good. Mortifyingly good. She didn't want to think about it, but she had to; she couldn't focus enough to Apparate with her thoughts whirling like this.

There was a part of the maelstrom in her brain saying that she was a slut and a whore for enjoying being taken forcefully, and a part of her brain demanding why shouldn't she enjoy it, when she knew very well it could've been so much worse. Hermione had a very active imagination. She knew that what had happened to Mrs. Pardgeter could've happened to her. Yes, she'd been taken against her will, but it could've been without pleasure, without consideration. She could've been injured.

Having her hair gripped had stung only for a little while, as did the spanking, and even the bites he had given her hadn't broken the skin, as far as she knew. The right side of her throat was a little sore, but in the way that said she probably had a hickey-bruise at best. All in all, it could have been so much worse.

Needing to see for herself the damage, Hermione dragged herself off of the bed. Her joints were a little stiff, but she padded into the bathroom and flipped the light-switch. Wincing at the bright glow, she eyed herself in the floor-length mirror. Being Muggle glass, it didn't move independently of her own actions. All it showed her was the truth. Her breasts were still a little flushed from lovemaking, and dotted in a couple places with the rose-coloured marks of suckled love-bites that would fade within a day or two. The side of her throat was bruised purplish-red, a mark that would probably take a week or so to vanish, and when she twisted and peered over her shoulder, her backside was still a little red, but otherwise unbruised.

She looked like she normally did after a lovemaking session with Russel, aside from the added blush on her bum.

He was relatively careful with me... It was scary when he implied he could be a lot rougher, a lot more brutal with a woman, and after what he did with Professor Dumbledore, I'm inclined to believe he could be that ruthless...and yet I think I believe him when he said he wasn't interested in that sort of...interaction with the Death Eaters' victims. Hermione touched her lower lip. Normally after a lovemaking session, it was puffy from desire, but he hadn't really kissed her mouth, just her body. His relative treatment of her only confused her even more. *Why was he so gentle? He was so angry that I'd pulled away the mask of his deception, I honestly thought he was going to hex the living daylight out of me...but he didn't.*

Hell, he tried to seduce me!

There had been no denying the mostly gentle stroking of his hands when she'd woken up, and after he'd pinned her face-down to the bed to continue his massage. Why had he done that? She'd been helpless at that point. He'd tutted over how tense she'd grown when he'd teased the soles of her feet, and massaged her all over again. Why? He'd treated her carefully, as if trying to gentle a skittish animal.

It can't be because he actually cares for me...can it? Oh, god, he sounded angry and bitter when he snarled at me for saying he didn't know what love was. Did I... Hermione stared into her brown eyes, her reflected face pale with lingering shock. Did I hurt his feelings? It almost sounded like I did, and yet...how could I, of all people, hurt his feelings? He was just using me all along!

More moisture seeped from her body. Blushing, Hermione plucked a washcloth and a complimentary bottle of shampoo from the counter and turned to the bathtub, intending to take a shower. She stopped before stepping inside the rim, staring at the implements in her hands.

I could take this as evidence of a rape to the Wizengamot...but if I did that, they'd want me to trap Snape so they can haul him into a mockery of a trial Hermione didn't deceive herself on that score; it would be a mockery. He would be the perfect poster-child for the Ministry to publicly abuse just to make themselves look effective in the war, to make Scrimgeour look good. The outcry against Albus Dumbledore's killer would be overwhelming. They'd be able to turn the so-called trial into a three-ring-circus, an entertainment more bloody and brutal than the gladiatorial games of the ancient Roman Empire.

But...by sending me all that information about Death Eater attacks, Russel...Severus...saved lives. He swore through the rings that he wants to defeat Voldemort, and if the rings won't allow a lie to pass through them unchallenged... He's done good things--he's been able to do good things, because he's still a Death Eater in the eyes of the other Death Eater bastards...

Her head hurt. She shouldn't have to make the decision of whether Severus Snape lived free or was crucified in the public eye...and yet she was stuck in that very position. Even if she didn't report him to the Wizengamot, there was still the decision of whether or not to confess his identity to the other members of the Order of the Phoenix. If she did so...no one would be inclined to trust any more messages from the Ring of Truth, because they'd know Hermione's partner in information was the man they most hated for his most heinous crime.

And even if she didn't tell the Order...she would have to keep this a secret from Ron and Harry. They wouldn't haul him before the Wizengamot for a mock-trial. They wouldn't even call on their fellow Order members. They'd just kill him outright, if they could. Ron, because it wasn't just Russel the Death Eater spy who had stolen his girlfriend, it was Severus Snape, ex-teacher and murderer, who had stolen his girlfriend. And Harry...her blood-bound brother hated Severus Snape with a level of passion that was almost frightening.

She couldn't tell anyone, Hermione realized as her eyes stung with the prickle of tears. Sniffing, she stepped into the tub while she could still see, and turned on the tap with trembling hands. There was no one she could talk to, no one she could ask for advice. As the initial shock of cold water quickly warmed, pouring over her body like a magnified version of her tears, she mechanically poured some of the shampoo on the washcloth to work up a lather. If she couldn't tell anyone, she might as well wash

away all evidence of what had just happened...though it would be far easier to wash away the semen on her thighs than it would be to wash away the knowledge that she'd thoroughly enjoyed how it had gotten there.

Her mind whirled with a million thoughts, all of them chasing each others' tails. The night she'd confessed her love for Russel...and how she'd spanked him, that night. Hard enough to leave a reddish imprint of her hand for a few minutes. He'd returned her few blows with a flurry of his own...but the stinging of her bottom would fade faster if she acknowledged and abandoned the hypocrisy of thinking she'd never have done the same to him. She'd already done it. She didn't have to be a Slytherin to know that turnabout was fair play, not foul.

Which left her with a mass of confusion over what he'd meant by having *plans* for her, and what his motivations were. Severus Snape was too intelligent, too methodical to not have motivations acknowledged and contingency plans plotted in advance. He was on the side of the Light, in that he wanted to destroy the Dark Lord, but his methods were far, far from orthodox. He claimed to have loved Draco Malfoy's own mother when they'd been in school, the youngest of the three Black sisters, Bellatrix, Andromeda, and Narcissa, yet he'd gone on to lie about loving her, throwing about endearments like spoiled potions ingredients, and having the gall to act *hurt* when she threw her previous love for Ron in his face...

Hermione stopped scrubbing her ribs. She had to know what the truth was: she had to know if Snape had told her the truth. Lifting her left hand, she rinsed the suds from her fingers and stared at the scale-patterned ring. There was one thing her 'husband' apparently didn't know about these rings, but which she knew... Swallowing the lump in her throat, Hermione gathered her courage and spoke.

"Sigurd, you are summoned."

The golden dragonette deigned to appear in a glittering cloud that shied away from the pouring water. Shifting her body to one side, she let him form around her left arm, spiral-wrapped halfway up her bicep, his golden eyes slitted against stray droplets from the shower spray. Swallowing again, dreading she knew the answer, that it was all just a game, a mental mind-fuck of the sort the bastard would enjoy holding over her head, she cleared her throat.

"Sigurd...show me the truth of what Severus Snape said, when he claimed through the ring that he loved me, just now."

The dragonette's head shifted, craning towards his sinuous flank. Hermione bent her arm a little so that she could read the words forming in the pattern of his metallic scales. For a moment the droplets obscured the shifting lines, then the hide around them cleared far enough that they stood out, plain and clear. Written on his hide was the undeniable truth of how Severus Snape, formerly Russel Fawkeson, truly felt about his young wife.

Hermione burst into tears, palms covering her face and muffling half of her broken sobs. The sound of the shower splattering around her muffled the rest of her gasping, shuddering cries. Sigurd vanished, his services no longer required. There was no one who could comfort the confused, overwrought witch, anyway.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

Author's Notes: For all those who are wondering, the cliffhanger at the very end of 17 is just that: a cliffhanger. You'll have to wait patiently to see when and where and what will be revealed, regarding it. As for this particular chapter--the summary says it all.

Angstville, Population: Hermione. ~Lotm

XVIII.

"Hermione!" Harry jumped up from the parlour sofa, hurrying into the hall as Hermione passed the open door. "Are you alright? Russel told us you'd been hexed by that bastard, Snape!"

Tears stung her eyes. Averting her gaze--Harry did know some Legilimency, after all, and her recent experiences were not the sort of thoughts she cared to share--she shook her head. "Rumors of my hexing were greatly exaggerated. I'll live."

He touched her shoulder, holding her back as she started up the stairs. "Hermione, something's wrong. When Russel sent that owl, and met with us, Ron and me..."

She'd already figured she'd been Stupefied for several hours, but the bastard hadn't told her he'd met with her two best friends. "Harry... I don't know what he told you, and right now, I don't care. I just had a very bad ordeal with...with Snape...and I just want to go upstairs, drown myself in some Dreamless Draught, and sleep behind the strongest wards I know. *I don't* want to talk about it."

"Did he hurt you?" Harry demanded, clutching her sleeve. "If that bastard laid a hand on you--!"

She'd applied some leftover Bruise Balm to the hickey on her neck; it was only half-faded, but on the side of her throat Harry had yet to see. Cutting off the latter half of her encounter, Hermione twisted the truth--*Lesson Number Three*--and stated, "He dug his wand into my throat and made some threats, when he caught me in his house, but I managed to silently cast a Portkey Charm and escape before anything bad happened."

Harry frowned. "That's not what Russel told us. He said you'd been hexed, that he had to rescue you."

Shite...bastard should've told me what he'd told the boys Hermione muttered mentally. "I was caught in a spell from a book. Russel probably only told you that so you'd hate the bastard traitor as much as he does."

An icy chill washed over her even as her words left her lips. *So you'd hate the bastard traitor as much as he does... Merlin, does Severus have a split personality? At the very least, does he hate himself so much for what he's done that he'd be willing to make Harry so enraged over it all, Harry would try to kill him on sight?*

...Didn't he once say to me that the only way I'd be free is if I were a widow? Hasn't he implied he doesn't expect to live through this war? Dammit, I don't know the man! She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, feeling her temples beginning to ache once again from stress and confusion. *And there's no one alive aside from him that I*

could talk to, to even begin to try! Pulling her sleeve free of Harry's grip, she started up the stairs again, pulling on the banister rail to help her tired body mount the steps.

"Wait, Hermione--you went to get the book, the one with the spell we need for the Hufflepuff cup," Harry reminded her. "Did you succeed?"

She winced. "No. Snape still has it. I'll have to go back and look for it."

Add that to the rest of your long list of things you'll have to do...

"That's too dangerous. You cannot go back alone, if there's a chance of Snape catching you again."

"Harry, the odds of anyone tricking Draco Malfoy into giving up the secret of the book's hiding place a second time is highly slim. I'm just going to have to risk going alone, that's all. But I'll take a Portkey enchanted like my--our parents' Portkeys," Hermione compromised. "One that'll activate if I'm attacked or knocked unconscious. Believe me, I'm not looking forward to being in Severus Snape's clutches anytime soon, after our last little encounter."

Since she didn't want to discuss the subject any further, Hermione moved up the stairs, leaving him behind. Crookshanks met her at the head of the second floor landing. Scooping up the fuzzy orange cat, she cuddled her Familiar. The half-kneazle cat couldn't advise her, but he could comfort her. Carrying him to her room, she shut the door behind her, and cast a keep-out ward, just in case Harry wanted to continue their conversation. Or, Merlin forbid, Ron wanted to start one with her. The last thing she needed right now was another male with pretensions of having a claim on butting into her life.

Not when her life was so confusing.

Dropping the cat on her bed, she stripped out of her clothes and pulled on her pyjamas. Sitting on her bed, Hermione cuddled Crookshanks to her chest when he head-butted her for attention. With his paws limp and his eyes half-shut, he gazed up at her with his squashed orange face, looking like the epitome of sourceless feline wisdom. Adviceless, but wise. Nuzzling the top of his head with her lips, she muttered, "What am I going to do, Crooks? How can I trust him after all he's done? How can I *understand* him? I don't know who he is, or why he's doing half of what he's done...and the one person who might've had a clue is dead!"

A knock made her jump. Crookshanks mrrred in protest and squirmed out of her arms. Ron's voice came through the door. "Hermione? Are you alright? Harry told me you're back. Can I come in?"

Oh god, not a Weasley interrogation. The ache in her skull from tension leapt several degrees closer to migraine status. "Bugger off, Ron!"

"Well!" a feminine voice exclaimed softly. Hermione jumped and looked around. She finally realized it came from a portrait of some female in clothes from a couple centuries ago. It was hanging near the door. Hermione had forgotten there were wizarding portraits in her bedroom. The painted woman scolded her. "That was very rude of you!"

Hermione quickly reviewed what she'd said aloud just now, and sighed in relief that she hadn't given any identities away. Then jumped as Ron knocked again. "...Hermione? I know you're in a bad mood but...but I need to see that you're alright. Please?"

Why is my life so fucking complicated? Hermione asked herself, lowering her head into her hands for a weary moment. Pulling her curls back with a slide of her palms, she looked up again. Her gaze caught the portrait of the 1700's lady, with her lace collar and ringlet curls. Another portrait came to her, then. The portrait of Albus Dumbledore.

Just because he was dead didn't mean she couldn't consult with him.

"Give me a moment, Ron. I'm not decent."

Petting Crookshanks one last time, she rose from the bed. Fresh undergarments, a pair of jeans, a pink blouse and a red jumper, and she felt more human as she crossed to her door. Ron started to move forward the moment she opened it, then checked himself.

"...I'm fine, Ron, as you can see," Hermione stated dully. "I'm sorry I yelled at you, but I'm rather stressed right now, and it's nothing you nor Harry can help me with, though I do appreciate your concern. Now, if you don't mind, I have to go consult with someone."

He stepped out of her way, but followed her towards the back stairs. "Consult with who?"

"None of your business."

Ron grabbed her arm, swinging her around. Sigurd appeared in dragonette form, wrapped around her other arm, and the redhead released her quickly. "--Sorry...but I care about you, Hermione, and you're not happy. I want to fix that. Somehow."

She did love him, Hermione acknowledged, meeting his concerned blue gaze. *Just not the way he wants me to love him. And lucky me, I went and fell in love with a man who doesn't exist, instead of one who does.* Sigurd vanished again, now that he wasn't needed to protect her from grabby males. "This is one of those things that you cannot fix for me, Ron. I have to muddle through it on my own." A soft, sardonic laugh escaped her as she raked her hand through her curls again. "Call it the price and the pain of growing up. I'll be back later. I've got to go talk to someone."

"Who? Where are you going?" Ron added, dogging her heels as she headed for the stairs again.

"I'm going to the school to talk to the one person who can help me with my current problem. I'll be perfectly safe," she reassured him, guessing he was concerned she might be going somewhere where she'd be at risk of another attack.

"Who?" Ron demanded.

"None of your business, that's who!"

"I'm coming along!"

Hermione whirled on him at the top of the stairs. She wanted to shout, *God, you are so thick! I don't want you along with me!*, but that wouldn't have been helpful. Instead, gritting her teeth to a degree that would've alarmed her parents, the witch ground out, "*Feminine problems*, Ronald Bilius Weasley!" The improvisation came to her with a kernel of truth behind it, allowing her to snarl realistically, "I have to go see Madame Pomfrey about bloody feminine problems, and if you follow me, I will hex your balls off and give *you* bloody feminine problems!"

He staggered back a few steps from her vehemence.

She whipped her finger up, cutting him off the moment he drew breath to speak. "*Not. One. Word.* I'll be back later. I don't know how long I'll be gone, but I'll be at the bloody school, where I'll be bloody safe, and when I come back, *not one bloody word!*"

Whirling, Hermione hurried down the steps, leaving a gape-mouthed, red-faced Ron behind.

...

Seeing Madam Pomfrey was a good idea. Unfortunately, the pot on Madam Pince's mantel was out of Floo powder. That meant traveling to the Infirmary via the halls. It

was an early Saturday morning; most of the students would still be in bed, sleeping in or playing games in their common rooms, and a rare few like herself had been might even be up early to cram in some study time, though most of those would be in House Ravenclaw. And it wasn't that far from the library to the Infirmary. Still, she was careful to not be seen, since even in Muggle jeans and a Gryffindor red jumper, she was still recognizably Hermione Granger. Even if she was technically now Hermione Snape.

The problem with that flawed little gem of information was, she couldn't, daren't acknowledge her married name openly. If it came out before the war was over, she could be accounted liable for anything her husband did. If it came out after...well, the easiest way to deal with the matter would be if he were dead, so that she could reveal what he'd done in the attempt to turn him into a martyr. But though it would be the easiest way--she'd be a widow, and free to do as she pleased--it was the coward's way out of the mess embroiling her. If she could understand Severus Snape's motivations, she might be able to put her mind to the task of sorting out the mess that was his life.

Because, like it or not, his mess was now her mess, as his magically bound wife.

Maybe I should make a note to ask Poppy for an anti-depressant while I'm at it Hermione thought, rubbing at the edges of her cheekbones to try and ease the tension in her jaw that was tightening the vice of her headache. *And a muscle-relaxant. Or a mallet. I'm just not sure who and what body-part I'd use it on...*

The mediwitch had two patients in the Infirmary, but they were sequestered behind privacy screens, and at least one of them was snoring with sleep. Hermione made it to the older woman's office more or less unnoticed, slipping inside with a brief, soft knock to herald her arrival. She found the plump witch yawning over a cup of coffee.

Poppy inhaled sharply, sitting up as Hermione shut the door behind her. "Hermione!" she exclaimed in hushed but not displeased tones. "What brings you here?"

"I, er... I need to be tested for pregnancy." Given how horribly wrong the rest of the last twenty-four hours had gone, Hermione only felt a small twinge of embarrassment at having to say that particular phrase aloud. It was a valid concern, after all; she'd just had sex with a man who had *told* her he'd taken care of their contraception needs, but who had been lying to her about a number of other things. And right now, being pregnant with Severus Snape's child was frankly the last complication in her life that she needed.

Still, it was annoying to see Poppy Pomfrey just sitting there behind her desk, jaw slack and eyes blinking every once in a while.

"Is there something wrong with your hearing, Madam Pomfrey?" Hermione prodded the mediwitch. "Or have you not learned the necessary diagnostic spells?"

Poppy closed her mouth. She swallowed, swallowed again, then drew in a shaky breath. "I'm sorry...this is just a terrible shock. You're only seventeen--"

"Eighteen," Hermione corrected.

"--Right, right...but still, you're young, and you're smart, and I'm just wondering why you haven't used a contraceptive spell or potion of some kind."

"I was relying on someone else to handle that matter, and I've discovered he's not quite as reliable as I thought." Sinking into the chair opposite the mediwitch, Hermione sighed unhappily as she braced her elbows on the desk and her forehead in her hands, fingers spearing into her hair as she pushed it back. "My life is going to hell like a goblin-cart to a bank-vault, and there's nothing I can do to stop the ruddy thing. No safe, sane way to get off that doesn't endanger others' lives as well as my own."

"Well, I wouldn't trust Ronald Weasley to know how to cast a good--"

"--It's not Ron," Hermione interjected wearily, and slid her left hand out of her curls so she could display the ring glittering at the base of her third finger. "I'm married. To someone else. Someone I thought I could trust, but now I don't know if I can, and the last thing I need is the complication of a pregnancy. I've nothing against children, and I'd *like* to be a mum someday, but *not right now*. And that's all I know, and I'm very confused, and I can't talk to anybody about any of this, because it's so fucking complicated, it's making my head hurt!"

Eyes squeezed shut against the prickle of frustrated tears, Hermione heard Poppy rise and come around the end of her desk. She found herself enveloped in a warm, motherly hug as the mediwitch knelt beside her, the kind that she couldn't go to her own mum for, right now. It allowed her to cry, and receive wordless sympathy. The portrait of Dumbledore might be able to give her advice, but he wouldn't be able to wrap his arms around her and give her the physical comfort she needed.

But all tears had to come to an end, and she'd cried more than enough in the shower, earlier. Sniffing, Hermione moved and Poppy's arms freed her from their embrace. The school nurse handed her a box of tissues to clear her nose. Rising, Poppy patted her on the back. "You just sit here and wipe your face, and I'll go check on my charges for a moment. Then I'll be back and give you an examination. Just think back on when your last few menses were, and whether or not anything was different in recent months from what had happened before you started being sexually active, alright?"

Nodding, Hermione let her leave without protest, mind already at work on the problem. When the mediwitch finally came back, she bustled over to the fireplace and ordered two breakfasts through the Floo connection to the kitchen. Appreciating the courtesy, Hermione shrugged as Poppy rejoined her. "Nothing's different, that I can tell. I've had two periods since...since things started. The last one ended five days ago, and it was...normal. The normal amount of pain, the normal amount of bleeding, the normal amount of bloating, the normal level of irritability...just...normal. Everything's been normal."

"Ah. Does normal include spotting between periods?" Poppy asked Hermione, who shook her head quickly. "Well, I do have to ask. Alright then. If you'll stand up, I'll transfigure that chair into an examination table, since I doubt you'd want to do this out in the rest of the Infirmary. I'll start with a general diagnostic, too, to make sure there aren't other factors that might have to be taken into consideration."

Hermione stood, then sat and lay down at the nurse's instruction. She wanted to clasp her hands over her stomach, felt the urge to wring them in nervousness, but forced herself to clasp them behind her head instead. Coloured lights sprang up over her body, lights she hadn't seen since Dolohov's curse had struck her. Lights she'd first seen when she'd accidentally turned herself into half a cat with a mismanaged dose of Polyjuice Potion. Eyeing the rainbow-jumbled hues, she noted with worry the increase in certain orange hues.

"You're definitely stressed, emotionally. And mentally. But not physically." Poppy flashed her a cajoling smile. "You might not trust this fellow to cast a proper contraceptive charm, but I'll bet he's worth the risk, in the sack."

Hermione flushed red. Some of the orange glows increased in size and intensity. "...Something like that."

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to embarrass you," the mediwitch apologized. "I'm trying to treat you like a fellow staff-member, since you're no longer a student, and, well...the lady professors and I all natter on about anything and everything when we're doing these sorts of exams, without sense or sensibility, since we all know each other very well. About the only one who doesn't have a sense of humor when it involves her biology is Madam Pince..."

"It's alright," Hermione found herself saying, face still very hot. "Um...yes, he's a really good lover. But...he shattered my faith in who I thought he was, so I'm stressing over that, right now. It's made the whole thinking-about-sex thing very stressful, because that's complicating the matter."

"Well, you've never struck me as the sort of witch who can separate her loins from her heart and her mind," Poppy summed for her. "So of course the dichotomy of it is causing you stress. But other than that, you're in perfect health. Now, if you *let* the stress continue to build and affect you, then you won't be in perfect health for long, so the sooner we can get the stress taken care of, the better-off you'll be. How recently did this stress occur?"

"Last night."

"Mm. Then we have a good chance of nipping it in the bud. Do you want to talk to me about it? As a licensed mediwitch, I am capable of giving a certain level of counseling up to a point, and it will be held confidential."

Hermione shook her head, staring at the ceiling. "I can't talk to anyone alive about it. I don't know how effective talking to the portrait I have in mind will be, but he's the only one I can talk to, right now."

"...I see. Well, have a nice, long talk with this portrait-person. Even if you're just rambling at an image that grunts and nods every once in a while, it could help grease the wheels of your own mind in turning and churning out a suitable solution. Just don't pick the *first* solution to your problem that comes to your mind, without examining that solution from all angles, and contrasting it with other possible solutions, so that you can find the best one. Which may or may not be the easiest one."

"Trust me, I've already discarded the simplest solution," Hermione muttered.

"Which would be?" Poppy asked, banishing the diagnostic charm.

"My dear, beloved husband *dying*. One way or another."

A near-soundless whistle escaped the nurse. "Sounds like you have a few issues with him."

"Try a whole subscription. Dumped in my lap without any warning," the younger witch joked morbidly. "Mind you, part of it was my own fault... I did go searching for the answers to questions I thought I was ready to handle, only I wasn't ready. Now everything's bloody complicated. Pardon my language."

"You're not a student anymore. I can't assign you a detention or take off House-points for foul language...and there aren't any minors around, waiting to be corrupted," Poppy pointed out reasonably. She paused to cast another charm, then added, "But if you want to know some really good swearwords and obscenity-laden phrases, just get Pomona Sprout drunk. Trust me, when she's in her cups, that woman has a vocabulary that could make a venomous tentacula wither!"

Strangely enough, that made Hermione giggle, and made her feel a little better. Maybe it was just the absurdity of the conversation, or more likely the absurdity of thinking the Head of Hufflepuff, of all Houses, being that coarse and crass, but she felt a little better. "I'll keep that in mind. Thanks, by the way. For treating me like an adult."

"You've always been rather mature and calm for your age, whatever age that was at the time," Poppy told her, dissolving the golden figure-eight drifting horizontally over Hermione's torso and casting another spell with a few muttered words. "At times you could be as silly as the next schoolgirl, but I always knew you'd be able to make the transition to maturity and adulthood with greater ease than most of your contemporaries. You're managing well enough so far...though I should tell you the greatest secret of Adulthood, since you're ready to hear it."

"Oh?" Hermione enquired. "What's that?"

"It's a hell of a lot easier to be an adult if you've got a support system of family and friends to lean upon, once in a while. If you'll pardon my own language," Poppy added, prodding the glowing symbols now floating over Hermione's lower abdomen. "Huh...how strange..."

"What?"

"Well, you're not pregnant, which I'm sure is a relief given the situation you're in..."

Hermione relaxed with a sigh against the padded table. She closed her eyes, ignoring the prickle of tears in them. "It is."

A popping noise made Hermione open her eyes. A school house-elf had appeared. It placed the tray of two breakfasts on the desk, then vanished again. Poppy waited until it was gone before speaking again.

"...But you are under the influence of a spell I've never seen before. It's...well...it's not affecting your fertility in the standard contraceptive ways," Poppy hedged, flicking her wand and prodding at more of the symbols, which were esoteric and unreadable when seen from the horizontal view Hermione had of them. "I'm not quite sure...ah! Sweet Merlin," the mediwitch breathed, staring at the newest group of symbols. "Is that even *possible*?"

"What?" Hermione asked, growing agitated. "What's going on?"

"Well, as far as I can tell, everything is functioning perfectly normally, except that your ovum have been enchanted to...to *gælsewhere* the instant they ripen and pop out of your ovaries. The spell is literally stealing your eggs the moment they become viably fertile. This level of mediwizardry is beyond my own expertise--I can tell it's *not* harming you," Madam Pomfrey quickly reassured her. "Far from it; the charm used to remove the ovum is incredibly gentle on your body, far more so than the standard potions and spells for such things. But I've never seen a contraceptive spell of this kind, before. You've had no side-effects whatsoever?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. Everything has been perfectly normal, like I told you."

"I'd love to be able to cast this sort of spell on some of my randier charges," Poppy muttered. "The contraceptive potions I normally dispense for careless young witches have side-effects that can range from mild nausea to vomiting, dizziness to lethargy. With this one...there's no side-effects. You're just rendered sterile while it lasts."

"Great. Something *else* I have to confront my *dear husband* about," Hermione muttered, shifting one arm so that it covered her eyes.

"Who did you marry, anyway, if not Ron Weasley?" Poppy asked her. "I always thought you and he would get together, given how you always acted around each other."

"I can't tell you." Hermione let her forearm slide to the top of her head, sighing.

"Pish-tosh! I'm a keeper of many secrets," the mediwitch told her, touching her arm to encourage her to stand. "What's one more?"

"Because I can't tell you?" Hermione retorted dryly, sitting up. She rested a moment, sighing. "It's too complicated to involve anyone else, Poppy, and that's all I can say. Do you have anything for a headache?"

"I've all manner of possets and draughts for headaches, including tension-based ones. In fact, I've gotten rather ahead of my stock, now that...well, now that Professor Snape is no longer among us. He used to get dreadful headaches every few weeks, almost like clockwork."

Hermione felt her face twisting at the mention of *his* name, and felt her teeth trying to grind together. Forcing her jaws apart, she asked, "Well, can you just hand me one? I've got to Floo up to see the Headmistress, as soon as I'm done here."

"Right. It'll be just a moment..." Bustling out, she left the younger witch alone in her office. Hermione unTransfigured the chair, restoring it from its temporary use as an exam table. Poppy came back with a vial of red liquid. "I hope you don't mind cinnamon-flavoured. I've got to use up the older stock, and that's what...well, it's a flavour that doesn't clash too badly with the medicine. Take small sips of this over the next half hour or more," she instructed Hermione. "Try to make it last as long as possible, otherwise you'll be flat on your arse if you drink it in one go, and Minerva will have to scrape you off her floor and pour you into a guest bed or something. It'll work at keeping your muscles from clenching for up to two days, too, which hopefully will give you enough time to sort out your, erm, subscription problems. And eat some breakfast, too, to cushion the impact of that potion."

Smiling wryly, Hermione accepted the bottle and sat at the desk. "Thank you, Poppy."

"You'll owe me a pint down at the Three Broomsticks, come the holidays," Poppy warned her as she also sat down. They dug into their breakfasts in companionable silence for a few moments, then the mediwitch idly asked her how her treatment of her mystery patient went, and Hermione took a sip of the potion to calm her headache before relating the news.

When they were down to crumbs, Poppy rose and crossed to the hearth.

"Here, let me Floo you through to the Headmistress' office. You'll need the password for that; someone tried to break in via the Floo from one of the other teachers' hearths, the portraits threw a fit, and she had to password-protect her Floo from even her fellow professors... I'm pretty sure it was one of the Slytherin students, but they've been an even more closed-mouthed lot than usual, since the end of last year...

"Thank you for your help, Madam Pomfrey," Hermione muttered.

"It's in the job description, young lady. Well, off you go, then!"

With a toss of the powder and a call of the destination and the password--something about haggis tasting great with treacle, which Hermione's brain refused to process fully--Madam Pomfrey sent her spinning through the grass-green flames.

"...wants me to allow the Board of Governors access to this school, and I don't--oh! Hermione," Minerva McGonagall exclaimed, hand going to the base of her throat. "You startled me, my dear."

"I'm sorry if I was interrupting anything, Professor," Hermione apologized, absently dusting soot from her clothes. "I, erm, just came to have a private chat with Professor Dumbledore, if I could."

"Well, I was just complaining about that pushy politician, Scrimgeour. He wants the Board of Governors to have free access to this school, to come and go as they please, and I'm worried that some of them are still under the influence, if not necessarily the outright control, of the Death Eaters!" Minerva muttered. "And I've got an Inverted Hogsmeade day to supervise, and it's only just after breakfast, and already I've got a headache the size of that squid out in the lake."

"I've got one, too," Hermione admitted, holding up the vial of cinnamon-flavoured painkiller. "I'd be willing to share the potion Poppy gave me for it?"

Minerva glanced at the bottle, studied the red contents, and sighed roughly. "Give me a measured dose, girl, or I'll be liable to chug that thing straight down, and then you'd have to scrape me off of the floor. And I cannot afford to be...distracted, however pleasantly...right now."

Obligingly, Hermione found a quill on the older witch's desk as they retreated to it, and Transfigured a small spoon. She measured out a tiny dose for her former Head of House, and watched as Minerva sipped at it slowly, making a face at the sharp cinnamon taste. She took a sip herself, enjoying the spicy flavor, then asked, "Headmistress, you said something about an 'Inverted Hogsmeade Day'? What is that about?"

"Oh, the merchants down in the village were bemoaning the loss of Hogsmeade weekend sales. I've arranged to have carefully screened goods sent up from the shops that the students patronize the most--Honeydukes being at the top of the list, naturally--and I've bribed the other teachers into serving as shop-clerks, since we can't have every John and Jill Employee having access to a Secret-Kept school." Minerva sighed and rubbed at her temple, then took another taste of the red liquid coating the spoon in her hand. "The shopkeepers have all sent up catalogs to circulate through the four House common rooms, and the students have the opportunity to request in advance what they'd like to see. We even have a few house-elves and Professor Trelawney overseeing a corner of the Hall that's been turned into a version of Madam Puddifoot's tea parlour, and the butterbeer is carefully regulated for third-years and older.

"It was quite popular last month... Come, tell me what you and your two friends have been up to; your visit to Hogwarts comes with a price, you know," Minerva commanded her, gesturing at the seats at the edge of the room. It obligingly slid over to the end of her desk, within comfortable conversing range.

Seating herself, Hermione took another sip. Her headache was disappearing and her tense muscles were relaxing, but she didn't need to take any chances. "Well...we've uncovered the need to brew a specific potion and use it in a specific way, to further weaken the Dark Lord."

Minerva's black brows rose in surprise. "--You intend to *poison* him? That's a suicide mission!"

Hermione shook her head. "It's an indirect thing, and I can't explain how it will work, but it will...except that when I tried to get my hands on the book...I failed."

"Where is the book now?"

"Um, in the hands of your former colleague," Hermione confessed.

"Oh, dear."

She nodded, confirming the older witch's unsettled expression, and used Lesson Number Three to her advantage. She might still be mad at her so-called husband, but she wasn't going to be like Harry and discard the man's teachings. Those lessons weren't the sort she could afford to ignore. "That's one of the reasons why I need to have a little chat with your predecessor. To know how he might react if I went after the book and we encountered each other again. And...um...given how sensitive and delicate the discussions will be, I'd like to ask you if you could request that all the other Headmasters and Headmistresses take a walk for a little while. Perhaps patrol the castle through its portraits?"

One of the wizards around them snorted; Hermione didn't know which one, but she did hear a distinctly muttered, "--Reduced to a bloody prefect?"

The current Headmistress gave the portrait in question a quelling look over Hermione's shoulder, then focused on the younger woman. "That's a rather tall request. All of the portraits here have vowed to hold strictly confidential any conversations overheard in this chamber."

"Well, I need to talk to Professor Dumbledore about my...about my husband," Hermione added, uncomfortable with the subject. "It's not the sort of conversation I'd feel comfortable discussing if there were others around to hear it, not even if they'd taken Unbreakable Vows to not discuss it with anyone else."

"...I see. Is there something I should know about, regarding Russel?" Minerva asked her perceptively.

"I need to talk to Albus," Hermione repeated. "He's the only one who might hold the answers to the questions I seek."

"Hermione...can Russel be trusted?" Minerva wanted to know. "Is he on our side?"

"He wants to destroy the Dark Lord, as much or more as any of us." She almost didn't feel like herself, stating those words calmly when she wanted to scream and cry, and shout that Russel the Deceiver was Severus the Murderer. Instead, she took another sip of the potion Poppy had given her.

"Alright, then." Rising, the stately witch faced the images hung on her walls. "Ladies, gentlemen, take a one-hour break. Go patrol the other paintings, go watch the children being rambunctious, go chatting with your other portrait-companions, if you have portraits elsewhere in the wizarding world. Hermione, you will stay here with Albus' portrait until we return. I don't know who tried to break into my office, since they were wearing an Invisibility Cloak, but I don't want this place left unguarded, even with a separate password for the Floo. Consider it the price for the privacy you seek."

Inclining her head in agreement with the bargain, Hermione watched Minerva shrug into the outer robes of the Headmistress of Hogwarts, and leave the study. The other Headmistresses and Headmasters made their way out of the frames of their portraits, passing through each other's spaces as they, too, vanished from view at the corners of the rooms. Within a minute or two, Hermione was left alone with a mock-dozing, purple-clad version of a storybook Merlin.

She set the vial of red headache potion on the desk and looked at the remaining occupied painting. Long silvery bear, pointed cap, runes and stars and moons stitched in glittering thread on his robes, and half-moon spectacles perched on his nose. With his bearded chin propped in his hand, his elbow on the padded armrest of his chair, he looked like he was peacefully dozing. Napping. Blissfully asleep, like some doddering old granther tucked into a hearthside armchair.

Hermione knew better.

"You should've told me."

He didn't move.

"You should've told me who Russel was."

He didn't 'wake'.

"You should have *told me!*" Rising from her seat as she shouted the words, glaring at her former Headmaster, Hermione cast several scrolls and papers off of Minerva's desk, though she was careful to not knock over the vial. She regretted the mess even as she made it, being naturally tidy and respectful of others' property, but it felt good for a moment to be wantonly destructive. Unfortunately, Albus only continued his sham of sleeping. Grabbing a ribbon-bound scroll, Hermione flung it at his portrait.

It missed, of course, but the clatter of it hitting the wall, then falling to the floor and bouncing made him crack open those oil-painted eyes. Some trick of the artist's brush had captured the gleam that made his blue eyes twinkle when he was happy, but his expression was somber as he finally gave her a reply. "...Is Lord Voldemort dead? Did you see it with your own eyes?"

"No. Not yet--but *Severus Snape* will be, if I don't get a straight answer out of you!" she snapped. "You should have *told* me Russel was your murderer!"

Lifting his head from his palm, Albus looked down at her soberly. "Miss Granger...Mrs. Snape," he acknowledged, "...if Severus should die, I will need to be informed of this fact by an eye-witness. However, I hope most earnestly that you will help to stay his killer's hand, not be his killer. If you kill him, you might escape Azkaban, given how public opinion currently runs against the man...but I assure you, if Severus Snape dies, most of our hope for winning this war will die with him. The most important tool in a war is knowledge, and he is a tool that I have hidden in the enemy's own hands."

"He *killed* you!"

"I still trust him completely."

Hermione's jaw dropped. For a moment, she couldn't find any words, and then they came to her, words which seemed utterly appropriate, for all she wasn't normally the sort to shout them at anyone. "--You're fucking barmy! You've lost it! You've gone round the bend of your own portrait frame!--Did they install your portrait backwards?" Hermione demanded, incredulous. "*He killed you*, Albus! Cold-blooded murder! And now I'm supposed to *trust* him? I'm supposed to let him *touch* me? Sure, he *says* through the ring that he wants to destroy the Dark Lord, but the man will clearly do *anything* to achieve that goal! What kind of a victory is it, if he's out there killing off *our own side* left and right?

"*How* can I trust a man whose motivations I don't know, and cannot understand?"

The look Albus gave her over the top of his painted reading glasses was a chiding one. "Young lady, if you are to be our only spy's liaison, you are going to have to learn how to motivate him. And you will have to do it yourself. Do not rely upon what he thinks are his reasons for doing what he does. Frankly, the man got a few wires crossed somewhere along the way, and cannot always see what's right in front of his face. You will have to lead him where you need him to go."

Hermione paced in the space between Minerva's desk and the Headmaster's portrait, agitated. "How can I lead him? I don't understand him! I'm afraid of him! I'm afraid to encounter him again," she added truthfully, rubbing her upper arms.

"Hermione, there is nothing to fear--"

She whirled on him, glaring up at his purple-clad figure. "--He *forced* me! I'll grant you it wasn't rape in the traditional sense, where I was battered and beaten and left for dead, but I said *no* and he still had his own way with me!"

"Yet he did not actually harm you, did he?" Albus probed perceptively.

"He slew my trust in him!" Hermione retorted, fists clenching at her sides. "I trusted *Russel*--I fell in *love* with Russel! And now I find he's a cold-blooded murderer who has lied to me repeatedly, and who betrayed my heart! He says he'll do anything it takes to bring down Moldybutt, but how can I trust him to do so in a way that doesn't betray everything the good side of this war stands for? How can I trust a man whose motivations I don't know, and cannot understand? How can I trust a man whose whole heart isn't on *our side*?"

Dumbledore stayed silent for a long while, gazing down at her as he considered her demands. Hermione paced again for a minute or two, feeling her tension creeping back through the effects of Poppy's brew. She took another sip, mindful of the mediwitch's warning not to overdose herself. As enticing as the idea of making the world go away for a day or two in a drug-hazed oblivion might seem at that moment, she knew she needed to keep her wits about her.

Finally she flopped down into the lightly padded chair Minerva had offered her.

"...Are you finally ready to listen with an open mind?" Albus enquired calmly after a little more time had passed.

"--I don't know about 'open'," Hermione quipped darkly, then sighed, "but I'm ready to listen. He broke my trust, Albus. I find I cannot condone the path that he chose."

"And yet, if he had not tread upon that path, he would not be in such a trusted position within the enemy camp, these days," the deceased Headmaster reminded her. "Allow me to paint you a picture of Severus' worth to Marvolo, Hermione. Severus was not the most trusted of Death Eaters, when he first joined. He knew more about the Dark Arts than most, true, but he wasn't as cold and ruthless as the rest. A hurting, spiteful, angry-at-the-world child who had learned it was safer to lash out at others first, rather than to wait to be lured in and betrayed by those he thought would be his friends. His talent for potions gave the Dark Lord ideas about the service that Severus could be put to, and his coming into this school to spy upon me under the guise of a teacher was his chance to prove himself to Riddle."

"When Severus delayed in returning to the Dark Lord after his resurrection, it was out of a deep reluctance to return to a life and a philosophy he no longer wanted to follow. But he went when I asked him, because he knew it was necessary, and because I could motivate him. That delay cost him some very fancy footwork to keep the Dark Lord's faith in him. In killing me, from what I have heard, Severus is now Riddle's right-hand man. Thus he is now in the perfect position to know all, and report whatever he safely can. But holding that right-hand position comes at a very high cost," Albus reminded her. "Merlin knows what he's had to do to maintain that position. I'm not saying I condone whatever he did to you that you did not like. I'm saying you must understand him, and the stresses of his position...and how very necessary maintaining that position is."

Hermione remembered with chagrin the state Russel...Severus...had been in, after that one raid had failed. After he'd had to prove himself, and had proven it by subjecting himself to the punishments of a sadistic, inhuman madman. She remembered with a flush of shame for having forgotten the way Russel--Severus--had cried in her arms, begging almost soundlessly to not have to go back again. To not have to do such things, just to keep his place among the enemy. *So much fear, and loathing. Such utter reluctance...I can't help but wonder how anyone could manufacture such angst, such depth of emotion? Did he lie about that, too? Or was it the truth?* "How much of what he showed me of his heart as Russel was real, and how much of it was a lie?"

"Severus is not a man prone to lying, when it comes to his emotions," Albus returned. Hermione started; she hadn't realized she'd spoke aloud. Dumbledore nodded his head slightly, confirming her hearing. "He cannot display emotions he does not feel; not easily. His passionate nature is too intense for that. Instead, he has learned to harness his emotions. His Occlumency skills are second to none, because of this. Whatever he's thinking, whatever he's doing, he's *feeling* that moment with a level of

sincerity that most others mistake for honesty. It is the truth, but it is his own truth. He pours himself into the mould that is needed, at times. This allows him to lie to Riddle by twisting that truth to suit his needs."

Lesson Number Three, Hermione thought bitterly.

"It also helps him that the darker emotions come to him more readily than the gentler, lighter kind. Darker emotions that Riddle can more easily understand. But make no mistake; his 'lighter' emotions are just as strong as the darker ones, and carry just as much weight in the moulding of the man's mind. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage," Albus lectured her. "Severus is used to concealing the disadvantages of his emotional nature, and he is accustomed to turning them into strengths instead of flaws. But, with my guidance, you as his liaison can take control of the advantages of his passionate nature...by taking control of that nature as his wife."

Hermione gaped at him. *Is he suggesting what I think he is...* She couldn't even bring herself to put a name to it.

"If you want to ensure that he throws his whole heart into our side of the war-effort, you are going to have to ensnare his heart," the former Headmaster told her bluntly.

"You can't be serious!" Hermione protested, gobsmacked by what the late Headmaster was instructing her to do. "You're asking me to...to..." No, she couldn't say it aloud. Not easily. She tried again. "I don't even know if I *want* a heart like his tied to me! He's a cold-blooded killer!"

"As I recall it," Albus countered mildly, "he was actually rather upset at the time. Furious with me, in fact. I'd say that raised his blood to at least a decent bathwater temperature."

"--How can you make jokes at a time like this?" she demanded, shoving out of her chair so that she could pace the patch of study floor in front of Minerva's desk.

"On the contrary, my dear; this is the perfect time. The situation you are in is neither as somber nor as dreadful as you are imagining," the old wizard dared to chide her.

"Stop making up your mind to be *unhappy* with your situation, and make up your mind to be *happy* with it."

"He forced himself on me, sexually--claimed it was his conjugal right!" Hermione snapped, face burning with the admission, but too upset to care at the moment. "How can I be *happy* with that?"

Albus regarded her somberly. "...Did he hurt you? Did he physically harm you? We'll set aside the status of your agitated emotions for now."

The gentle question brought a lump to her throat. Swallowing it down, Hermione forced herself to be honest. "Not...not really. He was quite...considerate." It took effort to get that part confessed. Effort, and a very hot collar. She paced again. "I know it could've been worse, I *know* he could've brutalized me, ignored my own needs--but I told him *no*! Even a wife has a right to say no!"

"Why did you say no?"

The question startled her. Hermione blinked up at the deceased Headmaster on the wall. "...*Why*? Because he was Severus Snape!"

"How was that any different from him being Russel?" Albus challenged her. For a moment, his obstinate blindness dumbfounded her, leaving her briefly speechless.

"Because...because I *loved* Russel!" she finally exclaimed, finding the words that needed to be said, even though it hurt her to admit how much of a fool she'd been. "I fell in love with him, and it was all a lie! Russel was kind, and funny, and charming--"

You wanted a charming man. I gave you one. You wanted a spectacular lover. I gave you one. You wanted someone to love. I gave you one! His words echoed in her mind. Hermione covered her ears in frustration, but it didn't shut out the memory of Severus Snape's baritone voice demanding to be heard. *I, I, I...*

Severus Snape had given her those things. Manufactured or not, in disguise or not, he had done those things for her. Tears stung her eyes, seeping onto her cheeks.

"No...no, I don't want..." Her whisper became a low, rough verbalization of her pain and confusion being reluctantly resolved. "I don't *want* to admit that they're the same man. Because every time I think of Snape, I think of him killing you, and of him scaring me, and of him being the black-hearted bastard who was a living hell as a teacher, the greasy git, the bat of the dungeons...and Russel wasn't *any* of that. He had me *fooled*!"

"I rather think he has himself fooled," Albus offered idly. Hermione wasn't deceived; Professor Dumbledore never did anything idly, alive or dead. She looked up warily and the silver-haired wizard in the portrait continued. "Despite the influence of his past, despite the things he must do at the present, Severus still has a great deal of potential within him. The potential to be a far better man. I suspect that, if you felt love for Russel, he has a great deal of potential within him; you are not an unperceptive woman," Albus allowed, folding his hands in his lap. "And you do know what they say about making a wizard a better man: all he needs is the love of a good woman."

"*Urgh!*" Turning away in disgust, Hermione pressed her hand to her stomach. "I cannot believe you just *said* that!"

"Well, most cliches are true at their core, Hermione. My meaning, however, is simple enough: Severus is an emotional man. You must therefore lead him by his emotions to the place where you want him to be," Albus instructed her. "I assure you, he is human enough to want to be loved. But he doesn't believe he deserves to be, and he has very little experience with being treated with love."

"Greasy git," Albus parroted back to her, making her flinch, then flush with shame. She'd never really used those words before now. When her friends had disrespected the man back when he'd been their teacher, she'd normally been the one to defend him, or at least give him the respect he was due. The Headmaster continued, watching her as he recited the hateful words calmly. "Black-hearted bastard'. 'Bat of the dungeons'. None of these are very loving appellations, wouldn't you agree? And how many times have you seen anyone willingly touch him, let alone touch him gently, with care and compassion?"

She scoffed the notion with a sharp exhale, folding her arms defensively across her chest. "You're trying to tell me that Severus Snape, cold-blooded--fine, *lukewarm*-blooded killer," she amended under his pointed look, "--would be a better person if I just *hugged* him more often?"

"For a start. Of course, you'll want to be a bit more subtle about it than just walking up to him and embracing him, at first. The man has the deeply seated suspicious nature of both a Slytherin and a decades-long spy. I suspect that, however you uncovered his true identity, Severus' own sense of trust in *you* was just as badly damaged by it as your sense of trust in him as Russel." He quickly held up his painted hand, forestalling her protest. "Try to remember when you deal with him that he is in a very precarious position. One where trust is nigh-impossible."

"If you fell in love with him, I suspect it was because he trusted you enough to show you facets of his emotions that he wouldn't normally show to anyone. He might've lied about some of it, perhaps even lied about loving you back, if you'd confessed your feelings to him at some point before his unveiling," Albus allowed, "but the potential in the man to be so much better than he thinks he can be is still in there, waiting to be mined and processed like a precious ore. You know how fiercely he hates; you have seen it in how he has transferred his hatred of James Potter onto young Harry. If he can be brought to it, he will love with equal ferocity...and if you can harness that, you will harness the most powerful wizard alive. Voldemort, you see," the old wizard reminded her, "has one great flaw that I have observed in him over the years. He does not understand love, and thus does not understand the vast power that those who love can harness."

"It is that aspect of Severus' passionate nature that you must take advantage of, and draw out of him. And the way to approach him is through your *own* rights as a wife. I suspect he will be feeling much like a beaten dog at this point, inclined to snap and growl and perhaps even bite, since to *his* way of thinking, his trust has been abused." Hermione snorted, but Dumbledore continued. "I know, I know... He put his trust in you when he was pretending to be Russel, and I can glean the idea that his revelation as Snape did not go very well. Thus he will be feeling very protective, since exposure as a spy, even to his own side, is a very dangerous thing. It will be up to you to gentle him, and show him that your hand, at least, will never strike him."

She snorted in disbelief.

"Love, Mrs. Snape," Albus chided her, "is the most powerful force in the universe. It can wrought changes where no other emotion, no other treatment, can alter a single speck of a situation--are you familiar with the Greek legend of the Sun and the Wind?"

His abrupt change in topic confused Hermione. She shook her head. "No. Why do you mention it?"

"It has a great significance to your situation. One day, the Sun and the Wind were chatting with each other when they spied a cloaked traveler wandering a road not far from the shore. The Wind, being boastful of his strength, challenged the Sun to a duel. He proposed that they find out who was the stronger of the two, by seeing which one could remove the cloak from the traveler's shoulders. The Sun accepted, and suggested that the Wind should go first," Albus recited. "And so the Wind drew a great breath and blew upon the traveler. His cloak flapped and almost came off, but he caught the edges and wrapped it around himself. The Wind blew again, and blew even harder, and he clung harder, and no matter how hard the Wind blew, the traveler just wrapped himself tighter in his cloak, thwarting all efforts to make him lose it by force.

"The Wind finally gave up, and the Sun came forth to have his turn. He did nothing impressive, just merely shone down upon the traveler, and in time the traveler eased his grip upon the edges of his cloak. The Sun continued to shine, gradually growing brighter and warmer as he rose higher in the sky, until the traveler's face began to sweat...and finally, the traveler unclasped his cloak, removed it from his shoulders, and slung it over his arm, from the need to be cooler as he walked." Looking at her over the tops of his half-moon spectacles, Albus added, "This is the same moral as is found in the saying 'you can trap more flies with honey than with vinegar.'"

Hermione lowered her gaze. She knew that saying, and she could see the silver-haired wizard's point with his story. Reluctantly, but she could see it.

"You, Mrs. Snape, are in the perfect position to put a martial ring through your husband's long, thin nose, and in a position to not only do so, but make him enjoy the process, and even eagerly anticipate the thought of being led around by it. *If* you do your job as his wife correctly. We *need* Severus Snape fully on our side. You are his handler, as his liaison with the Order. That is your responsibility, now. You must tame him to the touch of your hand, both literally and figuratively. You *know* what you must do, in order to achieve this task.

"And I remind you, Hermione, that if you don't want to be happy with this situation, then I can guarantee you ~~wil~~*be* unhappy...and if you are unhappy, your husband is perceptive enough to realize you are unhappy, and will not believe in the sincerity of your efforts. If you want him to believe in *you*, so that he can believe in your cause--and he *must*, for you to succeed with him--then you must make up your mind ~~to~~*be* happy with him. Try focusing on all the things you liked about Russel, and coax them back to the surface in the stubborn man." Propping his elbow on the armrest of his painted chair, the former Headmaster rested his cheek on his palm, closing his eyes. "...I suspect you have a lot to think about, for now. I'll give you some privacy in which to do so.

"Remember to stay here until the others return. I suspect whoever broke in here last time would not hesitate to try again, if they thought this suite was unguarded."

She did have a lot to think about. Too much to think about, but too many emotions raging through her to think coherently. Distracting herself, Hermione restored the papers and scrolls to Minerva's desk while her emotions settled, then paced as she further calmed and ordered her mind. When she thought she could think logically and calmly, she flung herself down into her borrowed chair. Then lunged to her feet, needing to do something active.

The one thing that could soothe her were the books lining the double-staircase arcing up either side of the Headmistress' desk. She perused the titles, touched the aging spines, breathed in the musty scents of leather and paper and parchment, and that was when she finally relaxed enough to allow herself to think about his words. To think about her situation. To think about her responsibilities in this war.

When Minerva returned shortly before lunch, the Headmistress found the other portrait occupants had quietly returned and settled themselves back into their spurious naps. And she found Hermione seated on the third step of the right-hand staircase, a lost look in her unfocused eyes. The younger witch's body was twisted so that her head and shoulders could rest against some of the tomes on the shelves, and her arms were wrapped around her stomach, one hand clenching the now emptied bottle that Poppy had given the younger witch.

Hermione had been doing a lot of thinking, while she was gone.

Concerned, the older witch drew near, stopping at the foot of the steps. "...Hermione? Are you alright?"

A shuddering, deep breath, and the chestnut-haired witch stirred to life. Blinking, she focused on the Headmistress. "...No. I'm not alright. I've been shaken, not stirred. Dumped in a blender with the button set on frappe. Told I'm a witch, and that all the odd things that have been happening around me are because I can do magic, and now the world I thought I knew was no longer going to be *my* world.

"No, right now, I'm not alright. One day, I will be. I'm going to cling to that hope, for now," Hermione added as she pushed to her feet. "Thank you for the privacy, and the use of your study, Minerva."

"Will you be going straight back to Headquarters?" Minerva enquired, concern lacing her voice as she followed Hermione to the hearth.

"Yes. Straight to my room. I've got quite a bit of thinking to do."

"Is there anything you can tell me? Anything I can do?"

Hermione shook her head. "Nothing useful, at this point in time. Maybe later, when I've sorted it all out. Thank you," she repeated, taking a handful of power from the pot on the mantel. Belatedly, she offered the vial. "Could you pass this back to Madam Pomfrey for me? And thank her for the potion? I think it's the only thing keeping me from flying apart, or breaking from sheer tension, right about now."

Bemused, Minerva accepted the vial, and watched as the young woman vanished in a verdant flare.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

Author's Notes: The scene with Arabella at the supper table is one of my favourites, especially the reaction of the boys. You'll find out why, later... More angst ahead! ~Lotm

XIX.

She didn't make it to her room unnoticed. Harry, Ron, Tonks, Violetta, Arabella and Molly were in the kitchen when she spun out of the hearth at 12 Grimmauld Place. The room reeked of cooked cabbage and sausages. It triggered a memory of a comment Russel had made, of Wormtail cooking bubble'n'squeak for some of the Death Eaters, meal after meal. Her gorge rose; it had been Snape who'd confided that tidbit of his life at Riddle Manor, Snape who'd tried to win her trust through the mediums of lies and disguise.

"Hermione!" Harry said, eyeing her with relief. "What took you so long? We were growing worried."

Clapping her hand over her nose and mouth, she shook her head as she hurried for the door, frantic to get away from the cloying, mustardy-sulfurous smell of cooked cabbage. The stink lingered in the ground floor hallway, so she rushed up the stairs. Footsteps followed her to the second floor, and Harry caught her elbow, turning her around when she was just a few yards from her door. Ron had followed him.

"Hermione, are you alright?"

She shook her head, then gulped a few breaths of cabbage-free air, and nodded instead. "I just...the smell was getting to me. It's rather strong, down there."

"It's actually a lot better than the last time we had bubble'n'squeak," Harry shrugged. "Mrs. Weasley made it, this time. Mrs. Figg always overcooks the cabbage, but this stuff is actually quite edible."

Stomach churning with unsteady emotions and memories, Hermione shook her head, hand pressed to her upper abdomen. She didn't meet either of their gazes. "No, thanks. I'm not hungry, right now."

A soft gasp escaped Ron. Looking up, she found his face mottling in a mixture of blood-loss and blood-rush. It was as if his body couldn't make up its mind whether to be pale or flushed. His mouth had sagged partway open, but after a moment he pressed his lips into a grim line and looked away. Snagging Harry's elbow, Ron tugged the other wizard away from her.

"Let her be, Harry. If she's not hungry, she's not hungry."

"But she's been acting rather weird ever since she got back from trying to steal that book!" Harry protested. Ron dragged him further down the hall. Hermione, about to turn and go into her room, grateful for the odd reprieve, watched as Ron hauled her blood-brother close and whispered something in his ear. Harry's eyes widened so much behind his spectacles, she could see their greenness even at this distance. He blinked at her, gobsmacked from whatever Ron had said, and allowed the redhead to haul him down the stairs.

There was no telling what that was about, save for one thing: whatever Ron had surmised, it was a headache she did not need to investigate. Chasing down that problem would only add to her many other troubles, right now. Whatever it was, it could wait. What she needed right now was a good, long sleep. And a way to make her brain shut up. Detouring to the bathroom, she used the facilities, brushed her teeth, then retreated to her room, locking and warding the door.

If only she could lock and ward out her own thoughts.

...You wanted a charming man. I gave you one. You wanted a spectacular lover. I gave you one. You wanted someone to love. I gave you one!

'Greasy git'. 'Black-hearted bastard'. 'Bat of the dungeons'. None of these are very loving appellations, wouldn't you agree?

Hermione removed her clothes, and slid under the covers. Crookshanks, sensing her distress, meowed and head-butted her. She petted him, taking some small comfort from his presence. He was the least complicated thing in her life right now, after all.

The potential in the man to be so much better than he thinks he can be is still in there, waiting to be mined and processed like a precious ore.

The Dark Lord has known all along about my plan to communicate with you through the rings... Marvolo knows everything but the fact that the rings enforce some version of the truth.

Sounds like you have a few issues with him... Try a whole subscription...

You do know what they say about making a wizard a better man: all he needs is the love of a good woman.

Her stomach churned. These were the same circle of thoughts that had plagued her into drinking faster sips of that muscle-calming drug. Her body was calm, relaxing itself towards sleep, but her mind was not.

I assure you, he is human enough to want to be loved. But he doesn't believe he deserves to be, and he has very little experience with being treated with love.

I am going to claim you, Hermione Jane. You have lost your last chance to escape. You will be my wife...and I will not let you go...

Why?

But know you this: I have plans for you. Regardless of how either of us feel. Resign yourself to being my wife!

What plans did he have?

The spell is literally stealing your eggs the moment they become viably fertile...I can tell it's not harming you...

May I collect your virgin's blood? ... The 'bastard traitor' needs it for one of his experiments...

Rolling onto her side, Hermione pulled one of the spare pillows protectively to her stomach; Crookshanks sniffed at it, then padded down to the foot of the bed.

I would think you would know it is a man's personality that stands the test of time, not the aging of his face.

That was a new chorus in the whirlwind occupying her head; she'd forgotten that Russel--Snape--had said that, back on their so-called honeymoon.

Severus is not a man prone to lying, when it comes to his emotions... Whatever he's thinking, whatever he's doing, he's feeling that moment with a level of sincerity that most others mistake for honesty. It is the truth, but it is his own truth. He pours himself into the mould that is needed, at times...

Did that mean he manufactured all of the feelings behind the personality she'd seen? Or had he used feelings that were already there? Some had been real, but she couldn't accept that all of them had been honest, and not manufactured.

But make no mistake; his 'lighter' emotions are just as strong as the darker ones, and carry just as much weight in the moulding of the man's mind... You as his liaison can take control of the advantages of his passionate nature, by taking control of that nature as his wife... Despite the influence of his past, despite the things he must do at the present, Severus still has a great deal of potential within him. The potential to be a far better man.

...Either I'm married to a man who honestly wants Voldiebutt dead, or I'm married to a man who is going to betray us all. I hope you don't mind if I prefer to cling to the more optimistic version of his character, since there's no way to annul this marriage.

Hermione winced as her own words came back to haunt her. The drug didn't let her muscles tighten up too much, though; physically, she was quite relaxed. Mentally was another matter. Crookshanks came back, curved around in a circle, and settled himself right in front of her face, bringing with him the tickle and warm scent of his butterscotch-coloured fur.

I don't want to go back...please...please don't make me go back...I can't do this anymore...I can't...don't make me go back...I can't take this...I can't...please...

She shifted the spare pillow from her stomach to her head, flopping it over her right ear. Crookshanks meowed in brief protest at the thump and gust of air, but didn't uncurl himself any more than it took to lift his head. Hermione pressed down on the feather-stuffed pillow, trying to shut out that particular memory...but she couldn't.

No one could manufacture that much misery.

I don't want to go back...please...please don't make me go back...I can't do this anymore...I can't...don't make me go back...I can't take this...I can't...please...

Marvolo trusts no one completely, but he believes I worship the very ground he fouls. If I'm careful, I might even learn how he managed to keep himself alive, when he should've been thoroughly dead...

I don't want to be a widow before this war is over...

You won't be, if I can help it. Not until the war is over.

I'm alive...I'm still alive...

He'd said that after they'd made love, the night he'd been injured, as if he were a drowning man still clinging to a board as it washed upon some island shore.

I need you. More than I need healing!

Severus is not a man prone to lying, when it comes to his emotions.

I need you!

He pours himself into the mould that is needed...

I like making you laugh. I don't know why, but I do.

She'd forgotten that moment, too. The memory of him teasing her even as he recovered from his injuries didn't fade away. She didn't know whether or not to believe he'd honestly not known why at that moment. It could've been a lie; he might *feel* the emotions of the moment, but did that make their origins true? Did that make them true when the moment was done and he wasn't needing to feel them anymore? What really lay at the center of Severus Snape's heart?

I assure you, he is human enough to want to be loved. But he doesn't believe he deserves to be, and he has very little experience with being treated with love. If he can be brought to it, he will love with equal ferocity...and if you can harness that, you will harness the most powerful wizard alive... If you fell in love with him, I suspect it was because he trusted you enough to show you facets of his emotions that he wouldn't normally show to anyone.

Love, Mrs. Snape, is the most powerful force in the universe... If he can be brought to it, he will love with equal ferocity...and if you can harness that, you will harness the most powerful wizard alive... It is that aspect of Severus' passionate nature that you must take advantage of, and draw out of him...and the way to approach him is through your own rights as a wife.

Stop making up your mind to be unhappy with your situation, and make up your mind to be happy with it.

Make up your mind to be happy with it...

I once heard that there are two types of people: those who fall in love and get married, and those who get married and fall in love. I didn't exactly have a chance for the first one, but I think I've done the second one, by now...

Another moment of her own truth she flinched from internally, but it was followed by the memory of his own reply.

I could've settled for a marriage of circumstance with you; you're smart, and charming, and very beautiful. But it's more than that, isn't it? Our minds have meshed, haven't they? All the interests we share, intellectual pursuits, senses of humor...the passion within you that is a match for my own sensuality...

Truth was a garrulous, quarrelsome bitch.

I remind you, Hermione, that if you don't want to be happy with this situation, then I can guarantee you will be unhappy...and if you are unhappy, your husband is perceptive enough to realize you are unhappy, and will not believe in the sincerity of your efforts. If you want him to believe in you, so that he can believe in your cause--and he must, for you to succeed with him--then you must make up your mind to be happy with him. Try focusing on all the things you liked about Russel, and coax them back to the surface in the stubborn man.

You, Mrs. Snape, are in the perfect position to put a marital ring through your husband's long, thin nose, and in a position to not only do so, but make him enjoy the process, and even eagerly anticipate the thought of being led around by it. If you do your job as his wife correctly...

You can trap more flies with honey than with vinegar... It will be up to you to gentle him, and show him that your hand, at least, will never strike him... How many times have you seen anyone willingly touch him, let alone touch him gently, with care and compassion?... If he can be brought to it... I suspect he will be feeling much like a beaten dog at this point, inclined to snap and growl and perhaps even bite, since to his way of thinking, his trust has been abused...

If you want to ensure that he throws his whole heart into our side of the war-effort, you are going to have to ensnare his heart... You must therefore lead him by his emotions to the place where you want him to be... You are his handler, as his liaison with the Order. That is your responsibility, now. You must tame him to the touch of your hand, both literally and figuratively. You know what you must do, in order to achieve this task.

You will harness the most powerful wizard alive...

...You must make up your mind to be happy with him.

Her thoughts were finally settling down enough for her to sleep, but Hermione didn't know if she *could* make up her mind to be happy with the man she had to call husband.

...

She woke abruptly, chilled inside and out. The temperature was warm, but she was alone. Rising from the bed, she slipped into the tunic-like chiton laid out for her, clasped it at the shoulders, tied it at the waist, and padded out of the whitewashed chamber. Everywhere she went, however, she was alone. And yet, she thought she heard footsteps. Corridors passed, lined with columns. A great hall with the hearth-pit in the center, a courtyard with plants arranged in pots. A series of chambers with low-slung furniture, great curving harps, shelves of scrolls and coverless books.

A glimpse of soft feathers, as she chased the sounds of retreating steps. Raven's wings. She hurried, ran faster, but the figure was always just out of her view. Until she burst onto a broad, curved balcony, and a great gust of wind tore at her garments, making her clutch at them to keep them on her body. Vast black wings spread, he leapt into the sky, fleeing her, racing into the half-clouded sky.

The wind died down, leaving her for a moment in cold shadow.

Hermione gasped, jerking herself out of the odd dream. She'd kicked the covers off as she'd slept, leaving her with only a thin sheet tangled about her legs for inadequate warmth, she saw when she grabbed her wand and cast Lumos with it. The hearth, neglected, was cold and dark. The chill in her dream was the chill in her room, yet even after flicking her wand to cast a fire, feeling its heat radiate on her skin, she still felt cold inside. Cold, and numb, like she'd spent all of her dream-time weeping. Her eyes felt sore and her nose was half-clogged; sliding her hand over her pillow, she found it damp in several spots.

Great. Crying in my sleep over something I can't fix.

You must make up your mind to be happy with him.

Shut up, Albus! Goddamned manipulative bastard!

We are only ever as happy as we're determined to be.

That voice, she couldn't tell to shut up. It was the voice of Daphne Granger. Years ago, when Hermione had been eight, she'd lost a friend who had moved away from their neighborhood. Her mother had come upon her, crying from sadness, and had reminded Hermione that she still had other friends to play with, and that her sadness could either feed upon itself, or she could break the cycle by allowing and encouraging herself to be happy again. So the young Hermione had sniffed away her tears, pasted a smile on her face, and though it took her a while to feel the smile on the inside as well as the out, she'd succeeded in bringing herself out of her own misery.

Somehow, I don't think pasting a smile on my face and grimacing it in Severus' direction is going to get him to believe me that I could be happy with him... Head in her palm, elbow on her knee, Hermione curled around her damp pillow. Crookshanks had moved to the windowsill, looking out upon the lights of the London Suburbs, leaving only a fluffy orange tail hanging down below a bulge in the curtains. Her stomach twisted, reminding her that she hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast in Poppy Pomfrey's office.

A glance at the clock on the mantel showed it was just past six o'clock. The supper hour, here at Grimmauld Place. When she, Harry and Ron were planning on spending their evenings in Hogwarts, they'd not attend, preferring to cook a quick meal closer to eight or nine, but she was hungry now. There was usually a bit of a communal meal at this time of the evening.

First I get some food in my stomach...and then I sit down and plan out what I'm going to do Hermione decided grimly. *The manipulative bastard is right. I'm going to have to ensnare every last scrap of what passes for Severus Snape's heart, if I'm to ensure that he's fully on our side...and that he doesn't fuck over anyone else in the course of his spying-induced duties.*

She winced a little at the mental swearing; it wasn't really her. Hermione granted herself a bit of leeway, though. She wasn't feeling exactly like herself anymore. Padding to the bureau, she pulled out a set of black woolen tights, a black, calf-length skirt, and a burgundy jumper. Adding undergarments and a camisole, she donned the outfit, brushed out her hair and pinned it back with a couple hair-combs and a spell, slipped into a pair of flats, and unwarded her room. Most of the time, she preferred jeans for their ease of movement and comfortableness, but whenever Hermione needed to feel confident, she donned a skirt to make herself feel more feminine.

Right now, she could use all the confidence she could scrape together. A mirthless snort escaped her. *Harry thinks he's got it bad, having to destroy all the Horcruxes and kill off Voldemort. I wonder if he'd just give up and turn Death Eater himself, if he knew his success hinged on my having to successfully seduce Severus Snape?*

The absurd, morbid thought cheered her, as Hermione descended the back stairs and stepped into the kitchen. The sight of an infrequently seen red head cheered her even further. "Charlie!"

The second eldest Weasley grinned at her. He'd been in France on a mission for the Order, but now was back again. "Hey there, Hermione! I'd leap up and hug you, but I'm not too keen on meeting a guardian-dragon. I've heard they're even tougher than the real things."

She laughed involuntarily as the freckled rogue winked at her. Tonks was there, and Lupin, whom she greeted with equal warmth, though he was looking a bit wan. Moody sat next to Mrs. Figg, Molly was fussing over her husband Arthur, Bill and Fleur were at the table, and of course Ron and Harry. Ron leapt up to get her tableware from the stacks on the sideboard, and Harry quickly held out a chair for her. Bemused by their solicitousness, she sat down between Harry and Remus.

"Are you feeling up to pot roast?" Harry asked her, his green eyes anxious. "Or are you not hungry?"

Hermione guessed he was worried over how upset she'd been when she'd left and then come back home again. "I'm famished, actually."

"Oh. Good," Harry stated, sitting down next to her. "That's good."

She eyed him askance, but not for long; Charlie passed her the platter of meat slices and she picked out several well-done ones from the end. The vegetables came next, and a rich gravy that made her mouth water. The dinner conversation was light chatter about Fleur and Bill redecorating their apartment, Tonks gave a very funny recounting of an event in the Muggle Minister's office that she'd heard from Kingsley Shacklebolt—funny according to the wizarding-world perspective, which made it doubly so for Harry and Hermione, who knew how it would be seen by the Muggles—and Charlie discussed the storm he'd had to circumnavigate in flying over the Channel.

A natural break came in the conversation, and Mrs. Figg cleared her throat. Loudly. The others glanced at the aging Squib. She cleared her throat again and spoke firmly. "Someone in this household...got knocked up!"

Ron spewed a mouthful of pumpkin juice. Harry choked on a piece of potato, coughing hoarsely to clear. Hermione, her last slice of pot-roast speared on her fork, paused it halfway to her mouth to eye the deliverer of that pompous statement dubiously. Especially since Arabella Figg was staring straight at her.

"That's right, young missy!" Arabella confirmed, glaring at Hermione. "And I blame *you* for it!"

This time, Bill, Charlie, and Remus choked. Arthur, Molly and Tonks gaped. Hermione glanced at Ron and Harry out of the corner of her eye; they'd stopped coughing and spluttering and were staring gobsmacked at the elderly woman.

"...Me?"

"Yes! If it weren't for that orange fluffball of yours, Mrs. Spots wouldn't have been up the duff! She'd been looking a bit fat, lately," Arabella continued as a spate of coughing and throat-clearing spread around the table, napkins raising to cover smiling mouths in a rash of rumpled linen. "And when she went missing yesterday, I went looking for

her. I finally found her in the attic with three little peachballs suckling on their mum--and I blame *your* cat for getting her in the family way!

"I'm holding you partially responsible for the welfare of those kittens. If that cat of yours *is* half-kneazle, then they're a quarter of it," Mrs. Figg reminded her tartly, "and they should go to good wizarding homes, once they're weaned and litter-trained."

Shaking her head slowly, eyes winced shut for a moment, Hermione wondered if the whole world had gone mad. It couldn't be just her that had the problem with reality, today. First the debacle with Russel/Snape, then the lecture from Dumbledore's portrait, Harry and Ron acting a bit odd, and now this. Being blamed for the randiness of her cat. "...I'll find them good homes, Mrs. Figg. Good wizarding homes."

"Erm...count us in for one," Arthur offered. "That's a smart cat you've got, good at chasing garden-gnomes."

"Yes," Molly agreed, firmly dragging the conversation to a slightly more decorous side of the subject, away from the taboo topic of feline breeding. "If his offspring are even half as good a mouser as he is, just one of them will help keep the little pests out of the vegetable-patch, next year."

"I zink we would alzo like a byootiful leetle *chat* for our apartment," Fleur decided, glancing at her husband for approval.

Harry snickered, choking on his laughter. Fleur's accent made the French word for 'cat' sound like *shat*. Hermione elbowed him sharply and he smothered the lower half of his face in his napkin. Ron only grinned and helped himself to more potatoes as his eldest brother sighed and shrugged.

"If that's what you wish, my love."

Love. Goddamned, endearment-tossing bastard... Her food didn't appeal to her anymore. Setting down her forkful of meat, Hermione cleared her throat. "I'll do the dishes, if someone will take care of the leftover food."

Harry touched her arm, his mirth exchanged for concern again. "Are you feeling alright? I can do the dishes, if you don't want to be in the kitchen, with all the smells."

Quirking her brows, Hermione reassured, "I'm *fine*, Harry. Honestly, what's with you two? I get into one little fracas with Snape, and suddenly I'm like an antique china doll to the two of you!"

--Snape?" Moody repeated, latching onto the name. "You encountered Snape?"

Stupid, stupid... Sighing, Hermione explained. "I had to get a book from his home. While I was there, I encountered Severus Snape. We had a little argument, I Portkeyed to safety, and got hexed by the book I'd used as my Portkey."

"Nobody's been able to *find* Snape's residence," the ex-Auror pointed out suspiciously. "It's suspected he threw it under the Fidelius Charm. How were *you* able to find it?"

"Russel set up an anonymous meeting with the Death Eater who is the Secret Keeper, and I went when I thought the place would be empty. Obviously, it wasn't. But I'm *fine*. He didn't hurt me," she reiterated, carefully sticking to the topic of her visit to 42 Spinner's End, and only 42 Spinner's End. "He threatened me and poked his wand at my neck, and that was *all*. I got myself out of there before anything worse than that happened. And I've already been checked out by Madam Pomfrey: I'm perfectly fine. I'm not hexed, not jinxed, and not under the Imperius Curse."

"What book were you looking for?" Charlie asked her, curious.

"*Diario ex Bruja Lucrezia*," she admitted. "Don't ask me why I need it; I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

Bill whistled, eyeing her warily. "That was a dangerous witch! She could've given even Bellatrix LeStrange the shudders! Why do you need her diary?"

"I told you; I can't tell you. Unfortunately, I didn't get to keep the book. It got taken away just after I'd found it."

"Well, obviously you didn't open it up," Bill muttered. "And a good thing, too; I've heard of wizards being blinded for a week, or worse, being blinded and covered in boils for up to a month, if they opened any of Lucrezia Borgia's spellbooks. They're almost legendary, in curse-breaker circles," he added as the others gave him curious looks. "It's said that Lucrezia was a Renaissance-era suffragette, in an extremist sort of way."

"The book-pages start out blank, you see," Bill Weasley explained, gesturing with his hands. "But there's a spell at the front that judges the reader, in each of her books. Males get blinded. Incompetent males get blinded and covered in boils. Females won't be blinded, but if they're incompetent...well, it's a month of the worst possible case of all-over spots you've ever seen. Only top female curse-breakers are allowed to open a Lucrezia book, and they aren't allowed to cast most of the spells inside, since they're very Dark magic...and those *weren't* from her Diary. I can only imagine how much more dangerous the contents of her Diary might be."

"Well, I opened the book, and I saw the blank pages, and then it cast its spell, but I wasn't blinded, and I didn't get any boils," Hermione admitted, relieved *someone* was willing to tell her why the book was dangerous. "I can't remember the message, though."

"Then you're very lucky," Bill praised her, smiling. "And probably one of the few witches in the world who could delve into that madwoman's secrets unscathed." His smile faded. "But I still don't see why you have to go anywhere near anything she'd written. You're not a Dark Witch, Hermione. Anything but."

Hermione shook her head. "The fewer who know, the fewer risks that word will get back to the Dark Lord. Suffice to say, it's all a part of our campaign to bring down Voldiedork."

A *snerk* sound startled them. It came from Alastor Moody. He *snerked* again, then started laughing. "*Voldiedork?* Ahahahahahahaha!"

He snorted loudly, dragging in some much-needed air, then guffawed again. Hermione shuddered. No, it wasn't just her. The whole universe had definitely gone mad.

...

Knock knock. "Erm...Hermione?"

She covered the stack of parchment she'd been writing her list of Plans To Pull Russel's Strings upon with a book and crossed to her bedroom door. Opening it, she found Harry and Ron on the other side. "Yes?"

"Were you, um, planning on going back there? Tonight?" Ron asked her, concern in his blue eyes. "To Snape's house?"

"No. I've got some planning to do, first. He's probably hidden it very well, too, and will be extra-vigilant regarding his home for the next few days," Hermione offered, trying to sound normal. She almost choked on the next bit, uncomfortable with lying outright to her friends. "I, er, was going to wait until Russel let me know he'd be occupied. Or maybe for a report of a Death Eater attack, in the hopes that he'd be there, or returned to...to Death Eater Headquarters."

She'd tried to say Riddle Manor; Hermione had forgotten she couldn't do so. She'd also forgotten that Snape was the Secret Keeper...and hadn't realized at the time, when Russel had told her that Voldemort's Headquarters were at his father's abandoned manor house, that Russel had stated that 'the bastard traitor' was the Secret Keeper...and shouldn't have been able to tell her the location himself, without being the Secret Keeper himself. Little signs and clues had been there all along, and she hadn't noticed them. Hadn't wanted to notice them.

Harry and Ron mistook her wincing, for Harry reached out and touched her arm. "It's okay, 'Mione. We'll find another way to do what we need to do."

"Yeah, you've had a rough time of it, the last twenty-four hours," Ron pointed out. "Why don't you just take a few days off to recover? The war's not going anywhere, for the moment."

The urge to protest that any delay in resolving Voldemort's demise meant more innocent lives would be harmed was a strong one, but Hermione seized on the opportunity they gave her. She needed peace and quiet, and most importantly solitude, in which to think her way through her situation. If they thought she needed a couple days off to recover from her encounter with Snape, well, she did, in a way.

"I think I'll do that. Thanks."

Patting her arm, Harry added, "You just rest, Hermione. Eat when you can, and if you need any potions or anything, Madam Pomfrey is just a Floo-call away."

Nodding, Hermione closed the door. She stood there for a moment more, wondering what was up with the solicitous behaviour. It wasn't important, however. Shrugging, she returned to her vanity-table-turned-desk. She had more important things to concentrate on, like her list of ways how to handle her husband.

Scheme after scheme had already been crossed off her list. The problem was, he was too smart and too wary to be deceived, tricked, duped, conned, led around, or beguiled. Sighing as she stared at her list, Hermione rubbed her forehead, wondering if any of this was worth it. *At this rate, the only thing I'll have left will be the truth...*

I will be telling them that I am attempting a mild seduction to distract you... I hope you don't take offense at my efficiency... given that I'm honestly interested in flirting with you physically. I do hope that, by being honest about it, you'll be able to keep a clear head on the morrow...

He'd seduced her very successfully, Hermione realized with more than a touch of chagrin, by *telling* her he was going to do so. Under the guise of 'needing to pretend to do it'. Honesty, but with a disarming twist. She was too smart to think that he would be fooled by the exact same trick. *So I have to come up with some other way of presenting the truth to him that'll disarm him long enough for it to work...assuming I can bring myself to do it. I'm not a deceptive woman by nature, and I'm not a hard one, either. This will take at least a little bit of both.*

About the only thing she had going for him was that he wouldn't really be looking for deception from an 'honest, forthright Gryffindor'. That was a Slytherin specialty. The man had been Head of Slytherin House for a good sixteen years, after all. *Yes...I'd have to be deceptively honest, and aggressively forthright, so that he wouldn't see the deception for what it really is.*

There was only one more problem standing in her way. Two, really, if she counted her reluctance to get near him right now. That would just have to be set aside. No, the other problem was that she had no idea how to go about distracting him with the truth.

Crumpling up the much-abused sheet, Hermione incinerated it with a sigh. Folding her arms, she laid down her head. *Why do I want to chase after him, anyway? Why do I have to be the one to tie him down? He says he's working to bring Lord Voldemort down. Isn't that enough?*

How long she rested there, trying not to think, Hermione didn't know. But some while later, the base of her finger rapidly warmed. Jerking her head up, she stared at the ring. Words were forming on the scaled surface. Cramped words. "Sigurd, you are summoned."

The dragonette spilled across her desk, presenting her his flank in anticipation of her need. The words were larger on his hide than on the ring. Snatching up her quill, Hermione wrote down the address portion of the message.

33 B Crooked Dog Lane, London...unless you think it's a trap, and not a handful of endangered lives.

Cynical bastard...though he's right to be cynical. But he brought it on himself! ...Didn't he? Her head hurt, even with the relaxing effect of the drug still in her system. She wrote 'Death Eater Attack' and 'Ring of Truth' on the paper, folded and enchanted it into a flying memo addressed to the Auror's Department, and left her room to Floo the Ministry.

It did occur to her that this might be a trap for the other side, but she doubted it. A man ruthless enough in his quest to kill his colleague and employer, a man who had no doubt been his friend, would not risk derailing that quest. She hoped.

Molly was in the kitchen, directing Harry in the practice of one of her multiple-dishwashing charms, cajoling him in the proper wand-movements needed for the most efficient use of his power. Hermione ignored both of them, stepping up to the hearth. Grabbing a pinch of Floo powder, she cast it on the low, crackling flames and muttered the address she wanted. Pitching the airplane into the flames, she watched as the folded paper soared into a tight spiral and vanished, drawn rapidly from view.

Let them handle it, she thought, turning away as the greenish flames died back down. *My life is tough enough, right now.*

She saw the worried look Harry gave her, but didn't want to deal with lying that nothing was wrong. Thankfully, he didn't stop her as she retreated back up the stairs. Maybe she should take a couple days off, let her battered heart and mind rest and rejuvenate. She was strong enough to bounce back from just about anything, if she put her mind to it.

You must make up your mind to be happy...

Damned voice. Wish he would stop haunting me like this...

...

It wasn't until late the next evening that she remembered something important. When her wand had been stolen from her, she'd read something being done to enchant or hex it in some way. She'd forgotten about her paranoia, foolishly. Now, she didn't know if Snape had hexed it or not. A glance at the clock in her room showed it was too late to go to Ollivander's...but not too late to visit Filius Flitwick, Hermione decided. Surely a serious wand-collector like him would know if there was something dangerous about her wand.

She'd only used it for a couple charms, but that didn't preclude it from being a Portkey, or enchanted with a hex that would trigger under certain circumstances...like trying to defend herself from her husband. She wouldn't put that past him. Sighing, Hermione tucked it into her pocket and hurried down the back stairs.

Arabella Figg and Alastor Moody were in another clinch. Wincing, yet happy for them, Hermione cast Floo powder into the hearth and stepped across to Madam Pince's office. For once, the older witch was there, busy working on cataloguing what looked like a stack of new reference texts. A storm raged beyond the diamond-paned windows of her office, and there was a distinct chill in the air, despite the roaring fire. The librarian sniffed down her long, thin nose at Hermione for the interruption; the younger witch muttered an apology and exited the chamber.

There were still students in the Library; there was still half an hour or more to curfew, and they were taking advantage of it. Hermione hadn't bothered with a plan for concealment, and she was in jeans and a jumper, a distinct contrast to the students still in their school uniforms. Heads looked up, and eyes widened in recognition. Cursing herself silently for her impatience when she could've waited just a little longer, she hurried past the study desks as quickly as she could, heading out into the halls.

It was icy enough in the castle, she could see her breath. Shivering, Hermione moved faster, since she didn't want to risk casting a warming charm on herself until she knew the verdict of her wand. There was a little-used stairwell near the Infirmary that would take her up close to Professor Flitwick's quarters. She had just reached the alcove for it, glancing behind her to make sure she hadn't been seen by anyone else, when she spotted a gleam of red hair. Wanting to see Ginny, even if only at a

distance, Hermione ducked around the edge of the stairwell opening, then peeked out.

It wasn't Ginny. It was Ron, half-carrying a limping Harry. Their hair and their cloaks were dripping wet; they must've been out in the storm. Hermione frowned. She hadn't realized Harry and Ron had left the house, but then she'd been sequestered in her room, alternately trying to think up ways to control Severus Snape and trying to not think about anything, in maddening cycles where when she'd tried to think, she came up with nothing, and when she tried to not think, she couldn't silence her mind.

What are they doing here?--Well, obviously because Harry's been injured, but why is Harry injured?

Her ears strained to listen as Ron grunted something, assisting Harry to the entrance of the Infirmary. "Almost there, mate... At least now you know how I felt after Sirius bit me.

"That tunnel is too bloody long to walk, when you're hurt. And the storm certainly didn't help matters..." Harry muttered, freeing a hand to push open the door. "I could use a warming potion, if nothing else."

She wanted to go up to them and ask what they'd been up to, who had attacked them. But if there was trouble, she might have to use her wand, and Hermione needed to know it was alright, first. Turning away, she hurried up the steps. First the visit to Flitwick, then a visit to the Infirmary to see if her friends were still there, and she could find out what was happening.

Flitwick was in his quarters, when she knocked on the door. He was still in his teaching robes, and not the dressing gown with the ascot, thankfully. Letting her in, he offered her a steaming cup of tea, as hard clattering sounds hit the window. "...Dreadful night, really! We haven't had an ice-storm like this since '85. You're shaking terribly, young lady. Haven't you cast a Warming Charm yet?"

"No, Professor, I haven't cast any charms, yet," Hermione demurred, shivering as she cupped the tea-heated porcelain in her fingers. "And I forgot to bring my cloak. I wanted to consult with you about my wand."

"Your replacement wand?" he asked in his squeaky voice. "Is there something wrong with it? And help yourself to an afghan; my grandniece crochets them for me; lovely girl, left Ravenclaw House two years before you entered the school. They're self-enspelled for warmth, and very pretty."

She covered herself with one of the zigzag blankets, grateful for the heat radiating from the blue-and-copper zigzag pattern. "No, sir; it's my original wand. I, um, well...the second one got broken, but I managed to re-obtain the first, only it was in the hands of the Death Eaters, and I'm afraid it might be...booby-trapped. It's too late to go to Ollivander's, so I thought of you as the next best authority."

Drawing the wand, she handed it over. He accepted it by drawing his own wand and levitating the carved vinewood. "Yes, you were right to have it checked. There was a time, shortly after I began collecting wands in duels, when some of my opponents tried to trap their wands against being taken from them. I spent two days in St. Mungo's, before I wised up and started scanning my prizes for latent hexes and the like. I'd say I'm just as good as Roland Ollivander, when it comes to searching for tampering..."

Halting the wand in front of himself, Filius began chanting spellwords and tapping her wand with his own, making mystical passes and causing coloured lights and symbols to glow. Hermione sipped her tea, enjoying the warmth spreading through her body. The process took longer than she thought; Professor Flitwick even went so far as to clear a spot on his coffee table, marking runes and a warding circle, and using that to enforce whatever spells he was casting. She wished she could do what he did, and tried to study the magic being used, but it was very advanced Charm-work, with a heavy slant towards Artificing. Once again, Hermione wished she'd taken those classes in her third and later years.

Finally, he hmmed, then sighed. "Well. It was booby-trapped. But someone neutralized most of the tampering, and did so recently. They weren't at my level of skill, though the hex was rendered inert--a nasty one, which would've triggered had you gone up against anyone wearing the Dark Mark while it was in place if it had still been viable, but it was still there. I've removed it for you, and there's no other signs of danger," Filius told her, picking up her wand from the table and handing it to her with a stretch of his short body. "If anyone who knew that particular spell had gotten their hands on your wand, they could've reactivated it with less than half the effort it would take to cast the original."

"Thank you, Professor." Accepting her wand, Hermione stared at it. There was only one person who could've removed the spell. *But why would Snape want to do so? Surely, if he neutralized it, he knew it would harm me if I harmed him with this wand? Why give up such a strong defense? Unless it was such a nasty hex, it would leave him without a contact for the attack-warnings he's given...*

"So, what have you been up to?" Filius enquired politely. "Any progress on destroying the you-know-whats?"

"I have to find a book with a potion, brew the potion, and let it steep in the cup for two days," Hermione confessed. "There's only one book in the world that has it, as far as I know...and that book is--"

Her finger burned. Glancing down, she saw the scales patterning her ring melting into blankness. Familiar with this oddity, Filius levitated a quill, ink-jar and notepad onto the coffee table for her. She had the notepad and pen she had gotten into the habit of carrying around with her in her back pocket, but the gesture was appreciated. Filius gave her a curious look. "Your mystery correspondent is calling again, I take it?"

Nodding, she braced the notepad against her lap with her ring-hand, and watched as copperplate words scrawled across the page.

What have you done with Draco? Where is he? If you think you can force the Secret of my home from him for your friends to--

No! Hermione wrote back quickly. **I've done nothing to him! I don't know where he is, so don't yell at me!**

Frozen pellets of rain clattered against the square panes of glass filling the narrow windows of Professor Flitwick's sitting room. She looked up reflexively at the windblown sound, shivering...and connections formed themselves in her mind. Ron and Harry, dripping wet. Harry, injured. A talk about a long walk, a tunnel, and Sirius Black.

There was only one place the two wizards could take a prisoner and be safe, but unseen. They'd somehow conned into a meeting, fought, kidnapped, and Apparated with Draco to the Shrieking Shack. And she'd bet their prisoner was still out there.

Snape was scrawling something else, the start of a threat. She scratched out his words with her pen and wrote her own underneath. **Shut up. I've just realized what's happened to him. I'll take care of it. But you OWE me for rescuing the prat!**

Setting down the quill and the notepad, Hermione nodded to Professor Flitwick. "Thank you for the help with my wand. I've got to go rescue someone, or I'd linger; I do enjoy your hospitality."

"You don't have to go outside, I trust?" Filius demurred.

Hermione grimaced. "I'm afraid I do. I'd ask you for a cloak, but..."

"Oh, just Transfigure the afghan," he dismissed, flipping a stubby, age-gnarled hand at her. "Use the *Paenulum* spell Minerva teaches her fifth-years. That shouldn't interfere with the warming-charm."

"Thank you, sir."

"Please, call me Filius, Hermione. I'm not your teacher. Though I wouldn't mind being your mentor," he squeaked, rising with her as she tapped the blanket, changing it into a blue-and-copper felted wool cloak. "Even I will eventually retire from this place, and it would be lovely to have a competent Charms Mistress to take my post, you know,"

he tempted her.

Smiling, Hermione fastened the cloak around her shoulders. "I'll keep that in mind."

Ice rattled against the windowpanes as the gusting storm winds changed direction once again.

...

When she slipped and fell for the fifth time, Hermione felt her ankle twist, adding to her bruises. The stone-lined path down the sloping hill to the Whomping Willow was coated with ice, as was nearly everything else. Even she would've become a shambling ice-mound, if she hadn't enchanted herself with protective spells against the foul weather. Poking her wand at her ankle, she recited the charm for sprains, glad she, Harry and Ron had studied such things.

Still, when her ankle healed, Hermione didn't get back up for a few moments, breathing heavily. It was tough, forcing her way through the storm. She'd tried her Self-Levitation spell just outside the doors of the school, but a gust had thumped her forcefully into the stone frame of the archway, negating that idea. If she'd had more practice at flying in bad weather, even if only on a broom, she might've risked it, but it just wasn't feasible.

Lifting her wand, she let the bright white light of Lumos beam into the darkness. Everything looked different, coated with a gleaming clear layer of ice, and fringed with the deadly-looking teeth of icicles. Branches had snapped off under the heavy weight of all that frozen water, forcing her to cast the Deflection Charm more than once. For the moment, the storm wasn't too bad, wind-wise. It was just horribly slippery.

It took her a few moments to realize the ice-coated tree not fifty feet from her was the Whomping Willow. Its limbs had curled in upon itself, giving it a very knobby, stubby look, but with them lashed tightly to its trunk, they wouldn't break off from the weight of the ice. It did, however, render the normally ferocious magical plant harmless. She hoped. Picking herself up, Hermione made her way carefully down to the base of the tree, warily studying its curled-and-coated limbs. It didn't even quiver.

A glance down found the opening to the tunnel sealed over with ice. Aiming her wand, wincing as the wind and the half-frozen rain picked up again, she melted the opening, then slipped--literally--down into the narrow cavern below. Wincing, Hermione rested for a moment at the bottom, mentally adding yet another set of bruises to her battered bum. But at least there wasn't any wind or rain down here to plague a weary traveler. Pushing to her feet, she left the opening behind, her face feeling almost warm now that she was underground.

A spot of blood on the ground alarmed her; from patterns of footprints marring the dust and dirt of the tunnel floor, she guessed Harry had rested here for a moment. She knew he would be alright in Madam Pomfrey's care, but it did remind her that the two kidnapping twits might try to come back out here to interrogate their prisoner. The last thing she needed was Harry and Ron coming upon her as she was trying to free Draco from their clutches. Casting a trip-alert charm, she continued on down the tunnel, pausing twice more to cast alert-spells that would let her know when her friends were drawing close.

The last one was placed at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the trapdoor into the Shack. Mindful of the last time Draco Malfoy had been bound and supposedly helpless, Hermione entered the freezing-cold, wind-whistling building cautiously, wand drawn and ready for anything. He wasn't on the rubbish-strewn ground floor, but then she hadn't expected that. Mounting the stairs to the first floor, Hermione peered cautiously through the damaged walls, and saw a silver-wrapped, black-garbed bundle. A shivering bundle, with a very pale face and bluish-tinged lips.

"Shite!" *The twats didn't even light a fire for him!*

Snapping her wand at the hearth as she hurried forward, Hermione enchanted a blazing fire into it, then slashed her wand at the walls, cutting off the gusting drafts with warding spells. Draco had jumped at her expletive, and now was shivering hard enough to knock his pale head against the floor. His eyes, squeezed shut against the cold, popped open as she cast a Warming Charm directly on him.

She couldn't just Portkey him back to Snape's home; there was no guarantee anyone would be there to receive the badly chilled wizard. Sending him to Malfoy Manor was also fraught with risk; if there were Death Eaters about, his condition, captured and freezing, might be seen as weak. Hermione could guess all too easily how they'd tear into him like a pack of feral dogs smelling fresh meat. Grey eyes stared up at her, several shades lighter than Russel's had been when she'd tended to his injuries. Pity welled in her heart for the trap Draco was in, pity and compassion.

Using her wand, she Transfigured a tempered-glass teapot out of a bit of broken windowpane, and purified a couple icicles from the same broken, boarded window into drinkable water. Transfiguring non-edible items into food never really worked for sustenance, so she just tapped the water-filled pot with a heating spell until its contents steamed, turned a smaller shard into a mug, and brought both over to the still-shivering wizard. She almost unbound him, but knew he wasn't helpless. Instead, she hauled him into a sitting position, braced his back against an upraised knee, and fed him sips of the warm water until the last of his shivering eased, then twisted to set the mug down.

"Why are you being k-kind to me?"

The whisper startled her. It was defensive, but not angry, not sneering. Looking back at the bound wizard half-propped in her lap, Hermione selected her answer carefully. "Because I'm the better person. Not a better witch than you're a wizard, because this isn't about magic. Not because I'm a Muggle-born and you're a Pureblood, because that doesn't mean anything in this situation, either. And not because I'm a Gryffindor," Hermione stated bluntly. "Two idiot Gryffindors trapped, bound, and left you here to freeze to death while they went to take care of their wounds, without stopping to think about how pissant-poor the sieve-like walls of this place would keep out the freezing cold of an ice-storm. For which I will personally ream their arses."

"Why d-do you care?" he demanded defensively, scornfully. "I'm just the platinum prat, a damned Malfoy!"

"Because I do. For no reason, no rhyme, other than I can't stand to look at someone suffering when they don't need to. That's what makes me the better person."

"Then why don't you unt-t-tie me?" he asked her, shivering inside his magic-heated Death Eater robes.

"Because compassion does not equal stupidity." Hermione drew in a breath to add that she'd be summoning Snape to fetch him, and realized she didn't know if her so-called...if her *husband* had told the others yet that she knew his true identity. There was also the question of whether or not Ron and Harry were going to be going after the book, if Draco had told them where Snape's house was located. She decided to pursue that line of query instead. "Did you tell Harry and Ron where Snape's house is located?"

He snorted and looked away.

"Did you?"

"I've been practicing Occlumency," he managed to draw loftily, or as loftily as one could while bound and helpless. Pale grey eyes slanted sharply in her direction. "So don't even think about trying to pry other secrets out of my mind."

"I don't need any of your secrets, Draco. Not today." No, what she needed was that book, and a way of getting it without endangering her two best--if dunderheaded--friends, and without having to fight her husband for it. She was fairly sure he'd hidden it away by now, perhaps behind some nasty protective spells that only he could get through. If she had something to blackmail him...with... She looked at Draco again. "Do you want more hot water?"

His reply was disdainful. "--No. The accommodations and hospitality of this place are dreadful. Is this Weasley's home?"

"Stuff the attitude, Draco. You're not in a position to play Lord of Slytherin anymore. And it's the Shrieking Shack. Lie here and be quiet, if you don't need anything," she ordered him, shifting his upper body back down onto the floor.

"I *need* to be free!" He jerked at his bonds as she moved away, drawing the notepad and pen she still kept in her back pocket. "You can't keep me here forever!"

"I'm not going to. I'm going to trade you for something I want."

He snorted, a soft sound of disbelief. "Don't count on dipping your filthy Mudblood hands into the Malfoy bank vaults."

"I'm not after your money, Malfoy." Unsure how to make the thing work, Hermione moved out of easy hearing range, over by a battered, dusty dresser, and touched her thumb to the ring. "Severus Selenius Snape," she whispered, and felt the carved gold warm around the base of her finger. Resting the notepad on the dresser, she held it in place with her ring-hand, and watched the scales fade away. As she'd hoped, the tablet was now ready to communicate. **Draco is safe.**

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (**HBP SPOILERS**)

Author's Notes: Yes. I am evil. You love my fanfics anyway. ~Lotm

XX.

She waited, flicking her wand at the fireplace at the other end of the room to keep the magical flames burning steadily. About a minute later, words seeped through the paper in green ink. Once again, he was using a dictation quill to disguise his handwriting.

Where is he?

Not so fast, Hermione wrote back. **I want something in return.**

A pause, then he wrote, ...**You can't be serious.**

I am. Very, she added in emphasis. **I want the Diario ex Bruja Lucrezia. You will swear you will be alone when you bring it to me, and that the book will be unaltered in any way, in a condition that I can open and read it--and don't say I can't read it,** she added. **Bill Weasley says Lucrezia was a feminist; only females can read her writing, which is why you, a male, were blinded. I want the book without any spell placed upon it to yank it out of my care. You will swear these conditions to me through the truth of these rings...and I will tell you the location where Draco Malfoy is being held.**

There. That was the truth. It implied he wasn't in the same location as her, without actually lying. Hermione didn't want him simply swooping into the Shack and snatching the younger wizard without bringing her prize.

You dare to dictate conditions?

Ruthlessly. I have a good teacher, husband.

Her words faded, leaving a blank page as he pondered his reply.

"Hey!"

She glanced over her shoulder. He'd rolled onto his side, but that was it. He gave her as arrogant a look as he could, though his pale cheeks were a little flushed.

"I need to use the bathroom," Draco stated baldly. "You'll have to untie my hands for that, at least."

"You can always piss in your clothes, if it's that bad," Hermione retorted daringly, though she looked away so he couldn't see the blush on her cheeks at the daring suggestion. Biting her lip, she hesitated, then wrote, **The longer you delay, the more uncomfortable Malfoy's situation will get.**

Her words faded. Another minute passed. She heard Malfoy squirming across the floor and flicked her wand at him, Petrifying him. He stiffened in place on his side, then rocked onto his back and lay there. The spell would wear off in a few minutes, but it gave her peace and quiet for the moment. Returning her attention to the notepad, she waited some more.

Words finally filled the page.

I swear I will bring you the Diario ex Bruja Lucrezia, unharmed and un-enchanted, for you to borrow--not keep--in exchange for the safe return of Draco Malfoy, in one piece, unharmed, alive, intact, and unhexed, and that this will not be a trap set to ensnare me. Swear it yourself.

That made her smile. **I swear to exchange Draco Malfoy for the Diario ex Bruja Lucrezia, and that he will be alive, intact, and as unharmed as I found him--actually, in better condition; I haven't seen any injuries on him, but he was freezing when I found him. This will not be a trap to ensnare you. Oh, and you will swear you will allow me to borrow the Diario ex Bruja Lucrezia for four months, in case you were sneakily thinking of letting me borrow it for only a single minute.**

Bitch.

The swearword startled a laugh out of her. Bending her head over the tablet, she wrote back, **Flatter me all you like; that's my addendum.**

I will swear to let you borrow the book for four months if you will tell me why you need it

No dice. Prepare to have the Aurors swarm all over your house, after they break down Draco Malfoy's mind, Hermione threatened him.

ALL RIGHT! Manipulative bitch! God, why did I marry you?

Because you made the choice to send me a chastity belt of a ring, in a war where your fellow Death Eaters rape and torture women, and selfish little me didn't

care to oblige their filthy lusts. Swear I will be free to borrow and use the book for as long as I have need of it.

Why won't you tell me why you need it?

Because Basilisk-Butt would kill you. Steeling herself, Hermione added as honestly as she could, **And I have recently discovered that I, too, have plans for you, husband. Swear it, or lose that fortune in books. Not even you could save them all before the Aurors arrived on your doorstep.**

Bitch. As you wish. You may borrow the Diario ex Bruja Lucrezia, unharmed, unhindered, un-enchanted, for as long as you wish, in exchange for Draco Malfoy, alive and uninjured, AND with the secret of my house's location intact.

Harry and Ron might know, Hermione cautioned him. **Draco said he kept them out via Occlumency, but I can't know for certain. Write to me and tell me when you have the book, and I will write to you where Draco is located.**

The ink faded from the page. Removing her hand, Hermione watched the sheet of paper incinerate itself, her ring resuming its normal temperature. Turning around, she faced Draco's prone body. Crossing to him, she crouched. The hex she'd cast was wearing off, making him blink.

"...You know, you really ought to take the time while you're tied up here to think about what you'll want to be doing, five years down the road. This war will have ended by then, and not in the manner that the Dark Lord hopes. He is going to lose, and he is going to die. All of his evil works will turn to ashes, all of his perverted dreams will crumble to dust and blow away on the wind. And he will not be coming back. The final battle will be coming soon, within a year or less. Where will the great house of Malfoy be, if you continue to let yourself be blinded by others' ideas, and paralyzed by your own fears?

"You're the only son your parents have, Draco. An only child. I know what that's like, how strongly your parents' hopes and dreams weigh on your shoulders. You made some bad choices...but redemption waits for you in the end," she reminded him. "Even a last-minute gesture would be worth something to your family's good name."

"When did *you* ever think my family had a good name?" he sneered, free of his stiff paralysis enough to speak.

"The night Harry found you crying in Myrtle's bathroom, because you didn't want to go on. The night you lowered your wand. The night you attacked me in Snape's home, where it took you several tries before you could actually bring yourself to harm me. Continue to practice your Occlumency, Draco. And learn how to pour yourself into the emotions you *should* be feeling, given the circumstances trapping you...but don't make the mistake of believing those are how you really feel, deep down inside. You started to think for yourself, that night in that bathroom. Don't break such a good habit, now that it's finally begun.

"Now, do you want any more hot water? Or are you warm enough?"

He looked away from her. "I'm fine."

A chime rang in Hermione's ears. She started. Draco didn't even twitch. It was one of her trap-alerts, the first of the three she'd laid down in the tunnel. *Oh, crud. Harry and Ron are on their way.* She had a horrible mental image of being caught between the two forces. Snape would be ruthless. Harry and Ron would be furious. And she and Draco would be caught in the crossfire. *Hurry, Severus!*

Minutes passed. Her finger heated. Standing, she moved quickly over to the dresser, pressing the smooth-surfaced ring to the tablet. His words scrawled across the surface.

I have the book you wanted. I will bring it to you, and you will take both of us to Draco.

We're both at the Shrieking Shack, first floor bedroom--hurry! she added, as she heard the mental chime of the second alarm being tripped. Removing her ring-hand, she didn't wait for the page to burn. Turning, she saw a blur of gold, and saw...Russel...lurching to a halt, a dragonette curled around his left arm, the Diary tucked under his right. Sigurd vanished as she stared at this tanned, light-haired version of her husband.

Severus Snape looked around with his lightened grey eyes, spotted Draco on the floor, noted the blazing hearth and the lack of other occupants, and faced her again. Uncurling the Diary from under his arm, he stepped closer, reached past her, and set the narrow volume on the top of the bureau, next to her notepad. A step more, and he backed her into the knobs of the dresser with the press of his body against hers.

She found herself trembling at the touch and the heat, the scent and the sheer nearness of him. Some of it was from fear, but his gaze had fastened on her lips. His hand left the book, and slowly buried itself in her curls, tilting her head back and bringing his mouth to within just a few inches of hers.. Swallowing hard, Hermione lifted her own hand, gripping his own straight locks. *You can do this...you can do this...*If only her heart would stop racing in her chest, stealing all the oxygen from her lungs.

Tightening her fingers to keep him from moving any closer, mindful that Draco was probably watching, she whispered, "This was *not* a part of our bargain."

"Consider it amended," he whispered back, and closed the gap between their lips. Her heart slammed in her chest, and the press of his body into hers sparked a traitorous fire in her loins. This was passion. Call it lust, call it hormones, call it severely crossed wires between her body and her brain, call it diced ham and scrambled eggs: her body still wanted his. Forcing her mind to relax its resistance at the thought of *this is Snape* and give in to the decision of her body, Hermione returned his kiss, tilting her head and returning each thrust of his tongue with a parry and riposte of her own.

This is Snape, her brain still tried to assert. Yes, her body retorted, *and he still kisses like a sex-god. Deal with it!*

She heard bells ringing, and almost ignored it in favour of continuing the kiss, but stiffened a second later in memory. Shoving him back, Hermione hissed, wide-eyed, "Harry and Ron!" Severus--looking odd as a grey-eyed blond--narrowed his eyes in wary confusion. Hermione pushed him away from her. "They're coming back! Get out of here! *Now!*"

Another shove pushed him back a step. A floorboard creaked...but not on their floor. The sound came from down below. Whirling, he strode to the bound youth on the floor, grabbed something out of his sporan as he crouched, and shoved it against Draco's forehead. They vanished in a rapid, swirling blur. Grabbing the notepad and pen, Hermione stuffed them into her back pocket again, then tucked the Diary under her arm and drew her wand, hearing the first of the stairs begin to creak. She didn't want to be accidentally hexed by a nervous, overly wary pair of friends.

Idiot friends, she reminded herself, as a red-haired head shifted into view through a gap in the ragged inner walls. Pitching her voice to start softly and rise in volume, hopefully to avoid startling them, she called out, "Ron, Harry, it's me, Hermione. Don't hex me."

The stairs creaked, and more of Ron came into view. He crouched and peered at her through the half-torn wall. "--Hermione? What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing, except I already figured it out. Is Harry with you?"

"I'm right here," her blood-brother's voice called from the stairwell. "Are you alone?"

"I am now."

Ron rushed forward at that, entering the semi-tidy wreck of the bedroom. "Oy! What'd you do with Malfoy? He was our prisoner!"

Harry followed on his heels, wand drawn and scarred brow furrowed. "Dammit, Hermione! You let him go!"

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Hermione kept the Diary tucked under her arm for the moment. "When I got here, over half an hour ago, Draco Malfoy was three shivers from entering the extreme stages of hypothermia. You two *inconsiderate idiots* neglected to ward the room against drafts, neglected to build him a fire, and neglected to even so much as cast a Warming Charm over the little prat. By the time you two got back, *he would have been dead*. Don't you *dare* yell at me!"

Harry advanced on her, scowling. "You let him go! We were *going* to get the location of Snape's home from him, and fetch that book we need!"

"--What, *this* book?" Hermione challenged, snatching it from under her arm. He jerked back, eyeing it warily. "Oh, yes, I *could* open this book and render both of you blind for at least a week, if not longer. I *traded* Malfoy for this book. Hostage for hostage. You see, Russel contacted me and accused *me* of having a hand in Malfoy's disappearance. If I hadn't been at the school to see Flitwick about examining my wand for potential Death Eater traps, I would never have put two and two together after overhearing your complaint about the tunnel from here...and *you* would've murdered a helpless prisoner. Being blinded for a week is no less than what you *deserve*!"

Both males flinched back from her angry growl. Tucking the book back under her armpit, Hermione flicked her wand, silently dropping the wards holding back the wind. Despite the still-roaring fire, the drafts that rushed through the gaps in the walls and the boarded, broken windows quickly cooled the warmth in the chamber. Ron shivered from one particularly strong draft that ruffled his mop of coppery hair. Next to him, Harry winced as Hermione extinguished the fire, leaving the three of them briefly in the increasingly cold dark.

Her voice haunted them from the shadows of the storm, wracked night. "He would have died. In the cold. In the dark. All alone. *Think*, next time you want to do something like this! *Lumos*!"

Her wand-tip glowed bright white, making both males wince.

Harry, shielding his eyes, asked in a chagrined, quiet voice, "...So how did you get the book? From Russel, you said?"

"Yes. And he's taken Draco back with him. Merlin knows what lies he'll have to spin to cover Draco's absence! If you *wanted* to shout to the wrong side of this war what we're doing, try taking out a full-page add in the newspaper next time!"

Ron, his own hand upraised against the light, scowled at her. "That's a bit harsh!"

Disgusted, Hermione closed her eyes, shaking her head. "I'm Apparating back to Headquarters. It'll be safer to return to the school through the Floo, given this weather. If the two of you are smart, you'll return to Headquarters, too. And stay in your rooms and think about what you nearly did. And *no*, I'm not sending either of you to your rooms. You're old enough, you should be ordering yourselves there. It's called acknowledging and dealing with the consequences of your actions...which is something that adults have to do."

"You're being rather, um..." Harry hedged.

"--You're being rather blunt, even for you, Hermione," Ron pointed out. "Are you alright?"

"Is there anything you want to tell us?" Harry added.

Hermione sighed, closing her eyes. "I'm just having to acknowledge and deal with some of my own consequences right now. And no, I don't want to talk about it. That would only make things worse, right now."

She felt Harry's arm wrap around her zigzag cloaked shoulders, squeezing her gently. "You know you can talk to either of us, whenever you're ready. Do you want me to Apparate you back home?"

Hermione pried open her eyes, glancing at him with quirked brows. "...What is it with the two of you and treating me like a porcelain doll, of late? I'm *fine*! I'm not going to break. And I'll Apparate myself home. I find I'm less likely to be dizzy if I do it myself...though your offer is appreciated," she allowed with a touch of graciousness. "I'll meet you back at Headquarters. And *think* about what you nearly did to Draco. If we go around doing things like that to people, how can we call ourselves the *good* guys?"

...

Hermione waited until she was in her bedroom, alone, before cracking open the Diary. She started with the end-leaf paper, as she sat on the bed. The runes started to glow, bathing her face in colour as the symbols shifted places, but the rings didn't twist like gears. Writing seared into view.

Avete l'occhio. Non avete la mano. Vedete tutto, ma non fate niente!

Again, she was left not understanding the meaning. Grabbing her seventh year Charms book, Hermione flipped through to the translation spell she'd located and practiced in the past twenty-four hours. Double-checking the wand-movement, Hermione cast the spell on herself.

"Omnilingua!"

Purplish light washed over her for a moment, then faded. Her eyes and inner ears itched, but Hermione refrained from rubbing. The effect would last for a day at most, as a Charm, though she could cancel it at any time. The best translation spells, the book cautioned, were rune-carved amulets; those caused no itching, though they had to be enchanted for each language individually, and this newly researched Charm was multilingual. Hermione longed to talk to the creator, to discuss theories and possibilities on how to stop the low-key but annoying itching. The words in the Lucrezia book caught her attention, however, reminding her why she'd cast the thing in the first place.

You have the eye. You have not the hand. See all, but make nothing!

What the...? I haven't the hand? I was the best in my Potions class! Turning the pages with a frown, Hermione glanced at the cramped but neatly written handwriting. She wasn't blinded, which was a relief, but the strange, brusque warning bothered her. *See all, but make nothing? What does that mean?*

Page after page turned. The handwriting was small, cramped, and a bit like Snape's when she thought about it, only more archaic-looking. Hermione, skimming the descriptions of the potions, charms and enchantments within, began to understand just how Dark a witch Lucrezia Borgia had been. Ruthless in a way that would make even a Malfoy cringe. Cruel enough to make Bellatrix Lestrange shiver in discomfort. There were wizarding illustrations of writhing victims, many painted in colour in a twisted parody of illuminated manuscripts. Wishing she didn't have to do anything from this book, Hermione sought the Infusio di Anima Te.

It was located about two-thirds of the way through the volume, and the list of ingredients alone covered one and a half pages. Bracing her head on her palm, Hermione read through the remaining six pages of instructions. There was only one illustration for this spell; it depicted a blond woman in a red Italian Renaissance gown seated on a terrace overlooking garden hills. She sipped from a cup of tea as Hermione watched, and set it down...and then her and her gown, indeed all of her colouring in the ornately bordered image, slowly fading as the sun rose and set twice in the background, leaving her as grey as death in the midst of vibrant life.

At the very bottom of the entry, Lucrezia had added a comment that the poison could be neutralized with the consumption of several bezoars, but in doing so, it would create a very strong acid that would dissolve the drinker's insides, killing most of the prisoners she had experimented upon. Sickened, remembering the way how the acidic neutralization had literally polished the iron cauldron in her vision, Hermione reluctantly bookmarked the page and closed the book.

Somehow she, who valued life, had to brew a poison that either subtly or brutally stole it away. And, joy of joys, she had to find a place to do so where she didn't have to worry about poisoning anyone with fumes or accidental splashes, a place with all the alchemical equipment she needed. A place where no one would interrupt her or her work. About the only place that suited those qualifications was the Room of Requirement at the school...but Hermione wasn't about to just appropriate the room. This

required going to Minerva McGonagall and explaining...well, explaining as much as she could as to why she needed the room.

Sighing roughly, she reopened the tome, dragged parchment and quill within reach, and began carefully copying down the list of ingredients, checking and double-checking her work. Since her handwriting was larger, in the interest of being easily readable, it took four and a half sheets. But when she started to transcribe the instructions, the book flared, the lettering on the page shifted, and a warning appeared before her mildly itching eyes.

This is my work! It stays mine! Take your list to the market, but write nothing else!

Warily, Hermione set her quill down. The words vanished, the text rearranging itself back into its original position. Drawing her wand, Hermione cautiously cast the Soul-Scanning Charm. "*Psycandum!*"

Nothing happened. Relieved, Hermione cast Finite, just to be on the safe side, and studied her list of ingredients. She wasn't about to test the book's protective powers where magical copyright infringement was concerned. It was frightening to see just how many of the ingredients she'd need were fairly common in most apothecary shops. Only five were rare and therefore expensive.

Double-checking the instructions, she made sure the ingredients were listed in order of addition, then sat back, eyeing the sheet. As sick and twisted as the Borgia witch had been, Hermione had to concede the woman had been very progressive for her time, a proactive-feminist who was protective of her intellectual work in an era before copyright laws were known. Now all she had to do was craft an extremely complex poison without killing herself, or poisoning anyone else.

Other than a little scrap of Lord Voldemort's fetid soul, of course.

Joy.

...

Mine...

You are mine, Russel Fawkeson. However long you live, wherever you may go...whoever you might be...you...are...mine.

And she bit the inside of his thigh possessively, pushing her finger up into his rectum, probing for his prostate gland...

Hermione jerked awake, sweating and trembling. Crookshanks protested in a sleepy grumble when she sat up, twisting further onto his back next to her pillow, barely visible in the sodium-orange city glow shining through the partially open curtains. Shuddering, Hermione braced her elbows on her knees and her forehead on her palms, wishing she hadn't remembered that fervent vow. A vow she'd made to her husband.

A vow she'd made to Severus Snape.

I believe that a man or a woman can change, if they conscientiously strive to change.

You're a fucking hypocrite, Hermione, for resisting your situation. That's what you are. A fucking hypocrite.

Flopping onto her back beside her cat made Crookshanks meow crankily again, his eyes narrowing and his ears folding flat. He looked cute with his paws dangling to either side of his chest and belly, but cranky. Apparently he was unhappy that his silly human was bouncing all over the bed at an hour when she should be peacefully asleep.

She knew exactly how he felt, being cranky at herself, too, but unfortunately her ears hadn't been able to fold down since her second year.

...

This time, Crookshanks went flying with a *rowr* of surprise, leaping off the bed as Hermione woke with a scream. For one still moment, she sat upright on her bed, eyes wide and unseeing, then she collapsed over her knees, crying. Two nightmares in a row. This one was far worse than the other had been, though.

She'd been tormenting Severus Snape in her dream, wearing fine, rich clothes, real jewels that outshone the cache she'd found in the junk-room back at Hogwarts, seated on velvet and gilt furniture, while he groveled and wept in filthy tattered rags, begging for a Knut.

It had been a nightmare, the kind that stabbed her in what she thought was a soft, tender heart for most of the creatures of the world, wizarding or otherwise.

Another scrap of memory surfaced.

Who else can I trust, if not my most beloved wife?

She was crying even harder from that mocking memory when her bedroom door flew open. He'd said that to her in trusting her with his Gringotts funds. It wasn't the question of him being trustworthy or not that tormented her. In the end, she couldn't control what he did or didn't do, only influence to a degree. It was the thought of *herself* not being trustworthy that tormented her each night.

Warm hands grabbed her shoulders, shaking her gently. "--Hermione! Hermione, wake up! What's wrong?"

It was Harry. She must've awakened him with her scream. He wasn't the only one in her room, Hermione realized as she struggled to control her sobs. She'd summoned Ron, too, sinking onto the foot of her bed with a concerned frown, though he was careful to not touch her. Molly and Arthur peered at her, standing behind Harry in their dressing gowns, and Tonks had shown up in the doorway wearing a cropped teeshirt and flannel pyjama bottoms, her coloured hair spiked with sleepiness but her eyes awake and alert, her wand gripped in her hand.

For one distracted moment, Hermione realized that Tonks *finally* looked like a competent, dangerous Auror. Then her breath escaped her in a shuddering gasp and she choked on another bout of crying for a few moments, while Harry awkwardly rubbed her back and Molly summoned a box of tissues, tutting and fussing over her. Slowly, her crying eased and her emotions calmed...until Hermione realized that she had people who loved her, who cared enough to rouse from their sleep and comfort her when she had a nightmare.

No one cared about Severus Snape, now that Albus Dumbledore was dead.

Her heart, always tender towards others--her campaign for the better treatment of house-elves was only one example--had been fighting her head, which knew the terrible things the man had done. She had to be an adult, to be cool, detached, in control...which she'd been interpreting as strong, distant, cold, even ruthless. She *had* to be strong; there was no getting around that one...but she would have to find a way that wasn't cold. She didn't want to be cold.

Dumbledore had said Snape had a passionate nature, but it could equally apply to herself. And it wasn't in her passionate nature to be as cruel as she'd been in that dream. Held in Harry's arms as he sat on the edge of the bed, blowing her nose on yet another tissue, Hermione sniffed and accepted that. It was a dichotomy: she didn't want to be ruthless, but she would have to be, just to be able to deal with a ruthless man. *Strength does not equal cruelty...there are ways to be strong without being emotionless. My emotions do not make me weak...*

Molly was ushering her son and husband out of the room, now that Hermione had calmed down. Harry lingered long enough to urge her onto her back, murmuring, "D'you

think you can sleep now, Hermione? I'd stay, or maybe Tonks could, if you need company. Maybe a light? Nothing too bright; you do need your sleep, right now."

Hermione sniffed and wiped at her face with a fresh tissue. "...A light would be good."

"Do you want to talk about it?" he offered, tossing the dirty tissues into the wastebasket between her bed and the vanity desk, before turning up one of the gas-lamps. Tonks left, leaving the door ajar as he sat back down beside Hermione again. "You know, your nightmare?"

"I...I didn't like the person I was, in the dream. Cold and cruel towards someone. A terrible person."

That made Harry chuckle, and he awkwardly kissed her on the forehead. "You could never be cold and cruel towards anyone, Hermione. It just isn't in your nature. Bossy, yes. Authoritative, yes. Study schedules up one side and down the other, yes," he teased her, rumpling her hair, "but you're not by nature cruel."

"I hope I never am," she agreed quietly, thinking about his words. Bossy. She could do bossy. Bossy was strong, without being cruel...

He gave her a lopsided smile and patted her shoulder. "You'll make a great mum, you know. Whatever happens, with the war and all, I'll help you through this. We all will. The little one will have so many honorary aunts and uncles--

"--The little *what*?" Hermione asked, sitting up again. "Harry, what are you blathering about?"

Green eyes blinked in uncertainty. "Your...you know...that you're going to be a mum. You're pregnant."

Her jaw dropped. She was speechless...for about three seconds. "...I'm *WHAT*?"

Harry flinched, and Tonks came hurrying back to the doorway at Hermione's shout. "What's wrong?"

"Ron figured it out," Harry offered as Hermione gaped at him. "The nausea from the smells, having to go see Madam Pomfrey about...erm...feminine problems, how odd you've been acting and feeling lately."

Hermione closed her gaping mouth. She licked her lips, then opened them again. "--Harry James Potter-Granger, I am most definitely, assuredly, confidently, without a *single* doubt in mine *or* Madam Pomfrey's mind, *NOT pregnant!* ...You go tell that imbecilic roommate of yours that I am *not* stupid enough to get pregnant in the middle of a gods-be-damned *war!* *OUT!*"

Flushing bright red, deeply embarrassed, Harry mumbled an apology and escaped as quickly as he could. Tonks lingered in the doorway, grinning. "...Watcher, 'Mione! You might wanna 'pologize to him in the morning for scorching his tail so badly."

Hermione rubbed her hands over her still damp face. "Gods, they're *all* imbeciles. *All* men are idiots of the *highest* degree!"

"Yeah," the older witch agreed, ambling over to the bed and plopping down beside Hermione with a bounce, "but we love 'em anyway." The pink-haired witch snorted. "Any woman could've told 'em you've got bloke-troubles, not baby-troubles. Take Remus, for instance. The man folds his clothes when he puts them in his laundry hamper. His *dirty* clothes! Mind you, he ain't got much, so he takes care of it, but...it's dirty clothes!

"And he's terrified of me getting pregnant. I think it's a good idea to not get knocked up while there's a war on, myself, but he's worried I'd have a little baby furry pop out of me, what with Bill liking rare meat and all just because that bastard bit him in his human form--we'll not even touch the tender lovmakin', which is nice, but sometimes a girl likes it rough an' randy, too," Tonks added candidly.

She eyed the open door, and flicked her wand at it, closing the panel, then dropped her voice to a low murmur.

"It's actually nice, having a girl my age who's getting some, too. I can't imagine this sort of girl-talk with Molly or Arabella, y'know? But...erm...don't you just love it when they nip you with their teeth? And a little love-spank on the flanks?" She shivered, sighing and smiling. "Makes me think o' some naughty teacher-student detention-spanking. I think I really missed out, not getting' to see him as a professor..."

Hermione stared at the other witch for a moment. Then her mind cracked and she started laughing and sobbing at the same time. She was *in* a bloody teacher-student scenario! Or had been in one, with those blasted 'Lessons'... Tonks shifted closer and wrapped her arms around Hermione, hugging her.

"There, there... Y'know, you and I are in like positions. Remmy can't visit as often as I'd like, given his work with the pack, and you have to wait for when Russel has a few moments to spare. My bloke's constantly in danger of being ripped apart by Fenrir, yet he longs to tear the bastard's throat out for what 'e did to 'im. And your bloke's in the same position with the Basilisk Bastard. We're terrified out of our wits for our men-folk, an' we can't do a think t' help 'em, except give 'em all the love we can. Erm...assuming you love your bloke," Tonks amended. "You did seem to have that happy woman-in-love glow about you, 'til the past few days."

Hermione choked on a sob. She'd been in love, alright. Up until she'd had her illusions shattered.

"Hey," Tonks soothed her, rubbing her back. "You don't stop lovin' him, you hear me? Or if you don't, start. Love's the most powerful thing in th' world. My Remmy's lookin' better, now that he has my love to anchor him. He says he doesn't want it, that he's afraid he'll hurt me...but I say what's the difference, if I gain a fuzzy face an' pointy teeth through a scratch, or through my own shape-changin'? I'm with him, and that gives 'im the strength to keep goin' on. It gives me strength, too, knowin' he loves me.

"I'm terrified of losing him, but I know what my life was like when I didn't 'ave 'im. Love is worth the pain. Love is worth whatever pain you have to suffer, whatever risk you have to take, just to know even one gentle touch from your lover, eh?" Tonks wrinkled her nose as Hermione pulled back and stared at her. "...Sorry. I'm not very good at waxin' poetic. But that's how I feel, even if it sounds stupid."

Love is worth whatever pain you have to suffer, whatever risk you have to take, just to know even one gentle touch from your lover.

It hurt. Hermione felt it like a stab to her chest. The truth hurt. Rubbing at her sternum, she sniffed to clear her nose. "No, it's not stupid, Tonks. It's the smartest thing I've ever heard... Thanks."

"You don't look too happy," the Auror pointed out. "Are you sure about it?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. You just helped me resolve a problem I've been having."

"--Bloke troubles," Tonks agreed sagely, catching on to her meaning. A squeeze of Hermione's shoulders, and she released the younger witch. "Can you get back t' sleep, now?"

"I will, in a little bit. I need to sit and think for a while. Plan strategies on how to deal with my 'bloke-trouble'," Hermione added, gesturing at her temple with a finger. It occurred to her belatedly that she was making the sign for 'crazy' by doing so, and laughed involuntarily.

Tonks grinned at her. "That's th' spirit! ...I know a spell or two for Transfigurin' lacy things out of your tidy-whities, if you ever want th' chance to hex that Russel fellow of yours between the eyes. Blokes can't think straight, when your knickers are naughty."

"...I'll keep that in mind. Goodnight, Tonks."

"G'night, Hermione." Rising, she left the room.

Hermione sat on the bed for a while, then rose and settled herself at her vanity table. Picking up her quill, she found a scroll, and wrote sideways on it in two lines of large, neat lettering, *Love is worth whatever pain you have to suffer, whatever risk you have to take, just to know even one gentle touch from your love*. Picking up her wand, Hermione enchanted the scroll, stretching it out and fixing it to the wall over her makeshift desk, removing and supplanting the forest landscape painting that had been hung there.

This wasn't the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, her failed campaign to make house-elves' lives better. Hermione acknowledged and gave up on the idea of freeing house-elves, since most were happy to serve, though she'd never give up on her campaign of encouraging others to treat them better. No, this wasn't anything like S.P.E.W.; this was a far more personal campaign, and it was one she dared not lose. This was a goal large enough to stop the conflicted arguing of her heart, body and mind: the salvation of her husband's soul.

...

"Goddamnit!"

She was a coward, and a failure.

Flicking her wand, Hermione stopped the meltdown of her third cauldron, disintegrated the ingredients that had caused the problem, and scrubbed the air inside the heavily warded work-area with cleansing charms. She was taking every precaution she knew: heavy protective clothing, the Bubblehead Charm to provide her with clean air, wards to contain any possible explosion, meltdown, acidic reaction, toxic cloud, whatever. She'd even carved herself a translation amulet so that her eyes wouldn't itch while trying to read the instructions. Following every single step in the book, researched over and over, practiced mentally in advance, double-checked to the point of having memorized the ruddy thing--and she still read directly from the pages to be absolutely sure--and every single time she got to this point, just three days into the brewing process...the ruddy flipping cauldron *melted*. That was the failure part.

And she still hadn't reached out to her husband, though he'd sent her two more Ring of Truth warnings in the past two weeks. She hadn't done anything to start her campaign of how to handle and manage Severus 'Russel' Snape. That was the coward part.

Dropping onto the lab-stool the Room of Requirement had provided, along with everything an alchemist could wish for in this willpower-summoned room, Hermione accepted her fate. She couldn't brew the Anima Te. She *knew* that Lucrezia's Diary allowed her to see every last step of the process; the locking-spell *told* her she could see everything...but she could brew nothing. There was something she was missing, some essential knowledge she just didn't have.

She wasn't a ruddy Potions Mistress.

Severus Snape might not 'have the eye', but she was fairly certain even Signorina Borgia's spell would admit that he had 'the hand', when it came to brewing. Hermione sat in thought for a while, working on a solution to her problem. She had to cure her cowardice in facing him again, if she wanted to cure her failure in brewing the soul-poisoning tea. Once she'd convinced him--somehow--to help her, she would need some sort of place to sit and read the steps of the spell from, like a podium, where his gaze wouldn't accidentally fall on the pages and blind him.

A podium with an angled partition-wall, facing out into the room so that she could watch him work. Maybe even help him. She wasn't incompetent when it came to potions. Far from it. She just...she just didn't have the *knack* for potion-making that he did. Her expertise lay in the field of 'foolish wand-waving'.

Sighing, she extinguished the flames under the half-melted cauldron with a flick of her wand, and scoured its twisted, slumped surface with another charm. A hard bit of wishing, and it vanished, consigned to the junk-room version of this place, along with its two predecessors. She'd have to go out and buy a new one...and that thought led her to the great question of *where* Severus would help her brew the ruddy potion. Certainly not in Death Eater territory, and not at the Burrow or at Headquarters. The Shrieking Shack was relatively neutral territory, but it was hardly a clean environment, and they'd have to bring in all the equipment they needed, and endure a very cold, blustery winter in a building that trembled with each gust and leaked like a sieve.

The best place, really, was right here at the school, in the Room of Requirement. There were a couple of problems with that, however. For one, she'd have to convince Minerva to allow 'Russel' access to Hogwarts. Somehow, she didn't think Minerva would want to allow him onto the grounds without knowing his true identity, and Hermione was dead-certain she'd never allow Severus Snape to set foot on the grounds ever again. And the other consideration was, she didn't think Severus would be all that happy to set foot on Hogwarts property, either. Hermione chose to believe he wasn't happy about having to kill his former employer, his confidante. She was fairly sure he'd have several unpleasant memories to fight, in coming back here.

That thought led her to a startling one. Eyes wide, Hermione stared blankly across the room. *And what will he do for employment, after the war is over? Assuming...oh, god, how can he be employed? He's still Public Enemy Number Two... Unless...we're in a war. Soldiers in a war have to kill, and are ordered to kill; they're ordered to do whatever it takes to stop the enemy. Once the war is over...they're not hauled into a trial for murder.*

It's a slim defence, but it's the only one he's got. I don't want to lose him to a Dementor's Kiss, just because everyone hates him for what he's done, without knowing why he did what he did. She paused for a moment as a new thought struck her, then winced in pain. *...Oh, bloody hell. I've got more interviews to give to Rita Skeeter...*

She was never going to be rid of the beetle-Animagus journalist. Yellow journalist, at that. Paparazzi journalist, even. *Oh, stuff it, Hermione. Insulting the woman isn't going to get an article written. A whole flurry of articles. The Truth of The War. Drag the story out of Harry, and the other Order members, and you could have a whole Special Edition of the paper...*

It would probably come down to that, but that dragged up another pain of her situation. *Harry and Snape. They hate each other. God, he was a consummate actor, being so nice to Harry at Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour that day... I'm going to get caught in the middle of that mess,* she acknowledged grimly. *And they will fight over me. They'll demand that I choose one or the other of them.*

Damn.

She was swearing a lot more these days, even if mostly only in her head. With honest provocation, admittedly, but if her mother could hear her thoughts, Daphne Granger would be reaching for the extra-strong mouthwash, the stuff that burned and tasted nasty. Sighing, Hermione acknowledged that she also had to start planning where she and Harry would be spending the holidays, now that she'd thought about her mother. Ron had bubbled with enthusiasm for his opportunity to spend his time at the Burrow, now a very safe haven, thanks to the Fidelius Charm. It would probably be a good idea to close down and ward her parents' house against intrusion over the holidays, and have them share the Weasley's hospitality...

But first, she had to convince the Headmistress to allow 'Russel Fawkeson' onto the school grounds. Standing, Hermione tucked the Diary into her book-bag and headed for the exit, confident that the Room of Requirement would hold all of the ingredients she'd purchased safe until her return. She'd need a new cauldron, though...

There's only one person who can help me convince Professor McGonagall to allow Russel past the Fidelius Charm. Hermione acknowledged as she padded through the night-quiet halls. *And that's getting Professor Dumbledore on my side.*

Harry and Ron were down in the library, chastised by her lecture over the Draco incident and feeling guilty enough to be studying more defensive and offensive spells with a diligence she'd only seen them apply willingly right before their end-of-year exams. Maybe they were finally growing up. She knew she was, though the whole process was proving hard to manage, and painful to endure.

"Winnie the Pooh, and Tigger, too," she recited at the stone gargoyle entrance to the Headmistress' study. Minerva had finally given up and used passwords that her

prefect students could remember, names from children's books that were popular in both the Muggle and wizarding worlds. The stone creature grated aside, allowing Hermione to step onto the upward-spiraling stair. She heard a clock chiming midnight as she rapped on the door to McGonagall's study. There was no answer, so she tried the doorknob. It was unlocked, so she stepped inside.

Lighting a few candles, Hermione approached the portrait of Dumbledore. He was napping in his armchair. She was tempted to use the same painting-zapping spell that Professor Flitwick had used, but settled for speaking instead. He was probably just shamming.

"Professor Dumbledore? Professor Dumbledore! Professor!"

He jolted awake, blinking and wiping at his eyes. Maybe he'd really been asleep. She didn't know if portraits had to sleep, or not. "...Hermione, my dear! What brings you by at this hour?"

"I need...I need Russel's help, in brewing a potion in the Room of Requirement. You know why. But I need to convince Professor McGonagall to allow him access to the School grounds...so I need you to speak up for him, to vouch for him without letting her learn of his identity. You know the why of *that*, too."

"Yes. Yes, I do," he agreed soberly. "Is everything...alright...between the two of you? Have you given my words some thought, then?"

"I've given them some thought," Hermione admitted. A mirthless sound escaped her, and she dragged her fingers through her hair, pushing it back from her forehead. "I've given it a *lot* of thought."

"...And?" he prompted her. "If you didn't have a project in need of his assistance...?"

"I've found a reason to deal with him. A motivation to make me want to handle him, as his liaison," she admitted dryly. "And as his wife. Unfortunately, if and when we win this war, everything will be torn apart at that point in time. Either he'll be a fugitive, or he'll be a prisoner, and probably given the Kiss. It's not exactly a happy future to look forward to, is it?"

"Just have an eyewitness tell me so as soon as Lord Voldemort is dead, and I pledge I will do my best to help out at Russel's trial. But enough of that subject. Isolde? Isolde!" His voice woke the portrait of a stately, grey-haired woman in a mid-nineteenth century gown a few frames from his. "Isolde, would you be a dear and go into Minerva's room to wake her for us?"

Nodding, the woman exited her painting, traveling through several others as she left the study. It didn't take long for Minerva to arrive, clad in a thick velvet dressing gown wrapped snugly over what looked like a floor-length flannel nightgown, her grey-streaked black hair braided under a flannel stocking-cap. She headed straight for Hermione, who was standing near Dumbledore's portrait.

"You have news?"

"A request. The potion I'm working on... I need Russel's help," Hermione admitted, wincing at the blunt baldness of her request. "So I'm asking you if you could please give your permission for him to come onto the school grounds. There really isn't anywhere else that's safer to brew this potion than in the Room of Requirement. Not without buying a ton of equipment that the Room could just conjure for us."

"If you need a second pair of hands, then why don't you just ask Ronald, or Harry?" Minerva challenged her skeptically. "They already have access to the school! There's no need to allow a spy into Hogwarts, even if he *is* on our side. Not when the Dark Lord could read his mind and use him to spy upon us! I see no reason to compromise the safety of our children!"

"Albus can vouch for him," Hermione protested, glancing up at the portrait on the wall. And gasped as she caught the elderly wizard poking one forefinger through the circle made by the other touching his thumb. "--*Headmaster!*"

"--*Albus!*" Minerva shouted at the same time, her hand going to the base of her throat. She looked for a moment like she was staving off a heart-murmur, then swallowed and cleared her throat, while the unabashed wizard folded his painted hands in his painted lap and smiled benignly. "Well! Well... If...if *that's* what you need him for... I cannot believe you just--! I'm *speechless!* For shame!"

Hermione wanted to hit her former Headmaster for the crude gesture. Then hug him for the brilliant why-it-*has*-to-be-Russel idea. Then hit him again anyway, for embarrassing her like that. "I was *trying* to be discreet about what is needed, Professor Dumbledore," she hedged tersely. "That was very ungentlemanly of you!"

"Perhaps, and I apologize for shocking and offending you...but sometimes it's better to draw someone a picture of an actual hedge, than merely beat around the bush?"

Hermione's face flamed again. Minerva cleared her throat once, twice, and on the third time got it working again. "...Very well. I'll have a note from the Secret Keeper readied for you in the morning. Make sure on your life it is only delivered into Russel's hands, and that it's destroyed as soon as he reads it. There'll be a spell for that on it, but I want you to guarantee it."

"You can trust me to take every precaution, Professor," Hermione reassured the older witch. "If I could think of a better way around this problem, I wouldn't be asking for it."

...

She had the letter, safely tucked into her pocket. Hermione still didn't know who the Secret Keeper of Hogwarts was, but that was fine by her. The safety of the students was paramount, and though she would have Sigurd to protect her from physical harm, if she were captured, Voldemort could still attempt to read her mind before the dragon spirited her away. It was better for her to not know.

But she couldn't summon him *to* Hogwarts to receive the letter. And Headquarters was no better. Both were Secret-Kept; he wouldn't be able to find either place. Hermione briefly considered the Shrieking Shack, but the weather was still miserably cold. They'd have a white Christmas, too, unless a thawing-snap occurred in the next week or so. It was snowing at the moment, adding to the inch of grainy white currently covering the ground up in that corner of Scotland, or it had been when she'd Floo'd out of the Headmistress' office.

She thought about a nice, safe, public meeting place, like the ice cream parlour. But what they had to discuss wasn't meant for prying eyes and straining ears. In the end, Hermione could really only think of one place to go to bargain with the man. The hotel-room. Back to the scene of their last, non-consensual encounter.

The kiss in the Shack was nothing, compared to that.

He still had to pay for forcing himself on her. Kind-hearted or not, quest-driven or not, the man had to understand--the man had to be *taught*--the lesson that, when a wife says 'no', she *meant* 'no'...and that the meaning of 'no' had to be respected. So she stalled a little while longer, culling through some of her books for any hexes or charms that might be able to help her with that lesson. It wasn't until she'd cracked open the Diary in desperation and flicked through its pages that she found something she could use.

Reading all of it, down through the fine-print, Hermione memorized the spell, practiced the wand-movements and the pronunciation and inflections, and made sure she knew how to cancel the hex, too. It wouldn't do her any good to teach him a lesson, if she couldn't undo the damage done so that he could prove later that he knew how to behave himself. Lucrezia Borgia had been an evil woman, but there was no doubting she was a feminist, and a genius. Hermione now had the perfect way of controlling her husband, the next time he got out of line...if she could get up the nerve to use it.

She did think about just handling the matter via the rings, but she couldn't guarantee that he would be alone, that way. Unless he was physically in the same room as her, she had no way of knowing who might be reading over his shoulder. Somehow, Hermione didn't think it would be so easy as saying, 'I need your help in brewing a really complicated potion,' and him saying, 'Alright'. He knew she needed the Lucrezia Diary for a potion within its pages. She'd have to reassure him she would keep the book hidden from his direct view at all times, since she would have to give him verbal directions on what to do, thanks to that anti-copying problem.

Still, it took her quite a bit of time to prepare herself for going there. And it took her quite a bit of courage, too. It was almost lunchtime, in fact, before Hermione got the courage to actually Apparate herself to the kitchenette-hotel room. Banging into the place, she opened her eyes, squeezed shut along with the rest of her body--and grabbed frantically for her wand.

Severus was already there, seated at the table, and he was grabbing for his wand, too.

They faced off at the same time. Neither had cast a spell, but both were tensed to do so. Hermione blinked and took in his appearance, black frock-coat and trousers, black hair, sallow-pale skin. Give him professorial robes, and he could've been seated at his desk in his classroom. But he didn't have essay-scrolls in front of him. Instead, it looked like he'd been working on a jigsaw puzzle.

Apparently there were parts of Russel she'd seen during his performance that were honest parts of Severus, too.

He didn't lower his wand, but he did curl up one side of his mouth as he took in her blue blouse and darker blue jumper, her omnipresent jeans and comfortable trainers. She couldn't tell if his expression was a smile or a sneer, though. Probably the latter, given the way he addressed her. "Well. What do *you* want, wife?"

Hermione steadied herself mentally, fortified herself with a breath, and laid her offer on the table. So to speak. "I was going to summon you here, but as you're already here, well, that's just convenient, isn't it?"

"That depends on what you need."

"Your potions expertise."

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Taking a risk, Hermione lowered her wand. He studied her for a long moment, making her nervous, but finally lowered his, too. "Go on."

She wasn't quite sure where to begin, now that she was facing him so unexpectedly. "...What, exactly, did the Lucrezia Diary say to you, when you first opened it? Before it blinded you."

"It was in Italian. I didn't exactly have the chance to memorize the matter, before I was blinded," he reminded her tersely.

"Well, it won't blind me, because I'm a fellow female...but while I can read the potion's instructions, I'm lacking in some essential knowledge, some *knack* to potions-brewing, and I can't get any further than the fifth step of the process. The Diary says I have 'the eye' but not 'the hand'. You might not be able to see the pages with any safety, but if you don't have 'the hand', then no one in Great Britain does. Probably no one in all of Europe now alive, either," Hermione admitted. "I want you to make the Anima Te. I'll read you the instructions, since there's a spell against anyone writing them down, but I can't do it on my own. I can't ask anyone else to try; there's too much danger from an accidental poisoning at several steps along the way. I've been working under several very strict security measures as it is."

Sitting back in his chair, he folded his arms and crossed his legs, regarding her with an arched brow. "So, the know-it-all needs the greasy git's help? How *badly* do you need my assistance? After all, if the brew is that dangerous, you're asking me to lay my life on the line for this draught."

Hermione wasn't about to promise him anything. She might as well enspell herself so that she was bound naked to the bed for him. Instead, she wielded the one weapon she was sure he couldn't counter. "This potion is absolutely necessary for destroying the Dark Lord. If you want to succeed, you *will* help me."

"So you say."

"So I *know*. And do not ask me why it will help. If he reads the answer in your mind, he will kill you," Hermione reminded him. "This is the next step in the process of weakening him, and it will take months to complete. If we do not do so, we will not be able to defeat him. There is no way to get around this task. The sooner you agree, the sooner we can get started. As for risks...I'm asking you to take the exact same risks I'm willing to take. Risks that I've already faced three times before. Do you help me? Or do we lose the war?"

He didn't budge. Her best logic laid on the line, and he didn't budge. Apparently her best wasn't enough for the bastard.

"Not good enough," he murmured, studying her with an unnerving, calculating stare. "Try again."

Bastard. Arching a brow, Hermione faced him down. "...You want to negotiate? Fine. Tell me what you want. We'll see if it's acceptable, or not."

Unfolding his body, he rose from his seat at the table. Two deliberate strides, and he stopped within a foot of her, towering over her with his height and his dark attire and his presence. Hermione forced herself to bravely stay where she was, to not even sway back. The last thing she wanted to do was let him think she was weak.

"What do I want?" he murmured, staring down into her honey-brown eyes, pinning her with his obsidian-sharp gaze, "I want you..."

She could live with that. Her mind and her heart were finally able to agree with her body on that one. Until he continued.

"...to bear my child."

Blackness flooded her senses, washing away the world beneath her feet.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (**HBP SPOILERS**)

Someone was wetting her brow and blowing air across the dampness, cooling her skin. It allowed her to focus her thoughts as she swam back to consciousness. Something bad had just happened, something which she couldn't quite remember. Something told her she didn't want to remember what it was, just yet. Wet fingertips stroked her forehead again, accompanied by another puff of coffee-scented breath.

Cracking open her eyes, she looked up into the face of her former professor. He looked vaguely concerned, not quite as impassive or cold as she might've thought...but the impression was only a fleeting one. As soon as he realized she was awake and watching him, the faint pinching of his brow smoothed. "Are you going to be hysterical, again?"

Memory rushed back into her brain. She *wanted* to be hysterical, given the bombshell of his demand, but Hermione was made of sterner stuff than that. "I didn't get *hysterical*," she snapped, pushing to sit up in his lap. He was cradling her in the chair at the dinette table, and assisted her with a push of the arm at her back, though he kept her from standing up just yet. Hermione didn't protest verbally; sitting up alone made her head spin. If she'd stood, she would've collapsed again. She saw fit to remind him of that fact. Tartly. "I *fainted*, you twit. There's a big difference between screaming and carrying on, and just dropping senseless at someone's feet!"

"Like you're not screaming and carrying on, right now?" he dared--he *dared*--to tease her.

It was so tempting to throw something at him, like the glass of water he'd used to dampen her brow and bring her back to her senses. Hermione tightened her mouth, resisting the urge. Instead, she retorted, "*Deal* with it! *Why* do you want a child? You *hate* children!"

He met her glare levelly. "I don't hate children. I hate idiots. And I told you I had *plans* for you."

Hermione felt the blood draining from her face at that. It wasn't so bad that she fainted again, but it was chillingly ominous to hear him say that. Poppy's commentary from a few weeks ago resurfaced in her mind. "What are you doing with my eggs? My ovum!" she repeated as he stared at her blankly. "Whatever contraceptive spell you used, it's stolen the eggs out of my body! What Dark Magic are you using them for?"

Mouth tightening, he stayed silent.

"Answer me! Tell me what you've done to me, Severus Snape, or so help me--!"

"--It is a *fertility* spell," he growled. "It holds *our* ability to procreate in abeyance, until we drink the potion I have made. Then it will ensure that you get pregnant once every three years with however many *eggs* the spell has managed to save, and the sperm to fertilize them...whether or not I am still alive to sire them in person." He grabbed and held her in place as she struggled to escape his lap, one arm bruising her ribs, the other crushing her curls, forcing her to look at him. "There *is no* immortality, other than this! I have no knowledge of even where to begin to create a Philosopher's Stone, and I have not the depths of inhumanity within me to do to me whatever the Dark Lord has done to himself.

"There is no immortality, other than the legacy of an heir! And I *will* have an heir out of you, *wife*," Snape growled into her ear as she managed to turn her head to the side, shocked and distressed by his ferocity. "You will pledge through the rings to give me full access to the delights of your delectable body, you will pledge to carry my children and care for them to the best of your ability--for I will not have *my* children abandoned in some orphanage--and you will raise them to honour their father, as well as love their mother. Or we have *no deal*.

"Your brains," he murmured, his voice gentling in tone, turning coaxing, seductive. "My intellect. Both of our vast talents and aptitudes for magic. The legacy of our genetics, combined in our children, will have a lasting impact on the wizarding world. *That* is immortality: my flesh and blood living to attain heights unimagined, in a world freed from the lash of evil now bloodying its back.

"Anyone with clear enough vision to see past their own prejudices can tell that an infusion of fresh blood into the wizarding world *strengthens* that world; inbreeding only leads to Squibs and insanity. Albus is a half-blood; the Dark Lord is a half-blood. I am one, myself...and you. You are a jewel found in the dung-heap of mundanity that is the magicless world." The hand pinning her head by her hair eased its grip, gently massaging her scalp. "A pearl coughed from the mouth of a swine, a diamond found in the crop of a chicken...no offense to your parents."

She tensed at the near-insult, then shivered as the brush of his lips just below her ear distracted her from her anger.

"Swear it on the rings...and I will swear in turn to brew this potion for you."

Gathering her scattered wits, Hermione focused on what he was demanding, not on what he was doing. She twisted a little in his lap, encountering a lump that felt like an erection. Ignoring it, she snaked one arm behind his neck as he licked the flesh behind her earlobe. "...You're asking that I accept a life-long responsibility, in exchange for one measly potion that will take only three and a half months to brew. I don't think so. I want a better recompense than that." Her fingers tightened firmly in his hair, tugging him back by his scalp so that their eyes met. "Here are *my* conditions. No more pulling my hair. 'No' *means no*. Even a wife has a right to say 'no'.

"If you want sex with me, you'd damned well better *coax* me into it, not *force* me into it--and we *will* discuss your punishment for that later," she added in a feminine version of his own growl. It was the only warning he would get. Where she was getting this inner strength from, Hermione had no idea; right now, she had the bit firmly in her teeth and was galloping fearlessly with it straight into the midnight of his eyes. "In addition, you will leave the surly bastard aspects of yourself elsewhere, whenever you're around me and we're alone together.

"If you have to play the part of Snape the Murderer in public, so be it, but I want the parts of you that were also Russel--and *don't* lie to me and say all of it was just Masterpiece Theatre-class acting." Tightening her grip on his hair, she watched his eyes narrow a tiny bit in a wince. "Tit for tat, *husband*. Treat me kindly, and I will treat you kindly. Treat me like an *arsehole* again, and I will make your life *alive hell*. Understand?"

He winced again when she tightened her grip as hard as she could, before releasing his hair. Black locks slid forward, concealing the edge of his face, not quite blocking the glare from his eyes. "There is nothing you can do to me that is worse than what I've already endured."

"You've obviously never lived with an enraged woman, before," she purred back, feeling like a lioness had control of her spirit. "You can either comply with my demands, have your legacy-child, brew that potion, and sever the chains that bind you to your so-called master...or you can remain a slave to Voldie-arse for the rest of your life," Hermione reminded him, watching him flinch reflexively at the near-miss of the Dark Lord's name. The lioness had swiped her claws, and drawn a few beads of blood with that one.

His brow arched. "And merely exchange his chains for *yours*?"

"Tit for tat," Hermione purred, leaning so close, the tips of their noses brushed, her breath feathering over his lips. "You're asking me to chain myself to you and your legacy. If it helps any, remember that the kinder you are to me, the kinder I'll be to you. Think of it as putting a fur liner in the shackles. That's a far better deal than the bleeding-raw one you've got with *him*."

He leaned back, studying her warily. "How do I know this potion will do what you say?"

Lifting her left hand, Hermione leapt in faith, placing her thumb on the metal at the base of her third finger. "Severus Selenius Snape, the Infusio di Anima Te is the very next step in destroying the Dark Lord."

He slid his hand from around her back, studying his ring and the words scribed from its scales. Dark eyes glanced at light brown, inscrutable aside from a hint of curiosity.

"And the rest of it?"

"Severus Selenius Snape, I swear I, and a few select others, know *all* of the steps involved in destroying the Dark Lord permanently." She removed her thumb from the magic-heated metal. "But you'd better keep *that* information buried deeper than your darkest secret."

He snorted at that. "The moment I forget how to keep a secret around him is the moment I am dead, but for the time it would take him to break my mind. Sooner than that, if I can manage it." He studied her for a moment, then asked, "I trust we have a deal?"

"...In writing, via the rings," Hermione asserted, shifting to leave his lap. To her relief, he let her rise unhindered, and even rose and fetched notepads and a pen from one of the end-tables near the loveseat. She drew her own pen, and accepted one of the pads, seating herself at an angle to him. For a moment, nerves made her hand tremble. She'd survived the initial bargaining session, the verbal battle of wills between them. Now she had to survive the written contract. "Severus Selenius Snape," she recited, bracing the half-sheet notepad under her left hand. "Item by item, shall we?"

"Hermione Jane Snape." He paused, holding his pen over the page. "...After you. You're the one who wants the potion brewed."

"Bastard." The mutter escaped her before she could stop it.

"Tut tut, such language. Consider it an addendum. I want sweet-nothings from my wife."

"Sod off. Only if I get them from *you*, too. *I, Hermione Jane Snape*," she stated aloud as she wrote on the page, "*agree to bear Severus Selenius Snape's child--*"

"--*Children*," he corrected her. "There's at least two ovum stored in that potion, right now."

Hermione stopped writing, lifting her tawny gaze to stare at him. She rather fancied her expression to be something like the look of a lioness who was ticked at a nearby, tasty gazelle who had dared to sneeze and disturb her sleep. "I am not going to be *your* version of Molly bloody Weasley. Get that thought out of your head *right now*. *One* child."

"I cannot divide the potion in half, nor modify it. Two consecutive children, spaced three years apart." His gaze remained implacable. Set in stone as solidly as Hogwarts itself. "A potion for a potion."

"Bastard!"

That arched his brow again. "Is that what you call an endearment, *bitch*?"

Hermione bared her teeth. "Sweet beloved husband. When were you planning on stopping the collection? Nine children? Ten?"

"Three. If I had remained just Russel in your eyes, I would've asked it of you as a *Christmas* present," he sneered.

Her anger crumpled like a castle wall struck by a solid cannon-shot. First, she snorted. Then her shoulders shook. Finally, she dropped her head onto her arms, and howled with laughter. Hermione had no idea why that was so funny, but it was. Her humor didn't last long, and when it faded, she stayed with her head down a little while longer, thinking about the gravity of her situation, and his demand. Finally, she lifted her head, her features flushed but composed.

"*Two* children will cost you." She kept her gaze on the wall across from her, not looking in his direction.

Warily, he enquired, "And the price is...?"

"You will surrender, if I demand it of you." A glance out of the corner of her eye showed him considering her counter-offer with a shuttered, narrow-eyed expression.

"Not until after Voldemort is dead."

"No deal. You can end the contraceptive charm, dump that potion down the drain, and we can go about it the natural way. You want two children out of me, you have to pay the price. You will surrender, Severus Snape, at any time I demand you do so, in exchange for bearing you two children, and so forth, in addition to the Anima Te and your ceasing to be such a surly bastard around me."

His lip curled up in a sneer, but to her surprise, he didn't object any further, just bent his head over his tablet, and wrote. Words seeped onto her own page from his ball-point pen.

I, Severus Selenius Snape, agree to cease being such a surly bastard in private, to brew the Anima Te potion being requested, and to surrender myself into the custody of my wife, Hermione Jane Snape, upon her demand at any point in the future, in exchange for her promise to bear me two children of my own flesh and blood, and to raise them herself with all the care and consideration they are due as our mutual legacy; my wife will also agree to continued sexual congress between the two of us, on the understanding that 'no' means 'no'.

Thumping the point of the pen for the period, he looked up at her, dark eyes burning with challenge for her to complete her own truth-written promises.

Bowing her head, Hermione wrote them through her own ring.

I, Hermione Jane Snape, agree to bear two children for Severus Selenius Snape, to help raise them with all the care and consideration they are due as our mutual legacy, and agree to continued sexual congress between us, with the understanding that 'no' means 'no', in exchange for my husband ceasing to be such a surly bastard in private towards me, that he surrender himself into my custody should I demand it at any point in time, and that he will brew the Anima Te as requested.

Arching her own brow, she asserted, "...The hair-pulling will be considered part of being a surly bastard towards me."

"Why do I have the feeling you intend to milk the definition of 'surly bastard' for every last drop you can squeeze from its teat?" he muttered, glaring at her.

"Children are a *lifelong* responsibility," Hermione retorted mock-sweetly. "Damned straight I'm going to milk this until it squeals." She looked down at the now-faded notepad, and realized what she'd just committed herself to do. Realized what she'd sworn to Harry wasn't possible. Her face crumpled. "Shite. I really am an imbecile, after all..."

"Care to explain that?"

Hermione sighed roughly, bracing her elbow on the table and her forehead in her hand. "Harry thought I was pregnant, a couple weeks ago. I told him I wasn't, and that only an imbecile would allow herself to be pregnant while there was a war on. And so here it is. Proof positive I'm an idiot--don't worry; I'll go through with it."

A hand appeared in front of her face, even as she heard him stand. "I wouldn't sully my genes by siring a child with an idiot, Jane. But war makes us all more expedient than we would otherwise be."

Sighing, she placed her hand in his, feeling the urge to tremble again. Rising to her feet, she stared at his chest. "...Now?"

"Yes. Now."

She was staring at the same cut of suit he'd worn as a teacher. Possibly even the same one he'd worn the night... Freeing her hand, Hermione turned away. "I can't..."

He grabbed her arm, halting her. "You *promised*."

Hermione cupped her hand to block her peripheral vision. "Not in those clothes!"

"What's wrong with my clothes?"

"Aside from the fact that a fantasy about a teacher-student fling is far different than the reality of it?" Hermione returned tersely, reminded of her conversation with Tonks. "That's probably the suit you fled the school in, and *that's* not a series of memories conducive to *coaxing* me into the right 'mood'."

She heard him sigh heavily, and what sounded like a muttered, "...Oh, for godsake..." and a sizzle of magic. "There. Is that better?"

Turning, she looked at him. He stood in a black version of his Russel garb. Black silk shirt, black-and-grey plaid kilt, black knee-socks. No sporran, and his ankle-boots were the same, not moccasins, but he looked different. Not at all like Snape, though not quite like Russel. ...*Like Severus*, Hermione finally conceded, for even his expression was different, more sober, more guarded, and definitely not smiling. *It's as if his other clothes make him Snape, just as the colourful version of this, with the paler hair and all, makes him Russel...but this could be the amalgamation of the two. The Severus I'm seeking.*

Hermione faced him fully and nodded, bracing herself for what they were about to do. "This will do. It's...it's a good look for you," she added, trying to keep a quaver of nervousness out of her voice. She clasped her hands behind her back as he released her arm. "Not nearly so stern, and...erm...surly-bastardish."

The pained look that pinched his face and rolled his eyes made her choke on a nervous giggle. His eyes narrowed, and she choked again. Whirling away, Hermione covered her mouth, mortified. She didn't want to laugh at a moment like this, but she just couldn't help herself! That sour, rolling-eyes thing he did was just...funny! Probably it was just a form of hysteria over her situation, but Hermione was willing to grasp at anything to make her situation more bearable, right now.

"If you are done laughing, *wife*, it is time to procreate."

That killed her sense of humor. It was such a cold thing to say, it almost felt like he'd dumped a bucket of ice-water down her back. It reminded her of two things: that he wasn't coaxing her into enjoying what she had to do; and that it didn't sound like either of them were doing this with any of the joy that would've accompanied their free will, had they still been Russel and Hermione. And that reminded her of what he'd done to her, when she'd uncovered the truth. Firming her grip on her wand, Hermione braced herself to do what she had to do. A heavy sigh, and she turned to face him.

"*Eunuxis!*"

Dark lightning zapped out of her wand, striking him in the groin. Severus gasped and clutched at the fabric of his kilt; at the same moment, something broke with an explosive *crack*. His head jerked to the side, zeroing in on the source. "--No!"

Lunging at the bedroom nook, he reached the nightstand in four long strides, staring down at the mess of broken glass and seeping, darkening potion that had splattered when the bottle broke. Chunks of transparent brown mixed with the creamy-pink liquid as it rapidly curdled and turned grey. The Potions Master gave the mess an anguished look, then whipped his head around and glared at her with a ferocity that made her breath catch and her body back up a step, bumping into the table.

"*What have you done?*"

"Th-The Eunuch's Curse," Hermione stammered, tightening her grip on her wand as he glared her. "It neutralizes all s-s-sexual potency in the male. And it can only be *undone* by the witch who c-c-cast the spell," she stammered quickly as he stalked toward her, the wand in his fist gripped so tightly, she could see the whiteness of his knuckles even against the alabaster pallor of his skin. Firming her courage, Hermione lifted her chin. "That's your punishment for raping me!"

"You just *destroyed* my potion!" Snape snarled at her, jabbing his wand-hand in the direction of the desk. Potion and bottle vanished, down to the last sliver of glass and the last drop of ash-grey liquid. "You and your two idiot-friends *always* ruin something in my life! That potion was *irreplaceable*! It can only be made with the virgin's blood of the maiden for whom it is used! You have *negated* our agreement--"

"I did not!" Hermione protested quickly, defensively. "You said two children! You didn't say *how* they had to be conceived--and neither did I agree! And I didn't *know* the spell would damage your ruddy potion! I just wanted you to know what it feels like to have your body exploited against your will!"

His left hand slashed down at his groin as he snarled, "There is nothing *there* to exploit! It's as numb as your brains!"

Clinging to the bravado of her plan, Hermione lifted her chin. "I don't have to exploit your *prick* to exploit your sexuality! I'll lift the curse when I'm good and ready--when you've *made* me good and ready!" Fighting the urge to blush as he blinked at her, confused, Hermione firmed her courage and told him the rest. "You've lied to me with that tongue, and made me feel pain by it, *husband*. You will now use that tongue to make me feel pleasure, or never feel any of your own!"

Rage boiled in the black depths of his eyes. For a moment she feared he would hex her; his fingers certain flexed on the ebony shaft of his wand. Breath flaring through his nostrils, he finally growled, "*Fine!* Get on the bed!"

Hermione almost lost the feeling in her legs; she'd out-hexed the most dangerous wizard in existence, barring only the Dark Lord himself, and was going to live to tell the tale. Not that she'd ever speak of this moment to anyone, if she could help it... Lifting her chin, Hermione pushed him that little bit more. "No."

"*No?*" His eyes widened far enough, she could see the whites all the way around their midnight depths.

"You're not coaxing me," she pointed out daringly. "Growling and ordering me around like a surly bastard doesn't put me in a cooperative mood, Severus."

His hands rose. For a moment they clenched at his hair, then his right arm snapped out. Hermione almost shouted a protective spell, save that he hurled his wand, not his magic, and he hurled it at the curtained patio door, not at her. The slim, dark shaft hit the curtains with a soft thwap and dropped to the floor, undamaged. His hands clenched in his hair again, his fingers separating the dark locks into awkward bunches. Whirling away from her, he muttered under his breath.

"I've been forced to do things by the Dark Lord...I've been forced to do things by Albus...and now I'm being forced to do things by *you*! And you expect me to *smile* and be *pleasant*, and to *like it*!" He snarled that last bit over his shoulder at her.

"If *you* don't like being forced, what made you think that/ would enjoy it?" she snapped back. "*Why* do you do unto others, if you don't like it being done unto *you*?"

He stared at her for a long, burning moment, then faced away. Shoulders hunched and tight, he slowly bowed his head, his muscles twitching a couple times. It took her a moment to realize he'd buried his face in his palms. Gingerly, Hermione forced herself to reach up and touch one black-clad shoulder-blade. He flinched and moved swiftly. Three strides and he had the bathroom flung open; four, and it slammed shut behind him.

Hermione knew she'd done something wrong. She'd done a lot of things wrong, actually. But her instincts said his swift retreat had little to do with having his virility spell-suppressed. Hoping it was because her words had struck home, she moved closer to the door, and closer still, until she carefully pressed her ear to the panel. Muffled sounds of sharp, unsteady breathing, caught at her like little hooks, jerking her nerves. *It almost sounds like he's...no, he couldn't be.*

Dithering on what to do, she finally gathered her courage, gripped her wand, and opened the bathroom door. He was sitting on the edge of the tub, and flinched away from her, shielding his face with his hand. "Get out."

"No." Shutting the door behind her, she moved so that she leaned back on the counter by the sink, across the small room from him. His face, normally pale and sallow, was blotchy in places...and streaked with moisture that he tried to subtly scrub away before she could notice it. But she did, and her heart hurt. Hermione swallowed and said what she had to say. "...This has been an expensive lesson. For both of us. But I trust the lesson has been learnt."

"It has. You won't have to suffer my *touch*," Severus added bitterly. "Our prior agreement is null and void."

Her mind raced, at the implications; if he wasn't going to force her into being a mum in exchange for the Anima Te...

Severus read her pinched frown in a single dark glance. "Don't worry; I'll brew your bloody potion anyway. Now leave me."

Not knowing what to do, Hermione gripped her wand. He *had* learnt his lesson. And she didn't want to make him suffer; this was already the hardest thing she'd ever done. But he'd demanded that she leave, and probably didn't want to even look at her right now... Flicking her wrist, she cast the counter-hex. "*Fecundis!*"

White lightning shot between them, striking him in the groin even as he flinched and covered the plaid of his kilt with his hands.

"You've learnt your lesson. As for our agreement--"

"*Leave me!*" he hissed, glaring at her. It was the sort of look that said he'd lunge across the space between them and throttle her neck, if she said or did one thing more. Hermione gave up on trying to make amends, and Apparated back to Headquarters, leaving him alone as ordered.

...

Her tortures weren't to be ended. First, she'd failed with the Anima Te potion. Then she'd messed up her bartering with her husband, trying to punish him and teach him a lesson. And now Ron wanted to have, "...A serious word with you, in private."

Could my day get any worse?--No, wait, scratch that! I'm not trying to tempt fate! Hermione pleaded, but it was too late. She allowed him to sequester the two of them in the Black family library, though she was careful to seat herself in an armchair, rather than on the sofa. Her instincts were confirmed when his mouth tightened for a moment, but he sighed and seated himself on the coffee table, pushing a couple tomes to one side.

"Hermione...I'm sorry I made an arse out of myself, leaping to the conclusion that you were...you know...in the family way," he apologized, blushing enough to hide some of his freckles.

Hermione recalled how she'd reacted to the stench of cooking cabbages, never her favourite scent, and never her favourite dish, and sighed. "I'm sorry I gave that impression. I just loathe cooked cabbage, and it was really overpowering. That, and I was upset from something else. It sort of worsened the problem."

Ron scrubbed awkwardly at the back of his head, not quite looking at her. "Yeah, well...even if you aren't...you know...it did make me think about your situation. I wanted to apologize for being such a prat about it, early on. You...you made the right choice. I'd never want you to be harmed like that, and, erm...better for you to be in the arms of a wizard who cares about you.

"At least, I hope he cares about you. Probably not as much as I do," Ron added with a lopsided smile, one that wrinkled his nose in a charming sort of way, "but that's better than nothing. I know I can't ever touch you or hold you or show you how much I care, but I hope he does that for you, Hermione. You deserve to be shown how wonderful you are, by someone who loves you."

How many times have you seen anyone willingly touch him, let alone touch him gently, with care and compassion?

You won't have to suffer my touch.

Hermione hid a flinch at both memories. She'd royally buggered up that one. She only managed to suppress it into a wince, though, for Ron eyed her speculatively.

"Hermione...is everything alright? You know, between you and, erm, Russel?"

Bugger. She wasn't going to let Ron know about any of this, but this wasn't one of his Ron-is-an-oblivious-thickie days. Wincing again, she shrugged. "I'm just...coming to terms with a few facts about him, that's all." Inspiration trickled into her mind; if she played this right, she could pre-warn the boys about who Russel really was. Hopefully that would mitigate some of the shock of revealing his identity. "I mean, we know he's a spy among the Death Eaters, but...well, I've found out some of the things he's had to do, in order to stay hidden in their midst. It's been a bit rough, coming to terms with it. And now I've discovered I need his help in brewing the potion. There's a step that's not in the Diary that I couldn't figure out, but with his help..."

"Is that why you kept melting cauldrons?" Ron asked her.

Hermione reluctantly nodded. She'd had to ask Harry for the money to buy the new ones. They were trying to use actual equipment for the most important things that the potion came into contact with, as well as entirely real ingredients, not just whatever the Room of Requirement could provide, since Hermione was never quite sure if what the Room of Requirement provided was actually real, outside of its walls. It wasn't as if she could play Star Trek fan and ask it, *Are you the magical equivalent of a giant holodeck and matter-replicator combined?* Somehow, she didn't think that would work.

Ron rumbled his hair with a hand. And said the last thing she'd have expected from Ronald Bilius Weasley's mouth, sighing as he did so. "...A pity we can't ask Snape for his help."

She gaped at him.

Defensively, he wrinkled his nose. "--What? Just because he's a ruddy git and a bastard traitor doesn't mean he wasn't smashing at potions-making! If he were still on our side, I'd have him doing the brewing in a heartbeat. Even if Harry loathes him. They don't give you a Master-ranking in a subject if you're a thickie at it."

"...You're right about that one," Hermione managed to say without stammering, making her mouth, lungs and voice work. "If there was a way for us to get Snape to make the Anima Te, you know I'd take it in a heartbeat." She managed a weak smile. "Even if I had to sneak around Harry to do it."

"Yeah. Hey...um...I know Russel's not always been a nice bloke, but...what counts is what he's doing right now, right?" Ron offered. "Doing the right thing, even if he did the wrong thing earlier in his life. There's only so much you could do with a Time-Turner without mucking up history, and they're really rare right now, so it's all about soldiering onward and dealing with what is, and what will be, not what was... Cripes, I'm not making any sense, am I?" he muttered, rumpling his hair again. "Look, I'm just trying to say...I'm dealing with your situation, and I want you to know that you have my complete support as a best friend.

"If he's good to you, and for you, then I'll be okay with it. Not necessarily *happy*, but okay," Ron clarified. Hermione felt her heart twinge with the love she had for him, guessing what it had cost him to come to this point. He continued as she nodded slowly. "Of course, if he's ever bad to you, I'll be first in line to hex him, even before Harry...but I just want you to be happy, Hermione. Whoever that's with."

Her smile was a bit lopsided, but it was genuine for all of that. "Ron, you are going to make some witch very lucky, and very happy, when you find the right one for you, one day."

He blushed a little at that, ducking his head in discomfort. "I thought I had..."

There wasn't really much she could say to that, without hurting his feelings. Given that he'd just come to terms with them, Hermione wasn't inclined that way. Instead, she smiled wryly, rose, and left him in the library. She had her own problems to deal with: namely, how she was going to fix the problem she'd exacerbated, with her husband.

Right now, she didn't have a clue. Not when he'd thrown her out of his presence. The next move would have to be his. She was just smart enough to realize that until he reached out, getting him to open up before he was ready would be like trying to get an oyster to let go of a pearl. In the meantime, she'd buy another cauldron--or two, just in case--and extra ingredients for the Anima Te.

It occurred to her, halfway up the front stairs, that she had a very funny sort of marriage, not living with her husband...but then the whole situation was funny, in the non-humorous sense.

...

The message on her ring was brief, and terse.

We need to discuss the potion, and other matters. Meet me at the hotel.

He would call on her right in the middle of an Order meeting. Sighing, Hermione leaned over and whispered in Harry's ear to take mental notes so he could fill her in on anything she might miss, and concentrated hard. She was wedged in next to Hagrid at the moment; if she tried to get up and leave, either she'd have to squeeze past the giant's shins, or work her way past half a dozen others just to get free of the chairs crowded into the parlour, never mind any hope of reaching the door unnoticed. But there wasn't any easy way to Apparate from a sitting position and not splinch through a chair on the other side, and so she concentrated very hard, Disapparating...

...And landed after a short drop on the bouncing springs of the mattress, yelping as her feet hit the mattress, then her bum, then her back and head in rapid succession.

"What is *that* supposed to be, a joke?" a cross, familiar voice demanded.

Hermione opened the eyes she'd squeezed shut, and found herself staring at the ceiling. Swallowing, she answered her irritated husband. "No, that was me Apparating out of a bloody Order meeting, without a chance to safely stand, and no idea of the height-difference between the chairs there and here."

He grunted, and came into view. His black-clad arms were folded across his chest, and he was still wearing the black-and-grey plaid kilt. This shirt, however, had a mandarin collar, and the plaid looked subtly different. So he'd changed clothes. Or maybe just Transfigured fresh ones, like he had the previous set. His lack of his usual imposing frock-coat and trousers gave her a flush of hope. Bravely, Hermione lifted and held out her hand. He frowned at it, not moving.

"...Well?" Hermione prompted Severus. "Aren't you going to help me up?"

The strained roll of his eyes was accompanied by a rough exhale...but he did grab her wrist and pull on her arm. Hermione found herself lurching awkwardly upright. He caught her before she could stumble against him, and only held her long enough to see her somewhat steadied, before snatching his hands away and folding them across his chest again.

Riiiiight. He dons his halfway-to-Russel clothes, in a sartorial gesture of reconciliation...and can't stand touching me, as if I had the bubonic plague. Hermione wasn't sure whether to be heartened or exasperated by her husband's mixed signals. She needed to start her campaign of taming him with kindness and proximity. "That's better--"

He grunted and moved away as soon as she shifted closer, interrupting her. "Where have you been attempting this potion of yours? Headquarters?"

"The School, actually. In the Room of Requirement. It has everything we need, including a Floo connection to Minerva's study," Hermione pointed out.

"That obviously will not do," he muttered. "We'll have to use my home. The basement functions as a makeshift lab, though it lacks a few of the necessary amenities for dealing with the brewing of a lethal potion--"

"Why won't the school do?" Hermione pressed, interrupting him as he had interrupted her, the moment he paused for breath. "The Room of Requirement by its very definition has everything we'd need."

He turned and pinned her with a pointed glare. "You seem to have forgotten that it is Secret-Kept. I cannot *go* there."

Hermione dug into her back pocket, pulling out the crumpled piece of paper she'd taken to carrying with her since yesterday morning. She displayed it between two fingers, then stuffed it back into her pocket. "I've got your passport through the Fidelius Charm right here."

Those black eyes narrowed, his short but thick lashes framing his glittering, suspicious gaze. "How did you get that?"

"I convinced Minerva I needed Russel's help to brew the potion. She knows as much about it as you do, that it's necessary to the defeat of the Dark Lord, but not what it is for. She arranged for the Secret Keeper to write you a note."

He snorted in disbelief. "Try again. Minerva is incredibly protective of her charges. What did you slip into her tea?"

"Oil of Albus. I asked the Professor's portrait for his assistance," Hermione stated, watching him flinch, then frown in confusion. "He still firmly believes in you, even after I pointed out what you'd done to him. He says he remembers everything the real Albus knew, up until the instant of his death...and he still has complete faith in you."

"*Bastard.*" The word looked like it had escaped him without his permission, but Severus didn't recant it. He ran a hand through his chest-length locks, turning away from her.

Hermione moved closer, earning her a wary look from him. Undaunted, she touched his back, braced for the expected flinch, which he gave. She followed the shift in his weight with her fingers, maintaining contact.

"After careful consideration, and much thought and deliberation...I'm giving you my faith, too."

He whipped around, shock widening his eyes. A second later, they narrowed as he hissed, "--Do not mock me!"

"Do you want me to swear it on the ring?" Hermione managed to ask him calmly, though her heart was pounding in her chest at her daring.

His breath hissed in through his grimacing teeth. For a moment, he seemed without words, then he jabbed a finger at her. "You cast those ruddy spells on me! Take them off, and then we'll talk about having *faith* in people!"

Hermione frowned. "What do you mean, take off both spells? I cast *Eunuxis* on you, but then I took it off with *Fecundis*. The second one *was* the counter-spell to the first!"

"A likely story!"

"I swear to you, it's the truth!" Hermione protested. "*Fecundis* is the counter-spell!"

Flushing, he gestured at his kilted groin. "*Nothing is happening!* Zero, zed, zilch! Why didn't you just cut it off, while you had the chance? I'd think it would be more *amusing*

for you to have my penis in a jar, just so you could parade it in front of your friends!"

She knew he'd be bitter and inclined to lash out, but that was harsh. And confusing. Hermione stared at his plaid-covered hips, frowning. A sickening possibility churned her stomach. *Oh, no...is this another instance of 'see all, but make nothing'? Oh, please, no...* Rendering him impotent and sterile could be considered 'make nothing', in a twisted point of view. Making him fertile, on the other hand...it was not a pretty thought to contemplate. *Damn Lucrezia! I will not be defeated in my plans!*

Irritation gave way to a rush of thought. She might not have 'the hand' when it came to potions, but Charms were undeniably her element. If the counter-spell provided by the Diary wouldn't work, then she'd bloody well come up with her *own* counter-spell. No one could best Hermione Granger when she was in her element. Certainly not some long-dead psychopathic murderess!

Drawing her wand, she slashed it at him, making him whip out his own. "*Fecundis Potentis!*"

Sizzling gold light shot out of her wand, zapping him before he'd begun half the motion of the Deflection Charm, his lips still forming the words as her magic washed over his body from his hips outward, spreading rapidly to head and toes.

"...How do you feel now?" Hermione asked him as soon as the light vanished.

A muscle worked in his jaw as he looked down at his body, then up at her with a sneer. "I feel no different!"

Gritting her own teeth, Hermione flung her second possibility at him. "*Fecundis Maximis!*"

Blinding light shot from her wand, impacting on his groin with a silent explosion. The change this time was instantaneous. As soon as she finished blinking away the rainbow of aftereffects on her retina, Hermione could see his kilt jutting out visibly below his belted waist.

"*Goddammit!*" he roared, and snapped his own wand at her, breathing heavily. "--*Fecundis Potentis! Fecundis Maximis!* How do *you* like the feel of *that* on your bloody self?"

Hermione gasped as she staggered backward from the double-blow, catching her balance. She was suddenly hotter than a thousand candles, burning from the inside out with sexual need. She wanted to rip off her clothes, rip off his, and fuck him--not make love, but fuck, like an animal--until he extinguished the fire of the spell burning in her blood and bones. Fighting it, she tightened her hands into fists, still gulping for air, breathing as heavily as him. He, too, had fisted his hands, but hadn't pounced. Yet.

"Your self...control...is incredible. But so is *mine*," she managed tersely. "And as I was...saying, yesterday, before you interrupted me...our *deal* is still on!"

"My body," Hermione muttered through clenched teeth as she stepped closer to him, one foot at a time, "for your skill...my child, for your cooperation..."

"*Why?*" he growled, forcing himself back one step for each of her own, though she saw him sway closer to her.

She was getting the hang of controlling herself. Or at least her breathing. "Because you are my husband, and I am your wife."

"*Not* good enough," Severus growled, edging around the table. She wanted to lunge and grab him, to throw him down and pounce on him, and had no idea where he was getting the strength to resist the enspelled lust in his own veins. The only thing keeping her from doing so was the knowledge that, once they touched, they'd both go up in flames, and her mind insisted on finding out why he was resisting her so strongly.

"*Why?*" she growled at him, rounding the other end of the table as she gave stilted chase. "Am I not good enough for you?"

That stopped him. It leaned him forward, too, but not in lust. In anger. "How is forcing *yourself* to touch me any different from *my* forcing myself on you?"

It was a valid question. One that burned through the fog of her spell-wrought lust with its poignancy. Unfortunately for him, Hermione had already figured this one out. "Because when you weren't *forcing* yourself on me, I *enjoyed* our time together!"

"That was Russel!" Severus snapped derisively. "You changed your tune the moment you knew I was Snape!"

"There was *plenty* of what I liked in what *Snape* did to me, too, even though it was forced on me," Hermione retorted, temporarily forgetting the heat of her body in the heat of their argument. "Enough to know that, though you wear the mask of Snape as surely as you ever did the mask of Russel, there's plenty of *you* in *both* personae!" A step closed the distance between them to a mere inch or two. Dropping her anger, though her fists clenched tighter, Hermione hit him with the truth. "And I *don't* want either of them!"

"I want *you*."

He drew in a breath to argue the matter. That made his body sway forward, and that brushed his chest against her breasts. It proved to be a tactical mistake; the moment that happened, a spark of energy jumped between them, destroying their control. Clothing exploded, yanked from each other's limbs, torn and tossed about with no care or consideration as they stumbled across the room. They didn't quite make it to the bed, either; they did manage to make it to the padded bench at the foot of the mattress, falling onto it as their mouths nipped and bit, as their hands clutched and grasped.

Somehow they got their legs untangled, and his hips slotted between her thighs. Her heels braced on the floor, her knees splaying wide and her upper body supported on her elbows, allowing her to kiss him as he thrust inside, his own weight in a modified push-up stance. She was wet, very wet, and the moment he pushed home, she dropped her head with a throaty moan, shuddering with pleasure. His arm slotted under her back just before the rest of her upper body followed, keeping their torsos pressed together. Mouths mating once again, she lifted and wrapped her legs around his hips as he rocked urgently into her.

Breathless moans escaped both of them. It was all about coupling, copulating, racing towards the finish line. Mindless mating, thought-free lovemaking, pursuing pleasure like a car racing downhill without any brakes to slow its descent. They could steer, somewhat, but mostly it was just holding on tight for a breathless dash to the bottom. Severus bottomed-out first, stiffening and gasping her middle name in his climax chant; Hermione dropped after him, his pleasure stimulating her own with each shudder-inducing thrust, dragging a moan from her throat.

His limp, sated weight was heavy. But the moment he shifted to leave her, instinct had Hermione tightening the grip of the arms she had wrapped around his ribcage at some point. He shifted again, but she didn't let go.

"...Let me up."

"No." They still had some things to discuss, and her instincts said that him withdrawing physically would only reinforce his mental withdrawal.

"Your bloody sex-spell has ended. There is no *point* in our staying together," he pointed out to her, his face tight with suppressed emotion.

That rolled her eyes in a pained expression worthy of one of his. She wanted to call him a total thickie, but that wouldn't help their situation. Wishing for her wand--lost somewhere in the textile carnage of their scattered clothes--made her think of the tome of wandless wizardry she'd been reading. *If a wizard or witch has a powerful enough mind, they will be able to focus their magic with their will alone, though the effort will be exhaustive compared to wand-aided magic...* She had the motivation to not go searching for her wand, right now.

"Semobilim!"

Her body lifted half a foot. The shift startled him, especially since she was still clinging. A thrust of her mind moved them slowly up along the bed, until she dismissed the spell, panting. That dropped her onto the bedding, and dropped him onto her, rendering her breathless with a grunt from the impact. Still, she clung so that when he shifted his weight, it was only distributed just enough onto his elbows and knees to allow her to breathe.

"...An impressive display of wandless power, Mrs. Snape," he acknowledged in her ear, making her shiver from his baritone murmur, "but there is no point to my inflicting my presence upon you any further--"

With a heave and a wrench that pulled muscles in her back, Hermione rolled them over, scrambling to straddle and pin him by wrists and waist to the bed. He had slipped out of her with their maneuvering, but that wasn't important at the moment. Leaning her weight on his arms, Hermione pinned him with a glare.

"You've learned Lesson Number Four, 'no' means *no*, and you've taught Lessons One and Three, that Severus can touch Hermione, and the truth can be twisted to suggest a lie while remaining true...but you haven't learnt Lesson Number Two, yet, *husband*," she reminded him, still a little breathless from her efforts. His eyes narrowed, and she manufactured a smirk. Her inner lioness had come back, and was ready to roar, the moment she did so. "Oh, yes. This *marriage*, however it came to be, is an *unequal* partnership. You can teach all the odd-numbered lessons you like, but I get to teach you the even-numbered ones. And Lesson Two is that Severus *belongs* to Hermione, and Hermione can touch Severus anywhere she damned well pleases! Any time, any way..."

Leaning down, she kissed his surprise-parted lips. She took her time, too, sampling the contrast between his smooth bottom lip and the faint rasp of impending stubble on his chin. He'd shaved, of course; she liked the fact that he was always clean-shaven, since she didn't really care for beards or mustaches, but it was still there for her lips and tongue to explore. Mindful of the weight of her upper body, she shifted her hands from his wrists to his palms, lacing their fingers together.

When the first subtle following movement happened, Hermione almost dismissed it, but when his head tilted again, his lips still seeking hers as she moved away from his mouth to taste his cheek, she knew she was winning their current battle. Not the overall war; that was still undecided at the moment. But she was winning this current skirmish between them.

His eyes were closed, his dark lashes lying in short but thick curves against his cheeks. If he had them open at all, it was only in the tiniest of slits. Returning to kiss him a little more, wanting to encourage and reward even the most subtle sign of his need, she waited through a few slow, tongue-tangled kisses. Then Hermione nibbled her way back along his cheekbone, until he turned his head with a faint sound that could've been a sigh. Freeing his hands so that she could use her elbows to support her weight, she brushed back his long black locks and gently breathed warm air over the curves of his ear.

He shivered. A glance down his arm showed goose-spots raising. Experimentally, Hermione blew hot air in a gentle gust over his earlobe again. He shivered again, and his lips parted soundlessly. Something nudged against the underside of her thigh. From its position, size and warmth, Hermione guessed it was his erection, reviving from its earlier flaccid satiation. If it wasn't fair for him to know that she liked having her toes suckled, it wasn't fair for her to know that he liked having his ears teased.

But then, all is fair in love and war...and this is turning out to be a little bit of both; she acknowledged to herself, draping her torso more firmly against his so that she could comfortably nuzzle the curve of his ear with the tip of her nose. His arms moved, his hands touching her hips for a moment, before sliding up her waist to her ribs. Hermione breathed again, then licked as delicately as she could.

"No..."

It was a breath more than a sound, but Hermione stopped. Holding herself still, she found her voice. "...Is that a 'no' as in stop? Because I'm not forcing you. I'm not tying you down," she pointed out, making him open his eyes to visible slits, turning his head to look up at her. Weight braced on her forearms, she pointed out the obvious. Just in case he was stubbornly oblivious. "I'm coaxing you, Severus. I want you to want this as much as I do."

A sound escaped him that could've been a snort, as he looked off to the side, away from her.

Hermione lifted her weight onto her hands and knees. "Roll over." He looked up at her with a puzzled frown, and she repeated herself. "Roll over, onto your stomach."

For a moment, she thought he would protest, or escape from under her, removing himself from her touch. But after a long, silent, wary look, Severus twisted onto his side, then onto his front, arranging himself with a brief squirm until he was comfortable. Resetting herself so that she straddled his thighs, Hermione studied his back with a sigh. There was a tagline to a joke she'd heard--she'd only ever heard the punch-line, and not the first half of the jest, but it came to her now, seeing the pale expanse of his spine. *Acres and acres, and it's all mine!*

There was something illicitly thrilling in knowing that Severus Snape, bastard extraordinaire, was all hers. The body was great, if a little too lean, and seamed with faint scars. No pudge on her husband. The mind was almost too much to contemplate, he was that intelligent. Not always smart--points in case, his joining the Death Eaters, and that fiasco the night Scabbers had turned out to be Pettigrew--but just thinking about how intelligent he was made Hermione's heart race and her body tighten in places he'd taught her to appreciate and exploit, in the guise of Russel Fawkeson.

Acres and acres, and it's all mine...

She started with the small, tight globes of his buttocks, kneading and rubbing them until he slowly, grudgingly started to relax. Working up onto the small of his back in circular waves, she gradually progressed towards his shoulders, feeling and slowly freeing the knotted tension in his muscles, all the way up the length of his spine. At first, he resisted her touch, resisted the urge to relax...but after a few minutes, he shifted position, snagging one of the pillows from under the flowered duvet. Pulling it under his cheek, he folded his arms underneath it with every appearance of settling in for the duration.

Relieved, Hermione continued her massage, shifting off of his thighs so that she could more easily reach his shoulders. He had a lot of tension in his body, from nape to buttocks, and it ended up costing her a bit of sweat to knead his muscles until they were loose. Eventually, she felt free to work on his thighs and calves, making sure to use a much lighter pressure when she worked across the backs of his knees. She'd read a couple books on massage therapy and massage techniques a couple years ago out of curiosity. Though she'd forgotten some of it, Hermione was pleased with herself that still remembered enough to relax his body, working her way down to his soles, then all the way back to his neck and even onto his scalp, massaging her fingers through his hair.

Without having to be around steaming cauldrons all day long, it was less greasy than before, though there was still a little more hair oil than average. Another memory surfaced in her mind as she slowly rubbed his scalp with the pads of her fingers. She'd been sitting in class one day, listening and watching as he lectured--fifth year, Potions--and had suddenly been struck by the odd fantasy of wanting to wash his hair. She'd been flustered by the very idea, since he was Severus Snape, surly black bat of a teacher, hardly the sort of fellow one expected to see on the telly selling hair-care products...but she'd had that fantasy all the same. Now it came back to her as she stroked the skin under his straight black locks.

Making a mental note to remember to do so at a later date, since it was still an appealing idea--however bizarre--Hermione prodded the limp body resting next to her. "Time to roll over, Severus."

He cracked open his eyes, studied her wordlessly, then sighed and rolled over, squirming to center himself. Another sigh, and he closed his eyes, relaxing his arms at his sides. Hermione started with his nearest arm, lifting and cradling it in the curve of her own as her free hand worked the muscles of his fingers and palm, then stroked onto his forearm. It wasn't until she was working on his bicep that she realized his fingers weren't lying lax and compliant, any more. He'd been brushing his knuckles against the curve of her breast, and she hadn't really registered the sensations. Until two of his knuckles caught the tip of her nipple, startling her.

Her gaze flew from his arm to her breast to his face. Holding her gaze, he did it again, nipping her flesh with his fingers. She arched her brow at him, and he arched one of his own at her. "Lesson Number One."

And he tweaked her flesh a third time. Hermione shifted her hand, smacking lightly at his fingers to make him stop. "My playtime. Behave."

"...No."

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XXII.

With that one-word warning, he surged up and twisted over her, catching her by the shoulders and pushing her down onto her back. Hooking an arm around her nearest thigh, he pulled her closer to the center of the bed, then covered her with the warmth of his body. Their hotel room was warm, in the manner of its kind, but it was mid-December and there was still a slight nip to the air. His flesh felt good, covering hers. Warm, hard, yet satiny-soft where his skin slid against hers. The rasp of the treasure-line of hair on his lower abdomen tickled her belly, a coarse contrast to the soft smoothness of the rest of his hide.

This wasn't Russel, but this wasn't Snape, either. Hermione didn't believe he had a split-personality, but she did believe Severus strictly segregated his different personae, in the way that a professional actor kept separate his different characters. And like an actor who had played one character for too long, she knew he'd have more Snape in him than Russel. More Snape in his reactions and thought-patterns. But there was something else, something more that she'd caught glimpses of, something for her to aim at drawing out of him. Some balance between the two roles, the comfortable but nasty old-boot of Snape, and the high-maintenance but more pleasant dress-shoe of Russel.

"My playtime," Severus breathed. His mouth covered hers, claiming the last of her attention, his dark hair curtaining out the world. This wasn't non-consensual, and this wasn't spell-enforced. This was the real deal, between them: real, honest passion. Hermione gave herself up to the pleasure of the moment, discarding her inhibitions with the sliding of her palms up his back, the parting of her thighs and the lifting of her knees, giving him more room to settle himself in place while they kissed.

Tongues tangled; fingers raked; thumbs rubbed. Hermione felt the tip of his erection nudging at her opening, little rhythmic bumps that teased but never quite penetrated. She could feel her flesh moistening for him, readying itself for him, but he never actually thrust inside. Frustrated, she tilted her hips down. It put a strain on her lower back to do so, but made him bump against her clitoris, giving her more pleasure with each nudge.

Until the canny bastard shifted, his erection dipping lower and returning to teasing the mouth of her vagina. Giving up, Hermione slid one hand up into his hair, gripping his head enough to break their kiss and push his ear close to her lips, though he resisted her actually reaching such sensitive flesh. Her other hand slid down his body, squirming between their pelvic bones so she could grip his shaft. Sucking in a sharp breath, he stilled against her, giving her all the opportunity she needed to rub his hardened flesh against the nub of her pleasure. The air in his lungs hissed slowly out, at that. It caught again, arrested mid-exhale, when she rubbed her thumb over his seeping glans.

"You're playing with *fire*, Jane," he warned her, growling into her ear. "I will burn you, if you don't behave."

"You're treading deep water, Severus," Hermione retorted, choosing to use his first name so that he would know she was well aware of who he was. The last thing she wanted was for him to believe she'd sunk into a fantasy that she was holding Russel, and thus accepting only that facet of the complex, complicated man in her arms. Shifting her hips and her grip, she realigned their bodies. "Be careful, or you just might drown in my arms."

His breath caught as she felt a pulse of wet warmth seeping out of her body. He pulled back far enough to look down at her. "...You're almost wet enough for it, aren't you?"

A quirk of mischief made Hermione smile and retort, "Care to try, anyway?"

He stared down at her in wondering confusion for a moment, almost as if he'd never seen her before. Slipping her hands to his buttocks, Hermione gripped and pulled, nudging him more firmly against her opening. His eyes fluttered shut when a tilt of her hips made the tip of him press and lodge just inside. She watched his adam's apple bob as he swallowed hard. As if that was the signal for the solidifying of his thoughts on what to do with her, he sank into her body slowly, pushing into her soft, warm flesh with the hardened heat of his own.

He breathed slowly, deeply for a few moments once he was fully embedded. Then his mouth sought hers. His kisses were slow, drugging, devouring, suckling her lower lip like it was a juicy wedge of fruit. Wondering when he was going to move inside, Hermione returned each suckling nip and savouring lick. It wasn't enough, though; she craved motion, friction, not patient waiting, however smashing the kisses might be.

Lying on top of her, his solid weight had all the advantage, pinning her effortlessly in place. Wanting, needing him to move, Hermione tightened her inner muscles. His breath hissed through his teeth, gusting across her kiss-swollen lips. She smirked and did it again, enjoying the way his stomach trembled against hers. A third time, and he half-choked, half-gasped.

"What the--? What the hell was *that*?"

"Kegel muscles," Hermione informed him smugly, enjoying the startled and almost lost expression in his eyes as she squeezed for the fourth time. "I read about them in a book."

His head dropped onto her shoulder. A spasm shook his body, then another. Muscles quivering, he buried his face in her throat. It took Hermione a few moments to realize he was *laughing* at her. In retaliation, she squeezed harder with her pelvic muscles. He choked again, coughing on his laughter, and for a moment it felt like she had Russel back in her arms again, for he nipped playfully at the side of her neck as he withdrew partway, then pressed firmly back inside.

"Toying with me, are you? Shall I toy with you, too?" Severus added a circular grind of his hips with the next stroke.

"Oh god, yes," Hermione muttered, closing her eyes in pleasure. She squeezed him yet again in reward and heard him grunt, felt him buck a little, reacting to her inner caress.

"Keep your eyes open!"

The snapped tone of his command did more to open her eyes than his words did. Staring at him, Hermione wondered if he was devolving into Snape again, or if he was just teetering on the edge of madness. "What?"

He studied her for a moment, no longer moving within her, then growled, "I don't want you to mistake who is making love to you."

She realized he meant fantasies about Russel. Rolling her eyes, Hermione retorted, "Severus, you could Polyjuice yourself into Goyle or Crabbe, smash yourself on the head with a lump-hammer so you'd sound stupid enough, and I'd *still* know you were Severus. You could paint yourself in Hufflepuff colours, wear a dress, and insist on everyone calling you 'Helga', and you'd still be Severus bloody Snape. You may have to dress and act like Russel in the future--and I'll call you that in public, to help maintain the disguise in front of the others--but you're still Severus Selenius Snape!"

Releasing the curves of his backside, she slid her fingers all the way up into his hair, spearing her fingertips through his midnight locks..

"You're the one who insisted on marrying me, rather than releasing me by removing your ring shortly after my donning mine allowed me to escape my captured fate," Hermione reminded him tartly, tightening her grasp just enough so that he couldn't look away. She wasn't saying it right, and didn't know how to say it right, but tried to say it anyway. "But if you took off that ring right now...I'd shove it right back onto your finger."

His lips parted to ask her a question, and Hermione quickly covered them with her finger.

"Don't ask me 'why', right now. You're not ready to hear it, and I'm not ready to say it. Look, we both...we both fucked up," she stated as bluntly as she could, feeling her cheeks warm at the crude analogy. "This is our chance to start over. There's too many reasons why we should stay together, right now. Not all of them are pleasant, but some of the...the fringe benefits might compensate in the meantime. And neither of us should forget the pleasant reasons. Like...like the fact that it's your turn to read the next section of *The Hobbit*."

His face scrunched, wincing at her odd segue. Gently catching her finger, he pulled it away from his lips. "...Jane, will you just stuff it? I'm in the middle of making love to you, and I'd *appreciate* your full attention, rather than your incessant babbling!"

Her mouth opened and closed a couple times, as her brain processed the fact that he wasn't protesting the meaning of what she was saying, just the fact that she was speaking. Finally, she relocated her voice long enough to splutter, "--As if you could make me! I have every right as much t--mmmph!"

"Mmmh," he agreed, breath gusting through his nostrils as he silenced her with lips and tongue.

"...Mmm," Hermione commented a moment later, as he began rocking slowly but firmly into her again.

"Mm-hmm," he agreed, sucking on her tongue. The tip of his nose bumped against her cheek in his enthusiasm, his hair tickling the side of her face. Hermione was abruptly reminded of *who* she was sharing such intimacies with. Not Severus, her husband, but Professor Snape, her former teacher. The greasy git. The black-hearted bat. Slick-stringy hair, long, thin nose, sallow skin, yellowed and crooked teeth, sour disposition...thin, nibbling lips...scarred, lean, warm body...heady, masculine scent...hardened erection...

Oh, fuck it, Hermione told the last of her objections, indulging in the mental vulgarity. He snogs like a demon and shags like an incubus, and he's all yours, Hermione. What woman wouldn't kill to have a lover like him in her arms, crooked teeth and all? Merlin, as far as the crooked teeth are concerned, just go ask Poppy what spells to use to straighten them, next time you're at the school! He's intelligent, he's brave, he's...well, I don't know about loyal... No, he's loyal. Unethical, unorthodox, immoral, amoral, scrambled eggs and ham, you name it, but he's...loyal to his own warped sense of ethics and honour...

...God, he makes love like a fallen angel she decided muzzily as he lifted one knee after the other, encouraging her legs to wrap around his waist. Severus then pressed the heel of his palm just above her pubic bone, stimulating that same spot he--as Russel--had stimulated a few times before. A gasping cry in her ears made her realize it was coming from her own throat, a high, rhythmic moan in time with each of his carefully angled thrusts.

His mouth left hers when she raked his back with her nails, allowing him to pant his other chant, the pre-climax one, "...Mmmh, good...mmmh, *good*..." The greedy murmur mixed and mingled with her own pleasure, until a hard shudder wracked her body with a ragged, wordless cry, tightening her flesh around his in the pulsing constrictions of her orgasm. That sent him into a ragged volley of thrusts with his own cry of, "--Jane, Jane, Jane, Jane!"

It wound down into a mumble against the curve of her shoulder. She'd felt the fluttering tickle of his semen surging into her with each plunge of his flesh into hers, felt its damp heat lubricating her depths, until he finally slowed and stopped. With his weight squashing her, he rested there for several seconds, then pulled out and rolled off of her. Flopping onto his back, he lay beside her, still breathing somewhat heavily as he recuperated.

Hermione struggled for breath, too, though it was easier now that he wasn't smothering her with his satiated weight. A twist, and she rolled onto her side far enough to drape an arm over his chest and a leg over his thigh. She didn't care if he took offense at her cuddling; she wanted to feel the warmth of their bodies still pressed together, even if it was a sweaty, sticky warmth. He glanced at her, but that was the extent of his acknowledgement, she noted, with no visible protest. That was good enough, for her. She knew she had a long way to go, to tame him to her hand.

A little while later, he broke the silence between them. "...I'm not going to hold you to that devil's bargain we wrote out. I'll make the potion anyway. Don't feel you have to sacrifice yourself for my cooperation."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Lifting her head, Hermione scowled at her husband. He wasn't even looking her way, ruining a perfectly good glare. "--Excuse me? I *told* you I have my own plans for you, Severus Snape!"

That made him look at her, albeit rather warily.

Hermione pushed up onto her elbow, frowning down at him. "For the last bloody time, believe me when I say I'm attracted to you!--When you're *not* being such a surly, self-loathing bastard, that is."

Thrusting away from him, she slid off the bed. Her knees wobbled as she moved to the foot of the bed, surveying the wreckage of their clothes. He'd done a number on her stamina with that pressure-trick. Hermione could've sworn she still felt him inside of her, too, an after-memory of how marvelous he felt, thrusting into her over and over. Finding what she was looking for, she palmed her wand, wondering what piece of torn clothing she should attempt to repair first. Her gaze fell on her jeans. It amazed her that he'd managed to actually tear them, somehow. Denim wasn't renowned for ripping easily, after all.

She heard him sit up behind her. "You loathed me from the moment you realized who I really am."

"I was in *shock*!" she protested, rolling her eyes. "You didn't exactly give me time to *think* about my situation!"

"I didn't want you thinking long enough to think about hexing me!"

Whirling, jeans in one hand, wand clenched in her other fist, which she planted on her hip, Hermione retorted, "I'm a *girl*, Severus! In case you hadn't noticed? Girls don't automatically go around hexing everything in sight, just because it upsets them! Only boys are that idiotic. *Men*, for that matter..." Turning back to her task, she tapped her jeans, repairing them. Stepping away from the foot of the bed, she found the torn cotton of her knickers and cast another repair charm. "Disarming me, I can understand. But that was all you had to do. You *didn't* have to break my other wand!"

"I was under orders to destroy it and return your original to you. They'd cast a spell on the one they had," he warned her. "I disabled it, but it was designed to backfire on you if you tried to hex a Death Eater. It was also enchanted so that Ollivander wouldn't notice it, if you took it to him."

"I already know about that. I took it to Filius to check over and he dismantled the last of the spell," Hermione returned, Summoning the two missing buttons from her blouse so that she could repair them and the ripped shoulder seam. "That was how I came to be at the School in time to overhear what the two idiots had done, in kidnapping Draco."

Her jumper was unharmed, if mangled, but his shirt was torn in two. Hermione repaired it absently as she hunted for her bra. Busy thinking about what they had to do once they were dressed, she almost didn't hear his muttered, "Thank you."

Pausing, Hermione glanced over her shoulder. She almost offered the question that he cared about the Slytherin boy. At the last moment, she bit it back. Professor Snape had cared about his Slytherins, and undoubtedly Severus did care about Draco Malfoy's fate, trapped among the Death Eaters, but pointing out a vulnerability like that would only make him wary, maybe even make him deny it to some degree. Instead, she simply said, "You're welcome."

Silence passed between them as he found his own wand and started repairing more of their scattered clothes. "That virility spell of yours is very potent. Where did you find it?"

"I made it up."

He stopped, wadded folds of wool in his hand, and frowned at her. "You made it up? That damned curse and the counter-spell?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. The curse came out of the Diary, as did the original counter to it."

"--You used something from *Lucrezia Borgia's diary* on me?" Severus hissed at her.

Hermione planted her fists on her hips, one holding her wand, the other clutching the broken strap of her bra. "I made a mistake! I *fixed* it! No fifteenth century witch is going to best *me* when it comes to Charms!"

He stared at her through narrowed eyes, then shook his head. "You are *unbelievable*. You cast a castration hex on me, the counter for which doesn't even work, and you do it from the spellbook of one of the most notorious witches in Italian history--"

"--/I'm unbelievable?" Hermione countered, touching her sternum. "Who was the *idiot* who should've been pacifying me, instead of terrifying me, when I uncovered his identity? How did terrifying me further the advancement of trust between us?"

"How did uncovering my identity when I told you *to not* do so advance that trust?" he shot back.

That backed her down. Hermione was fair enough to concede his point. "*Touche*. But you spent all of your time in your identity as Russel disparaging your identity as Snape," she reminded him. "That kept the wound of what you did fresh-picked and painful, rather than scabbed-over and healing."

"Oh, like you'd have trusted me if I'd said, 'Wait a moment, Snape isn't quite as nasty a bastard as everyone thinks he is!'" Severus retorted. "No one would've listened to me!"

"I would've listened--not eagerly at first," Hermione conceded as he snorted and drew breath to argue. "But I would've *listened* to what you had to say, even if I didn't agree with it. You wouldn't have gotten that much from anyone else, but you would've had it from *me*." He snorted again and she rolled her eyes. "I was the *only* student who ever gave you consistent respect! Even you surely noticed *that*."

"At the time, I thought it was just because you were a suck-up to whoever was in authority, in your quest for perfect grades." He held up his hand, cutting off her protest.

"Yes, yes--it was just your *innate* respect for everyone, all the way up through Merlin's arse." His gaze drifted down over her body, but it didn't look like a sexual perusal. "I'll admit I picked you as my first choice to send the ring to, figuring you'd be the most likely person to listen to Russel's story. But I'm surprised I haven't been denounced by anyone, yet."

"Credit me with *some* intelligence!" Hermione retorted. "You're still our only means of spying on the Snake-Snoggler's encampment! I'm well-aware that your precarious position depends on an extremely elaborate tapestry of interwoven lies and truths. The fewer people who know the truth, the fewer chances there will be for the lies to be noticed and picked apart, unraveling everything else about this war."

And there they were, the words she needed to reach him. Hermione didn't care where they came from, but they would allow her to steer him where she--the whole Order, though they knew it not--needed him to go. The logic was perfect for her needs.

"The success of this whole war now hinges on one thing, and one thing alone. It's not that ruddy Prophecy about Harry and Voldiebutt," Hermione told him as he studied her. "It's not even what Harry, Ron and I are doing to destroy the Dark Lord. The success of this war now rests entirely on *our relationship*. How you and I interact will determine the outcome of the wizarding world. Yes, we've made mistakes, and told lies, and broken trust within each other...but if we don't work together, if we don't figure out *how* to work together, to rebuild those broken trusts and work as a team, then we might as well kiss our arses goodbye! I, for one, would rather Avada myself on the spot, than live in a world ruled by that snake-snoggler!"

He closed the distance between them, catching her arm tightly in his fingers as he pinned her with a hard look. "While there is life, there is *hope*--you will *not* kill yourself! If the worst comes to pass, you will *continue* to work against him, even if you must foment a one-woman rebellion! Do I make myself clear?"

Biting her lip, Hermione nodded. She was containing the urge to crow at her success, not wincing at the tightness of his grip, but he released her arm with a muttered oath. Stepping back, he twisted his mouth wryly.

"...My apologies. I shouldn't have grabbed you like that."

"You're forgiven. Just remember that *you* need to concentrate on surviving, too," Hermione ordered him, poking a finger lightly into his sternum. He shifted back warily, stopping just out of poking range as she continued. "I cannot do this without you."

"Yes. You need me to make your precious potion. You still refuse to tell me why you need it?" Severus prodded her, arching a brow.

"For your own protection, no, I cannot tell you. You only need know that it needs to be done, and that it will help end the war," Hermione countered. "Don't push this issue, Severus. It's already a suspicion in the Dark Lord's mind, what we're up to. If he thinks it's a reality, he will break you, and he will kill you."

"Yes, and then you'll lose your precious spy. I'll not *push* the matter any further."

His reply was bitter. Hermione lowered her brows. "First and foremost, we'd lose a man who doesn't deserve to die. Second, I'd lose my ruddy husband! *Thirdly*, we'd lose our spy, in *that* order. You really have a low opinion of your self-worth, don't you?"

"I don't have a low opinion of my self-worth. My opinion is very *high*," he retorted, jerking his thumb at his chest. "It is everyone else's opinion that's scraping the bottom of the Thames, where I am concerned!"

"Not *my* opinion! I respected you--"

"You respected all of your teachers, like a little bleating sheep!"

"I didn't respect all of them! I never liked Trelawney! And that toad, Umbridge, could garrote herself with her own extra-large garters, and I'd be cheering her on like it was the bloody Quidditch finals!" Hermione snapped.

Severus winced. "Merlin's sweet arse! Don't put that image in my head! I could've gone my whole life being happily tortured by the Dark Lord, without being tormented by the thought of that toad-woman's thighs!"

Hermione shuddered at the thought. The absurdity of the moment struck her after a second or two. She let out a short, involuntary laugh, folding her arms under her breasts. He eyed her warily, so she ruefully explained. "Here we stand, naked as the day we were born, oblivious to the fact because we're too busy arguing about someone else's thighs!"

His gaze drifted down to her legs, lingering briefly at her bared cleavage and the curls at her groin. "...I will admit yours are far more pleasant to contemplate."

Returning his perusal with one of her own, Hermione shrugged and stated as honestly as she could, "Yours are rather good-looking, too. You looked rather dramatic in your teaching robes and all, but you really look smashing in a kilt. You've certainly got the legs for it."

Expression shuttered, he returned dryly, "I'll make sure to rearrange my wardrobe choices just for you."

That made her roll her eyes. "Stop being so snarky! When I give you a compliment, accept it. I don't give gratuitous compliments to anyone, and I don't spout false flatteries!"

Severus moved forward, closing the yard of distance between them. "...Is this part of that surly-bastard clause you insisted upon?"

Hermione didn't back down from his intimidating advance. He was naked, after all. Both of them were. Nakedness didn't exactly lend itself to the right sort of intimidation factor. She even shifted her hands to her hips, swaying forward until the tips of her breasts almost touched his chest, though his proximity put a crick in her neck. "Yes."

He let out a scoffing sound. "No wonder you're so determined to carry through your part of the bargain!"

"I have more than one reason for the things I'm doing, Severus. Just as you have more than one," Hermione pointed out. "You wanted a child, to continue your family line. I have agreed to be the mother of that child, in exchange for you ceasing to act like a surly prick around me. What's so difficult to understand about that?"

"Tut tut, Mrs. Snape. Less than half a year out of school, and already your language skills have severely deteriorated," he chided her tartly. "If you're going to go through with this, then I'm amending the agreement to include you cleaning up your language. That's hardly the sort of vocabulary a child needs to learn."

"Only if you clean up your own," she bargained tartly. "And it's not just about the language. I don't think you've quite realized what it means to be Mr. Hermione Granger, just yet."

"...Mr. Hermione *Granger*?" Severus repeated, arching one of his brows. "Explain yourself."

"Harry and I are now blood-bound brother and sister, as well as best friends. That makes him your brother-in-law."

He winced.

"Oh, yes, I'll expect you to be civil to him, within or without your Russel guise. I'm not giving him up just because I've married you. Furthermore," she warned him, "my parents are expecting to share Christmas with myself, and Harry...and *you*, as Russel, the man I've gone and married, however magically archaic the ceremony might've been. They want to get to know you better. The Weasleys are *also* expecting Harry and I to share the holidays with them.

"Right now, the idea is to invite my parents to the Burrow for Christmas Day, though they'll probably insist that I spend Boxing Day Supper with them and the rest of my Muggle family...and they'll expect *Mr. Hermione Granger* to come along, too, so they can brag about you...except they'll expect you to pretend to be a Muggle, since no one outside of my immediate family knows anything about the wizarding world, and it's going to stay that way.

"And you cannot weasel your way out of this nightmare," Hermione reminded him as he covered his face with his hands for a moment. "As Russel Fawkeson, you're *supposed* to be ingratiating yourself into my life, and the lives of the Order members, so that you can spy on us for the other side. Of course, it's getting to the point where I'm going to have to chart out who actually knows what, and how much they're *supposed* to know, regarding our situation..."

Dragging his hands down his face, Severus exhaled heavily, studying her. "And, amidst all of this, we're supposed to be brewing some deadly concoction created by a madwoman centuries ago, without killing ourselves."

"Exactly. Which is why I'm trying to find and repair all of our clothes," Hermione agreed, glad he'd brought them back to this point in the conversation. "If we hurry up to the School and get started tonight, now that it's past curfew, we'll be able to hit the first of the days-long simmering stages right before Christmas Eve, and be free to deal with the holidays."

"I am not going back to Hogwarts."

"Where *else* can we brew the ruddy thing?" Hermione prodded him. "I realize the place now holds a whole host of terrible memories for you, but the Muggle world doesn't have the facilities we need, and we cannot do it at Death Eater Central, Malfoy Manor, or at your own home, for fear of being interrupted by one of them. Merlin knows we've already run into enough troubles with Draco," she pointed out in an exasperated mutter. "You haven't learnt the Secrets of the Burrow or of Headquarters, Diagon Alley would draw too much attention, as would Hogsmeade, and the Shrieking Shack is second only to brewing out in the open for the worst possible preference in location, given that we're not even at the start of winter, yet, and it's already snowing, up in Scotland!"

"We'll have the facilities we need, and the security we'll need, now that I've figured out how to command the Room of Requirement. So long as we're careful about not being seen by the students, it's the best place for us to be. We can even require ourselves a suite of quarters next to the conjured lab, for those stages of the potion that require constant vigilance."

Something in what she said made his eyes gleam briefly with intensity, but his expression quickly shuttered itself. "And how do I explain such lengthy absences to the Dark Lord?"

"What, old Moldiebutt?" Hermione disparaged, arching a brow. "If he asks, Severus Snape, you should tell him you're doing exactly what you've been ordered by him to do: seducing your wife, and worming your way into the trust of the Order, so that you can be his personal black adder, ready to strike and weaken us when we think we're at our strongest."

He winced again, confusing her. Whatever he was thinking, he took a few moments to mull it over, before surprising her with a change in topic. "Would you do me a favour, and repeat something after me?"

Hermione looked up at him, thrown by the seemingly random segue. "Repeat what?"

"Severus Snape, you have my permission to lie when others are listening."

That made her frown.

"--Just do it! And do not ask me why!" he snapped impatiently.

"...Severus Snape, you have my permission to lie when others are listening," Hermione recited warily. "Now, why can't I ask why?"

"Why can't I ask you what you need that potion for?" he countered.

"Fine. I *won't* ask. For *now*," Hermione added in warning.

"Neither will I. For *now*," he parroted, folding his arms across his chest. The movement brushed his forearms against the tips of her breasts, tickling her flesh with the faint dusting of dark hairs on his skin. Hermione blinked, taken aback by the wash of pleasure prickling through her nerves at the simple touch. Those piercing, dark eyes didn't miss her shiver of reaction. He swayed forward again, brushing his limbs against her chest. Hermione swayed back, trying to keep a clear head, and he unfolded his arms quickly, catching and pulling their bodies together. "Lesson Number One, wife. I'm in the mood to play with you again."

She could've guessed that from the lump prodding against her lower abdomen. But they had a schedule to stick to, if they were to have the holidays free and clear...though the feel of him, warm and male and very naked, was very distracting. "We really should shower and dress, so we can get to work..."

"We will. Eventually," he murmured, lowering his head to nuzzle her chestnut hair away from her ear. "But first, I'm feeling the sudden urge to make you scream my name--my given name..."

"Are you always this randy?" Hermione managed to ask as he sucked and licked her earlobe. "Or is it the aftereffects of my spell?"

That made him stop, then pull back. Releasing her, he flicked his wand at himself. "*Finite Incantatem!*"

Magic sizzled over his body from dark head to bare toe, before vanishing. His erection bobbed between them, undiminished. An arch of his brow, and he encircled her with an arm again, pulling her close with a smirk before returning to nipping at the side of her throat.

"...Naturally randy," he murmured. "But then, what would you expect? I've a brazenly naked woman willing to be in my arms, which I haven't had in years. You're like a bloody green-grocer's to a starving man--" and she squeaked as he swept her off her feet, removing his nose from her neck so that he could study her in his arms, "--and I fully intend to feast. Consider it an effort to foment good-will and cooperation between the two of us, if we really are the pivotal relationship in this bloody war."

Clinging to his shoulders, Hermione let her bra fall, though not her wand. She'd pin it through her hair for convenience, or may be just set it on the bathroom counter... Recapturing her mouth, he navigated to the bathroom as they kissed, probably by some incubus-based instinct, since he didn't bang her against any walls or doorways. She didn't even resist when he set her on her feet in the tub and pulled her wand from her fingers, tucking it onto the soap-shelf.

A twist of the taps poured water from the faucet. A rattle of the curtain into place, and he pulled on the spigot lever. Cold water spurted down onto them, making her shriek in shock, since she was closer to the shower head than he was. The bastard had the temerity to grin, so she smacked him on the shoulder with the back of her hand as the water slowly turned warm. Catching her wrist, he pulled her against him, deliberately rubbing his body against hers, before bending to kiss her mouth, her chin, her throat, suckling the pouring water from her skin.

Twisting, she lapped at his own shoulder, determined to be an equal partner in exploring their relationship, even if there was still a part of her that found it very weird to be naked in a shower with her former professor. Hermione hadn't joked when she said their relationship--their situation--was the lynchpin for the success or failure of this war. They needed to work together, as equals and partners, in order to secure their victory.

She just hoped she could put the brakes on any future *unorthodox* means of winning the war--if not to stop him, then at least to slow him down enough to mitigate any resulting damages.

...

He stared at the note taken from the back pocket of her jeans for a long time before unfolding it. Hermione, guessing Severus wasn't happy at the thought of returning to the scene of his crime, returning to the place where he'd murdered his employer and mentor, hesitated a little before placing her hand on his shoulder. She suspected some of that reluctance came from the fact that he had to go back to the place where he'd been a professor for so long, a place where he'd been somewhat respected but mostly feared and despised. Instinctively, her hand rubbed at the tension in his back.

It was an innocent, unthinking act, but it earned her a swift, piercing look. Her hand stilled for a moment, then Hermione deliberately caressed him again. "Where else can we go, and have the same free, uninterrupted use of the facilities? I know you don't want to, but we don't have much of a choice. And you'll have to go back there as Russel, staying in my company to reassure Minerva that I'm keeping an eye on you, and staying in character whenever we could be seen by anyone or anything."

That earned her a slight, pained roll of his eyes. "I *do* know how to be a spy in dangerous territory, Jane. I've been one for longer than you've been alive."

Looking at the folded note again, he exhaled, then opened it. Reading the information written within, Severus didn't flinch when the strip of parchment incinerated itself. He brushed the ash from his fingertips without a word, inhaled deeply, and snaked his arm around her hips. A tug and a twist, and Hermione fell into his lap with a yelp. She didn't resist when he pulled her close, however. Not when it ended up with his face buried in her hair, blow-dried from the complimentary dryer in the bathroom after their shower. Not when it reminded her of what they'd just done, in that shower.

They'd caressed each other, under the guise of assisting with lathering each others' skin. She'd even daringly fondled his anus with one hand, while the other stroked his shaft. Pulling both of them down to their knees as soon as they were rinsed, he'd arranged her over him, straddling and riding him as he surged up into her. They'd kissed, too, tasting the spraying water, tasting each other as they copulated in the bathtub.

This wasn't kissing, though she could feel his lips pressing against the side of her neck. Hermione wrapped her arms around him, hugging him. This was about comfort, though she figured he'd deny it vehemently if she so much as hinted it was so. Some of the tension in his body eased. A deep breath, with his nose buried in her curls, and he straightened, allowing her to sit up from her cradled position.

Digging in his sporran, Severus pulled out the raven-carved amulet. Hermione covered his fingers with hers, making him frown warily at her. "Allow me."

Dark eyes studied her. "...Eager to have the nicer version of me back?"

It was Hermione's turn to roll her eyes in a pained, impatient look. "Eager to assist, since it's bloody awkward clasping something behind one's neck, where one cannot see what one is doing. Give me the ribbon and lift your hair up out of the way."

He handed it to her, and lifted his chest-length locks with a scoop of his fingers. Hermione slipped off his lap, kneeling on the bench beside him. Straightening out the ribbon, she made sure the carved obsidian was facing the right way, then carefully fitted it around his throat. Hooking the clasp, she watched as colour started seeping down out of his hairline, spreading under the collar of his shirt.

Catching her hand, he tugged her back into his lap. Already his face, throat, and the visible bit of his chest were Russel-tan, though his hands were still as Severus-pale as his knees. Hermione stared into his eyes, watching as the deep colour slowly lightened. His irises weren't dark brown, as one might surmise. Instead, they were a very dark grey; had they been brown, she figured his eyes would've lightened to a shade close to her own tawny colour.

It was a dramatic colour-change, watching his body alter from contrasting pale and black to complimentary tan and ash blond. The only thing that didn't change was his expression. Hermione lifted her hand to his jaw, fingering his spell-shaved skin. Not wanting to draw attention to the change in his appearance, and concomitant change in his demeanor, she remarked on a different observation. "Thank you for being clean-shaven. I was never that interested in beards or mustaches."

That arched his brow. "Not even a neatly trimmed goatee?"

His Canadian accent was back. She guessed it was enchanted into the translation spells of the pendant. It made sense to do it that way; his words would come out sounding like a native of that overseas land, without any mistakes. Studying him, she tried to picture him wearing a goatee. Even with his changed colouring, she couldn't do it. Canadian or British, he was a clean-shaven man.

"If I want to kiss something furry...I'll snog your groin," Hermione retorted boldly. To her surprise, he winced slightly, and urged her off his lap with his hands. "What's wrong?"

"I'm a little sensitive, after the third time." Closing his eyes, he stayed silent for three slow, deep breaths, then opened his eyes and smiled at her.

Just like that, Russel was back. Hermione was surprised to realize she missed Severus' own personality. Not because it was more pleasant, which definitely wasn't the case, but because she knew that, with Severus, she was getting the unvarnished truth of his opinions whenever he spoke. Russel had substance of his own, but he also gleamed with polish, so to speak.

Standing, he cradled her jaw in his palms and kissed her mouth slowly, gently. Tenderly. It felt nice, just the brushing touch of his lips against hers. It also felt a little wrong, after the tempestuousness of their previous, recent encounters. A little wrong, but a little right; Hermione didn't care if he was manufacturing emotions for himself to feel, or tapping into a side of himself that he rarely allowed to surface for long. It was nice, and she liked it.

By the time he pulled back, her fingers were tangled in his dark blond hair, her body hummed with relaxation, and the first thing she could think about when the kiss ended was pulling him down onto the bed and cuddling for a little longer. But the rest of her brain started functioning again, and she knew that the hour was growing late. A glance at the bedside clock confirmed her suspicions. The Order meeting would be over by now, and Harry and Ron would've most likely gone back to Hogwarts to study in the library for a while. Now was the time for her and him to skulk through the halls, while the students' curfew was in effect.

"...We need to get going."

He nodded. "We should Apparate to the Shrieking Shack. That's the easiest way to approach the grounds unseen. The Dark Lord does have Death Eaters scrying the landscape around Hogsmeade, looking for people who appear and disappear without a trace. He hopes to catch someone who can tell him who the Secret Keeper is, though so far there have been very few visitors who have approached on foot."

"I don't think *anybody* knows, save for maybe Minerva and the Keeper themselves, whoever it is." Drawing her wand, Hermione tapped her clothes, Transfiguring them into warm wool, including a cloak. "You'll need something warm to hike in, since the grounds are probably freezing."

Tapping his wand to his own clothes, he changed the black of his shirt and the greys of his kilt to warm shades of blue. A second tap, and his shirt became a woolly jumper; a third, and a kerchief taken from his sporran became a floor-length cloak, shifting from white to a rich burgundy red. He surprised Hermione by draping it over her shoulders, not his own. Extracting a second, rumpled kerchief, he enchanted that one into a royal blue cloak for himself.

Once the garment was clasped in place, he wrapped his arms around her. "Ready?"

Nodding, Hermione let him Disapparate both of them from the hotel room. The shock of cold air that greeted them at the far end made her instinctively bury her face in the warmth of his neck, her arms wrapped around his waist under the folds of his cloak. He permitted it for a moment, then set her back from him and lighting the tip of his wand, allowing both of them to look around. Ice crunched under their feet, slippery and treacherous. The roof had started leaking, allowing a fringe of icicles to form along one of the rafters overhead, the source of the frozen puddle on the floor. There wasn't a storm gusting a heat-thieving wind through the cracks in the windows and walls, like their last visit, but it was still icily cold.

Taking her hand, Severus led her toward the stairwell. The steps were dusty and creaky, but thankfully dry. When they reached the trap door, he released her hand long enough to open it, but caught it again to help her down the steep steps into the tunnel as soon as he was at the bottom. He continued to hold her fingers, too, keeping them warmly entangled with his as they walked down the tunnel.

At one point, he slowed and stopped, staring ahead of them. A frown pinched his brow, then it eased and he moved forward again. Hermione guessed they'd reached the edge of Hogwarts' grounds, which was where the Fidelius Charm would force him to focus on the message he'd read, allowing his eyes to finally see the rest of the path to the school. Continuing along the rough-hewn tunnel, they reached the uneven steps leading up to the Whomping Willow after a few more minutes.

Pushing her back when she would've led the way, Severus climbed up first, cautiously peering up through the hole in the ground between the vicious tree's roots. Only after a long moment of wary caution did he touch the knot that froze the tree in place, allowing them to climb out of the ground. Moving quickly out of the reach of the temporarily numbed tree, they headed up the hill towards the path that led between Hagrid's hut and the castle. She felt warmer when he sought her hand with his own, clasping it without a word.

There were only a few patches of snow on the ground, mostly under the northern shade of bushes and trees where the sun hadn't had the chance to eradicate their presence, but there was plenty of frost glittering on the tufts of grass, crunching under their feet as they headed for the path. Severus aimed his wand behind them, eradicating the evidence of their passage with a word and a cone of mist that disguised their trampled footprints. There wasn't much to hide, but it did obscure the location of the hidden tunnel. The night sky held wisps of cloud, and a partially occluded moon; it shone enough light to negate the need for any glow from his wand, allowing them to progress undetected as they came into view of the castle, and of Hagrid's hut, should the half-giant still be awake.

"...This long trek will get tedious, and troublesome, if we have to wade through snow drifts and worse, once winter progresses," he told her in a breath-fogged murmur. "When we leave, we will use the Floo to connect to my home in Spinner's End. We will Apparate to there, in the future, and use the Floo to the school. We'll have to find a hearth to use, for that."

"We've been using the Floo in Madam Pince's office, for the most part," Hermione confessed. "Harry and Ron have been spending more and more time in the library, these last few months, studying various texts and spells, in preparation for the war." She couldn't resist a giggle. "--I've never seen them so dedicated in the last few weeks, outside of maybe their last-month O.W.L. studies, and they're not even in class anymore."

"Most people aren't as studious as you. But...I'm glad to hear they're finally taking their lessons seriously, even if it's now self-directed. I trust you went ahead and bought your seventh-year books anyway, even though you're no longer enrolled?" he asked her as they started across the aging trestle spanning the ravine next to the castle.

"Of course!" Hermione nearly snorted the words, in her disdain at the idea of doing otherwise.

"Speaking of books, where is the Diary? I trust it is closed, and not lying open somewhere?" he prompted.

"Erm...it's actually back in my bedroom, at Headquarters. And it's closed, and buried in my book-bag. I'll find a Floo, once we get inside," she offered. "It won't take long to fetch, if you don't mind waiting for me. I've also figured out I'll need a sort of barricaded lectern to set it on, something with a low wall that's tucked into a corner of the lab we'll be using, so you cannot accidentally glimpse the pages while you work. There's a sort of copyright spell on the book, so I can't write down the instructions, but I can read them aloud to you."

He studied her as they reached the paved pathway from the trestle to one of the castle's side-doors. "I'm glad you've given this some thought. I have a request," he added, making her glance at him. "I would like to visit my quarters, first. There were several things I left behind, that night. Things I haven't been able to access since. Somehow, I

doubt you'd feel comfortable letting me wander through the school unaccompanied...and you aren't one of my students anymore. I don't have to worry about you seeking a spot of retaliation for a low grade. Even if your idea of 'low' would've been a cause for rapture in anyone else."

Hermione stopped and stared at him. He stopped, too, their hands still clasped together. Arching her brow, she dared to ask, "Was that a genuine compliment? And a jest?"

He flashed her a Russel-style grin. "Scary, isn't it?"

"--For that, I *will* short-sheet your bed. *And* brag about it to Fred and George, during the hols. Though I won't say how I found the place, nor where it's located," she promised.

His tanned face crumpled into a pained wince, at that. "Fuck. Fuck fuck *fuck!* Pardon the vulgarity, but...*fuck!*"

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked, alarmed by his vehemence.

"--You'll expect me to buy bloody *Christmas presents* for all of them, won't you?" he demanded, frowning deeply.

"Of course. Along with being nice and polite and friendly, and full of Christmas cheer. Now do you see why it's a fair trade, my willing to take on the lifelong responsibility of being a mum, in exchange for you not being such a surly bastard?"

Even in the partially obscured moonlight, she could see him rolling his eyes. "...I'd better get copious amounts of passionate lovemaking out of this, too--oh, *fuck!* If Harry is now your blood-brother, that makes James fucking Potter my *father-in-law!*"

"Shh!" Hermione hissed at him, tugging him quickly into the archway of the nearby door. They were close enough to the castle to have drawn attention from anyone who was awake and near a window, with that outburst. "We couldn't have been heard! And don't make me wash out your mouth with soap, for that!" she added in a hiss. "If I have to moderate my language by the time our child is born, so do you! So you might as well start practicing right now!"

His eyes glittered in the moonlight slanting past their shoulders, lighting one side of his face as his lips quirked on that side. She didn't know what to make of the humor in his tone, either, as he meekly murmured, "Yes, Jane."

Flustered, Hermione dithered for a moment in indecision, then caught the back of his neck with her free hand, pulling him down into range for a kiss. Whether it was a reward for his humor, his meekness, or what, she couldn't decide, but it seemed to be the right thing to do. When she pulled back and peered up at him, he was still smiling, though there was a puzzled edge to his expression.

Good, Hermione decided, turning to open the door. *Turnabout is fair play, between us. He makes me just as confused...*

They only got a few yards down the hall when a doorway opened abruptly, lantern-light spilling into their faces. Severus dropped her hand, snatching for his wand as Hermione shielded her eyes, guessing who it was. Her suspicions were correct when she heard Argus Filch hissing at her.

"You! You shouldn't even be here, you truant little Miss! If the Headmistress hadn't made an exception for you, I'd have you hanging in my office, in chains! Who's that with you? How'd you get him...Bob?" the caretaker interrupted himself, frowning at the face of the wizard standing beyond Hermione's shoulder. "Bob Sherleigh? Is that you?"

"Rorik Ferguson, actually."

Filch raised his lantern higher, squinting at Severus--at Russel's face. Hermione chided herself. *You must remember to call him Russel, when he's blond instead of brunette. Even in your thoughts!* The aging Squib grunted. "...You look like Robert Sherleigh, one of my cousins. Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"Mr. Ferguson is with me, and he obviously has permission from the Headmistress to be on the grounds, seeing how he came through the Fidelius Charm," Hermione asserted, dragging Filch's attention back to her. "As for what we're doing here, you'll have to ask the Headmistress, Mr. Filch, though I doubt she'll tell you. There's a lot of secrets happening, this year."

"I noticed," the caretaker muttered. "I saw your hands clasped! If you've brought him here for a snog, or more, I'll have points taken off your precious alma mater, for it! You won't be the first returnee to try that and be caught at it, either!"

The thought of the greying, sour-faced Squib catching her in a compromising position made Hermione's skin crawl. "...We'll keep that in mind."

Nudging Russel's arm, she hurried him past the caretaker. Russel took the lead, guiding her to the central stairs. He tugged her down into the dungeons when she would've climbed the stairs, having forgotten for a moment that they were heading to his former quarters, first. For a moment, as they approached the doors to his former classroom and office, she thought they'd have to break into Slughorn's territory, but he stopped them and faced other side of the corridor, between the two doors.

Leaning over, he murmured into her ear, the warmth of his breath making her shiver in contrast to the chill of the underground hall. "Severus Snape's quarters are across from the Potions professor's office and classroom."

Hermione stared at the age-worn stones lining the wall. Nothing changed. She blinked and glanced at him. He lifted his wand, tapped two adjacent stone blocks with the ebony tip...and they parted, forming a dark, arched tunnel. A touch of his hand at the small of her back guided her inside, and a flick of his wand cast enough light to see as the stones resealed themselves behind the two of them, cutting off the torchlight from the corridor.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XXIII.

A door waited for them at the end of the hall; a cobweb hung in one corner of the frame, long since abandoned by whatever spider had thought it would catch a meal in this unused passageway. Ignoring the threads, Severus opened the latch with his free hand. Light sprang to life as she entered the room, sconces flickering with a steady flame,

illuminating his sitting room. It was not, Hermione saw with relief, decorated in Slytherin silvers and greens. It was decorated in the browns of leather and wood, and a plethora of book spines on the shelves lining the walls between the sconces.

It was also spotlessly dusted and tidied, with a fresh scent to the air. That puzzled Hermione. Severus--Russel--grunted, unconcerned by her worry. "The house-elves are still cleaning it, I see. Two of them have access to the Secret of this place. You can peruse the books later; we won't be here long."

"I'd like to see the rest of the place," Hermione demurred, though she was tempted to study the shelves. "And I do have to short-sheet your bed, so you might as well show me where that is."

Another snort sound escaped him, this time tinged with humor. "Just remember, you required my assistance to put one over on the Weasley twins. You'll owe me, for that. *If* it's wise to tell them you were in here. Knowing them, they might get too curious and would want to see this place for themselves. I don't want the Ministry finding out that you know about it, either. But if you insist, I'll give you the two-Sickle tour."

Hermione followed him. The sitting room functioned as a sort of private study, spacious enough for a bachelor's needs, but not overly large. There was a kitchenette and dining nook, too, also spotless, though the cupboards and icebox had been stripped bare of all foodstuff but a tin of tea and a small canister of sugar. The bedroom was reasonably sized, too, with a four-poster bed covered in a dark blue duvet, the pillows looking freshly plumped in their white coverlets. The bathroom...well, it wasn't quite as sybaritic as the prefects' pool-sized baths, but it did have an oversized tub with a plethora of taps, a separate showering stall, and polished pale marble countertops.

Content with what she saw, Hermione followed him back to the bedroom, where he stopped to open some of the drawers in the tall, dark cherry wardrobe, rummaging through their contents. While he was occupied, her gaze kept returning to his bed. Normally Hermione was the staid, rules-abiding type...but there was just enough of a rebel within her to find the idea too tempting to resist. A flick and a swish of her wand, and the covers rustled and shifted subtly. The top-sheet was now doubled up, with the bottom end tucked around the top of the mattress.

The house-elves might discover and correct it before the bed was ever used again...but she'd done what no other prankster student had ever managed to do: short-sheet Severus Snape's bed. Feeling rather smug, Hermione turned her attention back to the dark blond man closing the wardrobe drawers across from her. He turned to face her, something cradled in his hand. "If you're done playing with my bed, I have something for you."

Curious, Hermione approached. Resting on his palm was a barrette, a hairpin, crafted out of silver and studded with blue gems. Sapphires, she realized suddenly. They were tiny, but there were half a dozen of them on the pin. From the lack of visible tarnish, she guessed the thin, swirling lines of the barrette were most likely made from white gold, not silver.

"This was my mother's. There used to be two of them, but I don't know where the other one went. I couldn't find it in her belongings, after she died. She was born in September, too, so I know you share the same birthstone. You'll need something to keep your hair out of your face, while you read the instructions for the potion."

"I couldn't wear this," Hermione demurred. "Not an heirloom piece. I wouldn't want to lose it, if it's the only one left."

"You'll wear it if I say you can wear it. I know you'll be careful enough to not lose it. I also don't want your hair in your face while we're trying to collaborate on a lethal brew."

Scooping her locks back from her hairline, he fastened the strands behind the top of her head. He moved around her as he did so, standing behind her as he finished pinning her hair in place. His hands dropped to her upper arms, cupping them. Warm breath gusted along the side of her bared throat; Hermione felt his lips saluting the skin just under her ear. It was cold in his quarters without any fires lit, but her shiver wasn't induced by the temperature. Sliding his hands down her arms, he released her, then caught her fingers, tugging her towards the door.

"I wanted to make sure the house-elves hadn't been ordered to strip my rooms bare for the Aurors to pick through, like vultures. I'm pleased to see they haven't done so...which means the other half of my personal library is still available for our use. But I would appreciate it if you did not come here without me," her husband cautioned her, sounding strange with his Snape-like seriousness, yet Russel-accented speech. "Some of the texts on my shelves can just as dangerous as the Diary, but without the Suffragette tendencies to side in your favour, if you do not know the trick of reading them."

"I'll keep that in mind," Hermione promised. Her ears were a little cold, exposed like this, but she wasn't going to touch the pin holding back her hair for all the Galleons in the world, in that moment. Anything he did, calculated or not, that was a positive interaction with her was something she was going to do her best to encourage, not discourage. "But we need to get going on brewing the Anima Te. Is the Floo connected to your hearth?"

"There should still be some powder in the pot on the mantel. I'll wait here," he promised, guiding her towards the sitting room hearth. "Don't dally."

"I won't," she promised, taking a handful of powder. Then hesitated, looking at him. "If you go into the bedroom, I can Floo directly there, but otherwise..."

Nodding, he turned back toward the bedroom. "I have to use the lavatory, anyway. Don't take long."

Hermione made a note to do that herself, and waited only until the door was shut before snapping her wand at the hearth to spark a magical fire; a quietly spoken command and she stepped through, spinning off to fetch the Lucrezia Diary and the new cauldron she'd bought.

...

It was late when Hermione spun out of the hearth at Headquarters. As in, after-breakfast-late. With her reading the Diary from behind a sheltered lectern, however, they had managed to get quite a lot done before the first of many 'overnight' simmering stages. Severus had used their requirement-conjured hearth to Floo to his home at 42 Spinner's End, pausing only to kiss her good-night, or rather, good-morning. That had left her free to Floo herself back to 12 Grimmauld Place without being overheard. Dusting herself off, she looked around the kitchen. Her stomach rumbled at the lingering scents of rashers and hash-browns, but Mrs. Figg was standing at the sink, scrubbing the last of the breakfast dishes.

Her second, louder stomach-rumble caught the elderly Squib's attention. Glancing over her shoulder, Arabella offered her a smile. And a scolding. "About time you got home! Harry and Ron wanted to wait up for you, but they've gone off to bed. You young folk are keeping such strange hours, right now. If you want a little something, there's a few leftovers from the fry-up we had, in the icebox there. Tonks is supposed to go to the grocer's this afternoon, but I think there's an apple or two left, if you want a little more...and if you do want to eat, you'd better dry and put away these dishes afterwards, and wash and dry your own."

She nodded at the dish drainer next to her elbow. Mindful of the older woman's admonishment to pull her weight in chores, Hermione nodded, stifling a yawn. Fetching the remnants of breakfast, she piled it together on a plate, cast a reheating charm, then sliced and added the apple she found. A glass of grapefruit juice rounded out the meal; it was halfway gone by the time Arabella finished scrubbing the dishes, wiped her hands dry, and dropped an envelope next to Hermione.

"That came for you, by owl-post. You'll want to answer it as soon as you can consult that man of yours. When will you be seeing him again, do you know?" the older woman nattered, curious.

"Tonight. We're working on a project...together," Hermione answered, yawning midway through her reply.

"Then you'll be able to reply quickly. Harry and Ron said they'd go, and Harry said he'd visit your folks to see if they'd accept, though he said he wanted you to be with him when he did so. Something about this afternoon, after they'd finished at their practice and had gone home."

Curious, Hermione opened the flap. The first of two folded parchments inside bore a neatly scribed invitation. It read: **Mr. Arthur and Mrs. Molly Weasley, and their Eldest Son Bill and Daughter-in-Law Fleur, cordially invite Hermione and Russel Fawkeson to the Burrow for Christmas Eve through Boxing Day Celebrations. R.S.V.P. ~Fleur Weasley**

Hermione rolled her eyes. Only Phlegm would be so formal about an invitation to share the Christmas hols. She checked the second one; it said the same, except it was

addressed to Jeffrey and Daphne Granger, her parents. Hermione suspected Harry had received a double-invitation set as well. Setting the invitations briefly aside, she finished her breakfast, and took care of the dishes. When the kitchen was neat, she took the envelope and its contents upstairs to the privacy of her room, pulled out a pad of paper and a pen, and touched her thumb to her ring.

"Severus Selenius Snape."

Touching the ring to the paper, she wrote, **Got a minute?**

He didn't reply. After five minutes of waiting, she removed her hand, wondering if he was alright. Hoping he'd just gone to sleep. It wasn't until she'd stripped her clothes and tossed them in the hamper that her finger burned. Wrapping a wool blanket from the foot of her bed around her body, since her bedroom was cold and she was naked, Hermione sat back down at her vanity-desk, pressing the blank gold to the page.

Sorry, I wasn't near paper. What did you want?

We've been formally invited to the Weasley's for Christmas Eve through Boxing Day. Both of us. And my parents, though they'll decline Boxing Day for the Granger family get-together that day. How shall I "Repondez, S'il-Vouze-Plait"?

In the affirmative. Find out who I have to buy presents for. And get some of that money of ours out of your account, for me. About a thousand pounds, converted--that's for your own use, too. We'll go shopping in a day or two. Now, if that's all, I'm very tired and am in need of sleep. I intend to ward this room to keep the other bastard traitor out of here, too, since the silver-handed oaf makes more noise than Nymphadora does, day or night, and you exhausted me with your demands.

I'm not the one who said he was 'naturally randy', Hermione retorted.

I meant the potion.

She didn't know whether to blush, laugh, or glare. She settled for a warm-faced snort. **Then you'd better get your rest, since I'll put you through the wringer tonight, too.**

Promises, promises...

Smiling, Hermione ended the communication. It wasn't until she'd crawled between the covers of her single bed and extinguished the light that she realized it was only a little while ago that she wouldn't have been in the mood to smile at anything her husband said or did. She might've made several mistakes right along with him, but she was fairly sure she'd gotten everything back on the right track again.

...

The surreal sight of a kilt-clad, light-haired Severus Snape--Russel Fawkeson, rather--in the aisles of Harrods two days later was a thing Hermione could never, ever have imagined. The man was a menace, wading through the other shoppers like a Muggle born and bred. Weaving this way and that, he hauled Hermione in his wake and smiled at everyone, from the rather harried salesclerks to the most silvery-haired matron shoppers doddering along the aisles. Well maybe not at the cranky toddlers, but everyone of adult age.

His tanned good looks ensured the lady salesclerks helped them, too. That put her out, since more than one of the lady-clerks referred to her as his *daughter*, or his *niece*, making her snap from time to time that she was *his wife*, *thank you very much* Which ended up in lesser service, but she was irritated by every single feminine smile sent his way, dammit. Luckily, he had ordered Sigurd to ignore any minor Muggle advances, and remain discreetly out of sight. But it didn't stop Hermione from glaring with the ferocity of a guardian-dragon.

He was definitely a power-shopper, too.

In the span of one and a half hours and five major stores--admittedly on the same stretch of London street and ending in Harrods--he had bought an expensive electronic scale for the twins to use in measuring ingredient weights for their shop; a fancy grooming kit each for Bill and Charlie; scented toiletry baskets for Fleur and Ginny; a pair of digital clock/radio/temperature-gauge thingies for Arthur Weasley--with the side-note to Hermione that one was for Arthur to actually use, and the other for the Muggle-loving wizard to pry apart and investigate--another clock-thing for her father, Jeffrey, along with a pocket voice-recorder; a nesting trio each of saucepans for Molly and Hermione's mother, Daphne, one set in red and the other in blue; a small hamper of assorted biscuits, sausages and cheeses for Ron, and a matching one for Harry.

He'd helped her to buy a towel-set each for Fleur and Bill in a nice light blue reminiscent of the blue Beauxbatons uniforms; a fancy Muggle first-aid kit for Charlie; and matching scarves-and-gloves for the twins. For Ginny, she bought a new quilted dressing gown in a light purple, a larger-sized one for Molly in rose, and one sized for her own mum in green. For her father, she purchased a page-a-day cat calendar as she did every year, along with a mug for his coffee cup collection; for Arthur, she sternly resisted buying him a similar calendar themed in duct-tape suggestions, afraid he'd actually attempt them. Instead, she got him a page-a-day calendar and a mug of a popular Muggle comic strip, Dilbert, figuring that the woes of the workplace weren't so different in the wizarding world. She figured he could take them to the Ministry and have a chuckle a day, in his cubicle.

...If they hadn't been able to discreetly flick their wands inside their shopping bags, reducing sizes and weights, it would've been a very awkward lot to haul around.

Harry and Ron were her last two gifts to get. One of her recent chores in the last few weeks at Headquarters was casting the laundering charms for the piles of clothes that had stacked up. Kreacher was working at Hogwarts, still, and that meant someone had to do the laundry for those Order members who lived at Headquarters. She'd seen the state of Ron and Harry's shirts, and the fact that they seemed to only have jeans, and had taken careful note of their clothing sizes.

The problem was, jackets and slacks were a little pricey. Throw in shirts and ties, and she didn't know if she could afford full-on Muggle clothes, with her share of their remaining funds. She could Transfigure something...but if anyone cast *Finite Incantatem* at the wrong object, they'd wind up in whatever the clothes had originally been. Which could be quite embarrassing, even if it were only cloaks made out of handkerchiefs.

An exasperated noise broke her concentration, as she studied the Clearance racks. A tanned hand shoved a collection of bags at her to hold, then impatiently grabbed two hangers of pale blue shirts, and two light grey jacket-and-trousers sets, each holding garments in the sizes she'd muttered she was looking for. Catching her elbow, her husband dragged her over to the round tables laid out with a rainbow of ties, picked out two silver-and-blue ties in the exact same colour and pattern, and tossed them over the clothes draped on his arm.

"--Russel!" Hermione protested, carefully avoiding his other name. "They can't have the exact same outfits!"

"Why not? They're around each other all the time. Why should Fred and George be the only twins in the family?" he returned. "Those two certainly act like it, themselves."

"Fred and George are the exact same size, and don't have to worry about getting their laundry mixed up," Hermione retorted. "Ron's a full five inches taller than Harry."

"This isn't a *faux-pas* like two ladies wearing the exact same dress to a formal tea," he pointed out, his Canadian accent standing out in the sea of British voices chattering around them. "It's two guys who are best friends. They'll think having matching outfits is a great idea!"

"--He's right about that," a somewhat portly gentleman offered from the other side of the tie-scattered table. "My wife would kill me if I got her the same dress as the neighbor's, but I certainly don't care if I've got the same jumper on or not. You should pay attention to your uncle's advice."

Hermione gritted her teeth, silently snarling, *He's not my uncle! He's not my father! He's not my brother! And he's not my bloody guardian! He's my husband, dammit!* But

shouting that in the middle of Harrods wouldn't be very couth. It would be a great stress-reliever, and slightly less disruptive than hexing the man's nose off his face, but not the polite thing to do. Giving in, Hermione let her husband steer them towards the nearest purchasing counter.

Two women stood there in jeans and jumpers, arms laden with gifts of their own as they waited in the queue for the cashiers. They eyed Russel Fawkeson from his boots to his brow, taking in the socks, kilt, and woolly jumper, and returned their gazes to his lean waistline. And points lower, where they lingered over the fine-looking legs displayed by his blue-and-red kilt.

Hermione had enough. Stepping in front of the object of their attentions, she stared pointedly at both women--mid-twenties, blond, smartly dressed--and turned, facing the kilt-clad wizard. Freeing one arm from her packages, she twined her fingers through his hair and dragged his head down into range, kissing him firmly and blatantly on the mouth. This wasn't a time for the famous British reserve in public, in her very irritated opinion.

He stiffened for a moment, pulling back. Spots of colour had appeared on his tanned cheeks, and one sandy brown brow had arched, silently questioning her actions. But he didn't look away from her; his eyes narrowed in thought, then warmed in decision, almost gleaming as he regarded her silently. He smiled and gave in, dipping down to recapture her lips and returning the sensual play.

Kissing him like that in a holiday-crowded department store felt very naughty, and yet very full of holiday cheer. It wasn't something she'd normally associate with Severus Snape--even if he was Russel at the moment--but Hermione decided the only thing that would've been better was the flavour of peppermint added to their kiss. She doubted she could get him to suck on a candy-cane, but somehow, she knew she was going to associate holiday sale signs, tinsel garlands, and queuing for a cash register with the man she'd married.

A spluttered noise of protest broke them apart, but when a flushed Hermione glanced over her shoulder, it wasn't from what they'd done. It was because a pushy middle-aged woman in a lurid purple outfit was trying to cut into the queue ahead of the two understandably distracted younger women. Glad she'd made her point to them and anyone else who might've been watching, Hermione faced forward again.

A blue-clad arm wrapped around her, and an accented voice murmured in her ear. "We'll need to break up and shop for each other, in a little bit. Shall we go back to the hotel to drop off our purchases, before then?"

Hermione nodded, shuffling forward in the queue with him. It did beg the question of what to get him for Christmas, though. The first thing that came to mind was books, but he had so many, Hermione didn't know how to tell if he already had a particular tome, first. Not without cataloguing his shelves beforehand. *Probably, he doesn't have anything absolutely brand-new*, she thought, knowing he hadn't been able to nip out to a bookstore since that disastrous night at the end of the last school year. *Which means I might be able to find him something good in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade. But I can't get him anything Muggle, and expect him to be able to read it while he's at Death Eater Central.* She could get him some jigsaw puzzles, but that seemed like a bit of a wimpy present...

They reached the head of the queue. Russel handed over the clothes to be purchased, and all of Hermione's remaining paper cash, plus most of his own. There went her idea for anything Muggle; by the time he got their change back, they probably had just over five pounds between the two of them. The salesclerk handed it to him with a smile. "Thank you for shopping at Harrods! Say...my shift ends in just two more minutes--would you like to share a cuppa in the store cafe downstairs?"

Gritting her teeth in an approximation of a smile, Hermione leaned forward over the counter, snagging the newest addition to their plethora of paper sacks. "My husband and I already have plans to go back to our hotel room and shag like rabid rabbits. But the offer is flattering. Have a happy holiday!"

With the sort of syrupy-sweet inflection to her tone that silently added the words, *...with all of your teeth intact*, to the end of her little well-wishing speech, Hermione hustled the kilted wizard at her side out of the department store as fast as she could. His grin didn't help her temper. It was very un-Severus-ish, too, and it was still splitting his face even after she pulled him into the visual shelter of the parking garage's stairwell, and Disapparated both of them back to their suite in the nameless Muggle hotel he'd picked, vanishing the moment she was certain no one was looking.

Dumping the bags on the floor, Hermione tossed her Muggle jacket aside, then reached up and unfastened his choker, tossing it on the table as he shrugged out of his own coat. Hands planted on her hips, she stared up at his still-grinning face, though he did arch his brow at her. Impatiently, she waited until the last bit of excess skin-colour had swirled up into his hairline, restoring his locks to raven-black. She had hoped that seeing him as Severus would ease her rotten mood, but it didn't. God, if he'd gone into Harrods looking like this, she'd still have had troubles! Sapphire blue was really his best colour to wear, even when his own colouring was restored to his natural black locks and pale hide.

Upset with all the feminine attention he'd received, irked that he *wasn't* enjoying it, Hermione snarled at him, "--Do you *have* to be so bloody handsome in a kilt?!"

Shock robbed him of his smile. His eyes widened, making the whites stand out in stark contrast to his dark irises. A moment later, they narrowed, and that ruddy, amused smile was back. In fact, it was even more smug than before. That only roused more of her ire. Part of the problem was that he'd been *smiling* at most of the women they'd met!

"Merlin's arse! I can't take you anywhere! Blond or brunette, you'd draw flies to honey, in that outfit!--I'm surprised you're not soaked in their drool! You were giving me the collywobbles, too, Severus! *Smiling* at everyone and everything! I know you were being Russel, but did you have to smile at *all* of the other ladies? And exactly how many of them tried to pinch your arse, in those crowds?" she demanded.

It didn't help that his shoulders shook with silent laughter. A lick of his lips, and the snarky bastard smugly admitted, "...Five. Plus two more who groped me for a discreet kilt-check."

Instinct had her grabbing her wand, even though the women from the store weren't anywhere near. She wasn't really going to use it--in fact, when she did touch it, tucked into her sleeve, Hermione felt rather embarrassed that she was overreacting so much. But Severus caught her wrists, gently parting and brushing her arms out of the way as he stepped up against her. Sliding his hands around her waist, he kissed her, silencing whatever would've been the next leg of her tirade.

Hermione let him silence her with his lips. The most contrasting thing about him was, to put it bluntly, his snark factor versus his sex factor. And after having seeing him be *nice* for an hour and a half, being attacked by his sensual passions was quite enjoyable. But his comment about the women who had groped him made her curious to know what he was wearing under his kilt, too. She hoped he had something under there; it would not please her to think of some female feeling up *her* man's arse, when she hadn't yet had the chance to do so herself, today.

Her fingers, pulling up the pleats of his kilt and exploring his hips, encountered the soft cotton knit of his briefs. Relief warred with disappointment for a moment, before Hermione decided it was a good thing he'd had his underthings on until this point...but since they were alone, away from any grabby fingers--other than hers, a thought which made her smirk as she kissed her way down his throat--she pulled gently on the waistband, easing the material over his hardening loins and down his thighs.

That broke her kiss, since she had to dip lower than his jumper collar, but he obligingly stepped out of them. Rising, she caught him in the act of tugging on his cuffs. Dropping his briefs, Hermione covered his hands, smiling. "No. Keep your clothes on. The rest of them, that is."

Severus arched one of his brows, then lowered both of them. "I'm *not* going outside, like this."

Hermione lifted her own brow, returning her hands to the hem of his kilt, lifting the red-and-blue plaid with a skimming touch of her fingertips on his thighs. "If you ever did, I'd hex you silly. And just to make my intentions clear, you will *not* go regimental under your kilts, not out where any other woman could possibly grope, let alone see, what is *mine*."

Her fingers tightened on his buttocks in emphasis, pulling their lower bodies snugly together. Even through the layers of his wool and her denim, Hermione could feel his

erection twitch at her possessive words. That smug smirk from earlier came back, curving his mouth as he kissed her. She squeezed him for looking so bloody superior without saying why, but that only seemed to encourage him, slanting his mouth across hers and all but devouring her lips and her tongue. Merlin, the man could kiss!

An unannounced tap on her shoulder surprised her, for it slithered her clothing from her limbs. Hermione hadn't realized one could do wordless magic while snogging someone, but she supposed it made great sense, since one *couldn't* cast a verbal spell effectively while the lips and the tongue were busy doing something else. Of course, it also left her naked, as even her shoes and socks squirmed off her feet, forcing her to shuffle a moment for balance.

For a moment, Hermione felt vulnerable, standing there naked while he was still more or less fully clothed. But the desire burning in his gaze, the way his hand trembled a little as he shifted it to caress her breast, the subtle but undeniable tenting of his kilt told her she still wielded some power over him. There was strength to be found in being nude; she realized that, now.

His hands covered hers as she started to unbuckle his belt, stilling her movement.

"I thought you wanted me to stay clothed," Severus murmured, tickling her skin as he nuzzled her hairline.

"Your sporrán is in the way," she returned, twisting her head to purr the words into his ear. He shivered. It made her feel smug, knowing exactly what hot-button to push on an otherwise powerful, passionate, but tightly controlled man. His current kilt was not actual folded yards of wool, but neatly stitched pleats of wool, so removing the belt didn't make it fall. But the latch wasn't fully fastened on the sporrán; when she dropped it on the table, a couple coins rolled out. That made her think of how he'd shopped. "You know, you were scarily efficient, in all those stores."

"That's because I absolutely loathe, detest, and despise shopping," Severus informed her, cupping her bare bottom in his hands as she returned her attention to him. "The only thing I can tolerate for any length of time is book-shopping. All else, I make up a list beforehand, even if it's only my mind, and I get what I want, and get out as fast as I can."

Her nipples rubbed against the warm blue knit of his jumper, stimulating the tips of her breasts. Concentrating through the sensation even as she wriggled her shoulders, rubbing them a little more, Hermione asked, "Even when you're looking for potions ingredients?"

He tipped his head slightly, acknowledging her point. "...I take slightly longer with that than other kinds of shopping, but mostly because I take time to ensure that the ingredients selected are in excellent condition. But I never browse. I have a list, and I stick to it. Browsing is for bookshops."

"Well, I'm sorry, but I can't get you a book for Christmas until I know what you already have on your shelves, so I don't accidentally buy a duplicate," Hermione found herself apologizing. "I'd get you a Muggle book, since you don't have many of those, but you'd never have time or a safe place to read it..."

"*Potions, Powders, Unguents and Salves of Upper and Lower Egypt*!" he asserted, sliding one hand up the length of her spine, sending goose-spots down her arms.

"I beg your pardon?"

"*Potions, Powders, Unguents and Salves of Upper and Lower Egypt*!" Severus repeated. "It was Copernicus Amalgo's first mass-published translation. They'd just run a third printing, and I had ordered a copy at the bookshop in Hogsmeade, right before everything was shot into hell in a rocket-launched hand-basket. It should still be there, and you should have enough in wizarding funds to purchase it, from what you didn't have converted, earlier. If anyone asks at the Burrow why you're giving it to me, I'll simply tell them I'm interested in Egyptian wizardry."

"And...if you go into Hogsmeade to get it," he added, "I can go to Diagon Alley and buy you a gift there, with neither of us crossing paths until our purchases are safely wrapped. You can buy me something I don't know about, as well. If you like."

His subtle diffidence made her smile. "I'll see what I can find. Erm...if you want to get me something, I'd love a copy of *The ABCs of Artificing*, or some other basic text on the art of making Artifacts. I'm beginning to think I should've taken that, instead of Divinations, or Care of Magical Creatures. And you could get something I don't know about, if you'd like to surprise me, too."

A curt nod, and he stated, "Then we're agreed." Scooping her up in his arms, he ignored her surprised gasp and the way she clutched at his shoulders, carrying her over to the bench at the foot of the bed. "As for that shameless display of public affection earlier, I think a spanking is in order. I did *not* give you permission to snog the daylight's out of me in the middle of bloody Harrods!"

"--Severus!" Hermione shrieked, finding herself quickly and firmly inverted over his kilt-clad thighs as he sat down.

"If you tell me 'no'..." he stated, and deliberately paused so that he could slide his fingertips very slowly along the seam of her femininity, "I shall have to find some other, less pleasant means of punishing you, than twenty swats of my hand."

"Less pleasant?" Hermione repeated, outraged, as he stroked her slowly with his hand. She did her best to ignore the rush of her blood to the body-parts he was touching as well as to her head, and refused to admit her heart was pounding. "You're going to spank me! Let me up this instant! Let me--*oh!*"

The bastard had inserted his finger between her folds, belying her outrage with the revelation of just how moist she was. He penetrated her all the way to the base of his finger, then withdrew it slowly, and sucked her moisture noisily from his flesh. Hermione couldn't breathe, hearing him swallowing, then moaning deep in his chest from the pleasure of her taste.

The sting of his hand, slapping her bottom rapidly in five painful smacks, caught her off guard. She twisted as she yelped, trying to get free, but his other arm had become a vise, pinning her to his knees. She caught her breath when he paused, rubbing his fingers blatantly through her folds, and managed to speak. "No!"

Instantly, Severus released her. He even pulled her upright, steadying her on her feet before letting go. Midnight eyes stared at tawny brown soberly. Then the bastard had the temerity to lift his hand to his mouth and suck her glistening dew from each anointed finger. He held her gaze as he did so, letting her see the heat building within him at the simple, sensual act.

Trepidation warred with sensuality, embarrassment, arousal, and disbelief, leaving her flustered and hot-faced. She'd said no, and he'd released her, but he had also threatened something worse. The thought of what Severus Snape could come up with for 'worse' unnerved her. And there was something else making her hesitate.

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment stilling the whirling emotions within her, so that she could think clearly; in the calmness she found, she decided that that it was *okay* to be aroused by being spanked. Opening them, she watched Severus curling his tongue suggestively between two of his fingers, and blushed harder. A deep breath, and she expelled it in a sigh, moving back to him and lowering her stomach back onto his lap. She felt his tension at the bold, odd-for-her act, and sighed again, grumbling, "You'd better give me a ruddy brilliant orgasm, if you expect to spank me and get away with it."

She heard his breath catch in his throat, and felt a tremor in his hands as they settled on her skin, one on her back, the other on her buttock. Rather than beginning immediately, he started caressing her, kneading the muscles under his hands. It felt good. Hermione relaxed under his touch, then shivered as he delicately resumed teasing her femininity with his fingertips. That felt good, too.

Smack!

Shocked, Hermione felt the stinging tingle in her bum. She felt the way her skin was more sensitive to the tickling caress of his touch as he skimmed his palm very lightly over her backside. He spanked her again, four more smarting, rapid strokes that made her suck in her breath and hold it. That breath left her explosively as he feathered his fingers between her nether-lips, stroking through the moisture that had seeped from her depths.

He circled her clitoris, teasing it and arousing her further, then slid his left hand over her shoulder, and down under her body, cupping and caressing the curves of her breasts. Ghosting his touch over their peaks, he lightly pinched and twisted one nipple at one end of her torso, while two of his fingers over at the other end pressed their way into her slick depths. Hermione shuddered with the strange pleasure of the act; her nipple ached, yet it felt good, connecting all of the nerves between the two locations. Especially when he twisted his hand a little and pressed one of his fingers down, rubbing it into that spot inside her vagina that made her ache so sweetly. She bucked under his touch, moaning with the helpless need he instilled.

"Yesss..." He spanked her five more times, rubbed and pinched and caressed, then smacked her one last time on her tender flank, leaving a damp spot from the wetness on his hand. "Get your wand!"

Hermione opened her eyes and craned her head, peering up at him. He smacked her rump again. Sliding off his lap, she looked up at him, trying not to sit on her stinging bum. "Whatever for?"

A tap of his wand, and his clothing slithered away. A second tap, and he stated, "*Semobilim*." His naked body rose off of the bench by about half a foot, and hovered in the air. The somber expression on Severus' face warmed, the corner of his mouth quirked up along with his eyebrow. "Well?"

Blinking, Hermione twisted and found her wand, tapping herself. She'd never quite considered the possibility of *two* people using her self-levitation charm, the one she'd used when he was injured but needy. But his adaptation was ruddy brilliant, when she thought of it. "*Semobilim*!"

Floating up, she willed herself towards him, pleased to see him moving towards her. They bumped awkwardly together, twisting as each one had their own idea on what position to take, but it got sorted out when he slotted himself between her thighs, and pulled himself into her by her hips. It was a strange sensation, floating in the support of a spell that allowed them to twist and turn free, taking any position they wanted. It did give them a great deal of freedom, though.

They found themselves oriented head-down at one point, and the heady rush of blood and silly swaying of their hair contrasted against each other and the pleasure they were experiencing, until Hermione found herself laughing. "--Wheeeee!" she gasped, holding onto him as her body shook with spasms. "Now we really *are* upside-down!"

Severus didn't laugh. Instead, he stared at her with a faintly puzzled look, as if seeing something in her for the first time. Wrapping his arms around her, he started to tilt them horizontal again.

"Oh, please--I was having fun, upside-down!" she pouted in protest. He stilled, then tipped them downward again, the two spells intermeshing as she allowed him to guide her. But rather than stopping when they were inverted vertically, he continued around, until he was under her at an angle. Then horizontal, then on their way to upright...and then over and down again. Hermione laughed as they spun like a wheel, until he captured her mouth with what sounded like a chuckle, silencing her laughter.

They drifted to a stop on an incline, their heads higher than their toes, with Severus lying under her, his hands guiding her hips as she rocked on him. Then he tipped to the side, and they spun onto their sides, then onto her back, rotating more or less centered over the floor in front of the padded bench. Growing dizzy, Hermione clung to him, kissing him until they were both breathless and panting.

They found an orientation that kept their hair mostly out of the way, but it didn't matter if it was upright or otherwise; limbs intertwined, they copulated with increasing urgency, increasing need. Greedy groans of, "Mmmh, *good*..." intermingled with breathy gasps of, "Oh god...oh god, yes..." until spasms wracked their bodies, first hers and then his, ending with that chant of her middle name. This time, it didn't sound quite so strange on Severus' lips, but more like it once had on Russel's, his baritone voice purring it into her ear in a sort of endearment.

In the aftermath of their passion, as little shivers wracked their muscles, as they floated literally in midair, Hermione clung to her mercurial lover and thought about what he'd said. What he'd sworn to not ever do again, in that moment of betrayal and rage between them. She thought about a lot of things connected to that promise, how it might affect their relationship, both in the eyes of others and in private between them, and wondered how she could address and fix the problem it would become.

A fingertip touched the center of her brow, gently tracing the furrow her frown had temporarily carved. "Something is bothering you." A nudge of his body against hers, and he drifted them down towards the bed, orienting them with their head to the foot, and picked up his wand with a stretch of his arm. Rotating them the right way around, he pressed them down on their sides, and cancelled the spells holding them aloft. "...Now, what is wrong?"

Taking a deep breath, Hermione did her best to patch up the problem. "I owe you an apology."

That made Severus' own brow furrow in confusion. "For what?"

"For my refusing to believe you could speak an honest endearment. I was feeling hurt and betrayed, and I lashed out at you," Hermione confessed as bravely as she could. "It was wrong of me. I'm sure you're capable of expressing honest tenderness...if you really want to," she added carefully. "And it occurred to me that, if you don't display any while we're with the others for the holidays, even if it's manufactured tenderness...it's going to look rather strange. So I owe you an apology, and if I hurt your feelings, I'm sorry."

"I'm not going to suddenly demand any endearments out of you, or anything...but if you feel the need to, um, use them, for whatever reason...I'll just take them at face value unless and until you say otherwise." She couldn't look into his eyes as she said that, but looked at his chest instead, wanting to give him privacy to react however he felt at her words. "And I won't deride your feelings again. They're your own business, and they're valid, whatever you might feel. Or not feel. I'm sorry."

He stayed still for a long moment. Hermione kept her gaze on his chest, watching the sparsely haired flesh swell and subside with each breath. Finally, he moved, rolling away from her. "The shops will be closing, if we don't dress and get moving."

Part of her had hoped for some show of tenderness on his part, even mock-tenderness, but part of her had not expected him to display anything. Somehow, Hermione doubted he was resilient enough to leap into expressions of emotion while he was being Severus, and she didn't think he was shallow enough to manufacture false ones when they weren't necessary. Summoning her clothes to her side of the bed, she stared dressing, resigning herself to a long and prickly road ahead of her, one that terminated in the cold stone guarding the fortress of his heart. *Lead him around by his emotions...what was the Headmaster thinking, that I'm an angel and can perform miracles?* She suppressed the snort that accompanied that thought.

"Bezoars," he stated suddenly, making her glance his way as she rose, pulling up her knickers and jeans together.

"I beg your pardon?"

"We'll need to purchase several bezoars, between now and the completed potion. Not every goat can ingest and transmute one, and the detection and extraction process is complicated, if you want a bezoar-capable animal to survive. There's only a small number of apothecaries in Great Britain, and only so many we could pre-empt from Professor Slughorn's collection before we endangered the school's supply of them. We might even have to visit the Continent to find enough in time to neutralize the poison, as you said the Mirror of Erised could do.

"Repeated purchases under the same guise could cause the shop-owners to wonder what we're doing. It might even cause a small panic over the thought of poisonings, which would be blamed on the Death Eaters...and possibly give the Dark Lord ideas. Even purchases under different disguises could cause problems," he stated, pausing long enough to pull his blue jumper over his head. "We need a more discreet source.

"When you're done with your purchases, I want you to go to the Hog's Head, in Hogsmeade. Go up to the bar and look for Old Abe; he's the aging bartender they usually have serving the drinks. Tell him you want a Sloe Screw Up Against The Potions Bench--it's a mixed drink, and a code-word for black-market ingredients. Hand him a Sickle enchanted with the ingredient name.

"When he asks you how much you'll want to drink, tell him to mix up a gallon, and that you'll be back to pick it up later. Make sure to remember how much it'll be, and when

he'll tell you it'll be ready, but tell him you'll not wait longer than two months. Aim in your bartering to bring the price down by at least a third. If he gives you any grief over the haggling, tell him it's a Sloe Screw, spelled S-L-O-E, not spelled S-L-O-W. I've dealt with him before, in various disguises. He should give you a discount, with that."

"Go to Hog's Head, look for Old Abe," Hermione recited, stooping to tie her shoes, almost finished dressing. "Ask him for a Sloe--as in S-L-O-E--Screw Up Against The Potions Bench, hand him a Sickie with 'bezoar' on it, and ask for a gallon's worth to be mixed up and delivered within two months, no later."

"Correct." He finished bucking his sporran and wand-sheath into place, then picked up the Muggle winter coats they'd used between stores in London, Transfiguring them back into proper wizarding cloaks.

Hermione stood and crossed to the table, picking up the ribbon. She'd taken it off of him; she should put it back on him. When she faced him, he arched his brow, but bent over a little and allowed her to gird his throat with the ribbon. He took advantage of their position, too, sliding his hands around her waist and his lips along her throat. It occurred to her that every time he got close to her of late, he was doing that. Kissing her.

She finished her task with unsteady fingers. Every time he touched her, every time he kissed her, she felt a warm flush coursing through her body. Even when she didn't want to feel that way, he made her *feel*. There was no such thing as a boring moment around Severus Selenius Snape, it seemed. Sliding her hands up into his hair, soft and slightly oily near his scalp, perpetually in need of a shower, she returned his kisses with little nibbles of her own. Six, maybe seven months had passed since he'd sent that letter to her. It felt like a year had been compressed into that small of a span.

He stroked her own curls, then pulled back, and pulled her around by the shoulders, confusing her. "Your hair is a mess. It needs fixing. *Accio* brush! *Accio* chair!"

Finding herself pressed down into the chair that slid over from the table, Hermione felt him unfasten her barrette before brushing her curls from the bottom up. She'd taken to wearing the clip in the past two days as a subtle sign of her approval of his gift, in the hopes he would understand that she cherished it--which she did--and would be encouraged to know that she was treating his gestures with the respect and consideration they deserved. After all, if he knew it was safe to give her a physical gift, he would eventually come to trust her. True, she'd bolluxed things a bit with the Castration Curse, but there had been one positive outcome to that: he now saw her as an equal force to be reckoned with, in their marriage.

Without some acknowledgement of equality between them, they'd never be able to forge a partnership.

Forging...I wonder what he needs that forging charm for? As he scooped her hair back from the sides of her face, Hermione asked him that. "Severus? What do you need that Protean-Forging Charm for?"

"Sabotage."

She felt the clip being snapped in place, then leveled with a slight tug. "Sabotage of what?"

"That will be my secret, for now. No, you keep your own secrets, wife, and I will keep mine," he murmured in her ear as she started to protest, hands resting on her shoulders. A kiss just in front of her ear, and he released her. "If I do not need to know how the potion will be used, you do not need to know how the charm will be used. Go to Hogsmeade, and do not forget to visit the pub."

Nonplussed, Hermione gathered her wits, concentrated, and Apparated.

...

Snow had fallen, in Hogsmeade. It was still falling, too, in large fluffy flakes. Despite the paucity of student-aged children--apparently Hogwarts had been deemed the safer place for most of them, rather than having them go home for the holidays--and the ever-looming threat of the war trying to cast its pall over the spirits of the wizarding community, there was a definite air of holiday-making. Garlands had been hung from every lamp post, doorway and windowsill, candles sat and burned magically on tree limbs in ever-changing hues, and the scents of cinnamon, peppermint and vanilla perfumed the air.

Madam Damereaux's was a tiny little building squeezed next to the wizarding Post Office. Like all good hole-in-the-wall bookstores--including the Muggle ones--it was larger on the inside than it was on the outside, crowded with shelves that themselves were crammed with books. Hermione inhaled that delightfully dusty, musty scent of leather, parchment, dust and paper as soon as she entered. But she was here on a mission, not here to browse, as Severus had put it. Firming her resolution, Hermione joined the queue at the counter, and waited patiently through four other customers, until it was her turn.

"Miss Granger! You're not at the school?" the petite, aging witch behind the counter exclaimed softly. "I'd heard a rumor that you weren't attending, but..."

"I'm busy with other things. I was in the area, and thought I'd try you first for a particular book, before heading down to Flourish & Blotts."

"Which book, dearie?" the silver-streaked blond witch asked, adjusting her glasses.

"*Potions, Powders, Unguents and Salves of Upper and Lower Egypt* First edition, if you have it."

"Oh, my...I *do* have one of those--it was an order for a client, but, erm...well, the war and all... Hang on a tick." She hustled away from the counter. The other patrons in the queue behind Hermione had cracked open their purchases and were reading to while away the time as they waited. It didn't take long, thankfully. Madam Damereaux set the book on the counter, opened it to the fly-leaf, and checked the price. "Here we are...nineteen Galleons, seven Sickles. With tax, that comes to...twenty Galleons two Knuts."

Wincing a little, Hermione counted out the coins. It was a bloody expensive gift. For a moment, an insane corner of her mind, squeezed in next to her lust-node, gibbered something about 'taking it out in trade' with her husband's body. Ruthlessly quelling the voice--and the urge to blush--Hermione handed over the money. "Could I have that wrapped?"

"Plain butcher paper is free, but Christmas paper is extra," the shopkeeper warned her.

"Butcher, please."

It didn't take long to wrap the thing, just a few taps of the other woman's wand, and it was done. Hermione accepted the package and stepped back outside. She lingered in the doorway under the cover of the entrance, and tapped the package again with her wand. The plain, rough brown paper Transfigured itself into slick sapphire blue. A second tap decorated it with silvery ribbons and holly leaves, making it look like a present.

That's the present he wants and expects Hermione thought, heading slowly up the street. *Now I've got to find him a present he'll want, but doesn't expect. A gift for a man I still don't really know--*

A passing witch slipped on a patch of ice just as she reached Hermione. That sent her stumbling into the younger woman, knocking both females over. Her finger seared, and Hermione found herself landing at an angle on warm, golden scales that had at least some give to them, rather than falling on her face on the frozen-hard, snow-trampled ground. Unfortunately, having a sofa-sized dragon suddenly appear in the street didn't sit too well with the other pedestrians, and Hermione found herself wincing as several people shrieked.

Righting herself quickly, Hermione glanced around, noting all the wizards and witches who had drawn their wands defensively, including the witch who had knocked her over. They hadn't attacked, though; a glance at Sigurd showed why. For one, he wasn't displaying any threat-signs; his mouth was closed, his wings folded, his claws hidden in the snow. Even his head was held low, the same as his tail. For another...she'd forgotten he was a ruddy metallic gold. There weren't any metallic gold dragons. Not real ones, at any rate.

Embarrassed, she patted the dragon on the shoulder. "Erm...thank you for catching me, Sigurd. You are dismissed."

He craned his head in her direction, *whuffed* a breath of steaming, smoke-scented air, and vanished in a stream of sparkling gold, to the tune of several startled gasps. It was only then that Hermione saw the broken stump of a sign-post, with a point sharp enough to have pierced her abdomen even through her layers of wool, had she fallen on it. Drawing her wand, Hermione eradicated the danger, then turned to the witch who had stumbled into her, and who was now struggling to repack her scattered shopping bags.

"Here, let me help you with that," Hermione offered, stooping and re-stuffing one of the nearer bags, setting down her book briefly. It had silken garments inside, a lace-edged nightgown in amber-gold, and a set of men's pyjamas in a claret satin. The deep hue and sensual texture appealed to her, but it was the *warmth* of the garment that surprised her. Unable to stop her curiosity, Hermione checked the collar for a tag, and found a line of runes stitched into the neckline, enchanting the garment for warmth in winter and coolness in summer. "Oh! How clever..."

"You noticed the spell?" the witch asked, smiling. "It's a new line of clothes. Pre-Enchanted Garments, by some witch living down in Cardiff. A bit pricey, but the spell is worthwhile."

"...Do they have this in a sapphire blue?" Hermione asked the older woman, holding up the pyjama top.

"Let me guess; a gift for your husband?" the older woman asked, and smiled as Hermione blushed. "I haven't seen a ring-guardian in years, but you just can't mistake a metallic beastie that appears out of nowhere. I think they had a set of pyjamas in blue; if not, just ask Gladys to enchant it to the right colour for you. She'll fix it so it won't accidentally come undone, either. They'll be on a rack in the front of the store, on the right."

"Thank you!" Handing the witch her shopping bag, Hermione made sure her book was still secure its wrapping paper, and hurried up the street, doing her best to ignore the stares of the other pedestrians, who thankfully weren't aiming wands in her direction, anymore.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XXIV.

Hermione returned to the hotel room just long enough to drop off her two wrapped gifts, and change her appearance. A bit of wand-work, and her features were obscured behind a scarf-like veil; a bit more, and a coin was enchanted with the name of her ingredient. Hagrid had told them that all sorts came and went at the Hog's Head, and a good portion of them went veiled or hooded, choosing to not show their faces. It was a lot more run-down and cramped than the Three Broomsticks, the glasses were of dubious cleanliness, the drinks of dubious quality, and she had no intention of actually consuming anything while she was there.

In her fifth year, Hermione had made the mistake of thinking that a meeting held in here would be private. That was when they'd put together the Defence Arts club, or Dumbledore's Army, as they'd taken to calling it. A clandestine meeting in the noisy, boisterous Three Broomsticks would've passed by with far less notice; here, they'd been noticed by a couple different factions.

It was a lesson in hiding things in plain sight. So, when she Apparated back to Hogsmeade and entered the Hog's Head, Hermione didn't try to skulk. She just entered, made her way through the tables without hurry or delay, and took one of the seats along the pub's bar. Away from the other patrons by about four stools, but then more of the clientele were seated at the tables at this hour than were currently at the bar.

Unfortunately, the bartender was a younger wizard. Not quite young enough to have been in school at the same time as her, but young enough to not be the aged wizard she was seeking. He drifted her way after a few moments and grunted, "What'll ye have?"

"Old Abe."

"He's in th' back. What'll ye have?"

"I'd rather wait."

He studied her through her veil. "Why?"

Hermione adopted what she hoped was a suitably Slytherin air of pointed disdain--something she'd seen Pansy Parkinson do a time or two--and looked at him from under her brows. "Because he makes a better mixed drink than you. Go about your business."

A grunt, a sneer, and the wizard moved away. Hermione waited, pleased with how she'd pulled that off, but affecting a disdainful look, just in case anyone was watching her. The conversations were muffled, the place reeked of stale beer and barnyard straw, and she was afraid that the black lumpy things in that nearby complimentary-peanut bowl were cockroach clusters. Without the chocolate and caramel.

"What'll you have, missy?"

Hermione looked up at the elderly wizard. He was balding but long-bearded, and what there were of his teeth would've given her parents fits of both disgust and avarice. The beard was tied in several spots down to his waist with bits of thong, and his stained, brown robes were hitched around the paunch of his waist with a bit of rope, making him look like an ascetic monk. Ignoring the way her heart had leapt into her throat, Hermione lifted the hand that had been clenching her Transfigured Sickle, and set it on the counter, pushing it towards him with a finger. "I'll have a Sloe Screw Up Against The Potions Bench."

He took the coin after she removed her hand, eyeing the writing. His brow furrowed for a moment, his bushy white brows bunching together briefly in a single line, then Old Abe grunted. "How much?"

"A gallon. Within two months."

He snorted and set the coin on the counter, pushing it back at her. "Get on wi' ye. Two months won't cut it, an' you're too young t' have that much coin."

Hermione pushed back the coin, hoping her finger wasn't trembling visibly. "I said, I want a gallon's worth of an S L O E Screw Up Against The Potions Bench," she recited quietly but firmly, "delivered within two months."

Those brows drew together into a single, caterpillar-like line again, and he didn't pick up the coin, but he didn't reject it again. "Two and a half, maybe. Three Galleons apiece."

"One."

"Three."

"One."

Old Abe studied her a moment, then huffed a breath of air that could've been a laugh, and took the coin. "Stubborn fool. One, at two and a half months. Two, at two months. Take yer pick."

"One, at two and a half months." She didn't have to decide.

"...With one caveat," Old Abe stated, settling down onto his elbows as he leaned towards her. Something in his hard blue eyes softened, making them look a little concerned, almost soft, though the rest of him was still hard and coarse-looking. "I haven't been able to overhear anything on how he's doing, and I can't even get up into that damned castle that's disappeared. You get word to me on how he's doing. I don't care how you manage it, but I need to know how he's doing, if he looks alright, if he needs anything..." A hand waived away any questions between them. "I know, I know, he's in that damned painting, and there's nothing that I can do to change it, an' little chance in hell of you getting to see it in person, but I want 'im to be as comfortable as possible. Hell, I'd pay to have a cozy room painted for 'im. Maybe some books or something..."

Hermione had no idea who or what he was talking about. She would have to ask Severus. "I'll see what I can do."

"Good. I'll leave a note in your room when the gallon is made. Now, how's that young missus of yours?"

He must think I'm Severus in Polyjuiced disguise..." "Fair enough."

"Things getting better, I hope?"

"We're working through our differences."

"Marriage is always rocky, in the beginning. Yours more than most. Still, she's pretty bright, from what I hear. Got a tender heart, too. Don't trample it, my boy," the bartender muttered under his breath. "When she finds out what happened, you'll want 'er on your side, that's for damned sure."

Hermione managed a curt nod before sliding off the stool. Something was going on here with Old Abe and Severus that she didn't know about. Wending her way back through the tables, she left the Hog's Head with a lot of questions running through her mind.

...

It was with trepidation that Hermione settled onto her seat behind the half-walled lectern and recited the day's steps. Twice, to be sure they both knew what to do. When she was done, she looked up at her husband.

"...This is the stage where I kept getting stumped," she told the dark blond wizard donning protective garments by the door. "After putting in the pulped horsetail ferns and stirring thirteen times clockwise, the cauldron always melted on me, and I don't know why."

Russel--she had to think of him as Russel, in that outfit--arched his brow at her. For a long moment he said nothing, then shook his head. "You really *don't* have a knack for potions-making, do you?"

"I was the best student in your classes!" Hermione protested, stung by the rejoinder. "I always made a perfectly acceptable potion!"

"Yes, and you can follow a recipe pedantically, but you cannot see the *obvious*, can you?" he retorted. "Ancient potions instructions weren't always written down step for bloody step, Jane. What do aspaecium root and dragon's bile do, when they're combined together and left to simmer overnight?"

"They form a gelatinous pyrotic, not too terribly unlike Muggle Sterno," Hermione recited, "except that it's self-igniting if it is exposed to iron. But this stuff isn't gelatinous, and it didn't ignite!"

"Only because of the addition of veela's tears," he reminded her, "which suspends the pyrotic compound. *Until you add a silicate*. The horsetail fern, also known as scouring rush, contains silicone in its cuticle, which is in the pulp! Once the silicate is added, it turns ferrosly pyrotic, albeit in a somewhat milder manner, and that's when your cauldron has a melt-down at the interface zone, where the potion rubs up against the iron."

"So how do we get around that?" Hermione asked him.

"*Liquilevis*. It's a spell you would've learnt in your seventh year, in Potions class. It has to be cast upon a container, as it uses the shape of the container itself to lift the liquid and cushion it by half an inch. And you have to be precise in stirring the potion contained within its magic," he lectured her, "because if you dip anything into the levitation zone, it collapses the spell. It is a pain in the arse to use because of that, but it is the only spell that does not interact magically with potions ingredients."

"Oh." Hermione felt a little better over her earlier failures, at hearing that. And terrible that she hadn't been studying her seventh year Potions text as assiduously as she had her Charms book.

"Yes," he agreed mockingly. "'Oh.' Of course, we shall take extra precautions with all future steps, in case there are other traps for the unwary... Recite the list again," Russel ordered her.

Dutifully, Hermione read the instructions. She wanted to ask him about Old Abe, but now was not the moment. She held her breath when they got to the pulped fern stage, but a tap of his wand against the cauldron caused the potion to lift and stay stable for the next hour, as Severus stirred carefully in the prescribed patterns, adding pinches of dried Troll Toe mushrooms at carefully measured intervals. Only when the liquid frothed and turned purple in hue did they both relax somewhat.

The next stage was to chill the ingredients with a cooling charm, and scrape off the foam once it had solidified. That would give them an hour or so in which to wait. Hermione marked their place in the Diary and closed it as he cast the necessary spell, and inverted an hourglass to give them an idea of how long before they could check on the cauldron's contents.

"Russel...when I talked to Old Abe, today," Hermione stated carefully, watching him strip off the uncomfortable, stiff weight of his dragonhide gear, "he said something very odd. Something he said was a part of the bargain--a gallon's worth of bezoars at a Galleon a stone, within two and a half months," she added. "I decided to fudge a bit on the time required, since it would've cost double for them to be delivered in two months."

"We do have the time for it. What did he say?"

"Something about needing to know how someone was fairing. Someone who was in a painting here at the school. But he didn't give a name, just rambled about painting a

room, or maybe some books."

He stilled for a moment, then finished hanging up the dragonhide coat. "I'll handle it."

"Who was he talking about?"

"No one you need concern yourself with."

"If it concerns this school, it concerns me," Hermione countered. "Professor McGonagall told us that the price for using these facilities is keeping her abreast of what's going on, as much as we can tell her."

"This is something I cannot discuss. Not will-not, *cannot*." At her skeptical look, he touched his thumb to his ring. "Hermione Jane Snape, I swear to you that Old Abe's concern with one of the portraits in this school is not harmful to Hogwarts or its inhabitants... Will that satisfy you?"

Eyeing her hand, Hermione found the words written verbatim on the band. Sighing, she nodded. Then muttered, "If only there weren't so many bloody secrets to be kept, in this war..."

"That's what you get for being a straightforward Gryffindor. Slytherins *always* expect intrigues," he teased her with a dead-pan expression, then flashed a very Russel-esque grin at her. "So, what did you get me for Christmas?"

"You'll have to wait a couple more days, just like everyone else," Hermione retorted. When he was being a Master of Potions, she could see him as just a funny-coloured Severus Snape. But when he did things like that, it threw her, reminding her of who he had pretended to be. Pretended being the key word. There was a lot of 'pretending' ahead of them, in the next few days. "Russel..."

"Yes, Jane?"

"While we're at the Burrow...erm...how *affectionate* are we going to be? In front of the others," she clarified, risking a glance at him.

That lifted his brows a little. "...Is the Diary closed?"

"Yes." Hermione wasn't thrown off by the question. As she suspected, he moved close. In fact, he stepped behind the curving half-wall of the lectern and swooped her halfway into his arms, dipping her back on her stool in a dramatic kiss-me pose. *That* part was unexpected, eliciting a yelp of surprise from her, barely remembering which name to use. "--Russel!"

"Shall I pledge you the sun, the moon, the starlit sky, before the others as my witness?" he murmured, grey eyes gleaming with amusement before he pecked her face rapidly with several kisses. Pulling back, he intoned dramatically, "Shall I swear my undying devotion, your most humble servant, fit only to suckle your delectable toes?" His expression shifted from mock-adoring to mock-leering. "Shall I *ravish* you on the Weasley's floor, amidst the wrapping paper and tinsel? Unwrapping you like the glorious present you are?"

She couldn't help the laugh that escaped. "You wouldn't *dare*!"

His eyes glittered at the challenge. "...Oh, wouldn't I?"

"Not in front of Molly Weasley, you won't!" Hermione retorted, gambling that her threat would stop his outrageousness. Not that it wasn't fun...

He righted her abruptly. "...Thank you for cooling my ardor. If Marvolo were at least a decade younger than her, instead of older, I'd sic her on him, and have done with this whole Death Eater nonsense." For a moment, his eyes darkened, staring across the room at nothing. "If only it were that easy."

Not wanting to deal with a melancholic husband, Hermione touched his cheek, turning it so that he faced her again. "We're doing what we can, and that's all we can do." A glance at the hourglass, and she arched her brow at him. "Now, that overblown romance was absurd, and they'd see right through it for the, well...the playfulness that it is--don't scowl at me, Severus," Hermione stated firmly, using his real name despite his disguise to make sure she had his attention. "You, Severus Snape, have as much right to be playful and silly and *happy* as anyone else. I'm just thinking...no actual, all-the-way ravishments in front of anyone, and we should probably be somewhat discreet around Ron."

A scoffing sound escaped him. "Shall I spare your beloved's tender feelings, is that it?"

Hermione frowned at him, bringing up her other hand to hold his head still. "Quit it. I love Ron, but not in that way. No matter how much either of us would have wished it otherwise, when all of this began." Pinning his face between her palms, she held his gaze. "You taught me something about myself. That I will refuse to settle for tepid passion in a relationship, and that is all it was between Ron and me. Lukewarm, in comparison. I don't love him as a brother, as I do Harry, but I do love him as a friend. I've learnt I can't love him as anything more than that...but that doesn't mean I have to rub his nose in the fact."

She could feel the tension in his body, see the cloaking of his thoughts in his eyes. "And what are we, in your opinion? You say we have passion. Would you call us lovers? Or just fuck-mates?"

The dry scorn seasoning his tone made her tense, too. Hermione shook her head. "What we have is passion, yes, but I'm *hoping* we can also increase our friendship. I was friends with Russel. I see no reason why I cannot be friends with you. Passion fades, with time. Friendship endures. Your friendship is valuable to me."

He broke free of her hands, spinning away and raking his fingers through his hair. "...Oh, yes, I'm valuable to you. I'm the spy that only you and a bloody painting trust."

"Oh, sod off!" Hermione snapped, startling him into looking over his shoulder at her. "I admired you from day one, you snarky git! Here was an utterly intelligent, highly educated man who was passionate about learning--I just about wet my pants with excitement, when you gave that opening speech on my very first day in your class! That little speech encapsulated everything I felt about learning magic and the wizarding life in general, and everything I still feel."

"Yes, you were a bastard and a biased, greasy git who wouldn't acknowledge the meaning of 'fair' even if it was tattooed onto your hide, but I still wanted to be your friend. If I could put up with Ron and Harry being thickies for most of our school career because their good qualities compensated for their bad, I could certainly put up with your piss-poor manners, just for the privilege of knowing that ruddy mind! The fact that you have many other good qualities certainly helps to compensate for your worst traits, too! You don't take only the good parts in a relationship, *Severus*," she emphasized, holding his bemused gaze. "You take *all* of it, and lump it or like it. If I ever want to lump any of it, *believe* me, I'll let you know."

He closed the distance between them, lifting a finger to her cheek, caressing it lightly. "Your face is flushed with emotion...and your eyes look like polished amber... I should get into an argument with you more often."

Opening her mouth to argue the matter--contradictory as that might be--Hermione found herself being kissed before she could do more than breathe. Breathing, of course, was highly overrated when his tongue tangled with hers. If she'd known back in class that he could do far more pleasant things with that appendage than just flay the skin from his students' egos, she wouldn't have been able to concentrate nearly as well as she had. As it was, the pungent-pleasant aromas of the ingredients over on their prep tables mingled with his own musky scent, adding a new dimension to their kissing.

Now Hermione had an illicit fantasy of the man currently teasing her upper lip with little flicks of his tongue, a fantasy of him in his foreboding black robes, her in her school clothes...

Hands on her shoulders pushed her back, though lips lingered in reluctance to end the intimacies between them. Breathing unsteadily, he looked down at her with wide pupils. Clearing his throat, he stepped back, releasing her. "We need to keep our attention on the potion. No mistakes can be made at any stage, and no delays. Passion doesn't lend itself well to keeping an eye on the time."

"We need a safer distraction," Hermione agreed, heart racing faster than her mind. Casting her thoughts about, she finally concentrated with a soft frown. A greenish-covered book appeared on top of the Diary, a bookmark nestled between its pages. Another firm thought, and a love-seat appeared to one side, just wide enough for the two of them to curl up together. "...I believe it was your turn to read the next section of *The Hobbit*?"

...

Crookshanks' ears were flat when Hermione Apparated into the hotel room, an overnight bag slung over her shoulder and her Familiar in her arms. She was ten minutes late, because of him. He'd been very cranky about being shoved into his cage for transport, and Hermione had just given up after he'd managed to paw the latch free for the third time. Apparation didn't appeal to him, either, but not nearly as much as his cage, today.

She felt the same way about being squeezed like that, but knew that, even had she liked flying on a broom, her cat would not have stood for it. Not with claws still firmly sprouting from all four paws. But Apparation really was the easiest way to transport him, and he was mostly quiescent in her arms. Looking around, she found Severus in his Russel disguise, seated at the kitchenette table, working on a jigsaw puzzle. The bed was rumpled, suggesting he'd come here to sleep after they'd set the potion to simmer for the next five days and parted company around six o'clock that morning. Not that she blamed him; this was far more relaxing an atmosphere than Riddle Manor had to be.

"Erm...are you ready to go?" she asked him as he rubbed at his forehead, glancing her way.

"More or less." His tone was flat, unsociable.

"Is something wrong?" she asked him cautiously.

"Merlin's arse, woman! I'll live, now leave me be!" he snapped, sounding far more like Snape than Russel. At her chiding look, he grunted and rubbed his forehead again. "...I have a headache, and am consequently not in a *holiday* mood. I'll *try* to get into one."

Recalling how many holidays at the school she'd seen him sneer and grouse and glare unhappily, Hermione could believe it. She wished for a moment that she'd brought a bottle of painkillers...and then recalled something Poppy Pomfrey had said. *I've gotten rather ahead of my stock, now that...well, now that Professor Snape is no longer among us. He used to get dreadful headaches every few weeks, almost like clockwork...*

Setting Crookshanks down, she dropped her bag to the floor. "--I'll be right back."

"We're already late!" he protested.

"I know, this won't take a moment," Hermione promised, and concentrated, Disapparating back to Headquarters. Grabbing Floo powder from the pot, she swirled into Madame Pince's office, then from there to the Infirmary. From the exclamation that greeted her, she'd started Poppy. Blinking against the dizziness, Hermione patted the soot from her clothes and smiled at the mediwitch. "--Sorry for the intrusion, Poppy! Erm...do you have any more of those headache possets? The cinnamon-flavoured ones?"

"Why...yes, I do," Poppy admitted, rising from her desk. "Having headaches, still?"

Hermione didn't want to lie, but she couldn't tell the truth, either. "Well, sort of... Boxing Day is with my Muggle relatives, and they give me a real tension migraine, since I can't tell them about the wizarding world. I want to be prepared ahead of time, you know? Two bottles, if you please," she added. "One for my husband, too. He's never had to deal with the Grangers *en force*, before."

"I think I've got two..." Disappearing into her storeroom, Madam Pomfrey came back within half a minute, two small vials of thick, ruby potion in her hand. "How is the subscription going?"

"The what?" Hermione returned, mystified.

Poppy circled the air with her other hand as she handed over the vials. "You know, the *issues* with your husband?"

"Oh! Right. Well...we've actually worked out a number of our differences," she found herself admitting, feeling some relief that she *could* admit that much.

"--And the contraceptive thing?" Poppy asked her as Hermione turned back to the hearth to leave.

"Oh, um...it was, um...well, it was part of a potion experiment, but the potion was ruined by something, and erm...well... I'll be back for a check-up after the hols--Merry Christmas!" Hermione managed brightly, face burning in what she was certain was a lovely holiday red.

Two rapid Floo trips and a Disapparation later, she reappeared in the hotel room. Her husband wasn't at the table anymore. He was sitting on the bench at the foot of the bed, a dismayed expression wrinkling his tanned face, one hand gingerly petting the furball writhing in feline ecstasy on his kilt-clad lap. He looked up at her after a moment, and she choked on a laugh at the plaintive, dismayed, and even bewildered look in his eyes.

"What does this...*thing*...think it's doing on my lap?" Severus Selenius Snape demanded, flinching as her Familiar squirmed far enough up his lap to head-butt him in the stomach, clearly wanting more petting from the disgusted wizard. "It wouldn't leave me alone! I have seen this hairy excuse for a butterscotch pudding on the school grounds before, and it has *always* hissed at me! What. Is. It. Doing. On. My. Lap?"

Hermione stared at him. Orange fluff coated his knee-socks, proof that Crooks had rubbed against his shins repeatedly. More orange fluff clung to his kilt, and to his shirt. "Erm...marking his territory?"

It was all she could think of to reply. A sound of disgust escaped him. Shoving her cat--gently--onto the bench, he stood, eyeing his shedding-covered clothes with dismay. The pained look that pinched his brow made Hermione want to giggle. "So help me, if he *piddles* on me--!"

"Crookshanks wouldn't do that! Would you, Crooks?" Hermione crooned to her cat, approaching him. He sniffed at her fingers, enjoyed a brief scritch behind his ears, then head-butted the utili-kilted man next to her, demanding more attention.

"He's *nuzzling* me."

The disgust in his tone was the last straw. Hermione laughed. She laughed so hard that when she straightened, she staggered into him. At least he was enough of a gentleman to catch and hold her upright, though his disgruntled frown only made her laugh harder. Finally, her giggles wore down into chuckles as she wrapped her arms around him, hugging her husband. After a while, she stopped laughing with a deep sigh. "Thank you..."

"I'm so glad I could amuse you. But he is still *nuzzling* me. He never treated me like this at the bloody school!"

Hermione remembered how Crookshanks had viewed Snape. He had ignored the Potions Master, for the most part. Once or twice hissed at the man. But never had he displayed such...affection. "Um...well... Maybe he just really likes you, as Russel Fawkeson. The shopkeeper said he's half-Kneazle, so he's super-smart about who's

trustworthy and all. I mean, he's hissed at Professor Snape, true, but he's just all over you, even though he probably knows you're a Death Eater, or at least that you've done terrible things in your past."

He rolled his grey eyes. "That doesn't solve my problem, Jane! What do I *do* with him?"

"Pet him! It's the Christmas hols for cats, too, you know!"

A pained look crinkled his eyes and pinched his brow, one that had nothing to do with his migraine...and then he started to laugh. Shaking his head, he dropped his forehead to hers, chuckling. "Only *you*, Miss I Want To Save the House-Elves, would consider it Christmas-time for *acat*, too. Was I supposed to get him a catnip mouse while we were at Harrods?"

"Well, it *would've* been nice," Hermione admitted, and grinned when he closed his eyes, enjoying teasing him. "Come along, then; pick him up while I get our bags. We're late for Mum and Dad's. Oh! Here's a bottle of that headache potion Madam Pomfrey used to make for you. She gave me some a while back, and said she had a backlog of it. I've got another bottle if you need one, but only if you promise to sip, not gulp."

"Thank you for taking the fun out of my weekend. I could've passed it blissfully unconscious," her blond-haired husband quipped dryly. "*You* get the furball; I'll get our bags. It's the man's job to carry them...thank god," he muttered audibly. Taking the bottle she silently proffered, he sniffed at it, sipped some of the liquid inside, then tucked the vial into his sporran. "Thank you. For fetching the posset."

Grinning, Hermione scooped up her Familiar, who looked rather smug for a squash-nosed cat. Then again, all cats tended to look smug, but she cuddled him close while Russel--she had to remember to refer to him always and only as Russel for the next few days--picked up her overnight bag, the bags of wrapped and spell-shrunk presents, and a colourful tapestry carpet-bag for his own luggage. Coming back to her, he shifted the bags to one hand and wrapped his arm around her with the other.

"Would you rather do the Apparating? I'd be tempted to leave a few whiskers behind."

"I can manage all of us," Hermione promised as she managed to get one arm around him. She closed her eyes, concentrating. A bang, and three bodies--one of them with flattened whiskers and even flatter ears--squeezed into her bedroom on the first floor of the Granger residence.

A voice called out from downstairs. It was Harry's. "--Hermione, is that you?"

"Coming, Harry!" Holding carefully to Crookshanks, who wasn't happy at not being let down, Hermione led the way out of her room.

The damage to the house from when the Death Eaters had attacked had not been as extensive as feared; Muggle artifacts weren't worth much in the wizarding world, and the noise of the initial attack had caused one of their neighbors to summon the police. Luckily, the nearest patrol car had only been a few minutes away, and the attention had chased the attackers away. It wasn't that the Dark wizards attacking them had been afraid of the police that had chased them away, so much as they were unwilling to draw blatant attention to themselves.

Of course, her parents had been forced to cobble together a spurious story of having gone off to visit friends overnight to explain their absence--which was more or less the truth, since they'd gotten along quite well with the Weasleys, that night--but it had smoothed things over with the authorities. Now there were only a few differences to prove anything had happened: a new door for her parents' room, a fresh layer of paint in the upstairs hallway, and a couple absent, damaged knickknacks that hadn't been repairable in the end. Hermione was grateful the Death Eaters hadn't had time to do more damage to her family home. She was even more grateful to see her parents had decorated for Christmas, though they'd mostly be enjoying the garlands and ribbons on Boxing Day.

Her father was waiting in the hall, clad in brown trousers and his Christmas Eve jumper of creamy white with green trees decorated in red garlands and multi-coloured light-bulbs. Just seeing it made Hermione nostalgic; he'd worn that sweater every Christmas Eve from his teens onward, according to the family pictures hanging in the upstairs hall. It said Christmas Eve in a way nothing else did, to her. Of course, she had been able to go home for Christmas more often than Harry and Ron, but not nearly enough, at the same time. Hurrying forward, Hermione freed an arm from her cat so she could hug her father.

"Merry Christmas, Daddy," she murmured into his shoulder as he squeezed her back with both arms, making Crookshanks squeak in protest.

Pulling back with a chuckle, Jeffrey Granger scrubbed the top of the ginger tom's head with his knuckles. "Go on into the living room. I want a few words with your...husband."

Nervous, but figuring this moment would come no matter what, Hermione headed through the archway between the hall and the parlour.

"Jane?" She stopped and looked back over her shoulder, wondering why the kilted wizard had stopped her. He set his collection of bags at the foot of the stairs and walked up to her. One slender, tanned finger pointed upwards, and one light brown brow arched, confusing her further, until he murmured, "...Mistletoe?"

Glancing up, Hermione spotted the sprig hanging in the midst of the garland framing the archway, with its little berries and its lobed, dusty-looking leaves. She blushed at the implication. From where they were standing, the others--Jeffrey in the hall and Daphne and Harry in the living room--could see the two of them quite clearly. She was rather relieved when he did nothing more blatant than cup her biceps in his hands, lean over the cat in her arms, and press a gentle, chaste kiss to her lips.

It took her a moment to realize the loud purring in her ears was coming from Crooks, and not from her. She certainly felt like purring, when the tender-feeling kiss ended. She also felt a little disappointed that their kiss wasn't more passionate than that, but Hermione knew it wouldn't have been appropriate. Sighing softly, she turned and stepped into the living room.

Squirming free, Crookshanks leapt to the floor, trotting up to the silent, thoughtfully staring Harry and nuzzling his shins. The young man picked up her Familiar, cuddling him for a moment. Hermione had the feeling it gave Harry a chance to stop staring and compose himself, since he wasn't normally so affectionate with her cat. He let the cat go when she sat down next to him, hands folded between her knees. All three of them heard Russel and Jeffrey going into the kitchen, and the door being shut. The kitchen door was almost never shut completely, save for Serious Talks.

Daphne cleared her throat. "--Well. How have you been, dear?"

"Fine. Just fine." Hermione re-clasped her fingers. "So...how long is Daddy going to take? Because we really should be going to the Burrow, soon."

"Not too long. He knows we have a schedule to keep," her mother reassured her.

Silence passed, broken only by the faint ticking of the cuckoo clock in the dining room, heard through the archway. That, and Crookshanks purring. He'd curled up on the seat of her father's recliner, happily remarking the territory her mother had long since brushed free of his summer-shed fur.

"How's the, erm...you know, your project going?" Harry asked her.

"Oh, good, good," Hermione replied quickly. "We're at the first of the 'simmer for x-number of days' stages. And we fixed the problem with my cauldron melting. The instructions didn't include a potion-suspension spell, but S...seems that Russel knew about it. He'd been through seventh-year Potions, you see, and it's a technique you don't learn until then. I've kind of been studying Charms in my spare time more than Potions, at the moment."

"You should probably catch up on that," Harry encouraged her.

Another awkward silence fell. Whatever the two men in the kitchen were discussing, they were doing so quietly. Perhaps they had even stepped outside, into the cold night air. Or perhaps Russel had cast a silencing charm on the room, to ensure that any yelling, shouting, kitchen-implement-throwing and/or hex-casting on his or Jeffrey's part

couldn't be heard by anyone else, at least until a victor could be declared.

"Crookshanks is looking a bit fat. What have you been feeding him?" her mother asked, filling the quiet in the living room.

"Oh, um, kitty kibble...and some leftover table scraps, tidbits of meat, mostly. I know I shouldn't, but I'm not always around, and I feel guilty about neglecting him," Hermione confessed. "Oh! And he's a father. One of Mrs. Figg's cats, Mrs. Spots, had kittens. Three of them, and they look just like Crooks."

"You should probably get him fixed," Daphne offered.

Crookshanks, curled up in a fluffy orange circle, reared his head with his ears laid back and hissed at Mrs. Granger.

"--I don't think that's a good idea," Hermione demurred carefully, as Harry's shoulders shook. She thumped him lightly in the ribs with her elbow, and he nudged her back, struggling with his silent laughter until it was under his control.

"Erm...the thing is, Mrs. Gra...er, Mum," Harry corrected himself at her look, "Crooks is half-kneazle, or so we think, and kneazles are really smart. It's not like he'd be fathering fuzzy little idiots. And I, er, would really pity the person idiotic enough to try."

"...I suppose there is that," Hermione's mother admitted faintly, staring at the cat snuggling back down for a nap on her husband's chair. "Forget I mentioned it, then."

The kitchen door opened. Hermione discovered she was holding her breath, and reminded herself to let it out silently, so she didn't look like a scared little twit. Two sets of footsteps allowed her to breathe more normally, loosening the tension that had crept unnoticed into her shoulders. The sight of her father's happy, beaming face reassured her further, though she wondered at the puzzled, uncertain edge to Russel's own smile.

"Well! Everything's settled. Shall we be on our way, then?" Jeffrey asked the others. They rose to start gathering their things.

Russel scooped Crookshanks off of the recliner, carrying him cradled against his blue jumper as he joined Hermione. Reaching for her cat, she murmured at him, "What did he want?"

He handed her the purring furball in his arms. "He just wanted to know if I'd behave in a civilized manner, instead of popping in and out like before, and then he asked me if I'd ever consider marrying you the proper Anglican way someday, rather than by some ancient piece of magic."

"And you said?" Hermione asked in a whisper, cradling her cat to her chest. She was curious about his answer.

"I said yes, of course. The man was standing right next to the knife block." Pulling back, he winked at her, his grey eyes twinkling for a moment. Almost exactly like Albus Dumbledore's had, in fact. Leaning down, he dropped a quick kiss on the tip of her nose. "I'll get the bags."

Harry delayed him for a moment, murmuring the exact location of the Burrow in his ear. Balancing Crooks in one arm, Hermione wrapped the other around her father's ribs on the side away from his overnight bag. Harry cupped her mother by the shoulders, carrying his and Daphne's bags. A series of sharp *cracks*, and they reappeared standing on trampled snow in front of the rambling structure that was the Weasley family home. Garlands of holly and evergreen branches had been affixed to every window. Even a couple strings of electric Muggle lights had been hung, outlining the door, though Arthur Weasley had made the visual *faux-pas* of mixing the larger, old-fashioned bulbs with the tiny, more modern ones.

Still, it was a cheery look, and the air, though crisp and cold and glittering with tiny, falling flakes, was scented with hints of Molly Weasley's spiced holiday baking. Harry opened the door, and warmth, sound and light spilled out, enveloping them as they entered. Happy to escape her arms and the nasty effects of Apparation, Crookshanks squirmed free and darted under the furniture. Bill and Charlie were laughing heartily at something the twins, still grinning, had apparently just said. Fleur was chatting with Ginny, who shouted and flung herself at Harry with a glowing face, impacting on his chest like a bag of flour dropped from the top of the roof.

As the couple embraced with a blush, Ron hurried forward to take the others' bags, stuffing the rest of a gingerbread man into his mouth to free his hands and mumbling something about room assignments. Hands were shaken enthusiastically by Arthur, and Molly called out from the kitchen that there were plenty of goodies on the table, and that they were to help themselves, since supper wasn't for another three hours. There was a bit of chaos for a while, everyone talking all at once, but the presents were brought out of luggage and stuffed under the Christmas tree stuffed into a corner of the sitting room, the luggage was taken upstairs by Ron and Ginny, and things eventually settled down.

Hermione enjoyed the sight of Molly Weasley fussing over Russel, nattering about how a man his size shouldn't be so skinny, and pressing yet another shortbread wedge or a frosted sugar biscuit on him, along with a tall glass of milk. She had to admit that, as a blond, he did look younger than his proper age...but he was still closer to Molly's age than to her own. To see the older witch mothering the man was very amusing. Grey eyes met brown over the rim of his glass; they narrowed for just a fraction of a second, letting her know that he would be getting her back for such unseemly delight in his 'suffering'.

She did delight in it, too...until Fred laughingly released a hexed Snitch with a sprig of mistletoe tied to it, and the thing zoomed over everyone's head, spiraled around, and paused with rapid silvery wing-beats directly over her head. Now it was her turn to blush as the others teased her. George reached for her with outstretched hands and puckered lips, though it was difficult to do so while he was laughing at the same time. Her ring flared with heat, a sinuous, golden body flashing into existence around her arm--dragonette-size, thankfully--and the redheaded wizard froze, the laughter dying down around them.

Long, tanned fingers snagged the hovering, greenery-burdened Snitch before it could move away. An arm curved around her back, turning her sideways with a sliding touch. Sigurd obligingly vanished, and Hermione found herself dipped backward over her husband's arm. Her own curved over his, clutching at his shoulder for balance. Ash blond locks slid down around his face, curtaining off the rest of the world. All she could see in the shadows cast by his hair was the way his eyelids drifted shut just at the moment his lips met hers. Her own lashes followed suit; the rest of the Burrow wasn't nearly as fascinating as the feel and taste of him.

A buzzing sound flashed by her ear, just before Russel's other arm wrapped around her back. Her free hand dug into his hair, massaging his scalp as their tongues played together. He tasted of butter biscuits and cinnamon; she like the way the spicy flavour mingled with the rich cocoa she'd been drinking. From the way he parried and played his tongue against hers, he liked it, too.

But as much as the moment of passion between them was enjoyable, even dramatic in its pose, it was an awkward position. Righting her, Russel traded smaller, lesser, sweeter kisses with Hermione for a few more moments, then lifted his head from hers with a sigh. This time, the silence that pressed on her ears was from embarrassment, not awkwardness. Flushed from more than just the kiss, Hermione tried to clear her throat. It took two tries to make a sound.

"...Well. I, ah, think I'm ready for some eggnog." A third clearing of her throat, and she repeated, "Yes, some nice, cool...eggnog."

Searching for anyplace to look other than the partially suppressed smugness of her husband's expression, Hermione's eyes wandered across the cheerful red-and-green decorations...and landed on the tight, pinched face of Ronald Weasley.

He'd said he was 'over' her, and had 'accepted' the fact that she was married. But he hadn't seen the passion between her and her husband. Hermione flushed for a different reason. Ron had just been hit between the eyes with proof that what little he had shared with her clearly paled in comparison to what she had with Russel. A candle to a bonfire. The knowledge looked like it was a little too bitter for him to swallow at the moment, like a lemon pie without the meringue.

The others glossed over the awkward moment, namely by turning to glance at the source of a giggle and a chuckle. Jeffrey and Daphne Granger were happily nibbling on each other in a clinch of their own underneath the hovering, humming Snitch. It darted away as Hermione flinched from the sight of her parents snogging the daylights out of each other, and zoomed over to Bill's head. Fleur smirked and kissed her husband; after five seconds of that, the little golden ball zipped on silvery wings to hover over Arthur's own reddish hair. Molly gave him a peck on the cheek, he pecked her back on the lips, making her blush...and the mistletoe-laden Snitch remained in place, buzzing determinedly over the eldest Weasley's head..

"It's no good, Mum!" Fred joked. "You'll have to slip him a bit of tongue, to make it go away!"

Molly blushed even harder, but took Arthur's face in her hands and thoroughly kissed him, until the skin under her fingers was equally pink. The Snitch took off, spiraled around the room again...and settled over Ginny's head. Mrs. Weasley spotted that as her own kiss ended, and her blush of embarrassment turned to a flush of anger. "--Fred Weasley! You catch that thing and get it away from your sister's head this instant! This game has gone on long enough! This is Christmas, not a kissing booth!"

Harry snagged the Snitch, since he'd been moving towards Ginny anyway. She in turn was pouting, but with his back to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, he brought the ball to his lips and kissed it, eyeing the youngest Weasley. Standing to the side, Hermione had a good view of her blood-brother's smirk, and Ginny's pleased blush. A soft, disgusted sound at her side had her glancing at her husband. He'd turned his face into her hair, one arm still around her ribs, and now muttered at her, his breath warming the curve of her ear.

"I did *not* need to see Potter doing that."

Suspecting he was trying to hide his expression from the others, since that *sotto-voce* snarl was far too Snape-like to be the sort of expression Russel would wear, Hermione hugged him around the waist with her own arm. "Now, now, *Russel*. It's just good holiday fun. And technically, you did start it."

"I would far rather be kissing you senseless," he whispered into her ear, "nibbling on either succulent set of your lips, than endure the sight of Arthur snogging Molly."

Her cheeks heated at his suggestive, purred comment. In fact, they burned, for he traced the tip of his tongue along the shell of her ear, his actions mostly hidden by her hair. Jeffrey Granger clapped his hands together, startling everyone and ending his son-in-law's hidden, seductive touch.

"--Well! Knowing that Arthur, here, loves Muggle things, I've brought a packet of regular crackers for everybody to pull. It's probably not as fun as the magical kind, but it's still fun all the same. Anyone interested?"

"Oh, I'd like to try that!" Mr. Weasley was clearly the most enthusiastic, but the others got into the spirit of things when Charlie stated he'd brought a large box of wizarding crackers, too. Hermione felt her husband resting his forehead against the side of her skull for a moment, no doubt gathering his strength before facing the oncoming torture with Russel-esque enthusiasm.

She didn't blame him; somehow, Hermione doubted Severus Snape had been invited to, let alone attended, very many Christmas parties in his past.

...

Eventually, Molly--being the mothering sort that she was--reminded everyone that Father Christmas couldn't come until they had all enjoyed a good night's rest. There was a mild sort of scrum as everyone wished everyone else goodnight, and started vying for the two bathrooms. Russel lingered downstairs, chatting with some of the other men; Hermione mounted the stairs, listening to him, Bill and Arthur laughing over something, and wondering where her things had been put. She encountered Molly on the first floor landing, chatting with her mum.

Waiting politely until her mother finished their conversation and disappeared into her assigned room, Hermione looked at her hostess. "So. Where are Russel and I going to sleep?"

Molly's smile froze for a moment. "Er...didn't we tell you? You're in Ginny's room tonight, and he's in Charlie's."

That lifted her brows. "I'm what?"

"Russel is sleeping with Charlie in his room, you're with Ginny in her room, your mum and dad are in...in Percy's quarters, Harry's tucked in with Ron... It's all been worked out, dearie!"

Somehow, Hermione knew instinctively the separation was deliberate. She arched a brow. "And is Fleur sleeping with us girls, while Bill's ensconced with the twins?"

"Don't be ridiculous! They're married!" Molly pointed out, flustered. "They're in Bill's room."

That crossed her arms over her chest. "And what, exactly, are Russel and I--treacle pudding? We're *married*, Molly!"

The normally unflappable witch spluttered and dithered for a moment, then blurted out her true opinion. "--No, you're not! Not in the proper way!"

That felt like a slap to Hermione. Like the older woman had called her a loose woman. Skin mottled somewhere between hot and cold, she glared at her hostess.

"Don't look at me in that manner, young lady!" Molly snapped, barely keeping her voice quiet as she hissed at the younger witch. "Until you are married in a proper Anglican ceremony, you *aren't* married in the eyes of the law!"

Hermione wanted to snap at the older woman, to argue the matter fiercely, but several factors made her bite back her words. One, she was raised to be polite; two, her mum was on the other side of the door right next to them; three, Molly probably wanted Ginny chaperoned, since after the Snitch incident, she'd done her best to keep Harry, who was of-age, away from Ginny, who was not. Hermione wasn't really tired enough to sleep, having done so in the latter half of that morning after finishing the latest stage of the Anima Te, but others were tired, and it wouldn't be prudent to disrupt the end of their evening with a big fuss.

"...I see," was all she therefore said, in an icy tone that made Molly Weasley flinch. Hermione longed to say more, but settled for a curt, "Goodnight."

She heard an indrawn breath behind her as she stalked up the next flight of stairs, but wisely, Molly said nothing more. Stalking into Ginny's room, Hermione grabbed her pale blue pyjamas and her toiletry kit, and went to go stand in line at the upstairs bathroom door. By the time Harry came out a few minutes later, she was resigned to the situation, and was able to give him a hug and a quiet 'goodnight'.

Changing in the bathroom, she scrubbed and flossed her teeth, mindful that her dentist parents were in the house--she nearly choked on her toothpaste, giggling at the thought of her parents giving Arthur Weasley an electric toothbrush set--and rinsed carefully. She had hoped for a room of her own to share with her husband. Given his mental weariness earlier at having to deal with this rambunctious, redheaded family, Hermione figured he would have loved a private room in which to relax his Russel persona. *But if it's not to be, it's not to be.*

Ginny was already in her nightgown when Hermione entered the younger witch's bedroom. It was familiar from years past, when she'd stayed at the Burrow for holidays and the end of summer vacations. She climbed into the twin bed Molly had transfigured for her at some point, squeezed in next to Ginny's, and lay back with a sigh.

"Sorry," Ginny murmured, guessing what the problem was without being asked. "But I think Mum would explode like a cauldron, if I didn't have a chaperone." Squirming onto her own back, Ginny stared at her ceiling. "She likes Harry, don't get me wrong, and she's cheering for the two of us getting together...you know, after the war. Or at least after I'm out of school. But Mum's got this bug up her backside about my being underage, and finishing my education first, and all that..."

Hermione, staring at the same ceiling, snorted. "That's part of it...but she also said we're 'not properly married'. She should've just slapped me in the face and called me a whore, while she was at it."

Ginny drew in a shocked breath, squirming onto one elbow so she could look over at her friend. Before she could say anything, someone knocked on her door. "--I'll get that."

Rising, she crossed to the door and opened it partway, peering through the crack. A gasp, and she shifted back. Russel stepped through, clad in white-and-blue striped

pyjamas, one hand hastily raised to shade his eyes from the sight of Ginevra Weasley in her ankle-length flannel nightie.

"Pardon me." Maneuvering around the young witch, he strode up the narrow aisle between the two beds, and scooped a startled Hermione into his arms, including the blankets draped over her legs.. "Grab your pillow and wand."

Twisting as he dipped, Hermione complied. Bedding and vinewood clutched to her chest, she found herself carried out of the room and down all four flights of stairs, right past a stunned Arthur Weasley. The middle-aged wizard followed them, spluttering, "--What do you think you're doing?"

"Going to bed with my wife; what does it look like?"

Reaching the ground floor, Russel carried Hermione into the living room, set her down, and snagged a cushion off of the sofa. A flick of his wand transformed it into the size of a queen mattress, though it still had the dark red velvet finish of the original, feather-stuffed cushion. Taking the top sheet from Hermione's armful of bedding, he enlarged it and enchanted it to cover the mattress, then transfigured the remaining bedding into three thick eiderdown comforters..

Hermione tossed down her pillow as he worked, Transfiguring a second cushion from the couch into a pillow for him as well. No sooner had it landed on the bedding than she found herself scooped up again, laid down, and the comforters flicked over her body, enveloping her in downy warmth. A flick of Russel's wand extinguished all of the lights, save for the faerie-sparks someone had enchanted onto the tree in the corner, leaving them bathed in a gentle golden glow that would hopefully be dim enough for sleep.

Arthur *hmp*ed as Russel slid under the covers next to her, but Hermione wasn't about to protest, or heed the opinion of anyone else in the legalities of her marriage. She just let her pyjama-clad husband snuggle up behind her, spooning with her, and sighed, closing her eyes. A few moments later, she heard Arthur's footsteps padding towards the stairs, and the creak as he mounted them to the first floor. The whole house creaked as everyone finished settling in for the night. Somewhere, one of the twins was laughing. Russel raised himself on his elbow long enough to prod the fire in the hearth, levitating more coal onto the embers, then settled behind her back again.

"...Arthur tried to claim we're not legally married," he murmured, warming her entire backside as he held her close with an arm around her waist. "But betrothal rings are still recognized by the Ministry as legal and valid, even if they are heavily antiquated. And I will not be stuck sleeping in a room with Charlie Weasley. For all I know, he snores like one of his dragons."

Hermione smiled involuntarily at that thought. "I didn't want to get into a screaming match with Molly...but her telling me we weren't married felt like she'd slapped me in the face."

"We *are* married," he asserted quietly, his Canadian accent--and dialect--tickling the nerves behind her ear. "No matter what any interfering hosers might say. And I *will not* let you go."

"I know," Hermione agreed quietly, thinking about their very strange marriage as the fire crackled and the faerie lights twinkled. "I know..."

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XXV.

Hermione kept dreaming she was wearing a boy's uniform in the halls of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...and that the other students kept trying to pull her pants down. It wasn't scary, exactly, just disturbing, because she'd slap at the hand drawing her clothes down her hip, then tug her garment back up, and that hand would come out of the crowd and tug them back down again. Finally, the hand grew impatient, yanked her clothes halfway to her knees, and rudely claimed her folds with its fingers.

She woke with a gasp, tensing as she realized someone *did* have their fingers in the folds of her crotch. She started to grab for her wand, set on the floor at the head of the mattress, only to find that her right arm was entangled in someone else's arm, both of them stretching up underneath her pillow. That other hand batted her fingers away from her wand, accompanied by a shushing sound. The tree still twinkled with lights, the coals in the grate glowed a dim red, and the snow was swirling even more heavily past the crack in the curtains, but it was growing light outside. Christmas morning had arrived.

"Shh... Relax."

It was difficult to do that when his fingers were pumping gently into her flesh. Distracting, when those depths were distinctly hot and wet. But when he withdrew his fingers, Hermione found herself murmuring a wordless protest.

"Shh," Russel commanded her again, whispering into her hair. His fingers left her folds; a moment later, she heard him suckling her dew from his skin. "Mmmh, *good*..."

Hermione, eyes open with the shock of having her pyjama bottoms pulled down, felt him doing something behind her rump. He squirmed a little closer, and pried one nether-cheek up, lifting her thigh a little. A moment later, her eyelids fluttered shut and her face angled deeper into her pillow as he pressed himself into her heat. Like most males--according to everything she'd read--it seemed her husband had a morning erection. And it seemed he was determined to do something about it, too. Very determined.

Yet he didn't move vigorously. He thrust deeply, but slowly, his left hand moving around to the front of her pelvis, ensuring that he pulled her into each of his languid strokes. More than ensuring it; his fingers wormed down underneath the elastic waistband and delved between her thighs. Thrusting from the rear, stroking from the front, he brought her from a simmer to a slow boil.

The stairs creaked. Hermione stilled, heat flooding her face with embarrassment. Russel thrust deep and held himself there, motionless save for the subtle rubbing of his fingertip against her clitoris. She drew a breath to tell him to stop, but he shushed her again.

"Shh. Tighten," he whispered as the approaching footsteps reached the ground floor. It took a nudge of his erection in her depths to realize what he meant. Flexing her Kegel muscles, Hermione was rewarded by a sigh, and a faster touch from the pad of his finger. She did it again, and heard him breathe, "Mmmh, *good*...again; do it again..."

"Good morning!"

Hermione jumped, tightening all of the muscles in her body in shock. The almost militant greeting came from Mrs. Weasley; craning her head, Hermione spotted the older witch at the entrance to the living room, a grim edge to the other woman's disapproving expression. "Er...g-good morning."

"Again," her husband breathed in her ear. Annoyance warred with bliss, making Hermione cranky at Molly's interruption.

"Well, now that you're wide awake, you can get up and help m--"

"Go stuff a Christmas stocking in it."

"--I beg your pardon?" Molly gasped, staring at Hermione.

The younger witch's tolerance had snapped. "You heard me! It's too bloody early on Christmas morning to be so rudely awakened by a hypocrite. Only very young children get up at this ungodly an hour, and don't even *pretend* that you're ready to cook breakfast this early in the morning, when every other Christmas I've ever witnessed or heard tell of in the Weasley household, breakfast doesn't start until nine o'clock--and I can see the time-piece on the end-table that says it's only six-thirty! Go. Away."

"Go back to bed, ma'am," Russel added, his fingers still moving subtly under the covers. "Your husband is most likely already missing your presence in his arms...and if you don't get moving, you'll be treated to a sight and a sound you do *not* want to witness."

"You--I--how--well, I *never*!"

Hermione snorted. "Seven children, and you're telling me you '*never*'...?"

An outraged gasp, and the older woman fled. Russel chuckled in her ear, resuming his slow, thorough thrusts as the stairs creaked rapidly. "How very *Slytherin* of you, my dear." A grinding of his hips, a swirl of his finger, and Hermione shuddered silently, biting her lip with pleasure. A buck of his hips as she tightened around him, and he breathed a tight, drawn-out, "*Jane*..."

She could feel each spurting twitch deep inside as he poured his seed into her, and shuddered again with the wickedness of making love on the Weasley's living room floor, early on Christmas morning.

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In a subtle apology for being so blunt with the older woman, Hermione nudged Russel into helping her cook breakfast so that it was ready by the time the others started coming downstairs at around eight thirty. The two of them had enjoyed plenty of sleep, among other things, and staying awake after their second bout of quiet, subtle lovemaking gave her disguised partner time to wake up and settle into his Russel personality. Thankfully, the meal was accepted without question, though Molly did sniff and *hmpfh* for a few moments, until tasting the pancakes-from-scratch and seasoned, scrambled eggs that Russel had made. She found herself asking him for recipes, and Hermione watched, amused, as he hedged neatly around his true expertise with vague replies of 'whatever smelled good', and 'just hoped I got it right...'

After breakfast, the group crowded into the living room, where all signs of last night's bed had been cleared away. George was declared the present-elf, Fred the paper-elf, and both were kept busy in the task of finding and handing out gifts to everyone, and folding and shrinking all of the wrapping paper into a compact bundle, though they did crack jokes as they did so. Hermione enjoyed the way her mum and dad watched the bits of magic with wide-eyed delight, but it was the look on Harry's face--his utter glow of happiness, and his mutterings about this being his best Christmas ever--that really touched her.

From the faint frown pinching her husband's face, she realized he didn't know just how bad Harry's other relatives had treated him, growing up. A murmured explanation in Russel's ear had him flushing red from her brief explanation of how the Dursleys had treated him. From shame, she thought, though he didn't actually say. But as she watched him, seated on his lap in one of the armchairs, since it just wouldn't have done for the kilt-clad man to sit on the floor, the tiny motions of suppressed eye-rolling and bitten-back snarks on his face faded after that.

The others exclaimed with interest and delight over the gifts Hermione and Russel had purchased for them. Russel even nudged her in the ribs when Harry and Ron exclaimed happily over their matching outfits. All of their own presents were good, mostly books for her, and somewhat generic gifts for him. He expressed special admiration for the ancient Egyptian translation she had gotten him, and she equally appreciated the Artificing primer he got for her, but when George plopped two more boxes into their shared laps, Hermione found herself opening an extra present at the same time as her disguised husband.

His, she held her breath over, until he drew out the sapphire blue pyjama set, spotted the heating and cooling runes at collar and hems, and laughed. He nudged her as she frowned at him, and she opened her own box. Inside was a sapphire-blue nightgown...with the exact same runes stitched along its own collar and hems.

"It's also something more than just an enchanted nightie," he murmured quietly in her ear while she grinned ruefully at the unwittingly matched gifts. One of his fingers traced the gathers underneath the high empire-waistline. "It's a *maternity* nightie. So you'll have room to grow...eventually."

"...And here are the final two gifts!" George announced firmly, while his twin finished demolishing the crinkly mounds of wrapping paper. He placed two large boxes in front of Hermione and Russel both, and sat back on his knees, beaming at them.

Hermione and Russel, setting the latest of their gifts aside, eyed the snowflake-wrapped presents warily. The label on the topmost one was addressed to Hermione, and it read: **To: Hermione Fawkeson, From: The Weasleys, Grangers, and Potter.**

She already had individual gifts from each of them. So did Russel; his had been mostly practical little things that could be handed to anybody, if their personal tastes or needs weren't known. Hers were tailored more to her bookish nature. Extra gifts from all of them combined just weren't expected. It smacked of a conspiracy, in fact. Hesitating, she finally leaned down and lifted the box onto her lap. Russel, equally curious, helped her remove the wrapping paper. Together, they opened the lid of the box, and peeled back the tissue paper.

Inside lay a dress. It had been stitched from white satin, and trimmed with panels of lace, and there was no mistaking what sort of a dress it was. A wedding dress. A carefully preserved wedding dress she'd seen before, since it was her mother's satin gown, and her grandmother's gown, and her great-grandmother's gown. Hermione looked up at the others, and found her mother all but bursting with emotion.

A knock on the front door startled them all. Ron set aside the grey suit jacket he was admiring, scrambled to his feet, and opened the door. He let in an elderly man dressed in black wizarding robes, but with a little scrap of white collar tucked into the otherwise dark neckline, and a broad-brimmed hat perched on his head, dusted with snow. A vicar. They'd summoned a vicar to the Burrow, and Harry *had* to have known about this in advance, to have given the aging wizard the Secret of the place.

"Reverend Dibley," Arthur greeted him, rising and shaking the other wizard's hand. "You're a bit early, but not too terribly early! We've yet to get the happy couple into their Christmas finery."

"Well, Molly's cooking is always a draw for me, you know that, Arthur," the vicar returned, while Hermione was still trying to process what was happening. They'd been set up. Her father's enquiries of Russel last night, *would* he be willing to marry her in an Anglican ceremony, if he had the opportunity, Molly and Arthur's actions to keep them separated, Molly's insistence that they weren't 'properly' married yet... They'd been set up.

A glance at her parents' beaming faces drained away her anger. Even Ron looked relieved about what was happening, though not nearly as happy as Harry, who was beaming as if this was even better than any other gift he'd received, and he had received many, this day. ...*They mean well, and they want to see us properly wed, and that*

means they want to celebrate...which means they're willing to accept Russel and myself as husband and wife.

Clearing her throat, Hermione found her voice. "Well. I suppose I should go put this on, then. I'll presume the other box is Russel's wedding outfit."

"We'll need to clear the presents from the living room," Arthur ordered everyone. "And we should get into our own finery. Ginny and Fleur will be the bridesmaids, Harry and Ron have volunteered to be the groomsmen--if you don't mind, Russel, seeing as how you don't have anyone you can call upon, exactly; they can wear those smashing new Muggle outfits you got them, too--and of course, Mr. Granger will be quite happy to give the blushing bride away. We all drew straws--the Weasleys, that is, being the ones unrelated to either of you--and Bill and Molly will get to be your witnesses on the registry papers--"

Hermione felt the man underneath her stiffen. "--Registry papers?" Russel repeated swiftly. "As in, Ministry of Magic wedding registry papers?"

"Well, yes, of course! Vicar Dibley is a vicar in both the wizarding and Muggle worlds," Arthur explained. "You'll remember him, Hermione; he was the one who presided over Bill and Fleur's wedding, this last summer."

"That's nice, but I can't exactly sign any Ministry paperwork," Russel asserted, making even Hermione glance at him.

"Why ever not?" Arthur demanded.

"Because of the *signatures*."

"The signa...*oh*!" Arthur replied, eyes widening abruptly. "Oh, dear! I didn't even think of that!"

"Yes," Russel agreed grimly. "The signature lines are enspelled for the truth, and we can't have that entering the Ministry's registry, now can we?"

"Is something wrong?" the minister enquired, peering at Russel and Hermione. "Why can't you sign the registry?"

Everyone looked at everyone else. Hermione glanced at her husband, leaving the decision up to him. Sighing roughly, he nudged her from his lap, rising himself. "Because we're in the middle of a war, sir. If certain people on the wrong side discovered I was officially registered as married, they'd kidnap, torture, and kill my wife. I'm sorry you came all this way for nothing...but I cannot and will not put her life at risk by putting my true name into the registry."

There was more than one disappointed look around the room. Even Hermione felt a pang of disappointment aching through her. She'd always fancied herself wearing her mother's wedding-gown, even though it was hopelessly out-of-date with its Edwardian, high-necked, long-sleeved, bustle-skirted cut. They just couldn't risk it, though.

The vicar snorted. "Nonsense. If you can't get married in the wizarding way, then we'll just do it with the Muggle version! Muggle law states that it is the person who gets married, not the name that's written down. A Muggle marriage certificate is just as valid as a wizarding one where the Ministry of Magic is concerned, but they do not bother to keep duplicate records...and for obvious reasons don't insist on enspelled certificates." He smiled at the staring couple. "I can nip out and be back with the Muggle paperwork in a trice, if you like, and you can take the time to tidy yourselves up while I'm gone. It's no trouble, really!"

Hermione looked up into the tanned face of the man beside her. Molly's comment about their not being 'properly married' still stung. She was an Anglican, and had always pictured a normal wedding, though she'd accepted the magical, ring-wrought version they'd undergone as just one more adaptation to the unusual ways of the wizarding world. Carefully keeping her expression open and non-pressuring, she waited for him to make up his mind, cradling the box with the heirloom gown in it.

"Go, and fetch the Muggle papers. I'll sign those willingly." He looked down at her, his mouth quirking in a wry smile. "If you don't mind the Muggle paperwork, that is."

"No, I don't mind," Hermione quickly agreed.

He dropped a kiss on her forehead. "Go gild the lily, my dear. You know I'd wed you in a potato sack, never mind something as lovely-looking as that."

Blushing from the endearment and the compliment, Hermione hurried towards the stairs as Arthur showed the vicar out the door. Ginny, Fleur, Daphne and Molly followed, and they found themselves crowded into Ginny's room, though Molly at least unTransfigured the second twin bed back into the chair for Ginny's desk. Daphne helped her daughter into the delicate, carefully preserved gown, and Molly wielded her wand--under Daphne's nervous Muggle eyes--to tailor the dress perfectly to Hermione's figure. There were undergarments in the box to be worn with it, brassiere and knickers in white silk, sheer tights in a neutral tan. Ginny Transfigured her a pair of shoes to go with the dress, and Hermione let Fleur fuss over her hair, though she insisted the French witch incorporate the sapphire-studded hair-clip into her attempts.

The dress was the 'something old', in the old wedding rhyme; the undergarments, Hermione's mother teased her, were 'something new'. The shoes that Ginny transformed were 'something borrowed', and the sapphires in the pin were 'something blue'. And for the last, her mother supplied Hermione with a pence to tuck into her shoe, to bring her good luck for her marriage in what was apparently both a Muggle and a wizarding wedding tradition. Whether there was any magic or not in the silly little rhyme, Hermione complied, until she found herself staring at her reflection when they were finished, trepidation and excitement churning her stomach with nerves.

The dress was old-fashioned enough to look like formal wizarding clothes. Her curls had been drawn off of her face and pinned at the back of her head by the clip, and the delicate white lace covering the satin of the bodice accented the slender curves of her breasts and waist. She couldn't see any lower than that, since Ginny's mirror was a vanity-style mounted on top of her bureau drawers, but she could see that she looked beautiful from the waist up. Fleur had applied only a modicum of make-up to her face, the subtle enhancing leaving Hermione seemingly natural-looking.

Her mother hugged her from the side. "My little girl's all grown up," Daphne murmured, studying her. "You seem to have snagged a good man, despite the circumstances. I want you to be as happy as possible, whatever the circumstances are. Will you be able to be happy with him?"

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, thinking of all the trouble and turmoil surrounding and within her relationship. She thought also of the facets of the man she had been shown, and the truth of him that she was slowly coming to know. Setting aside her fears of how it all might come crashing down at the end of the war, if she couldn't find a way to get him exonerated at least to where he was neither Kissed by a Dementor, nor imprisoned for life, she managed a nod as she opened her eyes. "I can be happy with him, Mum. I can be very happy. He's a better man than anyone knows."

And I will cling to that like a shipwreck survivor to a bit of flotsam, until the storm waves of war pull me down to drown, or I come across the salvation of some unknown island shore...

"I shall let ze men know we are ready," Fleur promised, slipping out of the room.

Hermione took a deep breath, preparing herself mentally for the wedding ceremony.

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"...By the power invested in me by Her Majesty's government, the Diocese of Devonshire, and the Ministry of Magic," Vicar Dibley intoned, once their final witness, a teary-eyed Molly, straightened from the plain, non-magical paper she had signed on the end table that had been pressed into makeshift service, "I now pronounce you husband and wife. Mr. Fawkeson, you may kiss your bride."

Gripping her hands, Russel tugged Hermione close. She swayed into him, lifting her lips eagerly. Clad in full Scottish regalia--in the Ferguson tartan, for lack of anyone knowing any better--he looked incredibly handsome. She'd blushed on seeing him standing there, plaid thrown over his white-clad shoulder, glimpses of his knees under the hem of his kilt, argyle socks neatly aligned on his calves, his fringe braided down either side of his head to keep the dark blond locks out of his tanned face. Longing silently to see him in his natural colouring while in such finery, Hermione accepted him in his amulet-wrought guise anyway; it was the man she was marrying, not the face or the name.

It was in that moment, kissing her husband, that Hermione acknowledged she was, just maybe, falling in love with Severus Selenius Snape. Not just with Russel. Not excluding Snape, either. With the whole, complex, complicated man that he was. It frightened her, a little. To be honest...it frightened her a lot. There was no easy way for their marriage to survive when the war ended, after all, and Hermione couldn't picture being in love with the wreck of a man thrown to the Dementors.

The wedding ceremony had passed with crystal clarity, leaving her increasingly anxious to have the matter done and officially signed, sealed, and delivered. Their kiss wasn't passionate, however, unlike last night's snog under the Snitch-carried mistletoe. Instead, it had a lot more in common with the one under the Granger's mistletoe, being a slow, tender press of their lips. When he pulled back, she wasn't sure if his smile was for her, or for the benefit of the others, but she hoped at least some of it was for her.

The warmth of his hands clasping hers, the gentle yet unhurried kiss, his absolute willingness to go through a Muggle ceremony with her, made her hope fervently some of it was for her own sake, and not for the sake of the war and its deceptions.

The others cheered and applauded when they were introduced as Russel and Hermione Fawkeson. Molly whipped up a luncheon while more gifts were pressed on the couple, gifts of a housekeeping nature, and the vicar regaled them with humorous tales of previous weddings, some of which had been pulled off a bit less smoothly than this one had passed. But Vicar Dibley did beg his leave of them after an hour, saying he had one more wedding to prepare for that day. Once again, Arthur showed him to the door. This time, however, more than just a few flakes of the still-falling snow swirled their way inside. An owl flew through the doorway, too.

Charlie caught the owl as the vicar Disapparated from the front stoop with a sharp *pop*. It didn't take the beast-handler more than a few moments to extract the message tied to the owl's leg. Passing the note to his eldest brother, he carried the owl to the perch that had once been reserved for Errol, the ancient owl who had finally passed away that autumn, and had yet to be replaced. It was too cold and snowy for the bird to be sent back out again without a bit of food, warmth and rest, according to the freckled wizard.

Bill's gasp caught everyone's attention. Hermione, once again seated in Russel's lap, looked up to see the eldest Weasley son with a face so pale, it made the pinkish lines of his scars stand out on his face. Molly eyed her son warily. "Bill? What's wrong?"

"It's...it's Percy. He's at St. Mungo's, in their critical care ward. He was attacked at the Ministry last night." Bill lifted his gaze from the paper. "Mrs. Figg sent the note; the portrait of Everard heard the commotion of the battle, and he told Dylis and Phineas, and Phineas told Mrs. Figg, who pretended to be the Ring of Truth and sent a message to the Aurors. She says she didn't know who was involved until Dylis told Phineas as soon as she figured out who the victim was, who in turn told Arabella, which is why we didn't know. They...the Healers couldn't recognize him, at first."

Molly's breath caught in a sob, her hands covering her lower face. Arthur quickly cupped her shoulders, comforting her. The decision was made swiftly by him, with no objections from the others. "Then we'll go to him, as soon as we can. Children, go get your traveling cloaks on; Mr. and Mrs. Granger, if you don't feel comfortable coming along--"

"We're coming," Jeffrey reassured him. "Your son is in trouble. That's reason enough to lend our support."

"Thank you."

Hurrying upstairs, Hermione flicked her wand, using the same spell her husband had used on her before to slither out of her wedding gown now. Scrambling into jeans and the purple jumper Molly had knitted for one of her presents as Ginny entered the room, she donned the spare cloak Ginny tossed at her. Hermione met the younger witch's anguished gaze. "He'll be alright, Ginny. He just has to be."

"He's a prat. A total, pig-headed prat," Ginny muttered roughly, her brown eyes wide with anxiety. "He's too obnoxious and pompous and stubborn to die...right?"

All Hermione could do was hug her friend briefly, and urge both of them out of the room.

...

The man suspended by several spells a foot over the hospital bed wasn't easily identifiable. Someone had tried to incinerate him, on top of his other injuries. Glowing runes in various colours flickered and shimmered over his skin, which glistened with healing salves, but the prognosis was grim. Hermione stared through the glass at the seared wreck that was Percy Weasley--identified by a parallel scar on his foot, one of the few places on his body that had escaped the blackening of the rest of his skin--and worried for his life. Beside her, Russel was a grim, silent figure, almost Snape-like in his stance, save for the deep worry and remorse showing in his grey eyes, softening his visage.

Arthur escorted Molly out of the ward. The attending mediwitch cancelled the protective spells layered around them, and Arthur let his sons envelop their mother in their arms. With slow, weary steps, he crossed to where Hermione and Russel stood. She saw her husband flinch as Arthur stopped in front of him, though the movement was subtle. Wringing his hands, Arthur Weasley took a moment to speak.

"I know...I know this wasn't your fault. That you had no warning. I know you would have told us, had you known," he murmured in quiet tones.

"Arthur, I swear I didn't know--"

"I *know*," the older wizard repeated, lifting his head and looking into Russel's eyes. "But he was found in the stairwell leading down to the tenth floor...and the Department of Mysteries had been broken into. We need to know what they stole, and why."

"I'll find out whatever I safely can," Russel promised.

"Thank you." Arthur wrung his hands, glancing through the window at his middle-born son. "They don't know if he'll make it, the burns are that bad. They're going to try to brew the Eiterubrenner Salve, but they're having trouble trying to find a supply of buggane liver bile. The bugganes are locked fast in their hill-burrows at this time of the year, and they don't have anything fresh enough to use on hand."

"They don't n--they don't know if they can get any?" Russel corrected himself, his tone changing from impatient to inquisitive. Hermione glanced at him, wondering what he knew, what he'd been about to say.

Arthur shook his head, his gaze fixed on his son's badly burned face.

"I have certain contacts. I'll see what I can do." Snagging Hermione's hand, Russel pulled her away from the critical care ward. "We'll try to be back soon."

"...Do you have something in mind?" Hermione whispered, following him downstairs, past the public Floos that were reserved for emergency visits. He didn't stop until they were outside, around the corner, and hidden in an alleyway. Wrapping his arm around her, he Apparated them to a familiar location: 42 Spinner's End. A slash of his wand started a brief fire, a toss of Floo powder turned it green, and he pulled her through the whirling emerald flames, emerging in his private quarters at Hogwarts. "You know where there's a fresh source of buggane bile, don't you?" she asked as he led her towards the door out of his suite.

"You don't need fresh buggane bile. There are other ways to achieve the same results." He paused before opening the door to the short corridor between his quarters and the rest of the school. Turning, he faced her. "I need you to get my sixth-year potions book. I have some notes in there from something...from something my mother once taught me. I don't want to rely upon my memory. I'll get the bile and everything else we'll need, and meet you in the Room of Requirement. Try not to be seen."

Nodding, Hermione returned to the hearth, as he slipped out the door. She didn't Floo herself outside the school, however; during the two weeks she had attempted the Anima Te on her own, she had dumped her cauldrons in the junk-room...and while there, had taken to perusing the books in that little mammoth-hide grotto, the collection with all the crib-notes. It was there that she'd brought Severus' sixth-year Potions textbook, since it seemed to make sense to her to store his margin-scribbled ideas with all

the other graffiti-marked tomes.

"Hogwarts, Seventh Floor Illusions Classroom," she asserted firmly, casting the powder onto the embers leftover from their arrival. They flared green after a moment. Stepping through, she hurried out into the hall, paced agitatedly until the door opened, and slipped inside. Hermione glanced apprehensively at the cauldron simmering to one side, then firmed her concentration. It took a couple moments to order her mind, but the door she wanted appeared on the far wall, summoned by the strength of her will.

For a brief moment, Hermione idly wondered if the Room of Requirement responded best to wandless magic, since that was essentially the manifestation of a witch or wizard's firmly concentrated will. She didn't linger on the thought, however. Drawing her wand, she cast her Self-Levitation Charm and rose up over the debris of the ages, orienting so that she could reach her target. Swooping over, then down, she landed in a crouch, entering the cushion-lined grotto.

The book she wanted was in the middle section, slightly to the right around the circular, makeshift space, since she'd arranged the texts alphabetically by topic. Kneeling as she reached for the right book, she knocked over one of the tins holding various bits of jewelry. Hermione hesitated over cleaning up the spilled gewgaws, but her innate tidy nature wouldn't allow her to leave a mess in this hide-covered place. Even if the rest of the cathedral-sized chamber was a maze of discarded items, this one space was as organized as any place in a junk-room could get.

Scooping the necklaces and bracelets back into place, she tossed in a few rings and a hair-clasp. And froze, blinking. Digging into the mess, she extracted the clasp, staring at it. Fumbling at the back of her head, Hermione removed the one holding her hair back from her face, and compared the two. She hadn't imagined what she'd glimpsed. They *were* identical. Both made from the slightly heavy feel of white gold, both moulded in swooping, curved lines...both dotted in tiny sapphire chips.

This was his mother's missing hair-clip. This grotto had once belonged to Eileen Prince, who had become Eileen Snape. But something about that bothered her. Frowning, Hermione eyed the two clips. *How could Severus have known that his mother had two hairclips, and that he couldn't find them in her belongings after she passed away, unless she'd had them as an adult? Which would have been after she left the school at the end of her seventh year...*

Unsure what it meant, Hermione finished tucking everything else back into the biscuit tin, grabbed Severus' book, then grabbed the wizarding photo of the girl sitting on the steps of the school, waving diffidently every so often. If it was his mother, he'd be able to identify her in the photo, surely. If not, then she might be recognized as one of his past students, and perhaps whoever was the pack-rat for this little grotto could be linked to his mother's hair barrette somehow. She liked having mysteries tidily solved, after all, and this was a mystery to her.

Severus arrived a short time after she returned to the laboratory, two baskets of ingredients dangling from his hands. He set them on one of the worktables across the room from the simmering, spell-warded Anima Te, and held out his hand for the book. Hermione passed him the two barrettes instead. He blinked, frowned...and lifted his brows.

"My mother's barrette... You found the second one? Where?"

"In the junk-room. There's this grotto-thing, made out of what I think is a mammoth-hide," Hermione admitted. "There's little bits of jewelry in tins, and a whole collection of books with notes scribbled in the margins. And...this." Holding out the photo, she let him take the frame from her hand.

His tanned face tightened. At first, she thought it was anger, but the hand holding the hair clips caressed the edge of the frame gently. "Mother... I had wondered what happened to her collection. The majority of her jewelry and a small number of her books weren't in the boxes of her things that were turned over to me, after she died."

"I don't understand," Hermione stated, studying him. "Why would she store her things here, long after she left this school?"

He looked up at her, his jaw muscles flexing for a moment. "She was the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, in my seventh year."

Hermione frowned at him, confused. "...But, I've looked at the long line of teachers that have served the Defence post. You're the only Snape that was ever listed."

"She separated from my father in my fifth year. He died in my sixth year, in an automobile accident." He looked away from her, admitting the details tersely. "There were debts. He had drinking problems, gambling...he hadn't worked in a few years. She came to the school and asked Albus to hire her. He had long suspected the Defence position was cursed, but most of the teachers wound up unable to do more than one year at a time for non-lethal reasons, though most of them were less than happy, overall--Quirrel was the only one who managed two years as the Defence teacher here, though they weren't consecutive. The first time, he received enough money from an inheritance to allow him to take the next year off and travel on a research trip. We all thought it was the first positive thing to happen to a Defence professor in a long time...but he met the Dark Lord on that trip, as you know.

"Mother didn't care about the temporary nature of the job; it would pay the creditors, and allow her to close the house for most of the year, saving even more money. She'd gone back to using her maiden name after Father died; you may recall the name 'Professor Prince' on the rolls of past Defence teachers."

Hermione blushed a little. "I thought I read 'Professor *Pince*' on that list, actually," she informed him. "I thought it was some relative of Madam Pince's, at the time."

"Thankfully, I am not related to that sourpuss. Not by at least five generations, if not more," he returned dryly.

"How did your mother pass away?" Hermione asked, unable to help her curiosity.

"She was murdered."

Hermione covered her gasp with her hand.

He nodded, confirming that she'd heard right. His face was grim, and as pale as his enchantment-tanned skin would allow. "It was the weekend before I left the school, just after having taken my N.E.W.T.s. She'd gone home early to open and freshen the house over the weekend...and to meet her lover. I never knew who he was, but she'd meet him every few weekends or so. She went home that Friday night...and early Saturday morning, I was called into Professor Slughorn's office to be confronted by Albus, and an Auror. The Auror had seen the Dark Mark cast over my mother's house, and Albus confronted me, telling me he suspected I had done it, as no one could say where I was, that night.

"They suspected me of being a Death Eater, you see."

"I know you didn't do it," Hermione murmured immediately, firm in her conviction on that point.

The look he slanted her way was shuttered, inscrutable. "I had already taken the Mark. I didn't want to believe them; the members of Death Eater families weren't being targeted. Not unless they actively tried to betray someone to the authorities, but I didn't even think at the time that her lover was one of them. I demanded to see her body, and the Auror told me she'd been...used, repeatedly, before being murdered. He demanded to see my arm. I...showed it to him, and...things were discussed...and..."

Hermione frowned softly at him. He seemed to be having trouble speaking. Patiently waiting, she watched him searching for words. Finally, they came to him.

"I couldn't forgive the Dark Lord for what he had allowed to happen, and I have tried to learn who killed her, who harmed her, ever since. But there were too many raids, and too many secrets..."

Something in his confession nagged at Hermione. It came to her after a long moment of thought. "I don't understand. If you were already a spy *for* Dumbledore that early on," she surmised, since that seemed to be the logical conclusion to this confession of his past, "why were you spying on him and Trelawney, the night she suffered that prophecy about Harry?"

"I cannot tell you what happened, that night." At her skeptical look, he scowled at her. "I cannot tell you! Accept that fact, and drop the subject! We have a potion to make, if

we're to save that total, self-righteous hoser dying of third-degree burns back at St. Mungo's. Now, start chopping the comfrey leaves into quarter-inch slices."

Hermione concentrated on her requirements, conjuring a knife-block as he thumped open his old Potions text, flipping through the pages. The Canadian slang he'd used reminded her that he was still in his Russel persona. She'd grown used to the foreign slant to his speech, and hadn't paid attention, but when he said things like that, it stood out.

Her hair threatened to slide forward. Reaching for the barrettes he had set on the table, she pushed her fringe back from her face, clipping it over each temple to keep the wayward locks out of her face. He glanced her way as she did so, but said nothing. Some of the tension between them eased, however.

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Three hours after their departure, they returned to St. Mungo's. Mounting the stairs to the fourth floor, they reached the waiting room for the critical spell-damage ward. A Healer was talking somberly with Arthur, while Bill held a quietly crying Molly. The others all looked rather shell-shocked. Hermione found herself hurrying after Russel as his strides lengthened.

"--just don't have enough time to do what we'd need to do. His burns are just too bad," the mediwizard was saying.

"He's still alive?" Russel asked the green-clad man.

The middle-aged wizard gave them a regretful look. "Not for long. We tried brewing the potion he needs, but it failed."

"Try this." Pushing the lidded pot into the Healer's hands, Russel nodded at it. "Eiterubrenner. Fresh-brewed."

The man peered through the glass lid. "It's the wrong colour. Eiterubrenner is orange, not purple."

"Ignore the colour, and apply the salve. You have nothing to lose, but your patient's life." The Healer hesitated. Russel added impatiently, "If you do nothing, he *will* die. If you apply this, he just might live. The choice--and the responsibility--are now yours."

The Healer looked down at the pot, then up at Russel again. Hermione, placing her faith firmly in the man at her side, added a quiet, "Please, trust him."

"If this hurts my patient--"

"--It's Eiterubrenner, you medical hoser," Russel drawled, his accent thickening. "Of *course* it's going to hurt him! The point is that your patient is *dying*. The cure for his burns lies in your hands. *Move*."

Jerking back almost as if that final word had been *Imperio*, the Healer stared at him a moment more, then stepped up to the door of the ward. The duty nurse cast the necessary spells to prevent infection or contamination, and the green-clad Healer passed into the chamber beyond. Arthur moved up beside Hermione and her husband, peering through the window at the silently floating figure of his son.

"Is that really...?"

"Yes. Don't ask me how I got the bastard to brew it. Just...consider it my Christmas gift to your son."

"The bastard?" Arthur wanted to clarify.

"Snape."

As quiet as their conversation was, someone outside of the three of them heard that name.

"*Snape?*" Harry hissed, jolting out of his chair, his hands fisted at his sides. "He went to *Snape* for a cure? That kilted bastard is going to *poison* him!"

"Harry!" Hermione snapped, stepping quickly between the two males. "*I trust Russel*. I trust him with my very life. I would trust him with *your* life. And I certainly trust him with Percy bloody Weasley's life! No matter whatever else he may have done, Professor Snape *is* a Potions Master--*you* certainly trusted the words of the Half-Blood Prince when it came to saving *Ron's* life!" she asserted. Harry flinched at her vehement reminder. "If anyone could brew a cure in time to help Percy, yes, it *would* be Snape, and *you* need to stuff a Christmas stocking in it!"

"I'd trust Snape, with Percy's life," a voice interjected. Everyone's eyes shifted to Ron's pale, pinched face. "I wouldn't turn down any help he gave, as a Potions Master. I wouldn't turn my back on him, either, but if it saved Percy's life, I'd take his help any day."

A muffled sound, rising from a deep moan, drew their attention to the windows. The Healer was applying the salve to the now writhing, screaming figure thrashing against the levitation spell holding him over the bedding. The duty mediwitch drew the curtains. Hermione caught Harry as he threw himself at the door, wanting to barge in there. He pushed forward with his greater strength, until Russel took over, manacled the younger wizard's arms with his own.

"If he is screaming, then the salve is *working*, Harry!" Russel told him forcefully. "Eiterubrenner draws the dead and irrevocably damaged cells to the surface, even as it forces the body to repair and replace that which it destroys. That *includes* any nerve cells! Which is more important to you, Harry? Your blinding hatred of Snape, or your concern for Percy's life? I have more cause than anyone to hate that bastard, including you--and I *still* fetched the Healers that salve to spare Percy's life!"

Harry struggled to shrug him off as Percy screamed hoarsely on the other side of the curtained glass.

"*Think!*" Russel ordered him. "In the final battle, if you see the bastard and the Dark Lord before you, *which* one do you go after? Think *very* carefully on that one, Harry. Do not let yourself be side-tracked by trying to high-stick the wrong asshole in the cup!"

"...In the *what?*" Harry asked, frowning in confusion. At least he wasn't struggling towards the closed ward anymore. Percy screamed again, and he tensed, but he didn't fight either of them.

"High-sticking in the athletic cup. It's a hockey thing," Russel dismissed impatiently. "Think of it like a Bludger to the family jewels. *Prioritize*, Harry. Snape the bastard can wait for another day. The important thing right now is the Dark Lord...and saving Percy's life."

Again, that moaning, keening yell rose from within the private room. Harry tensed again, then slumped, shoulders sagging. "I feel so helpless..."

"We all do, when we have no way to stop what's happening," Russel murmured, meeting Hermione's gaze over her blood-brother's shoulder. "Sometimes, all we can do is follow our orders, whether or not we like them, and wait for the results to unfold. And pray that we're doing the right thing."

Percy's screams punctuated the silence following his words.

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The Healer came out of the room roughly twenty minutes after the last of the screaming, the crying, and the audible whimpering died down, an hour or so after the first of the salve had been applied. Stripping off his protective spells, the ward-nurse opened the curtains. The figure inside still hovered over the bed, but he was no longer a

blackened, crusted horror. Pale pink skin greeted their gaze, blurred at the waist by a privacy glamour, but the only things that touched his flesh were the spells keeping him a foot above the covers, cushioning his body from any undue friction or pressure.

He was completely bald, and freckleless. Molly, sniffing into her kerchief, peered through the window at the recumbent figure. She finally nodded. "...That's my son. I'd recognize his profile anywhere, even if...even if he's like that."

"His hair will grow back," the Healer reassured them quietly. "And in time, when it is safe to expose his skin to sunlight, his freckles will come back, too. Right now, however, his flesh is too new, too sensitive to expose to bright light. He'll have to stay in the isolated ward for a week, and then wear spider-silk, combed cotton or lambs-wool, and stay completely covered up for at least a month afterwards, if not longer.

"Thank you," the Healer added, looking over at Russel, who had seated himself between Hermione and a potted plant. "Whatever that salve looked like, it worked exactly like Eiterubrenner. It saved his life. I'd like to see the recipe that was used."

"I can't guarantee I can get it for you, but I'll see what I can do," Russel returned calmly.

"Can we see him now, sir?" Arthur asked the Healer.

"Two at a time, and not for long. He's unconscious from a painkiller, and will stay that way for several more hours...but the presence of our loved ones can be as much a panacea as any mediwizard's tricks, even if we're unconscious."

Hermione stood as the Healer nodded to them all and departed. She wasn't high on the list of who got to visit first, but it felt good to stand and stretch. Russel stood as well, wrapping his arms around her while her own were in the air. Something in her stomach fluttered as she hugged him back, making her gasp and pull back. He frowned at her, and the fluttering, tickling sensation happened again. Hermione pressed her hand to her lower abdomen, below her belly button.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I just...felt something."

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Molly stiffen, staring at her. Arthur stared, too, his mouth drooping a little in astonishment. Bill frowned, while the other Weasleys, her parents and Harry all looked confused...and the duty-nurse beamed at her.

"Congratulations!"

"Congratulations?" Hermione repeated, eyeing the mediwitch askance. "For what?"

"You're glowing! Is this your first flutter, or your second?"

"I beg your pardon?" she asked, confused.

"Did you feel a flutter about a handful of days ago, dear?" the mediwitch clarified. "Low in your stomach?"

Hermione remembered a strange fluttering feeling she'd felt the night she and the man at her side had resumed intimacies. "Well, yes, but..."

"Of course, I'd have to cast a diagnostic spell to be sure, but I'd say you're going to have a bundle of joy coming along 'round about the middle of September," the mediwitch informed her merrily.

Bundle...of...

Arthur nodded at Hermione and Russel. "I'd say she's right. I've seen 'the glow' seven times on Molly, and you're definitely glowing, young lady. Erm...congratulations."

An anguished moan escaped Ron, seated a few chairs away. He clutched at his hair, his elbows on his knees. "I *did not* need to know that!"

Harry glanced between his two best friends, his scarred brow furrowed. "...I thought you said it'd be stupid to get pregnant during a war! Merlin's undershorts, Hermione! I thought you had more brains than that! Didn't you do anything to avoid it?"

Russel drew a breath to speak, but Hermione beat him to it. "My *intimate* life is none of your business, Harry James Potter! If I am pregnant, than I am pregnant. Deal with it! And before the two of you twits go all mental on me again, I am *not* a delicate piece of china that has to be coddled and pampered and kept out of the bloody fray! I *will* be an active participant in this war!--And that goes for *you*, too!"

Russel flinched back from the finger she jabbed at his face. He lifted his hands placatingly. "I wouldn't dream of holding you back from whatever you want to do, Jane. I'm not that stupid."

"You're just going to let her risk herself, and the life of your child?" Ron demanded, lifting his head from his hands. "You're going to let her go up against the Death Eaters while she's pregnant?"

Russel arched a sandy brow at the younger wizard, giving him a quelling look. "Your ideas about the fragility of a pregnant woman are antiquated and insulting. Jane is more knowledgeable and powerful than you are in many areas. She is also wearing a betrothal ring forged by the great Elizabethan wizard, John Dee," he stated baldly. "So long as she is wearing my ring and carrying my child, Sigurd will do everything within his considerable powers to protect both of them. Up to and including deflecting the damage from hexes and curses he cannot counter, transferring them from her to me via the rings.

"The power of these rings have not been tested against the Killing Curse, but family legend does speak of the Cruciatus Curse being deflected onto the husband, sparing mother and unborn child," he recited as Hermione stared at him, undone by the revelation of his 'plan' for her. No doubt it wasn't the only reason, but if he was speaking the truth... He continued briskly, scattering her thoughts once more. "Jane is now heavily protected defensively, without any curtailing any of her abilities offensively. To withhold her from a confrontation would not only be redundant, but an utter waste of her spell-casting abilities."

Harry glowered at him. "You sound like you planned this in advance!"

"--I repeat, Harry James Potter-Granger, that my intimate life is none of your business," Hermione asserted, re-gathering her wits. "Besides, we don't even know if I really am pregnant! And if I am, it's my own business, and Russel's, and no one else's! It's also hypocritical! I remind you that your own mother was pregnant while smack-dab in the middle of the last war, and *she* still fought against Voldemort!"

Russel's breath hissed through his teeth. The others flinched. Hermione stiffened; she hadn't meant to say the name aloud in her husband's presence.

"...Sorry. Look, I'm going to go back to Hogwarts, and I'm going to let Poppy examine me. If I am, I am; if I'm not, I'm not. So what, if I am? It's not the end of the world," she pointed out pragmatically. "Women have been doing this sort of thing since the dawn of our species--and I will not be coddled and wrapped in tons of cotton-wool! Now, if you'll excuse me, since Percy has stabilized and can't have too many visitors, I have an appointment to make. I'll be back to visit with him later. Russel, if you'd like to come along, you'd be welcome."

"I think I will." Nodding to the others, he joined her in heading for the stairs. He waited until they were descending the steps before speaking again. "That was...rather bluntly managed."

"Our situation is complicated enough without them sticking their wands into the cauldron," she muttered. "Russel, is what you said true? About Sigurd deflecting hexes onto you?"

His face tightened; she could tell he didn't want to answer, but he did. "Yes."

She almost asked him if that was part of his 'plans' for her, but bit back the words at the last moment. Instead, she offered a hesitant, "...I'm sorry."

"It was my choice. I could have given you a second contraceptive at any point. Or myself. And it was your choice to go through with our bargain. I still have plans for you," he warned her, opening the door at the bottom of the stairwell. "Your protection is only one of them."

...

They had to wait for Madam Pomfrey to return from the Christmas Feast, but there was no one in the Infirmary other than themselves, and the school nurse was alone when she bustled into the ward. A surprised smile lit up her face as she spotted Hermione sitting on the edge of one of the beds near her office door. "Hermione! Merry Christmas, dearie--you're not injured, are you?"

"Merry Christmas. Apparently, I'm 'glowing'," she returned dryly. The school nurse spotted the wizard next to her, and Hermione quickly made the necessary introductions. "Russel, this is Poppy Pomfrey, mediwitch and Hogwarts nurse. Poppy, this is Russel Fawkeson...my subscription."

Russel's eyes narrowed briefly in confusion at that, but Poppy laughed. "Sorry, dear; it's a private joke. You've got a lovely young wife, here. Make sure you treat her well, alright?" Poppy returned her attention to Hermione, taking on the brisk manner of her profession. "'Glowing', you said? Well, stretch out on the bed, and I'll cast the diagnostics. Do you want him on this or the other side of the exam curtain?"

Hermione felt a flutter in her stomach that had nothing to do with 'glowing'. "It's his choice," she decided. "Though I don't know if he'd do lamaze classes with me."

"Lamaze?" Poppy asked as Russel left the bed long enough to snag a chair and bring it over. Since there was no one else in the ward, she didn't pull over the mobile privacy curtain.

"Muggle breathing exercises for controlling labor pains."

"Muggles always do things the hard way. Now, just relax and let me do my wand-work over you..." Flicking the slim cedar shaft, Poppy cast one of the spells Hermione remembered from before. Bright-coloured energy leapt up from her body, forming softly pulsing columns of light. The result was immediate. "Well, you're definitely pregnant!" A flick of her wand, and she added, "Implantation was less than half an hour ago, too. Add nine months... You'll be due around September 24th. Of course, babies come on their own schedule." A third flick, and Poppy smiled at her. "The baby is in excellent health, though it's not even really a fetus just yet, let alone a proper bun in the oven. Let's just check Mum's health, too..."

"...Excellent! You're in fine fettle, my dear," the mediwitch informed her, canceling the spells. "I'll write you up a list of books to read, symptoms and changes to expect, what activities can be done up to what point, and so forth. Of course, you can do just about anything you normally could, up until the last month or two, then you'll feel as big as a heffalump and as graceful as Hagrid after a night at the Hogs Head.

"I would be extra careful in handling certain potions ingredients, though," she added, helping Hermione upright on the edge of the bed. "Always wear protective gear or use anti-contamination spells with anything that could be absorbed through your skin. And wash thoroughly afterwards, before either of you touch each other. It's important to not mess with the health of the embryo."

"Can you tell us what the gender is?" Russel asked quietly. "I'd like to know."

"Not until the sixth week. Speaking of which, you should go for a check-up every two weeks, Hermione, just to keep an eye on things as they progress. St. Mungo's has a registry of licensed midwife-Healers you could consult. I could do it, too, if you like, though my obstetric skills are a little rusty," Poppy shrugged. "We do try to discourage the students from that sort of thing."

"I think I'd like that. Coming here to see you," Hermione clarified, standing.

"Then I'll expect you in two weeks. If you experience any nausea, especially in the morning, nibble on a couple of saltine crackers, or dry toast. Weak tea at most, too, until you're feeling better. And watch out for those cravings!" Poppy chuckled. "When my sister had her little girls, she would crave avocados smothered in maple syrup, of all things! Now, how is your Christmas going?"

"Fairly well, all things considered. Um, Percy Weasley got caught in an attack on the Ministry, but he got some Eiterubrenner Salve in time," Hermione added, glancing at her husband, "and is expected to make a full recovery. It put a bit of a damper on things for a little while, but he'll be alright."

"That's good to know."

"How has your Christmas been?"

"Blissfully quiet. Not even a sniffle among the staff, for the last three days," Poppy related chattily. "Though Rubeus did look like he was coming down with something at supper, tonight. Either that, or he'd slipped something into his pumpkin juice to make his nose look that red..."

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XXVI.

Her mother didn't even have to say anything. Daphne Granger just looked at her daughter with worried hope in her brown eyes, and Hermione caved. Nodding her head, she found herself scooped up in her mother's arms, her mother's voice whispering fiercely in her ears.

"I'm so very happy for you! And very scared at the same time, and you're awfully young for it, but you'll make an outstanding mum--and I could kick your husbands kilted

little arse all the way to the Isle of Man and back for doing this to you without thought for the consequences, but you're going to have a *baby*! I've got a new son, and I'm going to be a grandmum, and I'm so happy to know that you were properly married before all of this happened!"

Hermione stiffened a little at that last bit, but her mother continued breathlessly--squeezing her daughter breathlessly, for that matter.

"Not that you'd be the type to get knocked up, but you're my little girl and you're obviously passionately in love with your husband, and I'm just so very glad things look like they're going to work out for you!" Releasing Hermione's shoulders, Daphne leaned back. Hermione hastily covered up her shock with a dazed but hopefully pleased-looking smile. "Now, I don't care what the wizarding world has to say about pregnancy, there's nothing like the knowledge of an actual mum, so don't you hesitate to call on me, or on Molly--especially on Molly!" Daphne laughed, "--for any sort of advice or reassurances you'll need!"

"Er...yes, of course..."

Jeffrey embraced her next, a squeeze around the shoulders as soon as his wife released them. "I suppose this means I can't use my staple-gun on him, if he's going to be the daddy of my little grandson or granddaughter?"

"--Dad!" Hermione choked, unnerved by his off-handed remark. *God, what must Severus think of the madhouse of all of this?*

Her father kissed her on the forehead. "If I didn't throw the contents of the knife-block at him last night, sweetie, he's mostly safe from me." Releasing her, he held out his hand to Russel. "I expect you to do your duty as a good husband to her."

"Of course, sir," Russel returned, gripping palms with the somewhat older male.

Harry touched Hermione on the shoulder. "You look a bit pale, Hermione--are you alright?"

Mum thinks I'm passionately in love with my husband, whom you think is Russel, and you like Russel but you loathe Snape, Ron looks green enough to be vomiting up slugs without being mis-hexed by his old, broken wand, I'm pregnant, and you want to know if I'm alright?

But shouting that, just like shouting in the middle of Harrods that she was a wife, not a niece, would not have been appropriate. No matter how much the shock of her situation had just impacted, inside her head. Instead, Hermione closed her eyes and sagged into his arms. Awkwardly, he rubbed her back, then patted it. A moment later, he shifted her into a different pair of arms.

Hermione didn't have to open her eyes to know who she was leaning against now. The comfortingly familiar scent was enough to tell her who held her, and she found her frustration soothed just by clinging to Russel; after their meeting with Poppy, he'd spell-scoured any traces of ingredients from his clothes, leaving only his own male musk for her to breathe. His amethyst-purple shirt was a long, far cry from his black teaching robes, his gentle touch a counterpoint to the way she knew he'd always held himself aloof as a professor. Russel or Snape or Severus, he smelled the same...even without the faint traces of potions ingredients from brewing the Eiterubrenner Salve.

"It's been a long day," Russel murmured quietly over her head. "We should go back to the Burrow and gather our things, then Apparate to the Granger residence, as planned."

"Yes; we wouldn't want my little girl overwrought with too much more excitement," Daphne agreed. "She's going to be a mum, and needs to start conserving her energy!"

It almost felt like she sprained something, Hermione rolled her closed eyes that hard.

...

It was during Aunt Cecilia's lecture to Russel on how a 'proper' marriage should have gone--none of that eloping in a civil ceremony, then just a private ceremony with immediate family and a handful of friends, but rather one conducted in an Anglican cathedral with extended family, friends and neighbors--that Hermione slipped upstairs. She tried to be discreet about it, but her uncle caught up to her on the first floor landing just as she reached her bedroom door, tugging on one of her locks to catch her attention.

"--Hey, little curls," Uncle Jonathan teased her. Dropping the hand that was rubbing the bridge of her nose, Hermione faced him with a smile that wasn't entirely pasted-on, but wasn't entirely carefree, either. He frowned at her, a slightly pudgier version of her father, but with a little bit more in the way of grey-edged brown hair. "Are we giving you a headache?"

Her answering smile was rueful. "Yes. Sorry."

He ruffled her curls. "We should be apologizing to you. I've got some analgesics in my bag, if you'd like?"

"No, thanks, Doctor Granger," she teased, though she couldn't quite hide her pained wince. Her father had gone into dentistry, but her uncle had gone into general-practice medicine. She glanced up and down the hall, then leaned in and whispered, "I was just going to fetch a potion to share with my husband. If he hasn't got a migraine already, it's probably a miracle."

"You know I can't approve of any of these potions of yours, Hermione," he chided her, following her into her bedroom. "At least my analgesics have medical-board approval! And the government watchdogs their manufacture Who oversees and approves your potions? And how do they know the...the eye of newt wasn't past its expiration date?"

"Shh! Uncle Jonathan!" Hermione protested, unable to help the laugh that escaped her. It was impossible to hide the truth of her magical nature from her father's twin, though only her mother, father, and uncle knew, of all of the family. Not even her uncle's late wife, Diane, had known Hermione was a witch. "This potion was brewed by Madam Pomfrey--she's practically a G.P. herself, she knows so much, and has to practice so much, what with all the students who constantly get themselves into trouble!"

"I'll believe that when I see her at work," he snorted. Then licked his lips, as Hermione pulled out the small vial of red liquid she'd been saving for today's anticipated stresses. "Is she...pretty?"

"She's plump, middle-aged, hides the fact that she wears spectacles to read, and is very no-nonsense when it comes to her patients. Compassionate, as a good school nurse should be, but efficient. And she has a sense of humor," Hermione added, popping the cork and taking a small sip of the cinnamon-flavoured brew.

"Oh? How so?" her uncle prodded.

It felt odd, to be match-making Poppy Pomfrey with Jonathan Granger, but Hermione had to admit she'd done odder things. Licking the spicy liquid from her tongue, she shrugged. "Oh...I had some issues with Russel a few weeks ago, and when I went to her for a check-up and a headache-potion, she commented on those issues, I quipped it was more like a subscription, and she and I had a good giggle over it."

"Ah. So your husband isn't all Mr. Perfect Canadian, then?" he enquired, folding his arms across his chest in a manner entirely unlike his twin's. Jeffrey Granger preferred to plant his hands on his hips.

"Nope. But he's my husband, and I've accepted him, flaws and all." A second sip would make her feel good, but Hermione wanted to save that for when she rescued the husband in question from the clutches of her relatives. Corking the vial, Hermione cupped it in her fingers and tucked her hand into the side-seam pocket of her burgundy skirt.

Her husband had teased her about not ever wearing one, after having only seen her in jeans and slacks in the months since the midnight gown with the constellations that she'd worn to the wand-exhibition. She'd threatened to make him wear trousers in front of her Muggle relatives, and he'd threatened to spank her for her temerity. Alas, the

sound of her father calling them and Harry down to breakfast had curtailed any follow-throughs to those threats. But she'd worn a skirt just to prove that she did in fact own something feminine.

Shaking her head, she shoosed her uncle out of her bedroom. "I've got to get this to Russel, before he throttles Aunt Cecilia with her support hose, or something."

Jonathan choked on a laugh, smothering it behind his hand.

Descending the stairs, she found her husband still trapped on the sofa by her mother's aunt. Grey eyes met her tawny brown ones with the mute hope of a drifting shipwreck survivor wondering if that blot on the horizon was a bit of palm trees and sand, or just another lumpy storm-cloud. Biting her lip against the urge to giggle, Hermione stopped next to the arm of the sofa, thumbed the cork free, and discreetly tipped a small mouthful past her lips while the elderly woman droned on and on about what sort of job a *good* husband should have, instead of 'a government job', as Russel had explained his career to her relatives.

Re-corking the vial, she dropped it into her pocket next to her wand, leaned over the arm of the chair, and claimed his mouth with her own. She timed it so that he had parted his lips to answer one of her aunt's many yes-or-no questions, and passed some of the spicy, crimson draught straight into his mouth. The moment he tasted the brew, his throat vibrated in a hum of pleasure. The curling of one arm around her waist, dragging her over the arm and into his lap, only made her giggle as the second, larger dose of the potion--even shared as it was--made her feel very relaxed, and very good.

Arms wrapping around his shoulder and neck, Hermione snogged the daylights out of her husband. It didn't matter if Aunt Cecilia said anything or not, at that point. There wasn't much point in anyone saying anything to the couple, until Russel finally let her droop back over his arm, her calves still dangling over the sofa arm. One of her flats had fallen off, and the other dangled stubbornly from her toes, but she didn't care. She felt *good*, and from the silly smile on Sev-*oops*, *Russel's*-face... She giggled and kissed him again, chasing down and savouring the last bits of cinnamon in both their mouths with her tongue.

The shriek-like giggling of several of her cousinly nieces and nephews on her mother's side, caused by them chasing each other through the living room with Christmas toys, broke their kiss. Out of pain, unfortunately. The temptation to sip more of the cinnamon draught was strong, but after even that small of a shared mouthful, Hermione knew the two of them were in danger of melting right off of the sofa from too much relaxation. Apparently her wizard mate wasn't thinking along the same lines; he tucked his lips next to her ear and muttered, "One good, solid *Silencio* and we'd have peace and quiet for at least an hour..."

Some piece of devilry within her made her twist to reach his own ear, and mutter back, "...On the kids, or on Aunt Cecilia?"

"*Both*," he snarked, making her glad his expression was hidden by the mass of her hair. Grinning, she lifted her lips to his for another kiss.

"--Look! Aunt 'Mione has a pretty stick!"

Shite! Twisting, Hermione all but fell out of Russel's lap, trying to grab her tow-headed niece, Amalie. But it was too late; the child had already snatched her vinewood wand from her pocket; it had crept halfway out, thanks to the sloped angle she'd been sitting at, in her husband's lap. The little girl was a Muggle, and wouldn't be able to conjure anything, but Hermione really, *really* didn't want to have her wand stolen and damaged, again.

Amalie stopped on the far side of the coffee table, hauled her arm back, and lashed it forward, playing with the 'pretty stick' like it was a toy wand. Hermione, rounding the end of the coffee table, banged her shin painfully into the corner when a jolt of golden sparks shot out of the wand like a miniature comet, slamming into the wall next to the Muggle picture of her in her fourth-year dress-robos, taken when they'd been bought late that summer, just before departing on the Hogwarts Express. The sparks left a blackened spot on the wallpaper.

Snatching her wand from Amalie's seven-year-old fingers, Hermione acted with a flash of complex thought, snapping her wand in a cobbled-together, mass-Stunning Charm.

"*Gens toutarette!*"

That much magic, set to blanket the whole house, exhausted her the moment the white sphere of light blasted outward. But it froze everyone in place--neatly side-stepping any nasty, inexplicable bruises from falling--and it allowed her to go to her husband and touch his forehead first with the tip of her wand, muttering *finite*. His eyes darkened as he blinked and stared up at her.

"...What was that spell?"

"Erm...something I made up on the spot?" she offered weakly. "Look, the Aurors are bound to notice all of that magic I just used, and they'll no doubt be here shortly to start modifying memories," Hermione fretted. "Do you think you should leave, just to be on the safe side?"

"If my disguise will hold in the face of Alastor Moody's magical eye, it'll hold in the face of a lesser Auror," he returned. "Just don't ask me to do any magic in their presence. Seriously, where did you find that spell?"

"Erm...it was an amalgamation of ideas that just sort of...coalesced. In my head. At that moment," Hermione shrugged as he frowned. "Should I unfreeze my parents and Uncle Jonathan now, or wait for the Aurors?"

The look he gave her was somewhere between wary and thoughtful. "Wait for the Aurors."

Almost as if cued by his advice, the doorbell rang. Hermione jumped, then smoothed her skirt with nervous fingers and dodged around the coffee table and the frozen little girl who had started the mess. Going up to the front door, she peered through the spy-hole. She recognized both Aurors from that first time with the Chronomancer, Mr. Lubbock. Violetta, she knew from the Order. The other one, a non-descript, sandy-blond wizard, she didn't know his name, but she knew his face. Opening the door, she ushered them wordlessly inside. They slowed at the sight of her frozen relatives, but allowed her to close her door.

"...I presume you have an explanation for casting magic on so many Muggles, Miss Granger?" Violetta enquired.

"Erm, well...my niece, here," Hermione explained, gesturing at Amalie, whose arm was still in the cast-forward position, "stole my wand out of my pocket, and before I could stop her, she...well, she flung a bolt of sparks at the wall--you can see the scorch-mark there. And since everyone was looking at her at that moment, I just put an All-Stop Hex on the whole house, knowing that you Aurors would be coming shortly, and I figured you could just use it to make your task that much easier in modifying all these memories. Well, except for my parents' memories, and my uncle's, since they know...and I think my cousin Julia and her husband Phillip should probably know that their daughter's going to be getting a letter from Hogwarts in a few more years," she finished with a lopsided smile. "They were in the kitchen, last I knew."

"I see," the wizard stated. "Is that what happened?" he asked Russel, who had stood up from the couch.

"Yeah."

"You look...familiar."

"Russel Fawkeson. And you?"

"Mark Walsingham. You're not from Britain, are you?"

"Born and bred. I've just spent several of the last years in Canada."

"Right... Which ones are your parents, Miss Granger? And why your uncle?" Auror Walsingham enquired.

"My father and my uncle are twins," Hermione explained, shrugging. "You can't keep secrets from twins."

"Right. I've never seen this spell before. How do you unfreeze everyone?" he asked her.

"Well, I just applied *Finite Incantatem*, and that seems to work."

"You don't know?" Violetta enquired.

Hermione shrugged. "I just made up the Charm. It works, so I'm not going to complain."

Walsingham eyed her askance. "You don't work for the Unspeakables, by any chance?"

She shrugged. "Not yet."

"Jane, cast it again! They're thawing!"

Hermione glanced over her shoulder at Russel's sharp command. The Muggles in the living room were starting to move. "*Gens toutarette!*"

Again, the white light burst outward from her wand in an encompassing shell. Resisting the urge to sag onto the coffee table from the expended energy, she unfroze Russel, Mark, and Violetta. As they blinked and shook off their stupor, she shrugged sheepishly.

"...It seems like it only lasts for a few minutes. You'd better hurry to modify all these memories. Only the ones in here would have seen anything unusual, thankfully."

"Right." Pushing on her partner's shoulder, Violetta started with the child, then moved on to the spot on the wall. "...I'll leave it up to you as to when and how to explain to your relatives about this little girl's future, after we're gone. But don't hesitate to call on us to modify their memories, if they pitch a fit."

Her husband nudged her towards the little girl, then returned to his end of the sofa. "You'd better take your position behind her."

It wasn't until after the Aurors had finished their work and left, after everyone had unfrozen and she had carefully explained to Amalie that good little girls didn't go stealing fancy, long, wooden hair-pins from their favourite aunty's pockets, that Hermione realized she hadn't unfrozen Harry during the commotion. Of course, he'd been in the dining room, enjoying some colourful, complicated card game with his new cousins, but she knew she owed him an apology. Later, though. First, she had to figure out when and where to approach her mother's niece and nephew-in-law...and find a moment to discreetly swallow another sip of headache-posset.

It was shaping up to be a very interesting holiday season, with all of this excitement.

...

"I wish there was a book we could give her," Harry murmured as he worked beside Hermione, carting cups and plates by hand to the rubbish bags or the kitchen, depending on what material they were. "Something to prepare her, something to warn her that her whole life is about to change in just a few years--something for her parents to read that's more than just a letter."

"Harry, she's only seven. She's not mature enough to keep such a huge secret," Hermione pointed out.

"I know, but...like a fairy-tale book," the dark-haired wizard offered. "Or rather, a series of them. When they start out, they're just stories for her to read and enjoy, and if any other Muggle were to read them, they'd only think, 'What an imaginative story.' But later volumes would start treating it like it's real, if still like a story, so that when she was let into the secret, she'd be better-prepared than most Muggle-borns and Muggle-raised usually are. You being the know-it-all exception, of course," he teased her with a grin.

Hermione slugged him on the arm. "You and Ron were total prats to me, those first two months! It was awful, not having any friends."

Harry winced, but didn't protest. He just rubbed his bicep for a moment, then gave her a one-armed hug. "We're not prats at heart. A little thick at times, but not prats. And if we hadn't been so horrid to you, we wouldn't have felt so bad about it, and we wouldn't have gone looking for you." He squeezed her shoulders. "I think that we suffer for a reason. That, so long as we don't stay nasty towards one another, that we honestly try to make amends, it serves a greater purpose in the end."

Staring at him, Hermione wondered if he knew just how hypocritical his hatred of Severus Snape was, in the face of those words. *Hang on, Hermione*, she chided herself, catching a glimpse of Russel carrying a stack of plates from the study to the kitchen as he passed by the living room. *All he knows about Snape is that he 'turned traitor' back last spring. He doesn't know Snape is Russel, that he's still been doing a lot of good things...and that he's still on our side, however unorthodox his means.*

Lifting her gaze back to her brother, she gave him a lopsided smile. "I hope you really do believe that, Harry."

...

"Ms. Granger. Mr. Fawkeson."

Hermione and Russel stopped in the doorway of Madam Pince's office. They hadn't expected to encounter Minerva McGonagall in the school library, but the Headmistress was waiting for them. "Professor," Hermione acknowledged. "Is there something you wanted to discuss?"

"Yes. Arthur said Russel, here, was going to find out what he could," Minerva returned, folding her arms across her crimson-clad chest. "I feel it is time for another one of your progress updates. My office."

"We have to work on the potion," Russel interjected quietly. "But...the first part will only take half an hour, then we will have about an hour to discuss matters. You could come to us at that time, if you wish."

"No, I want you in my office. The password for the stairs is 'One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish'...and if you come by Floo, it's 'Peter Rabbit'," she informed them, peering over her spectacles at the pair. "Where are Messrs. Potter and Weasley?"

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Moody challenged us to try sneaking around this afternoon without being heard or seen, and, well...we weren't very good at it, what with all the creaking floorboards and such. They're still practicing. He only let me go because I have to handle the potion."

"Mm, yes, 'constant vigilance'. Sneaking around is a good skill to have," the Headmistress allowed. "Especially since you've been spotted once or twice in these very halls...when you weren't supposed to be seen at all. My office, in just over half an hour."

"Yes, ma'am." A subdued nod of her head, and Hermione hustled the wizard at her side out of the library, heading for the seventh floor.

One could Floo out of the Room of Requirement, but one couldn't Floo into it, unfortunately. Not unless someone was in the room, anchoring the requirement of a Floo-connected hearth. They'd learned that one the hard way. Trying to Floo to an address that didn't exist at that moment only spun the person around very dizzily, and spat them out of their original hearth. About the only good thing that could be said for such a sooty, dirty, vertigo-inducing endeavor was that it did seem to clean the chimney flue, though it dirtied the carpets.

Thus, roughly half an hour later, Hermione and Russel spun out of the Floo connecting the Room of Requirement with the Headmistress' office. Her husband had looked less and less like Russel as the half-hour progressed, and more and more like Severus, despite his blond hair and grey eyes. She had carefully addressed him by his disguise-name when informing him that the next simmering stage was upon them, and had watched him rebuild himself with a deep breath. But the grey eyes that he averted from hers were dark and troubled.

She didn't have to be a Seer to accurately guess why. On spilling out of the hearth, she watched him dust himself off and resolutely *not* look at the portrait-lined walls. Instead, he focused his attention on his former colleague, now the Headmistress of the school. "...You wanted to see us, ma'am?"

"Yes," Minerva agreed, peering at him over the tops of her spectacles. Hermione wasn't even the recipient of that look, and she felt like a truant schoolchild. "It is time you reported to me. Hopefully this will take less than an hour, since I realize you have to return to your mystery potion. But there are certain protocols that need to be discussed.

"Hermione may be your wife and your most immediate contact, but you claim to be a member of the same side as Albus, and Albus has confirmed this matter. Therefore you will report to me, upon occasion, as I am the new general of our side's more covert forces...and a spy among the Dark Lord's numbers is about as covert as it gets. What have you found out about the attack at the Ministry of Magic, Christmas Eve?"

He clasped his hands behind his back, adopting a sort of militant, parade-rest stance. "Not a damned thing, ma'am."

The Headmistress arched her brow at that, visibly torn between surprise and skepticism. "You've had three days!"

"I returned, I listened, I skulked, I asked the most innocuous questions I could safely manage...and I heard nothing. Saw nothing. Learnt nothing," Russel drawled in his North American accent. "Unless you want to know the 'presents' given to the Dark Hoser for his enjoyment. A subject, I assure you, that is not fit for civilized people to hear, however strong-stomached you may think you are."

"Nothing unusual happened? No one was absent? Not even a normal activity disrupted for some excuse that you couldn't confirm?" Minerva queried probingly. Hermione had to admire her sharp mind, when the lattermost question made Russel frown softly.

"There was one, now that I think about it... Bones was absent, the night in question. There were a handful of others who weren't around, myself included," he dismissed, then shook his head. "But Bones is one of the oldest and most loyal of *his* followers. He is never sent away on a mission, though he is not always Summoned. Bones is a close relative of the Groswights; he manages some of their northernmost properties, and cannot be absent for long because of this visibility. Of all of those who were punished after the Dark Lord's return--and we *all* were punished for our lack of faith, or for being imprisoned in Azkaban, or for lying about our loyalties--he was the only one who has never been harmed. I have never seen the Dark Lord angry at Bones, either.

"He is there for all of the major revels," Russel revealed slowly, thoughtfully. "He is also the only one the Dark Lord entrusts with the safety of the brand that binds us through the Dark Mark."

Hermione bit her lip to keep from gasping at that information. This Bones was the man they'd have to look for, the man who held Voldemort's most cunning Horcrux. There was the Mirror of Erised's vision of destroying the brand during the moment a new Death Eater was being made that she and her friends would have to heed, yes, but it would be good to know who held onto the thing in the meantime, to know who to look for when it was being brought forth.

"But he wasn't there, Christmas Eve, when nearly everyone else had been invited to attend. I wasn't there, but I was excused, on the understanding that I was supposed to further insinuate myself into my wife's life, and the lives of the other Order members."

"Yes, yes," Minerva dismissed. "But you learnt nothing at all?"

He shook his head, then shrugged. "I still have a few more avenues of enquiry, but they will have to wait until I have a suitable opportunity to employ them."

"Make sure you do," Minerva ordered him. "And report back to me on the results. That's an order."

"...I only take orders from my wife, ma'am."

Hermione quirked her brows at that. So did Minerva. Russel was smiling, but it wasn't necessarily a friendly smile.

"I beg your pardon?" the Headmistress said, sitting back a little.

"I may work with you, but I don't work *for* you, ma'am."

"Now see here, young man--"

"--I spied for Albus Dumbledore, and only Albus Dumbledore. Now I spy for Hermione Jane. As a courtesy to her, I have given my report to you," Russel stated arrogantly, lifting his chin and making himself look like a Canadian-accented, dark-blond Lucius Malfoy for a moment. "Do not make the mistake of thinking you command my loyalties, ma'am. Respect, yes. Loyalty, no."

Minerva looked at Hermione, who shrugged helplessly. She didn't know what game Russel was playing, either. The older witch peered past him at the wall. "Albus? Is this true?"

At the familiar voice, Hermione turned halfway so that she could see him more easily, but the man at her side didn't move.

"It is true, Minerva. Indeed, he only works for Hermione because I ordered him to do so," the painted figure of the former Headmaster stated.

"Well, then, order him to work for me!"

"I'm afraid I cannot do that, Minerva," Albus countered calmly. "The situation is more complicated than you realize, and it involves oaths of a nature I cannot reveal in front of others." He smiled benignly as his replacement bristled and added, "You would all have to take a 'prefect patrol' before I could discuss the matter. And even then...it would not be guaranteed. Not until I had heard his report and gauged it accordingly."

The portrait of Phineas Nigellus snorted. "Even as a portrait, you're still trying to run the world, Albus!"

"Not the whole world, Phineas. Just managing those of my original plans that cannot be shifted aside, nor discussed in front of anyone who is not privy to this particular secret. ...Well, Minerva?" Albus asked her. "Are you going to order the others to leave with you so that I may have a word with this gentleman? Or shall we go on about our business? They have a potion to brew in about forty minutes, if I remember correctly."

The former Transfigurations professor stared at the wizard on the wall. Finally, she sighed. "All others, please leave the room for twenty minutes. That's all I can give you, Albus. Come, Miss Granger."

"She will remain," he countered. "At least, for a few minutes."

The look Minerva McGonagall gave him should've curled his paint, but the Headmistress let it go. Sighing, she rose and headed towards a door tucked next to a display case. "There are days when it is difficult to fully trust a manipulator like you, Albus. And nights, too, like this one."

"I can only plead that I am trying to do what is best for our world."

Silently, the other portraits retreated out of the room. When they were gone, Albus waited a moment, more, his gaze patiently resting on the back of the younger wizard. Hermione, standing at her husband's side, could see he had closed his eyes and fisted his hands, as if bracing himself for torture.

"Severus. Severus, turn and look at me."

"I can't...I can't--I must go--" Whirling, head bent low, he strode for the door.

"Severus Snape, stop!"

He halted.

"Severus Snape...look at me," Dumbledore commanded. As Hermione watched, understanding unfurling within her, Russel lifted his ash blond head, meeting the older wizard's gaze with glistening eyes, and a body so rigid, Hermione wondered why she couldn't hear his bones creak. "Severus Snape...I forgive you."

A wordless scream escaped that tanned throat, crawling its way free with an intensity that made Hermione shiver. She expected him to grab one of the objects on the table next to him and hurl it at the older wizard's portrait...but instead, her husband collapsed with a raw, rough sob, slumping on his knees, his hands fisting in his hair. Torn with the need to go to him, yet give him his space and what little dignity was left, Hermione glanced at Albus' portrait, unsure if she should even approach. Albus nodded, silently confirming her choice. Crossing to Severus, she knelt by the crying, spell-tanned man.

He tried to shove her away, when she wrapped her arms around him. Tightening her jaw, Hermione pulled him back against her, holding him firmly, but not bruisingly. He was, she suspected, not a man accustomed to being given physical comfort.

He's probably a man accustomed to crying alone, because no one would care long enough to comfort him, thanks to the unpleasant personality he cultivated. A man who had a less-than-lovely childhood, for that matter, she reminded herself. Parents who cheated on each other, who separated, and then died, abandoning him. One in a car crash, the other in a murder. And given how no one ever mentioned his own mother being one of the teachers at this school...he probably received very little affection from his parents while they were still alive...

"Severus, listen to me," Albus stated as the other wizard's grief subsided into near-silent, shuddering breaths. "You took a calculated risk. One that I admit I goaded you into making. One that I demanded of you. It succeeded...on *all* fronts, more or less as expected. The fact that I am where I am now is not meant to trouble you, but to give you strength, and hope."

That's an odd thing to say...the fact that Professor Dumbledore is dead is something that's meant to give Severus hope Hermione thought, frowning softly in confusion.

"...As for you, Hermione, I am pleased to see you are taking my advice to heart."

The man in her arms stilled. That meant he was listening. Hermione flushed and averted her head, muttering an epithet under her breath. "Bastard."

Severus twisted in her arms, pushing her over. Hermione found herself lying on the carpet, her blond-haired husband nipping at her mouth, one hand tugging up her jumper so that he could slide his hand under the fabric, cup her breast, and knead her flesh. Parting her lips to demand an explanation for his sudden behaviour, to protest in embarrassment that they really shouldn't be doing this in front of their late Headmaster, she found her ability to speak muffled by his tongue commandeering hers. It really wasn't fair that he was such a good kisser; a man whose tongue was notorious for lashing and cutting others shouldn't have so much talent when snogging his wife...

The fingers massaging her nipple through the cup of her brassiere slid down her abdomen again. Tugging briefly at the waistband of her jeans, they abandoned the garment. A tap at her hip and a slither of Transfiguring fabric made her tip her head back with a gasp; he'd replaced her denim trousers with some sort of skirt, and was now rucking up the fabric, pushing it out of his way. His mouth sucked on her jaw, then on the tender flesh of her throat.

"Se...Russel!" Hermione hissed, eyes fluttering open but unseeing; his fingers had found the leg-band of her knickers and were burrowing their way underneath. "Not *in front* of him!"

The scrape of lips and teeth were briefly interrupted for a low, loud growl. "*Get out.*"

"...I was just thinking of doing that, myself. I'll, erm, go talk with the others. Don't forget about that potion you have to brew!"

Throat under renewed attack, hips wanting to flex under the rubbing, circling caress of his fingers against her dampening folds, Hermione strained to see the walls of portraits. She caught a glimpse of purple robes vanishing through a frame in the corner, and felt relief at being alone. "...What do you think you're doing, attacking me like this? In front of *him*?"

Lifting his head, he stared down at her. His grey-coloured eyes were a little reddened around the edges from crying, his thin lips a little swollen from kissing her. Breath escaped in heavy pants from his lungs. A shift of his lower body nudged her legs apart, and his fingers came back, pulling the crotch of her knickers aside; his own undergarment had already been tucked down out of the way. Glans nudging against her opening, he sniffed to clear his sinuses, and gave her an arch, arrogant look.

"Lesson One, wife. Anytime...anywhere!" He thrust forward on the last word. She wasn't completely wet; he only lodged about halfway inside, but gentle rocking lubricated their connection, allowing him to slide deeper. His hand came back, delving below the rumpled folds of her Transfigured skirt and his kilt. Lowering his head, he nipped and suckled her lips, a two-front attack, for his fingers slotted to either side of her clitoris and began squeezing and rubbing in rhythm with his thrusts.

Hermione gave herself up to the pleasure of the moment. Intercourse on a hard wooden floor, even if most of her back was lying on a tapestry-rug, wasn't entirely comfortable, but just lifting her knees eased the pressure on the small of her back. He moaned into her mouth, his palm caressing and kneading the muscles of her thigh, lifting it higher in encouragement.

"Mmmh, good...mmmh, *good!*"

The words were half-muffled, but the sounds were just as greedy as ever. He wanted her. However it had come about, he wanted her enough to take her on the floor of the Headmistress' study, uncaring of who might have seen. The hand down at her folds kept her undergarment pulled to one side even as it rubbed and massaged. The other one, elbow braced on the floor to take up a fraction of his weight, buried its fingers in her curls, holding her head at the perfect angle for a ravishing kiss.

Rising towards her peak, left leg now twined high on his hip and her right knee bent by his thigh, Hermione vaguely heard something click, heard something thump rhythmically. But what was happening to her was too distracting, too delicious to focus on the importance of those noises. He was grinding himself into her now, his right hand freeing itself from where they were joined, slotting instead between their mating, panting mouths, bringing the scent of sweat and sex and musk to entangle the last of her senses. Both of them licked at her moisture, tongued meeting and sliding between his fingers. She was almost there, almost--

"Hermione? Russel--oh, *dear god!*"

Head thunking on the edge of the carpet her body arched, Hermione barely registered the shock of being interrupted; it was lost in the shock of her climax, in the scent of her own musk, the moaning of her throat, the dampness on his hand smearing onto her chin, the hot puffs of her husband's breath as he groaned her middle name. She felt his stomach clench, felt the twitching of his shaft, the tickling pulses of his ejaculate filling her deep inside.

The door slammed shut. *That* clearly registered. An unwitting laugh escaped her, part humor, part embarrassment, part bone-deep, lingering pleasure. The dark blond head resting in the curve of her neck lifted itself, then flicked impatiently to shift the long strands of hair out of his way. His tanned face was flushed, with just a hint of embarrassment behind a facade of unconcern. "What?"

"We probably looked like Tonks and Remus!" she laughed, unable to help herself. At his puzzled look, she choked back most of her giggles and rolled her eyes. "It was a while ago--the boys, Minerva and I all Portkeyed into Headquarters, and there they were, on the carpet in the library, *completely* oblivious to us!"

"Well, I would like to be completely oblivious," a familiar voice sneered from nearby, "but unfortunately, I had to come back in time to see *that!*"

It was Phineas Nigellus--the only Slytherin to ever become Hogwarts Headmaster, as far as Hermione knew. She squeaked in embarrassment, but a wide-eyed glance at the wall showed him to be the only occupant in the portrait frames, an occupant who had turned his back on them. He spoke again, his voice somewhere between bored and impatient, and just a little bit snarky, as if trying to hide his envy.

"If you're quite finished, I've been delegated the unwitting victim of waiting until you're decent, then fetching the others. They seem to think that a reminder of the joys of martial bliss might make me a *nicer* man, instead of reminding me that I am *dead*."

Russel levered himself up enough to slide free of her body and discreetly readjust their clothing under the covering folds of his kilt. "Considering what I've seen some of the Hogwarts portraits get up to when they think no one's watching late at night, being a bunch of oil daubs is only as miserable an existence as one's personal prudery will demand."

He started to rise onto his knees, then flashed Hermione a wicked grin. Backing down the length of her body, he lifted the red wool of her skirt and threw it over his head. Breath sucking in sharply, she checked the paintings to be sure the only one occupied was Phineas, then dropped her head back to the floor, feeling him pulling aside the damp crotch of her undergarment. A nuzzle of his nose, an audible, deep inhale, and he lapped and sucked at the liquid trickling from her depths.

Still sensitive from her climax, Hermione gasped again, this time with a buck of pleasure; it took only a few strokes of that wicked tongue to tip her back over the edge of her pleasure. This time, she fought to stay silent. Shuddering, she clutched at the carpet until he finally stopped, then slowly relaxed, panting heavily. A tap of her skirt Transfigured it back into jeans as he extracted himself. Crawling up the length of her body, he cradled her limp head in his palms, and shared their combined flavours in a deep, musk-scented kiss.

Someone knocked on the door, impatiently. Breaking the kiss with a sigh, Russel stood, pulling Hermione up with him. Her limbs felt like they'd been hit with a Jelly-Legs Jinx. Embracing her, half-supporting her, he kissed her thoroughly again. That didn't exactly help her regain her equilibrium; all it did was make her muscles tremble and her body ache with returning need.

"Come in, Minerva! They're upright...though I wouldn't call them *decent*," the portrait of Phineas added snidely. "Whoever this Russel fellow is, he surely would've been a Gryffindor, to be so brash and brazen like that."

Pulling back as the Headmistress re-entered her study, Russel tossed over his shoulder, "Slytherin, actually. I can't help it if you were born with an icicle for a di--"

Hermione smothered his mouth with her hand, blushing. Minerva shut the door, her cheeks flushed with spots of colour. The look she leveled on the two of them was pointed, and disappointed.

"My office is not an appropriate place for such...for such *shenanigans*! You are both adults, and you should know when and where such behaviour is acceptable, and when and where it is not!--Twenty points from both your Houses, for sneaking back onto the school grounds for a snog--and five more apiece, for doing so in this office!"

Her sharp chastisement reminded Hermione of being caught by Filch, the first time she'd snuck Russel into the school. Grinning up at the man still holding her, she asked, "...Well, Bob Sherleigh, that's twenty-five points each from our alma maters. Was it worth it?"

"Of course it was. And don't call me Sherleigh," he added, making her do a double-take at the Muggle joke. He shuddered a little. "I'd rather not be related to Argus, thank you."

Minerva stared at them as if they'd both lost their wits. Shaking her head, she fixed Russel with a sharp stare. "Well. You were *supposed* to talk things over with Albus, about obeying my orders."

"--We discussed things, yes," Albus interjected, striding in from the corner of the room as he returned to his portrait. "And it was decided that, like Harry, Hermione and Ron, Russel should remain something of a free agent. You must understand, Minerva," he added chidingly, peering at his successor over the tops of his half-moon spectacles, "that a spy *cannot* take the same level of orders as a more normal sort of participant in this war."

"Russel is under orders to do whatever it takes to maintain his position as our most carefully hidden spy. The fact that he is now in a relationship with Hermione both complicates and compromises that secrecy, even as it advances our cause! We cannot put any more pressure on the lad than we already have--and I will not have you bearing down with the final ounce of weight that will break his back!"

"Really, Professor," Hermione interjected quietly as the two stared each other down, past Headmaster versus current Headmistress, "it's no different than what Harry, Ron and I are doing right now. And you have *my* word that I will keep an eye on what he's doing."

Minerva snorted inelegantly. "--You don't even know who he is!"

"Actually, she does. But don't bother asking, ma'am," Russel warned her. "None of us will tell you, for your safety's sake."

"I don't like operating blind!" she protested, scowling at all three of them.

"We know," Hermione soothed. "But the Muggles have a phrase, 'plausible deniability'. It means if you don't know about something, you cannot be held accountable for whatever happens, regarding it."

Studying the three of them, Minerva heaved an irritated sigh. "It seems the three of you are determined to pursue this matter in your own fashion, no matter what course I might think would be better suited for you. Very well. Do what you must and do what you may, even if you'll damn us all to hell by it."

Russel gave her a coaxing smile. "You don't really think that, do you?"

A pointed look over her spectacles killed any hope that his blond, tanned, Canadian charm might have won her over. "You have a potion to finish, Mr. and Mrs. Fawkeson...or whatever your surname is. I suggest you get to it--but you *will* report to me in two week's time, at least one of you, as to how your project is faring. Dismissed."

Exchanging wordless looks, Hermione and Russel stepped up to the hearth. He paused after he reached for a fistful of Floo powder, looking up at the purple-clad wizard above and to the left of the mantel. Hermione could see a muscle working in his jaw, before he stated quietly, "...He was asking after you, during a visit to Hogsmeade, wanting to know if you were...alright. What should I tell him?"

"That I'm fine," Albus shrugged. "A little bored of the view, but fine."

"Do you need anything?" Russel asked the portrait of his former employer. "A painting of a library, or of a bedroom or something?"

"I'll be fine. I can go wandering through the other paintings late at night, if I want a different venue, though I try not to do so outside the hours of curfew. It wouldn't do to upset the students," he stated gently. The younger wizard looked away, at that. "Remember my words, Russel. They should be a comfort to you, if you can accept them as

true."

Casting the powder into the flames, Russel caught Hermione's hand, pulling her into the flames with him, without answering the older wizard.

...

"...And stir five times clockwise, then simmer, covered, over ashen embers of olive wood for three weeks, adding one and a third cups of water per day," Hermione stated, lifting her gaze from the book. She watched her husband enchanting the brazier on which the cauldron currently rested; a bin of olive wood chips sat nearby. A few glowing runes, and the bin would supply the embers in the brazier with a steady supply of wood for fuel while they were busy elsewhere. Another slash of his wand as he stepped through the first of the protective ward-circles, and his clothing and hair ruffled, spell-cleansed.

"I will need to check on the simmering each night and add the water, but it should be fine," he stated, cleansing himself again as he passed through the second layer of protections. "We have a few things to discuss, now that we have the time to do so."

Closing the tome on its bookmark, Hermione lifted a brow. "Oh? What things?"

"The other night--Boxing Day," he clarified, "--you cast a spell you claimed you made up on the spot." Grasping a tall laboratory stool, he carried it over next to the lectern and straddled it as soon as he set it down. "Explain how you managed that particular feat."

The order was a bit autocratic of him, but Hermione didn't protest. She settled back on her own stool with a shrug. "Well, I knew I had to stop everyone, to freeze them in place. But I'd forgotten about...um...that is..." Her fingers had brushed against the bracelet on her wrist. Flushing, she removed them and cleared her throat. "Well, I'd read about Hazel Plinkington's treatise on Stasis Charms and how they were Arithmatically similar to *Impedimenta*. And in Lyskell's book--the one I borrowed from you, *Expanding Enchantments*--there was a section on how to increase the coverage of the Stasis Charm across a range of similar objects, like several cauldrons, or a bed of daisies.

"But for something like that, the spell requires a specific limitation, such as the walls of a chamber or a house, or the brick border of a garden plot, that sort of thing. Otherwise the spell won't work," she explained. "That's the problem I've been running into, with the Protean-Forging Charm you wanted; you didn't say if you needed it specifically to work within a room, so I'm having to develop practically from scratch, rather than just an arbitrary boundary that I don't know if it'll work, let alone be broad enough in its scope. So, anyway, I used the boundaries of my parent's house, specified that it was for people, and commanded that everything stop.

"Of course, I used the *lingua magica francaise*, because in the book *Linguae Magicum*, it discussed how French was particularly effective at multiple-target Charm-work, and Professor Flitwick taught us back in first year that magic is best expressed in a foreign language, because we don't consciously think of the actual meaning of a word in our native tongue when we use it. But when we speak in a foreign tongue--Latin, being a dead language, is the most commonly used one--we force our minds to concentrate on the meaning behind the words we're reciting, and that focuses the mind, which focuses the magic, which allows the new spell to take shape. And that's how I came up with the All-Stop Charm," she concluded. "It's adaptable to other things besides people, but it does have the drawback of not lasting for very long, as you yourself pointed out."

He stared at her.

"What?" Hermione asked defensively, as he just stared at her with those grey eyes.

"...You have a true affinity for Charms work," her husband finally replied. "As sure a talent for it as I have for Potions. I couldn't have thought of all of that on the fly, as you did. Not unless it pertained to improvising brews and draughts."

Blushing at the praise, Hermione looked down at her hands, clasped in her lap. "Well...I've been thinking about what I should do with myself, after the war. I was thinking of apprenticing myself to Professor Flitwick, since I do have a knack for it, and he says he's getting on in years..."

His fingers plucked her wrist from her lap, lifting her bracelet into view. "Jane, what is this thing? You never remove it. What is it?"

She flushed and looked away, not wanting to give away her secret.

"What. Is. It?" Russel enunciated.

"It's a...a gift. From someone." Under his pointed, heavy stare, she fidgeted. "I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind."

"I do mind. What is it, Hermione?"

He used her first name. Hermione bit her lower lip, undecided for a long moment. Giving in, she sighed. "It's a Velocitemplet. A magical artifact made by Mr. Lubbock--he's a Chronomancer. You sent me a message about rescuing him, last summer. The first message you sent, via the rings."

"I remember. What, precisely, does it do?" Russel enquired. "It's not a Time-Turner, I trust?"

"It, um...well, it sort of speeds up my perception of time, making everything else seem to slow down. For a few minutes, at least--look, I don't want to talk about it," she told him bluntly. "I don't want the Dark Lord inking it out of your mind, because that's how I escaped him, that time I was kidnapped. It's really exhausting to use, and I don't know what it'll do to me if I used it while I'm pregnant. If it would harm...anything. I haven't tried to use it since...um...since I removed your amulet."

"Take it off. Please," he added as she gave him a chiding look for his command. "I would like to examine it up close."

She tried. It wouldn't budge. "I don't think I can. Leastwise, not while it's still charged with time. I have to charge it, you see, sitting still on my bed for up to twenty-four minutes of not being able to anything. Then I can use it in four-minute bursts, at up to six different speeds. It's got twenty-four slots, see? They darken from mother-of-pearl to abalone, when each slot is used."

"Perhaps you should test it," he suggested. "One minute, at the slowest speed. If you have to use it in a future emergency, better to know now how it reacts to your pregnancy."

He had a point. Nodding, Hermione grasped the inner ring, and clicked it forward once. Nothing much really happened, save that the faint haze of steam coming from under the lidded cauldron at the far end of the chamber slowed to a misty crawl. When the bracelet clicked, however, she felt a jolt of nausea, and quickly pressed her hand to her stomach.

"--Urgh!"

"What?"

"I think I'm finally experiencing morning-sickness, that's all." She grimaced at the thought. "I'm really not looking forward to more of that."

His eyes narrowed in thought. "Maybe, and maybe not. Use up a few more minutes, maybe at one of the higher settings. Not too fast or too much, though."

Hesitating, Hermione waited until the nausea faded, then clicked the bracelet, enough for two minutes at three times normal speed. The nausea built up a lot faster, this time while time itself was slowed. Jolting back into normal-time, she clamped her hand over her mouth. Twisting off of the stool, she stumbled away from Russel, and vomited into the bucket the Room of Requirement thoughtfully provided in answer to her sudden, overwhelming need.

Warm hands caught her as she collapsed to her knees from the strength of her heaves. The clips in her hair held her locks mostly out of the way, but the ends still dangled close to the bucket. He gathered the ends behind her back, and summoned a warm, damp cloth and a mug of water as the nausea slowly quelled its attack on her system. Wiping her mouth, Hermione waited a few minutes, then wished the bucket away when her body didn't try anything more.

"That...definitely...gave me morning-sickness."

"Use up the rest of the minutes, one at a time," the wizard at her back directed her, "remove the bracelet, and hand it to me."

"Excuse me?" Hermione challenged him, quirking her brow. "It's my bracelet!"

"And it clearly taxes your system more than is safe for you and our child to endure," Severus returned firmly, sounding like a strange mix between the commanding of Snape and the cajoling of Russel. "Do not argue with me! Lesson Number Five: when I give you an order that is clearly meant for your own safety, you will obey it, without questioning or arguing."

That made her snort, though it reminded her throat of how sore it was from its most recent activity. "As if! What you might consider to be dangerous or safe, and what I consider to be dangerous or safe, are two differ--"

His hand covered her mouth, silencing her. Before she could issue a muffled protest, he breathed in her ear, "You said this marriage is the lynch-pin of winning this war. You are far more protected than I am, right now, thanks to our rings. Giving me the bracelet will give me an edge against the others, in addition to protecting both you and our child from the side-effects of temporal distortion. Do this, Jane...and I will concede that Lesson Six will be the same as Lesson Five, applying conversely to me. Do we have a deal?"

It didn't take Hermione long to weigh the potential threat to her pregnancy if she kept the bracelet for herself, versus the threat to their only spy if she kept it. "...We have a deal."

One click at a time, Hermione divested her bracelet of its stored supply of time. The nausea was stronger than the first time, though not quite bucket-summoning in strength. Almost strong enough to need the bucket at the end, but not quite. Tugging and twisting carefully, she got the bracelet to release itself from her flesh.

"You'll want to wait until just before bedtime, before charging that," she offered as he wedged it over his hand, settling it onto his right wrist under the cuff of his jumper. "And be in a safe place, too. I wouldn't advise doing it at Death Eater Central."

"I'm not that stupid," he muttered, pushing to his feet. "I'll charge it at the hotel. In the meantime, I want you to show me that place you mentioned, where you found Mother's barrette."

Nodding, Hermione accepted the hand he offered, helping her to rise. A thought struck her. "Wanting the Defence position, all those years--did you want it, in the hopes of maybe finding out something from when your mother was the Defence Professor? Something about her lover?"

"A little bit," he confessed reluctantly. "But I didn't find anything. Perhaps she left a clue in this little grotto of hers."

"Perhaps," Hermione agreed, though she didn't hold much hope for the matter. Concentrating, she made the door to the junk-room materialize.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (**HBP SPOILERS**)

XXVII.

Hermione twisted onto her back, staring at the photograph in her hands. That diffident wave, the solemn little smile, the sepia tones leeching colour from the girl seated on the steps of the school... "What House was your mother in?"

He grunted, briefly glancing at her as he flicked through the pages of the volume in his hands, *Advanced Herbology & Magical Horticulture*. "What did you say?"

"I asked what House your mother was in. You know, when she went to Hogwarts."

"Ravenclaw. She was a disappointment to her family. Most of them were Sorted into Slytherin."

"What happened to your extended family?" she asked, curious. "On both sides, that is."

"My father was one of three. His father died in the Korean War, and my paternal grandmother struggled to make ends meet, running a restaurant until she died of a heart attack some fifteen years ago. His sister...rumor had it my aunt was pregnant with some sod's child; she was disowned by the family, and left the country. Their youngest brother worked at the mill alongside my father, until it was shut down. But he got a job shortly thereafter, whereas my father did not, and that split them up. Last I heard, he was a cabbie in London, but that was over twenty years ago."

"And your mother's side of the family?"

"Only child. Her parents died shortly before the Dark Lord's original rise to power. Potions accident, or so the investigators say. There weren't many immediate cousins. Not on the Prince side. Some on the Nikatea side--they're a Grecian wizarding family, but we haven't exactly stayed in touch."

"You must have been lonely, growing up on your own. Didn't you have any friends, before Hogwarts?" Hermione asked.

The muscles in his jaw tightened for a moment. "...Just one."

"Who?"

"More like 'what'," he corrected.

That intrigued her. Sitting up on the pile of pillows lining the hide-covered grotto, Hermione wrapped her arms around her knees. "What did you consider to be your friend?"

Slanting her a sidelong look, he narrowed his grey eyes. "You're not going to let this subject drop, are you?"

"Nope."

An aggravated sigh, and he confessed, "My cat." At her expectant look, he expanded. "I was five. She was a stray, a half-grown kitten. I...called her Ms. Kitty."

Her mouth twitched. Hermione struggled to control her mirth, adopting a solemn, sober expression. She didn't want to insult his sense of masculinity. Men could be so touchy about such things. "Ms. Kitty? Was that her full name?"

"Ms. Kitty...Fantastico--I was *five*," he emphasized as she unsuccessfully smothered a giggle. "And we'd just taken a trip to Majorca for the holidays." His face stiffened with suppressed emotion; it took the witch a few heartbeats to realize it was sorrow. "She stayed with me until I left for Hogwarts. Father wouldn't let me take her, and Mother concurred, since she was just an ordinary cat. Not suitable for a wizard's Familiar. Mother told me she fed her for a little while, but Father put a stop to that, and she returned to being a stray. I never saw her again."

Hermione couldn't stop herself; she shifted close and wrapped her arms around him in a hug.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, frowning at her.

"What do you *think* I'm doing?" she quipped, holding him closer.

"--I don't need your *pity*!" he snapped, pushing at her arms.

"Lesson Two," Hermione retorted as she clung to him. "Any time, anywhere, any how, any *why*! If you can make love to me on a carpet in Minerva's study for no damned reason, I can hold you for a perfectly good one!"

Twisting in her arms, he bore both of them back onto the pillows, sprawling over her. With his hair curtaining out most of the light of the lamp he'd lit, it was hard to see his face. But she could see enough to notice his expression wasn't as irritated as it could have been. "...Jane, it was a long time ago. I don't need comforting for something I recovered from years ago!"

"If it still hurts, you still do." Lifting her head from the cushions, she kissed him. He started to respond, then pulled back, grimacing. Hermione frowned. "What?"

"It feels wrong." He rolled off of her and sat up, rubbing his arms. "Like my mother is still here. When she..."

"Go on," Hermione encouraged him softly, propping herself up on one elbow.

"When she found out what I'd done with my sixth-year pin-money, she took one hundred points from Slytherin."

"What did you--oh," Hermione finished, remembering what he, as Russel, had told her about himself, early in their relationship. "Going to the brothel, you mean."

"She caught me confessing to it in the middle of seducing someone."

"Ah. Um...how many at the school knew she was your mother, at the time?" Hermione asked, curious.

"The Headmaster, Madam Pomfrey, some of the staff...virtually none of the students. Mother said it would be better for me that way. That I would endure less hazing from the others." Again, she saw a muscle working in his jaw. "We exchanged gifts, of course. Her birthday, Christmas, my birthday...but not in person. It wouldn't have been proper."

This time, when Hermione sat up and wrapped her arms around him, he endured it without trying to push her away. She suspected he didn't want to deal with her inherent stubbornness. Not wanting to push the matter, she held him for a few moments, then leaned back, though she kept her arms looped around his shoulders. "Your mother's birthday is in September, you said?"

"The 29th."

"Ten days after mine," she murmured thoughtfully. "So...when is your birthday?"

He glanced warily at her. "January 9th. Why?"

January 9th. That was only a couple weeks away. Hermione shrugged, wondering what she could do between now and then. "Well, I should get you a birthday present, shouldn't I?"

"You don't have to get me anything."

Sensing he was about to push her away, in more than one manner, Hermione leaned her forehead against his, keeping her arms looped around his shoulders. "Don't make me come up with a Lesson Eight about this. Tell me what you want for a gift--better yet, tell me what you can safely have, wherever you go. I don't want attention drawn to anything I give you, whenever you have to go back there."

She didn't have to say Riddle Manor. Didn't want to say it, either. His gaze dropped between them, to the hands on his kilted lap. He pushed up his sleeve after a moment, displaying the abalone-and-gold bracelet girding his wrist. "I believe this could be considered a gift."

Biting back the words that it was only supposed to be a loan, Hermione mustered a smile. A shift forward, and she touched her lips to his in a brief, dry salute. "Done. Now, how about something less tangible? A gourmet meal? A trip to the Muggle cinema? Me, belly-dancing in some scarves and a thong?"

A dry, sardonic sound escaped him, not quite a laugh. "Not in here. My mother's presence lingers too much for that sort of thing."

"Not to mention, I'd likely whack myself on the candle-stands and chairs," she muttered, glancing up at the underside of the hide. "...Do you suppose that really is a mammoth-skin?"

"How the fuck should I know?" he muttered. Snagging a small stack of books, he caught her hand in his and tugged her towards the opening, crawling that way. "Come. It's getting late."

Following him, Hermione found the junk room had shifted shape. A fireplace burned merrily where a china cupboard should have stood. Freeing his hand, he cast Floo powder into the flames, then caught her wrist again, pulling her into the flames. "Snape's quarters."

They spun through the Floo connection, stumbling out onto the hearthstones just as the lamps lit themselves, responding magically to their presence. The sitting room was cold. So was the bedroom. Released, she flicked her wand at the bedroom hearth, igniting a blaze in the coals laid in readiness by the house-elves that tended this half-forgotten place. It would take a while to get the chamber warm; under the covers was probably the best place to be, in the meantime.

Ducking into the bathroom, she used the facilities, found a toothbrush and scrubbed her teeth, washed her face, and debated Transfiguring herself a set of pyjamas.

Somehow I doubt I'd stay in them for very long she thought, amused. *That man does have a lusty appetite...* Shivering from more than just the cold, she padded back into

the bedroom. The disgusted look her now dark-haired husband was giving her made her choke on a giggle. She'd forgotten her little short-sheeting trick. Caught by it in the attempt to climb into the bed, one bare leg angled awkwardly under the covers, he had been reaching for the wand on the nightstand when she had entered the room.

Tapping the bed, he stood as the sheet slithered back into place. His dark eyes pinned hers with a familiar, professorial glare of annoyance. "Do you think that is funny?"

She flashed him an unrepentant grin. "Yes. Mainly because you were *there* when I short-sheeted the bed, Severus...and even I forgot I had done it."

He grunted and slid under the covers, successfully this time. "The house-elves probably only change the sheets once a month, or whenever they air the bed."

Shedding her clothes, Hermione hurried under the covers as well. The cotton sheets were cold. Shivering, she grabbed her wand from the nightstand on her side of the bed, and prodded the covers. "*Pellelenteum!*"

Smooth white cotton rippled and became fuzzy white cotton. Severus gave her a bemused look. "Tell me you didn't invent *that* spell, too?"

"Good heavens, no!" Hermione muttered, dropping her wand on the small table before snuggling the covers up to her chin. The sheets were still cold, but they warmed much faster, now. She squirmed close to him, pressing her flesh against his to share body warmth. "No, Professor McGonagall taught it to me, back in third year. I was complaining about how cold I was at night. For about two years after being petrified by that basilisk, I had a lot of trouble handling cold weather."

"I trust you've recovered?" Severus enquired, nudging her onto her side and snuggling his longer frame behind her own, spooning with her. She could feel his shaft hardening, prodding her a little.

"Yes. She taught me some Transfiguration tricks, and I asked Professor Flitwick for some warming charms...oh!" The squeak escaped her. Cold fingers had wrapped around her leg, burying themselves between her thighs. "Couldn't you warm those up, first?"

A chuckle escaped him. "What do you think I'm doing?"

"I'd rather feel something warmer, down there!"

Withdrawing his hand, he slid it the other way around, underneath her thigh. A lift, a scoot, and a prod of his flesh against hers made her squeak from a different reason. The angle was a little wrong, until she squirmed and tilted her hips a little more. That allowed him to slide inside, using short, teasing strokes. It was much like Christmas morning, only they were lying on their other sides this time.

Well, not quite like Christmas morning; Hermione didn't feel the need to consign her voice to hard-won silence. Neither did he. The quiet crackling of the fire was quickly surpassed by panting breaths, hungry moans, and lusty cries. Limbs entangled as positions shifted, lips and tongues bathing skin. Soft flannel rubbed against smooth skin that turned sticky with sweat as the space beneath the covers grew warm from their exertions.

It ended with him collapsing in a warm, heavy weight, her middle name a whisper panted against her jaw, the rasp of his stubble marking her cheek. She didn't want him to move; keeping her arms and legs wrapped around him, Hermione held him in place when he started to leave her. Nuzzling him, she focused on the after-play, not wanting the good feelings to end just yet. They kissed for a few moments, but he extracted himself, removing her arms as she tried to keep him with her.

"I have to use the lavatory."

Disappointed, Hermione let him go. Bracing her head on her palm, she contented herself with watching his naked backside pad towards the bathroom door. Pale and scarred, it was still a fine view, in her opinion. The bathroom door closed, and she started to pull the covers higher, cooling down without his presence beside her...but the bedroom door opened silently. Groping for her wand with one hand, the other pulling the bedding higher, Hermione froze at the sight of the tea-cozy clad figure creeping into the room. It wrung its spindly fingers, its pointed ears flattened much like a cat's in its unhappiness.

"M-Mistress McGonagall demands your presences, Miss," the house-elf whimpered. "She is furious with M-Master Snape--"

Snatching her wand from the nightstand, Hermione Transfigured the top sheet into a velvet gown, scrambling out of the bed even as it wrapped itself around her. The bathroom door was thick; it didn't seem that Severus had heard the creature. Charming her shoes to follow her, Hermione hustled the house-elf out into the living room, shutting the door as quietly as she could. Implications crashed together in her mind, tangling with the question of how badly Minerva was going to react to realizing just who Russel was.

"How did she find out?" Hermione hissed, stepping into her shoes as the Charm wriggled them onto her feet. They weren't entirely comfortable without socks, nor the dress without undergarments, but she wasn't going to pause to find her knickers if she had to do damage-control immediately.

The creature wrung its hands. "Lissy was told...was told to tell the Headmistress if M-Master Snape ever returned, and I am supposed to check for dusting, M-Miss, when I am hearing noises in the bedroom--"

"You did your job. I'll tell 'Master Snape' what he needs to know. Now go back to the kitchens." Grabbing Floo Powder from the pot on the mantel as the house-elf vanished with a pop, Hermione cast it into the living room hearth. "Headmistress' study, password...Peter Rabbit."

Hurrying through the emerald flames, she spun out onto the carpet where her husband had ravished her earlier. Right into Minerva, who from the shouting she interrupted was having an argument with Albus. The Scottish witch was in her dressing gown, a nightcap covering her dark, greying hair, her cheeks flushed with anger, her eyes all but emitting sparks like a wand, she was that furious-looking.

"Miss Granger--"

"--*Mrs. Snape*," Hermione corrected her sharply. If Minerva knew Severus was on the premises, the younger witch knew she had to protect her husband...and assert her right to do so. The older woman gasped, hand going to the base of her throat. Gritty powder caught Hermione's attention. Familiar, gritty powder, the same powder that dusted her own fingers. "...Just what do you think you were going to do, Minerva?"

"She was going to Floo-call the Aurors." That was from Albus. Hermione's hand snapped up, her wand holding the Headmistress at bay. "I've been trying to tell her that Severus is still on our side, but she stubbornly refuses to be convinced."

"You're married to him?--Severus is *Russel*?" Minerva gasped, hand rising from her throat to her mouth.

"Surprise." It was a dry quip worthy of the former Potions Master. In fairness, Hermione had to allow, "--I know I myself was surprised, when I found out. More than surprised. That time I came here, demanding to speak with Albus...I had just found out, myself. It took me a while to get used to the idea," she admitted. "But you will, too."

"But--he killed *Albus*!"

"And I *still* have absolute faith in the boy!" the portrait of Albus Dumbledore asserted firmly. "Minerva, if you call the Aurors to arrest Severus, you will *destroy* our sole source of insider information on Lord Voldemort's movements!"

"He killed you!" Minerva snapped, switching from gaping at Hermione to glaring at the former Headmaster. "Or had you *forgotten* that part?"

"I have forgotten *nothing*. Have *you* forgotten that Russel has been passing Hermione vital information? Have you forgotten that, through his guise as a kilted Canadian,

Severus has been able to save more than a dozen lives? I *remind* you that it was thanks to Russel's warning about the impending attack on Harry's birthday-party that made the Weasley twins think of protecting their home with the Fidelius Charm, which in turn made *you* think of protecting this school with that very same Charm!" Albus paused, letting that piece of hammered logic sink into the woman's brain. "Minerva...there are reasons for everything, in this matter. Including reasons why we need to continue to keep this information a secret, and reasons for why I cannot tell you anything directly, other than that the boy still has my absolute, unwavering trust!"

"I am asking *you* to continue to place your trust in me. And in Hermione," he added, tipping his silver-maned head at the younger witch.

"Why in her?" the Headmistress demanded.

"Because she is his handler. His liaison. He is her responsibility to monitor and control, and I ask that you place your faith in her ability to do so."

Before she could answer, a blur of colour snapped in the study, resolving itself in a kilt-clad, blond wizard with a golden dragonette clinging to his arm. Grey eyes flicked over the tableau of the angry Headmistress, the tight-lipped wizard in the portrait, the mock-sleeping denizens of the other paintings, and his grim-faced wife. Before he could draw a breath to ask what was happening, his former colleague rounded on him, railing at him.

"How *could* you?" She charged at him, heedless of the dragonette hissing at her. "You bastard!"

"--Sigurd, stand down!" Hermione snapped. The last thing she wanted was Minerva McGonagall being bitten by the guardian. The dragonette flinched but vanished, even as the resounding *crack* of a palm striking a cheek echoed through the office. At least Minerva hadn't gone for her wand, though she did pound on his chest until he grabbed her wrists, subduing her with minimal struggle.

"You *bastard*..." Sagging in his grip, Minerva started sobbing. The wizard holding her looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Hermione gestured with her arms, catching his attention. "*Put your arms around her*," she mouthed, gesturing again. "*Hold her*." His return look was dubious. Hermione lifted six fingers, gave him a pointed look, and repeated herself silently. "*Hold her!*"

Visibly uncomfortable, he complied, releasing his colleague's wrists and gingerly wrapping his arms around her. Minerva collapsed against him, thumping him in the chest twice, but mostly she just shuddered and cried. Looking like he would rather be anywhere else, he held her until her sobs subsided, patting her back awkwardly now and then. Until she punched him, making the disguised wizard *oof* at the impact.

Lifting her head, Minerva glared at her former fellow teacher, and thumped him again. "Bastard!"

He caught her wrist, preventing her from hitting him a third time. "Enough."

She glared at him, then stepped back, wresting her arm free. Moving back out of reach, she turned and attacked Hermione verbally. "--And *you!* I trusted you! I trusted you enough to give *him* access to this school!"

Torn between being defensively angry and needing to calm the other woman down, Hermione planted her hands on her hips. "I would advise you to not say anything you would regret later, Minerva--and I speak from experience. I was just as angry as you were, when I initially found out. But I'm not going to let *either* of you make the same sort of asinine mistakes that Severus and I did! Both of you are adults, and both of you were friends and colleagues. And both of you are still on the *same side*," she stressed. "Behave, or be silent!"

It was a testament to how far she'd come from being a mere student, that neither of them objected to her demand. Her husband slanted her an inscrutable look, but he didn't protest. Neither did Minerva, apart from a heavy sigh and a brief, irritated glance.

"That's better," Hermione muttered. That triggered Minerva into flipping her hand at the kilt-clad source of her current problem.

"Yes, but what do I *do* with him?"

"You leave him to me," Hermione stated arrogantly. Internally, she was amazed at her own temerity, but externally, merely lifted her chin a fraction of an inch. "I'm his handler; that's my job, and I take it seriously."

A snort from her husband made both women glance his way, then dismiss him. It drew those sandy blond brows downward in an irritated scowl, but neither Hermione nor Minerva were impressed. Minerva tugged her dressing gown tighter over her flannel nightshift and folded her arms. "Well. Can you prove you've got him under control?"

Hermione gestured at him, keeping her eyes on her former Head of House. "--He's behaving and being silent, isn't he?"

"Only because he wants to be," the Headmistress scoffed. "Give me a better proof than that."

"Take off your amulet." Her words were aimed at her husband, though Hermione did not remove her gaze from Minerva. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched his hands rise to the back of his neck, then lower again a moment later. Minerva glanced at him, frowning softly as his skin lightened and his hair and eyes darkened.

"...Is that how you've been disguising yourself? Pigmentation alteration?" she asked him.

"Yes."

"And do you really obey her commands?" At his nod, Minerva frowned. "Why are you so compliant? That's not the Severus I know."

"She is my wife, and the mother of my child." He flashed a Russel-esque smile, though there was a tight edge to it that didn't quite warm his dark eyes. "I was taught to never argue with a pregnant woman."

Only by sheer willpower did Hermione keep from choking at that.

The impatient look Minerva gave him was accompanied by crisp tones. "For whatever reason you're doing whatever you're doing--and don't think for a minute that I've forgiven you for what you did last spring--do not think for an instant that I will permit anyone to share with you the secret of the Order's Headquarters. You may have gained access to this school, but you will not gain access to the members of the Phoenix."

Folding his arms across his chest, he retorted, "I don't *want* to know the Secret of your Headquarters. I didn't *want* to know the Secret of this School! The less I know about your efforts in this war, the better off you'll be!"

"--Play nice!" Hermione interjected as Minerva drew a breath for her own reply. She softened her tone. "I have come to terms with his position in this war, Minerva. You will, too, given enough time. I suggest we go back to what we were doing, and leave you to think everything through. I also suggest you think carefully about the Creeveys, and Mr. Lubbock, and all of the other would-be victims that his timely warnings have helped to save since he seemingly defected to the other side."

"Albus--"

"--Albus can explain his position for himself," she cut the older woman off as gently but firmly as she could. "Now, if you don't mind, it is late, and Severus and I were in the middle of something when your house-elf came calling."

Lifting the stone-strung ribbon back into place, Severus fastened it, letting it bleach his black hair and midnight eyes, darkening the sallow pallor of his hide. "I give you my word, Minerva: the students of this School are as safe from me as they were when I was a teacher. More so, since they will not feel the lash of my tongue."

A deep breath, and he smiled at her, his eyes grey, his skin tanned, his hair dark blond. Minerva narrowed her own eyes at him, seeing him make the transition from Severus to Russel. "...Who are you, Severus? Was the man I knew all these years nothing more than an act?"

Hermione waited, too, curious to know the answer.

The corner of his mouth quirked up in a humorless smile. "Only somewhat. I am a bastard in temperament, Minerva, for all I was legitimately conceived." He glanced at his young wife, letting his gaze slide down to her abdomen for a moment. "But I'm trying not to be such a surly bastard. When I don't have to be. Goodnight."

"--Oh, Russel, one thing," Albus interrupted as the kilted wizard reached for the Floo-plot near his portrait. All three of them glanced up at his oil painting. "I almost forgot. Poppy has a pamphlet in her storeroom waiting for you; I think you'll know the one I'm talking about when you see it. Fascinating stuff; you really should have a good, thorough study of it, soon."

Nodding curtly, Russel cast the greyish-green power on the coals and pulled Hermione in after him. "Infirmary."

Madam Pomfrey's office was empty, when they emerged. It was still very early in the morning, earlier than most of the staff and students cared to rise even if it weren't a holiday. Russel tapped his wand on the storeroom door as Hermione waited, arms folded under her breasts to support them, thighs feeling sticky from the moisture that had seeped out during the argument in the Headmistress' study. She hadn't noticed it at the time, but now that the crisis was over, she could feel the combination of their mutual pleasure working its way out of her flesh; a cleansing charm wouldn't have been amiss, though she figured she would wait until they returned to his quarters, and take advantage of his bathtub, or perhaps the shower.

It didn't take long for him to disable the wards; it took longer for him to find whatever it was Albus was talking about. Four minutes after he entered the storeroom, he came back out again, a booklet tucked under his elbow. Several taps of his wand on the panel to reseal the shelf-lined chamber, and he turned back to her. A glimpse of the cover showed it blue and white, with a red cross in one corner, but it wasn't until he Floo'd them back to his hidden quarters that she caught a glimpse of the title: *Basic First Aid and CPR Certification Training Manual*.

Hermione frowned in memory. *Didn't Poppy say something about a CPR pamphlet, back when he'd been systematically tortured by the Dark Lord? I wonder why she has it, and why Albus wants him to read it?*

Not that she would object, of course; she might even study it herself. Just because they were wizards and witches didn't mean they couldn't study and use Muggle medical techniques. Of course, the exception of Arthur Weasley's troubles with that snake-bite in her fifth year came to mind, but the failure of the Muggle stitches to take hold had not been a failure of the medical technique itself, but rather the result of an anti-coagulant property of Nagini's venom that had been difficult to counteract.

Making a mental note to borrow the booklet for herself, Harry and Ron to study at a later date, Hermione slipped out of her shoes in the bedroom, Transfigured the gown back into a sheet and Charmed it back onto the bed, and joined her husband under the covers. Then climbed back out again, padding for the shower with a muttered explanation at his curious look.

Sticky thighs and flannel sheets didn't cohabit very well...but husbands who followed their wives into the shower stall apparently did.

...

Percy finally recovered enough to give his report on what had happened. He surprised his family by asking to speak not only with them, but with other Order members as well, to let them know what had happened. Violetta, as investigator-in-charge, agreed to let him go home to the Burrow before speaking, since he refused to talk while at the hospital. Hermione, remembering what had happened to that one fellow in the restricted ward, the one that had been strangled by a Devil's Snare cutting, thought it was wise of him to wait until he was elsewhere. Russel wasn't able to attend, nor could Charlie, but Hermione was there, along with Ron, Harry, Ginny, Moody, Bill, the twins, Tonks, and even Minerva.

Swathed in the softest fabrics, with most of his face covered by a balaclava and his hands tucked into gloves to keep his tender skin from burning, Percy cradled a cup of warm tea as he spoke. His voice had been healed by the Salve, but it was rough with emotion. Molly and Arthur sat on either side of him, giving him their unconditional love and support, even though all knew he'd been a prat for the last few years.

"It was...Christmas Eve. I...I didn't have anything better to do," Percy added as casually as he could, though he fooled no one in the room. "So, I went to my department in the judicial level, to get some paperwork done. I realized I had some case files that had to be delivered down to the Department of Mysteries--they have a mail drop next to the door, with a lid that can only be opened by someone authorized, and I was authorized four months ago. So I took the stack downstairs.

"I said hello to some of the portraits on the ninth floor. They were tutting at me for working on a holiday," he explained diffidently, hoarsely. "And then I descended the steps, walked up to the box, and lifted the lid. Just as I set the files in the bin, I realized something wasn't right. The door to the Department was slightly ajar."

He ducked his head a little. Molly had drawn the drapes to further protect his skin, so it was a little dim in the Weasleys' living room. But despite the lighting and the balaclava that covered most of his hairless, pink-skinned head, Hermione was fairly sure he was blushing.

"It's never ajar. It has a closing and locking charm on it. If it was ajar, then someone had broken the enchantment. I...I almost went in. But then, I remember...what happened to Father. I was brave enough," he quickly clarified, as if wanting to reassure them that, prat or not, he was still a Gryffindor, "but I wanted to get word to someone, anyone--even the portraits would do. So I ran for the stairs. I guess I was too loud, or maybe they were coming out. They caught up to me at the turn in the stairwell. I screamed, but one of them threw up a Silencing Charm. I don't know if I was heard. That's when they...got me."

"You were heard, Percy," Minerva reassured him. "Everard was visiting one of the portraits at the Ministry on that level. He was the one who raised the alarm. The arrival of the Aurors chased away your attackers, but not before...well, they reached you before it was too late, though we're all horrified at your suffering."

The others nodded, and Percy looked down at his teacup. Alastor cleared his throat in the uncomfortable silence. "Describe these assailants of yours, boy."

"They were cloaked and hooded--I didn't recognize anyone, or anything. There were three of them. One was short and kind of fat. And I think he was wearing silver gloves, which I thought was rather strange. One of them was very tall and thin, almost like a Dementor. I knew he wasn't; I was afraid, but...but not cold. Not sunk in despair, like that one year on the Hogwarts Express. But very tall, and very thin. He had a bit of gold on his hand," Percy added, gesturing vaguely with one gloved hand. "Wrapped around it. I'm not sure what it was. A bit of ribbon, or maybe a chain... It was looped several times; I remember that. The third was...ordinary, I guess. A little on the tall side, but not that much above average.

"It was the third one that attacked me. I think..." He hesitated, frowning in thought. It was strange, seeing the scrap of skin above his eyes wrinkling faintly; without any eyebrows, one could hardly tell he was frowning at all. "I think the third might've been a female. The other two I'm fairly sure were male, but I don't know about the third. That one attacked, and...everything turned into pain."

"Thank you," Violetta stated, glancing at her dicto-quill for a moment. "You've managed to recall a number of details that should be useful to us. But...given that it was the Department of Mysteries that was broken into, Professor McGonagall has agreed to loan us the use of her Pensieve, to see if we can view your memory of the incident for ourselves."

Percy nodded. "Sure. If you think it'll help."

"It's quite easy to use, Percy," Minerva explained to him, summoning the bowl and the small side-table on which it had been placed. "You think very hard of the incident in

question--start with your trip through the halls and down the stairs, and as you touch your wand to your temple, imagine pushing the memory outward on that side of your head. It should cling to your wand and allow you to extract it.

"You will feel very strange as you do so, because the memory is literally being extracted from your head...but you're only actually extracting a copy of what you knew; you won't forget what you saw, though the memory will be suppressed for a little while as it recovers. It won't hurt a bit, I assure you," she added at Percy's worried look. "Your thoughts will also remain your own. It will only extract a copy of the objective, physical record of your experiences--sight, sound, smell, taste, touch--but not the subjective record of your emotions or thoughts."

Nodding, he touched his wand to his forehead--a replacement purchased earlier that day from a selection brought to him at the hospital by Roland Ollivander himself before his discharge ...and checked afterwards for jinxes or traps by Alastor Moody--and extracted a thick, silvery mist. Hermione watched as Percy dropped the mist into the stone-carved bowl. Harry had described the phenomenon to her, but it looked very strange, like Percy was trying to pull a thick, gently wafting mass of cobwebs out of his head.

Nodding at her companions, Violetta gestured for Moody and Tonks to follow her. All three of them reached inside the rim with their non-wand hands. White light shone up at their faces, which took on an arrested look, almost as if they'd been Stunned. After that, it was a matter of waiting and watching.

An idea crossed Hermione's mind. Rising from her seat next to Harry, she eased around behind the others, and stooped over Minerva's shoulder. The Headmistress was still a little stiff around her, but it had only been a few days since the incidents in her study. Touching the older witch's shoulder, Hermione whispered in her ear. "...I wish *Russel* were here to see this for himself, but he was Summoned. He might've been able to identify the people in the memory."

A slight twitch of the older witch's head formed a nod; encouraged, Hermione continued.

"However...if I went in there, and saw what happened...I might be able to describe who Percy saw that night. Or even show him my own second-hand memory of it, via Legilimency," she offered. "If he knew who to investigate, it might help us all figure out why they were there, that much faster."

The Headmistress' mouth tightened a little, but she nodded curtly. Satisfied she had a promise of compliance, Hermione made her way back to her seat. Harry leaned in close as she settled back into place, murmuring in her ear. "What was that about?"

"I want to witness it for myself, so I can tell Russel in detail who or what to look for," she returned under her breath.

He frowned briefly, making her worry about how much or how little he might trust the man he knew only as Russel, but Harry finally nodded. "That's a good idea," he whispered. "I can't completely trust anyone who was one of them, even if he's a spy for our side. Not after what the last one did. But he would know who they are better than we would. I'll take whatever information we can get."

"Harry..." Hermione wasn't quite sure what to say. She groped for the right words. "Harry, he's my husband. And you're my brother. Either you accept him as your brother-in-law, and deal with the fact that he's now a part of my life, just as much as you are...or you're going to tear me apart."

He started to reply, but the trio at the bowl stirred. Tonks, predictably, had the roughest re-entry of her consciousness back into her body. She jerked backwards, tripped, and sprawled on Fred and George's laps. They grinned and helped right the clumsy Auror, muttering quips about how lucky a bloke Remus was, though they quelled and fell silent under the glare of their mother. Violetta merely extracted her hand. Moody came back to himself with a shudder, and a rub at his magical eye.

"...Damned bowl. I couldn't see anything with this eye. Whatever that tall one had in his hand, I couldn't tell what it was, other than a bit of chain." He shrugged, almost sheepish in his confession. "Wasn't my memory, so I couldn't see through anything. Couldn't even rotate my eye properly. Damned nuisance."

"I would like to have a glimpse myself, if I may," Minerva requested, catching Violetta's attention. "And I think Hermione should, too, so that she can discuss the matter with a certain fellow a number of us know."

Percy was the only one who looked puzzled at her veiled reference, but Hermione could understand why Minerva was being discreet. He might've been a Weasley, but he wasn't an Order member. Yet. Hermione hoped he would finish coming to his senses, after this attack. She could wish the attack hadn't happened, to spare him the pain of it, but it had, and maybe he would stop being such a prat.

"I'd like to see, too," Harry stated. Violetta studied Hermione and him, and nodded her permission.

"Don't I have a say in this?" Percy asked, as Hermione and Harry started to move forward. "Why should they get to see my memories?"

"Don't be an idiot, boy," Moody warned him in a growl. "You're in it up to your singed scalp-line, and these are the people who've been trying to put a stop to the sort of villains who attacked you. The least you can do now is cooperate, and let 'em get on about their business! We'll discuss what we've seen after they're out."

"But..." Subsidizing, his hairless, pink brow wrinkling in bafflement, Percy swallowed his objections. Joining Minerva at the edge of the little table, Hermione made room for Harry. She thought, glancing at Percy, that Moody's statement accurately summed up just how much of a royal prat the former Head Boy had been, divorcing himself from his family for so long. Minerva cleared her throat, and Hermione quickly extended her arm with the other two. Together, they touched their hands to the surface, and let the swirling mist draw them down and inward.

...

Falling through the silvery light, Hermione found herself abruptly standing in the Ministry of Magic's equivalent to a cubicle maze. Holiday decorations lent a festive but somewhat tired air to the chest-high walls, garnished along their tops with tinsel garlands and the occasional miniature tree or magically suspended mobile of ornaments and crystalline snowflakes. Orienting herself, Hermione noticed Minerva and Harry first, then spotted Percy Weasley.

He was gathering his files with a pinched expression. It took her a moment to realize it was unhappiness. Grim, un-seasonal unhappiness. Pity twisted in her heart, but annoyance did, too. Even if he was a figure to be pitied, separated from his family on Christmas Eve, all alone with no one to help him celebrate, he had brought this part of the mess of his life upon himself. All by himself. *Maybe he'll wise up finally, and admit that his family and the Order were right all along.*

It would take a courageous man to admit he was wrong, however.

Percy, files in hand, started navigating his way out of the maze of desks. As related, he stopped to chat, and blush, with the portraits lining the outer wall of the office area and the hallway beyond, embarrassed at having to defend his presence at work on that particular night. Reaching the stairs, he lifted a hand from the files to wave goodbye to the last cluster of paintings, including the visiting Everard, and pushed open the door, twisting to enter the stairwell.

Hermione felt compelled to follow him. She knew it was the magic of the Pensieve, having researched the phenomenon. Witches and wizards had a sort of sixth sense aura about them--it occurred to her belatedly that this was the sixth sense her husband had mentioned earlier--and this sixth sense permitted them to be unconsciously aware of their surroundings for the distance that their other five senses encompassed. But it did have its limitations. Anyone viewing a memory in a Pensieve had to stay within that radius, meaning primarily within sight and sound of the central figure of that memory.

Something occurred to Hermione. She stopped on the stairs to chase down the threads of the idea forming in her brain. A tug at her body forced her to continue downward, but she didn't enter the corridor beyond. Instead, she tucked herself to one side of the door in the stairwell and waited, thinking hard.

Anyone within sight and sound of the central figure of a Pensieve memory... All wizards and witches have an innate, unconscious sense of their surroundings... You can enter a Pensieve and look at things not within the direct line-of-sight of the central figure, and still make sense of them, so long as they're within the ambient greater aura... How was it that Albus Dumbledore always seemed to know things? Did he ever...? Snorting, Hermione dismissed that line of thought; it was a dead end. *He probably just*

used the paintings in the school to keep abreast of all the Hogwarts gossip, and his friends and associates outside the school...

No, but...there is a way to capture that sixth sense awareness for a Pensieve to replay...so there has to be a way for a witch or wizard to tap into it consciously, since it can be heightened into the subconscious range for other spells, too...

Biting her lip, Hermione quashed the urge to yank herself out of the Pensieve and go chase down Filius Flitwick. *Stop wool-gathering, Hermione*, she chided firmly. *You've already got that Protean-Forging Charm problem to work on, and no time in which to apprentice yourself to the Charms Professor, until this war is over. In three months' time.*

The door, partially shut, burst open. Percy scrambled up the stairs, shouting for help. A spell sizzled past; Hermione flinched and watched the middle-born Weasley son glancing back over his shoulder fearfully. A second spell smashed him into the back wall of the landing. Bolting up the stairs herself, she hugged the railing, even though she knew the spells hexing the redhead couldn't touch her, wouldn't harm her. Whirling to the next set of steps, she spun around and sat down, peering back down the steps as the hooded, cloaked figures charged up the steps.

Well, the fat one and the average-one swarmed the wizard they'd caught. She saw a glint of silver, alright...but only on one hand. *Peter Pettigrew*. That didn't bode well. The other figure, Hermione recognized after a moment only as a pale-skinned female, but one with a flattish chest. It was the shape of her wrist and the placement of her hips in relation to the length of her torso, stooping slightly as she reached the landing, that told Hermione it was a female who was hexing a now screaming Percy. The woman didn't use any verbal spells, which was impressive.

Standing up a little, Hermione ignored the craning, peering faces of Minerva and Harry. Instead, she focused on the tall wizard that had stopped behind Pettigrew and the witch. Squinting, she peered at the chain wrapped around his hand. It was not thin, nor delicate, but not bulky, either. It looked like a normal chain. Leaning over the railing, flinching but doing her best to ignore Percy's shrill screams, Hermione peered closer at the loops. It was a long chain, that much was certain, for it looped around his hand--

...

--Hermione lurched back into herself, blinking down at the white mist. The memory had ended, ejecting her automatically from the stone bowl. *The chain looped around his hand several times. I think I saw at least six lines of gold, which halved is three times... That's a long chain to loop around someone's neck. I think it would hang to their navel...*

"Well. I think we all saw the same things," Alastor grunted. "A silver hand, not a silver glove. That's that bastard, Pettigrew. The chief hexer...I'd say a female."

"Nah, it looked more like a male, t' me," Tonks offered.

"He had short fingernails, not long ones," Harry added, nodding.

Hermione cleared her throat, and held up her hand, displaying the short-trimmed nails she possessed. "Not all females have long nails, Tonks. I'd have to agree with Moody. It was a flat-chested female."

"Minerva?" Alastor asked her. "You've got the most experience with robed figures."

"Female," she stated with only a moment of thought. "Possibly Bellatrix Lestrange. But...possibly Melissa Nott."

"Melissa Nott?" the re-activated Auror next to her grunted. "...Yes, I could see that. Didn't know she had it in her to be that cruel. That efficient, but not that cruel. But the woman in the memory seemed a bit skinny. I thought Mrs. Nott had a bigger girdle than that."

Percy, Hermione noticed, looked very uncomfortable at this frank discussion of his attackers' aptitudes for torture.

"Who was the tall, thin fellow?" Violetta asked, looking at the others. "And what was he holding?"

"There's any number of amulets and talismans strung on chains," Alastor grunted. "They smashed a lot of things down there, mostly in the Experimental Artifacts section. Don't know what good it'd do 'em to take something out of the Department, though."

"Why is that?" Harry asked.

"We don't work down there, obviously, but the Aurors do know some of the security measures," Violetta informed him. "They've got special enchantments on the Artifacts, down there. If you don't know the exact counter--and it's different for every single item--if you try to take it out of the Department of Mysteries, the wards in the front chamber will scramble the magic, and render the object useless. It's a new requirement for all items being made or stored down there. Aside from the Prophecies, of course." She smiled humorlessly. "About the only change they felt necessary for those was to construct sturdier shelves."

Hermione flushed right alongside her blood-brother. It was their fault so many Prophecies had been smashed in the battle at the Ministry a year and a half ago. She cleared her throat. "I take it that, with so many smashed Artifacts, it'll be hard to catalogue what's merely broken, versus what's outright missing?"

"That's why we still don't know what they took," Violetta confirmed. "That's also why it's taking so long. Even Unspeakables take vacations, and we haven't been able to recall all of them, yet."

"What about the Imperius Curse?" Ron asked. The others blinked and looked his way.

"What do you mean, Ronald?" Minerva asked.

"What if someone got a hold of one of these Unspeakables, and put *Imperio* on them? Or even two, or three," he offered. "Imperius to question them, Obliviate to hide the evidence they were ever there, taking advantage of the holidays to hide their tracks long enough to find out who knew which counters to what Artifacts...and then they nab the Unspeakable they need and put them under the Unforgivable just long enough to break in, snatch what they want, and then wreak some havoc on the rest of it so no one knows what they grabbed. Another Memory Charm, and they're home free," Ron completed the scenario. "Have you looked at a list of all those who were unaccounted for around the time of the attack?"

Violetta, Moody and Tonks exchanged looks. Alastor cleared his throat. "I'm glad you're on our side, boy... We'll look into it."

Something was bothering Hermione. She moved back to her seat by Harry, and spotted Molly's knitting basket. Picking up a skein of yarn, she unwound a bit, looped it around her hand six times, marked her place with a pinch of her finger and thumb, and made the measured length into a necklace, thinking idly. The result dangled to her navel, as she had suspected. It was also a vaguely familiar length, but her brain was still puzzling out something else in the whole matter. She needed to talk to Severus. Unfortunately, he had been Summoned, and she didn't dare interrupt his own meeting.

Her finger heated. Breath catching, Hermione quickly tossed the yarn back into the basket, lifting her left hand. Words scrawled themselves out of the scale pattern. She could turn the ring to read it more easily, but couldn't remove it. The trick was needed, as his message wrapped around the ring a couple of times.

I am unable to return for ten days. Take all precautions when adding water. Do not stir.

She caught Harry peering at her ring. His brows rose when he noticed her staring at him. "What's up with him?"

"I don't know," she murmured back, nervous at the thought of having to handle the current stage of the Anima Te on her own. She had until early morning to figure out how

to negate any potential curse that the Diary might afflict on her efforts. It looked like she had another consulting visit to make with Professor Flitwick.

...

"...Yes, this should be very helpful," Hermione murmured, closing the book on thwarting curses in her lap. She set it aside and picked up her teacup. "There was something else I wanted to discuss with you."

"Yes, my dear?" Filius prompted her, flicking his wand to enchant the teapot to refill his cup. A gesture in her direction, and she held out her own for a refresher.

"Well...I was thinking earlier today, about the 'sixth sense' that permits a Pensieve to contain a record of anything within a mage's aura to be witnessed by anyone viewing the Pensieve recording. I was wondering if there was a way to make that sixth sense conscious, instead of subconscious or unconscious? To be actively aware of one's surroundings, even if they're not in direct line-of-sight?"

"I'm afraid that particular ability has eluded many a Charms researcher," he informed her. "But there have been some books published on the subject--the Pensieve was actually a side-effect of sixth-sense research. A brilliant young lady in the thirteenth century, who went on to be the Charms instructor, wrote an excellent treatise on the subject." Setting his teacup aside, he abandoned his chair in favour of the wall of books that lined one side of his sitting room. A swish of his wand, and he lifted himself up to a shelf near the top in a graceful but odd climb of the air, his toes and heels rocking as he rose.

"Sir...Filius," Hermione corrected herself as he floated back down. Six years of polite, admiring respect was hard to get past, some days, even if she did have permission to call him by his given name. "What spell did you use, just now?"

"*Saltara*. I learnt it in my second year, here. That's how I became such a good dancer, actually. I had to learn how to be, to use the spell," Filius explained, descending much as he had risen. Tap-dancing, Hermione realized, for all his shoes made no sound as he descended the unseen steps he had climbed. "Would you like to learn it? Just because you're not height-challenged doesn't mean it's not useful to be able to climb into the air every now and again."

"Actually, I came up with one of my own," Hermione confessed. Setting down her teacup, she drew her wand. "*Semobilim!*" Rising up half a foot, still in a seated position, she smiled as his eyes widened. A bit of thought, and she swam upwards, straightening and twisting slightly so that she faced him. "It takes effort; if you don't *think* about moving, you just sort of hang there, but then it's sort of a safety feature, isn't it?"

"Marvelous! Marvelous, Hermione!" he praised her, clapping his hands. Descending to the floor, he cancelled his own spell, set down the book he had fetched, then looked up at her. "What was that word again? *Semobilium*? And the wand movement?"

Hermione brought herself down to the floor as well. "The exact same as for *Mobilicorpus*, except for an inward flick at the end. *Finite Incantatem*. ...*Semobilim!*"

Again, she rose off the floor. Clearing his throat, Filius practiced a few silent swishes, mouthed the words, then cast the spell himself. "*Semobilim!* --Oh-ho! I did it! I'm floating! And none of that tedious tap-dancing!" An experimental, thoughtful frown, and he moved up, then sideways. "...Wonderful, simply incredible! There's a bit of a learning curve for figuring out how to control the movements, but a disciplined mind shouldn't have too much trouble... How far have you tested this spell, Hermione dear?"

"Um...a few times. Including in an...intimate experiment with another, equally enchanted participant."

It took a few blank, uncomprehending blinks for the meaning in her words to sink into his brain. A soft gasp, a blush, and a cough cleared his throat, though not his embarrassment. "Er, well...yes, I suppose something like that would be...rigorous in testing the safety parameters. Even at your most...rigorous, when you weren't consciously thinking about moving, you just...hung there?"

"Well, there was some movement, but it was basically all in the same area of space--could we change the subject, please?" Hermione asked, blushing fiercely. He nodded and gestured down at the chairs. Floating back down, she cancelled her spell at the same time he released his, and they settled back into their seats.

"This is a marvelous spell! Testing must be done on it, of course, to see how long the spell lasts, how much of the witch or wizard's energy it expends, how safe it is... Safer than a broom, I'd imagine," he chuckled, working his way through the ideas her Charm had triggered, "though probably not nearly as fast. Oh, but this would make a wonderful hedge against falling off of a broom or a carpet! Assuming, of course, that a first-year could cast the magic. It feels a bit advanced for that, though...perhaps a fourth-year spell? Yes, most students wouldn't have progressed far enough in their Charms work to be able to handle it before then... Except for you, of course. You could've probably handled this one back in your second year!"

Hermione smiled at his praise, lifting her teacup again.

"Miss Granger," Professor Flitwick stated, surprising her with the formality, "I feel it is time, and past time, to tender an offer to you to take you on as my apprentice in the exciting field of Charms. And I must insist that you accept! This one spell alone is simply remarkable in its scope! There's no telling what else you could come up with."

Hermione cleared her throat. "Well...I also came up with an All-Stop spell, the other day..."

Fixing her with a fierce look from under his bushy silver brows, Filius commanded, "Explain yourself, young lady, and leave *nothing* out!" He paused abruptly, his bearded cheeks tingeing pink above the hairline, and backtracked verbally. "...Er, that is, provided it's nothing terribly intimate in nature..."

Choking on a giggle, Hermione complied.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XXVIII.

Protected by wards erected around the book to counteract any possible curses, and wearing a talisman carved with further protective runes on an ash-wood bracelet that now replaced the Velocitemplet on her right wrist, Hermione carefully tended to the Anima Te early each morning. The rest of her time she spent with Harry and Ron in the Hogwarts library. Or in training sessions at Headquarters with the boys and either Tonks, Moody, or sometimes Remus or Violetta. And of course, in reading.

New Year's Eve came and went. Clinging to the hope that Severus was alright--for she dared not contact him while he was busy, since his absence could only be Death Eater business--Hermione laid plans for his return. In specific, she laid plans for his birthday. Every time she glanced up at the banner pinned to the wall of her room at Grimmauld Place, Hermione read the words inked there with an ache in her heart.

Love is worth whatever pain you have to suffer, whatever risk you have to take, just to know even one gentle touch from your lover.

She'd originally written them as an encouragement to herself. There was nothing she could do about her husband's feelings; they were his own to control, to shape, change, or keep the same. But she could try to guide how he felt. It was the lattermost part of Tonks' advice that spurred her to try. *To know even one gentle touch from your lover.* That was the way to guide a man who had precious little affection in his life. No matter how he felt, no matter how he acted or reacted, she had to get him to accept gentle touches and kind words from her.

It wasn't easy, but she could only control, shape and change herself. Reviewing her actions since the unveiling of his identity, Hermione winced at her memories, and consigned them to a list of Things To Never Do Again. Then, examining her actions more deeply, she made up a second list of Things To Do Again (And Acceptable Variations Thereof). Those could only be put into practice after his return.

She also studied her Seventh Year Potions manual, completing her first read-through the night before Severus was due to return, just in case there were any other advanced techniques she hadn't learnt in her sixth year that would be required to handle the Anima Te correctly. All she had to do was don protective spells and gear, gently pour a cup and a third of water into the cauldron each night--without stirring--and then cleanse herself once the cauldron was safely lidded again. Nothing seemed amiss when she did so; according to the descriptions listed in the Diary, the potion was doing fine.

He didn't contact her on the 7th. Hermione consoled herself with the fact that ten days might mean a full two hundred forty hours. But he didn't contact her on January 8th, either. Adding water to the cauldron early in the morning hours of the 9th, she nibbled on her lip with indecision. A trip through the Floo to his quarters revealed nothing but a bit of dust, which the house-elves apparently only cleaned once a month. A quick trip to Headquarters allowed her to Apparate to the hotel room, but he wasn't there, either. Returning to Headquarters, she fetched what she would need for that evening, then returned to their kitchenette suite to sleep, and to wait for him to arrive.

When she woke, he still wasn't there. Rising, Hermione wrapped herself in the terrycloth dressing gown she'd worn for their honeymoon breakfast, alternately worrying and working on the latest jigsaw puzzle on the table. Just as she was ready to make up her mind to risk changing and going to the house in Spinner's End, a *bang* startled her with a little shriek. A dark-clad figure whipped around, wand at the ready, arresting her mid-leap from her chair. Freezing, heart pounding in her chest, Hermione stared at her husband with wide brown eyes.

"--Shite! Do not scare me like that again, Jane!" Snape swore at her. She could only think of him as Snape, as he was wearing his professor-clothes, the fully buttoned frock-coat, trousers, waistcoat and so forth. He lifted his other hand, stopping her as she started to move away from the table. "Do not come any closer. I may still have certain ingredients about me to which you, in your condition, should not be exposed. Stay here, while I bathe. And cast a Scourgify on the room, just in case."

Relaxing back onto her chair as the bathroom door clicked shut behind him, Hermione let her relief pound through her blood. That wasn't Snape; the man who had just spoken was Severus. It wasn't easy, keeping his three identities separate. Drawing her wand, she spell-cleaned the air and the carpet, then settled back to listen to the shower running in the next room. She was tempted to go to him, to join him in the shower, but a glance at the clock showed there just wasn't enough time. In fact, if she didn't hurry to dress now, they might be late.

When he emerged several minutes later, she had just enchanted the zipper on her dress to slide itself up to the nape of her neck. Turning to face him, Hermione caught his puzzled look. She also spotted his lack of anything other than a towel around his waist, and a second cloth draped over his hands, his hair ruffled from having been scrubbed dry.

"...What are you doing, Jane?" Severus asked her, frowning. "Why aren't you still in your dressing gown?"

Hermione toed her stocking-clad legs into her dress-pumps, wriggling her feet to settle them in place. Her hair had been swept up into a bun that was skewered in place by her wand, ensuring that she would have it available in a flash if they were attacked, and she had applied a charm she'd learnt from Lavender Brown that was the magical equivalent of a light application of make-up, but without the taste of lipstick or the smell of foundation, blusher, or eye-shadow. "I'm getting dressed, Severus. Which you need to do, as quickly as possible--as Russel--or we'll be late."

His dark brows lowered in confusion. "Late for what?"

Firming her courage, hoping he would forgive her the temerity of what she had done, Hermione fixed him with a firm look. "Today is your birthday, remember? I made dinner reservations at *La Chocolat* on the outskirts of Highgate--I took the liberty of pre-ordering our meal so there'd be no delays--and then we're taking in a performance of *Phantom of the Opera*, uptown. It's an utterly Muggle evening," she shrugged with a touch of diffidence as he studied her silently, "but then I figured that was the easiest way to avoid detection from the wizarding world while still celebrating your natal day. Dinner is in fifteen minutes, so you really should hurry and get dressed, if we're to make it on time."

Tossing the towel in his hands at the bench, he pulled the ebony shaft of his wand from where it was tucked into the waistline of the towel wrapped around his hips, and flipped open the folds of that one. "And what am I supposed to do about *this*?"

Hermione glanced down, and flushed. His erection jutted out from his hips, turgid and red, clearly aroused with desire. For most of the past eleven-plus nights, she had only been able to sleep after frigging herself into a relaxed state of satiation. It wasn't the same as having her lover pleasuring her, though. The sight of him like this, excited and ready for her, made her own body ache with need. Clearing her throat carefully, she dragged her mind out of the gutter.

"...Unfortunately, we don't have time for that. After the play--"

"Bollocks, we don't!" Snapping his wand-hand, he muttered under his breath.

The drawers of the dresser that stood against the wall on the bathroom side of the bed jolted open, fabric sailing out and wrapping itself around his body. He had chosen the formal white shirt, black, plaid-trimmed dinner jacket and kilt ensemble of his wedding clothes, with blue-green argyle socks and black dress shoes. The great-kilt wrapped itself around his hips and shoulder, cinched in place by the black leather and silver fittings of his belt and sporran. The pouch canted out at an angle, however. Shifting the thing to one side, he smirked at her as he finished balancing from the enspelled donning of his footwear. His hand drew out the black velvet ribbon and its dark, carved cabochon.

"Forty seconds. That leaves us fourteen minutes, minus a few seconds to Apparate. Bend over the bed, wife," he ordered her, fastening the enchanted choker around his throat. "Hands on the mattress. Now."

The autocratic order made her feel hot with both desire and annoyance. Still, it was his birthday. Hermione turned and complied, balancing somewhat awkwardly until he nudged her feet apart with one of his own, lowering her hips with the spreading of her legs. The sigh that escaped him as he studied her was masculine and flattering, especially considering he was usually already inside of her before she got to hear it.

"Mmmh, *good*...oh! Why, Mrs. Snape, how naughty," he muttered, the hands sliding up the backs of her thighs having encountered the tops of her stockings. Sheer stockings, coloured to go with the high-necked, sleeveless, classic little-black-dress she had donned. They matched the suspender belt, too, black satin that contrasted in its texture with the nubby black crepe-de-chin of her dress.

He pushed the knee-length skirt higher, up to her waist, and sighed at the sight of her black bikini knickers. She'd almost chosen a thong, but didn't want to be squirming uncomfortably all throughout the musical. Eventually, he would get to see the demi-bra that completed the ensemble, but for now, she could feel the warm puff of his breath as he crouched and breathed in her scent. Not just breathed--a mutter, and her knickers vanished. They didn't crawl down her legs and wrestle with the straps of her

suspenders; the undergarment just vanished.

The soft feel of satin was replaced for a moment by cool air, and then by the slick heat of his tongue. Sucking in a deep breath, Hermione bit her lower lip, arching her head back. His voice groaned into her flesh between slow, savouring laps.

"Sweet...I've missed this...so good..." Abandoning her abruptly, she heard him rise, felt the flipping of wool against her backside as he lifted his kilt out of the way.

She felt him prodding her nether-lips with the rounded tip of his shaft, felt him dipping in and out by only a fraction of an inch, not enough to really push inside. Just enough to tease. Maybe they did have a few minutes for this... Flesh in hand, he rubbed the glans against her folds, taking extra care to bump it against the hood of flesh that was her bundle of sexual nerves. He did this for more than a minute. Rolling her eyes, Hermione demanded, "Oh, stop playing around, Severus!"

Nudging her opening again, he pushed a fraction deeper and withdrew. "And what would you have me do, if not this?"

"Fuck me!"

Her deliberate choice of words, carnally blunt, made him drag her hips backward under the clutching grasp of his hands. It shoved him into her as he pulled her back onto him, and forced a grunt from both of their throats. It was a surprisingly tight fit. They'd been apart for just as long as this at other points in the tumult of the last few months, but it felt as if her inner muscles just snapped down around him, not wanting to let go, contracting tight enough to stimulate both of them with each quick withdrawal and rapid return.

"Oh god, yes! Oh god, oh god, oh Severus, oh god god god god--!" Hermione chanted, lost in his grip. His bollocks, slapping her clitoris with each pounding stroke, twisted her body with pleasure against the clutching of his hands.

"--Jane! *Jane!*" Two hard slams, and he shuddered in straining, rhythmless bucks, spilling inside of her.

Her limbs trembled, making her worry through the haze of her pleasure that she was going to collapse, that he was going to fall with her. But somehow he held on, kept them upright through the last twitches of their flesh, then withdrew abruptly. She felt his hands shift on her hips while she was still panting and seeking enough energy to stand upright, and felt his tongue and nose delving into her no doubt glistening folds.

"Mmmh, *divine*...but I need more sustenance than this, tonight." A light slap of her hip, just enough to make her lax muscles jiggle a little, and he ordered, "On your feet, and straighten your dress, wife. We have two minutes to be at the restaurant--wait," he added as she righted herself with a groan and turned around. "Suck me clean."

Arching a brow, Hermione tugged the hem of her form-fitting dress back down over her hips. "Ask nicely, and I might comply."

Grey eyes batted short, thick, sandy-blond lashes at her, and his tanned mouth curved up on one side. "Pretty please? With the sweetness of your musk on my cock?"

Rolling her eyes, Hermione dropped to one knee, letting him lift the folds of the kilt out of her way. His penis had deflated partially, but hadn't shrunk by that much, an inch at most. Not when she knew it was normally half-length when uninterested in anything. Fully erect, he was probably just over seven inches long, about as long as the distance between her longest fingertip and the seam of her wrist. Right now, he was about three-quarters of that, with the firmness of a peeled banana. He didn't taste like a banana in any way, however, but rather a combination of his salty-bitter seed, the musk of her dew, and a hint of sweat.

What peculiar things we wives get to learn, in the intimacies of a married life. Swirling her tongue over every inch she could manage, Hermione pulled back at a touch of his hand on her nape. Less than a minute, according to the bedside clock. Rising to her feet, she found herself briefly but deeply snogged, tongue and all, then released.

"Mmmh, thank you."

"Hurry and get your knickers on," she ordered him, looking around for her own.

"Jane, men have pants; women have knickers," he countered, giving her a dark look. It shifted as she peered past him at the dresser, annoyance replaced by a masculine smirk. "And you're not putting your knickers back on, so don't bother looking for them."

Her mind calculated the impact of his amused little smile, sexy though it was, and came up with a spot of blackmail. "If I'm going out there without my knickers, you're not going out there with your own undergarment, either!"

"Only if you promise to grope me," Russel had the temerity to tease her. At her cocked eyebrow and folded arms, he smirked. "Besides, you wouldn't dare make me leave here regimental."

"I'm a Gryffindor, husband dear. I thrive on dares!" she retorted.

And found herself spun around abruptly, and shoved over once again. Yanking up the back of her skirt, he prodded her damp clitoris with his wand, and dragged it up the length of her slit as he intoned, "*Numivolutremens!*"

A brief tingle swept over the peak of her flesh, soaking into her vagina and labial folds, and ending at her anus. A jerk lifted her upright, a tug lowered her gown, and he spun her around, wrapping her in his arm. He met her confused gaze with a smirk, then flicked his wand, summoning their cloaks. Another sharp swish, and they Transfigured into Muggle-acceptable overcoats.

"Now, Apparate us to the restaurant."

Gathering her wits, knowing they were late, Hermione closed her eyes, concentrated, and squeezed them into the alley next to the building they wanted. Orienting herself, she started to walk toward the mouth of the alley, but his hand on her arm stopped her. Glancing back, she found the blond-haired wizard still smiling like a cat that knew which household pet had eaten the canary.

"One moment, my dear..."

Hermione gasped softly; the moment he said *one*, she could feel a faint buzzing in her loins.

He laughed softly, wickedly. "Testing...*one, two, three*..."

The buzzing increased on *two* and *three*. It was centered around her clit at the moment, though the tremors did stimulate some of her vaginal opening, too. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he nudged her towards the street. The buzzing didn't stop. Hermione swallowed. "What...kind of spell is this? What exactly does it do?"

"Every time I say a number between, well, nothing, and as many digits on both your hands as you possess, that is the number of the intensity you will experience," he murmured in her ear, that exotically accented baritone slithering into her ear and down her spine, joining the level-three buzzing of her flesh. "The spell is selective, in that it only chooses actual numbers. There is a difference between 'to go', and '*two* toes', after all."

The buzzing diminished slightly.

"Or if you prefer, "After we have eaten our meal, it will take us *eight* seconds--"

Hermione stumbled, choking as the buzzing stimulated everything from the top of her cleft at the front to the rosebud of her anus at the back.

"--to Apparate...in time to get to the theatre and not be late," he murmured in her ear, reaching for the handle of the restaurant door. Hermione could only hope it was the right restaurant. The bastard had turned her brain to mush, and knew it. "Which means you should have one very interesting evening, my dear. And I'll have a very enjoyable birthday, watching you writhe with hidden pleasure in such public settings as a restaurant and a theatre."

"*Shite*," she swore, feeling her blood rushing through her veins as the intense stimulation settled into a discreet, barely-felt throbbing. Blinking, she cleared her throat and pasted on a smile for the restaurant hostess as they stepped through the double-door entry and into the foyer. "Er...dinner reservations for Mr. and Mrs. Ferguson?"

A brief check of the list at her podium, and the woman smiled, gesturing a server forward. The gentleman gave them both an abbreviated bow of his head. "This way, if you please...?"

Feeling torn between wanting to glare at the bastard at her back, and wanting to grin like a silly, mouth-breathing Hufflepuff, Hermione let her hips sashay as she wended her way between the tables. 'One' was just a tiny little bit of stimulation. She could live with that.

Until the glorious, kilted bastard whispered while seating her at their table, "*Four*..."

...

She attacked him in the alleyway beside the restaurant, her flesh still silently buzzing at level five, which was where he had held her through most of dessert. Grabbed him by his jacket, shoved him against the stones of the restaurant wall, yanked his sporran to one side, and groped underneath his kilt, all while she kissed him breathless. He was already hard, and clutched at her wrist to stop her from caressing him after only a few seconds. Tearing his mouth from hers, he nipped his way to her earlobe, growling, "Now, now, Mrs. Snape. No accosting me before we've been to the theatre."

"Sod the theatre!" Hermione snapped, tangling her fingers in his dark blond hair. He'd had her boiling from one to nine and back, bouncing all over the scale at his bloody whim. It was time to finish this. She didn't even feel the winter chill in the air; her blood was boiling too hard with desire.

Turning his head to the side, she licked a path from his collar to his ear canal, spiraling around the outer folds before reaching the dimple of the center. That, she knew, would burn him with his own desire. He stiffened, inhaling sharply, then spun them around. With her pinned to the wall, he covered her with his body, lifting her skirt with a glide of his hands as he kissed her throat and jaw. Hermione kept her mouth to the shell of his ear whenever she could. With her other hand, she helped him shove the folds of his kilt up out of their way.

A bend of his knees, a lift of one of her own, and he nudged his shaft against her pubic curls. A hitch, and both of her legs wrapped around his waist as he lifted her off her feet, the weight of his torso pinning her to the wall. A shift of his hips, a tilt of her own, and he slid home. Groaning softly, he stayed that way for a long moment, eyes closed, face straining for control in the shadows of the alley.

Opening his grey eyes to slits that glittered in the light shed from a streetlamp across the way, he studied her open, panting mouth, the involuntary little twitches triggered by the vibration in her flesh, and the need for him to move inside of her. Which he didn't. Instead, he quietly intoned, "*Six...seven... Ten*."

Hermione choked, head thumping back against the wall. That was when he moved in her, long, hard, driving strokes that ground her into the thankfully flat stones of the alley wall. Her body was one mass of pleasure radiating outward from the earthquake of her loins, triggered by the bliss of that damned spell and the rhythm of his own fierce need. How she kept from screaming aloud, she didn't know. Maybe it was because everything else was too busy spasming with the intensity of her climax.

Somewhere in there, when her loins were filled with his semen, when his breath was as ragged as hers, he whispered, "*Eight...six...four...two...nine*."

Her torment returned. Again, she choked on a cry, this one audible. Covering her mouth with his own, he let her punish his softening shaft in the vise of her inner muscles for a few moments, then pulled back and ended it.

"*Five...three...zero*."

Gasping for breath, Hermione continued to shiver, but not from the spell. The only magic keeping her trembling right now was the after-pleasure of her orgasm. At least he'd had the courtesy to bring her down out of the stratosphere gently. He even held her against the wall with his body, making sure she didn't fall.

Mouth brushing her lips, he gave her a few more moments to regain her wits before gently guiding her legs back down to the ground. The shift in position pulled them intimately apart; his withdrawal was accompanied by a trickle of liquid that seeped down her thighs. Blushing, Hermione leaned back into the wall behind her. Legs feeling about as strong as a steamed pudding, and as messy as a melting sundae, she studied her husband as he extracted a square of linen from his sporran. Smirking, her blond-haired lover discreetly wiped himself clean under the fallen folds of his kilt.

She cleared her throat as he moved to put it away. "Hey--what about me?"

Even in the dim light of the alleyway, she could see one of his brows rising. "What about you?"

"I need a spot of cleaning, too."

He leaned forward, pressing his hips and abdomen into hers. "Do you, now?"

"Yes, I'm...leaking." It was embarrassing to admit out loud. Not just because it was a biological sort of thing, but because it aroused her to admit that he'd just had her up against a wall without any care in the world as to who might've peered into the alleyway and seen him taking her like a high-class call-girl. At least, she hoped she looked high-class in her little black dress. She wasn't wearing any jewelry, but it was still a nice dress, with a nice overcoat.

A smile curled the corner of his mouth. Sliding his right hand under her hem, between her thighs, he slowly scraped two of his fingers upward. When he encountered moisture a few inches from her apex, the smile spread across to the other side of his lips. Scraping upward, he flicked his fingertips across her slick nether-lips, then extracted his hand carefully. Tongue curling around his fingers, he slowly suckled the combination of her juices and his seed from his skin. Then wrapped one arm around her waist, smirking. "Apparate us to the theatre, Jane. We don't want to be late."

Closing her eyes, Hermione gathered her lust-scattered wits and carefully pictured the alley she had scoped out earlier in the week. A *pop*, and they Disapparated from the shadows next to the restaurant. It was a good thing they'd had half an hour of leeway between the end of their supper of delicately baked sole, grilled vegetables, and the chef's signature chocolate mousse, and the start of the show. By the time they crossed the street to the pavement in front of the theatre, almost everyone was inside.

Her husband strode up to the box office, his wife tucked firmly at his side. "I believe you have some tickets on hold? For a Mr. and Mrs. Ferguson?"

It was a good guess; Hermione had indeed reserved and paid for the tickets under that name, as well as the prepaid, pre-selected meal they'd just eaten. If he hadn't come home in time, she'd have shanghaied Harry to go with her, but it wouldn't have been nearly the same. *Thank god*, she thought wryly, feeling her thighs dampening with another slow trickle from her feminine depths.

"Yes, here they are; two tickets," the lady inside the booth announced.

"Yes...*two* tickets," the bastard holding her to his ribs agreed. Bastard, because the buzzing started up again, a soft but distinct stimulation of her senses. Hermione hissed in his ear as soon as they were past the ticket-takers at the entrance.

"It's doing it again! Aren't you going to remove it?"

Craning his head, he cocked a blond brow at her, his grey eyes glinting with a very Slytherin sort of half-cruel amusement. "Whatever are you talking about, my love?"

Given the proximity of the usher pressing a pair of programmes on them, she didn't doubt he'd said the endearment deliberately for their audience. She walked with him down the steep section of the aisle, whispering. "The *numbers game* you've been playing with me all evening, that's what! It's still going on!"

He stopped halfway to their seats--prime ones, too; it had cost her a number of pounds to get eighth-row tickets on the ground-floor, though they were at the far left of the row--and caught her close. "You *could* end the problem with a flick of that glorified hair-pin of yours," he murmured in her ear. "But it's my birthday...and I am not through playing with my present to myself. After all, you're the *one* who wanted to get dressed up to the *nine*...and go out for the evening, instead of staying in our hotel room."

Her brain had turned to mush. So had her legs. Her breath was rather rapid and shaky, too. Apparently he didn't care to hold up that much of her weight; nuzzling her earlobe, he took pity on her.

"But *one* must do what *one* must, in a situation like this..."

The buzzing melting her brain and stimulating her flesh from pubic mound to tailbone thankfully stopped. Almost. There was still a tiny bit of a tremor in the hood of flesh guarding her most sensitive nerves, and he had the gall to drop a kiss onto her brow before stepping back. The smiling bastard left it that way, too, guiding her quickly to their seats as the lights dimmed. And then he tormented her by muttering the Act and Scene numbers, referencing his programme in the glow of the lights on the stage from time to time, and by muttering other randomly picked, randomly timed levels of torturous bliss.

Apparently he was familiar with *The Phantom of the Opera*, for he permitted her three climaxes, which she fought to keep silent, fingers digging into his wool-covered thigh during the signature, title song in the first act, a second one during the Don Juan seduction song late in the second act, and a third one during the kiss scene near the very end. That one was expected, but ambushed, for he cupped her cheek and pulled her to him, whispering '*ten*' just before kissing her himself. Thankfully, he muttered a '*zero*' somewhere in there, permitting her to relax and recover from her increasingly sore, deliciously abused pleasure-zones.

When they broke apart, the musical had already progressed by several lines. Thumb caressing the edge of her chin, he rested his forehead against hers. "Unlike our dear Phantom," he whispered, his mouth curved in a Russel way, but with his eyes glittering under the calculation of a Snape, "I will *never* let you go. Do keep that in mind."

A soft brush of his lips, gentle in contrast to the sharp edge underlying his words, and he sat back, letting her absorb his determination on the matter as the musical drew to its poignant close. Hermione was grateful for the respite, even as his words gave her mixed feelings. She was finally beginning to reconcile and accept his true identity, to accept that her feelings for Russel were transferable to Severus, and adjust to the fact that he was Severus Snape. Acceptance was only part of the matter; she still had to figure him out, to understand the complex man seated at her side, if they were to have any hope of a real relationship.

Sliding her hand over his where it rested on his kilted thigh, she laced her fingers with his. The fate of the wizarding world depended on how well the two of them interacted, how well they got along. For such a heavy responsibility, Hermione felt remarkably buoyant as she daringly held his hand. It didn't last very long. The musical ended and the audience applauded, many of them rising to their feet as the cast came out to take their bows; she was forced to let go of him so that she could rise and applaud beside him. Gathering their coats, he guided her up the aisle from behind, wrapping his arms around her whenever they had to pause and wait a while as the crowd slowly cleared from the theatre.

By the time they reached the street outside, it was very late, and very crowded. Walking by silent, mutual accord, they didn't use the alley they'd Apparated into, earlier; it was too close to the theatre, too easily noticed by the throngs of leaving patrons. Instead, he guided her a few blocks away until they were virtually alone, then pulled them into a recessed doorway just long enough to Disapparate.

Banging into their hotel room, he shifted back from her. A flick of his wrist enchanted his evening-wear into slithering off of his body. Stepping out of his footwear as they wriggled off his feet, he flicked his wand at her, too. The black dress peeled itself off her body, followed by her stockings, shoes and undergarments as she moved backward under his naked advance. He didn't reach for her though; instead, he swept his chest-length hair back, twisted it into a knot, and pinned it in place with his wand. It was a peculiar look for a man to wear, but a practical one for a naked wizard, if that naked wizard wanted his hands free but his wand kept close.

Hermione dropped her gaze, eyeing the rest of him. He was aroused, though not yet fully erect, when he removed the ribbon holding the raven-carved stone at his neck. Hermione glanced down, watching the tanned hue of his skin swirling upwards from his feet, vanishing into his leg-hairs. Curiosity getting the better of her, she asked, "Where did you come up with that skin-changing spell, anyway? I've never heard of anything like it, before."

"It's an advanced disguise Charm. I learnt it from an Auror years ago." The blond nest of curls at his groin darkened, holding her attention until the ribbon took its place. He offered it to her. "Would you like to try it?"

Tempted, Hermione gave in and nodded, accepting the ribbon. Taking her hand, he led her into the bathroom, flicking on the light-switch. His hair was nearly black, only his shoulders and face still tanned. The last of the magic drained into his hairline as he positioned her in front of him, facing the broad, full-length mirror on the wall opposite the bathroom door.

"Put it on."

Obedying, Hermione lifted the ribbon into place, making sure the cabochon was the right way up. He assisted her, hooking it behind her nape. Magic tingled across her skin, pouring down from her scalp. Fascinated, Hermione watched as her chestnut hair lightened and her skin darkened, spreading down through her skin like a dollop of coffee in a glass of cream. Warmer-complected to begin with, her skin still turned only as tan as his had been. Her hair just wasn't as dark as his, though the amulet drained her curls of colour until they were as pale as a Malfoy's.

"Wow, I look...I look *and* sound different!" she laughed, hearing the oddity of a Canadian accent changing the way her words emerged. Staring at her image, Hermione shook her head after only a few moments. Even her eyes had lightened from light brown to a pale hazel-amber. They looked very strange, to her. "...This isn't me. Unlike you, I don't look good as a blonde."

He stilled her hands as they reached for the ribbon. "Wait another minute for the magic to settle." His hands shifted to her throat, then slid up into her curls. "You don't look hideous as a blonde. Very different, but not exactly repulsive." A pause, and a Russel-grin flashed across his face. "Care to see if blondes really do have more fun?"

Hermione attempted to elbow him for that. They tussled for a few moments, Hermione squirming for an advantage and him grappling for purchase. When she realized he was more interested in groping her breasts, she gave up and unhooked the choker. Ignoring the tickling, swirling feel of melanin reorganizing itself in her flesh, she turned in his arms. Their eyes met, his black and shuttered, hers darkening to brown even as she smiled at him. "Happy Birthday, Severus."

His mouth twitched. "You wouldn't say that, if you knew what I wanted to do to you."

Unable to resist her curiosity, Hermione eyed him warily. "And what would that be?"

Leaning close enough to brush his half-turgid flesh against her lower abdomen, he gave her a tight little smile. "Claim your final virginity."

That puzzled her. Frowning up at him, Hermione asked, "What final virginity?"

Turning her around, he pulled her back against his chest, her buttocks against his groin. Arms wrapping around her, he rested his chin against her temple, her hair darkened once more to its natural chestnut brown. A brief readjustment of himself against her, and he pulled her close again, this time with his half-erect shaft nudging between her nether-cheeks. "Your anal virginity."

Hermione stiffened with shock. She felt her cheeks flushing with embarrassment when he smirked at her reaction. "You...surely, you can't be--"

Two of his fingers flew to her lips, cutting her off. "It is my birthday, and I am invoking Lesson *One*."

Hermione gasped as her flesh started buzzing again. It was still a very faint tremor, but she was a little sore from her earlier pleasure. "Oh, no...tell me you're not going to leave that spell still going?"

"Why not?"

Bastard. She could hear the smirk in his voice, as well as see it reflected in the mirror. "Because I'm feeling a little tender and sore. Do you know how many times I've come, tonight?"

The chuckle that escaped him reverberated from his chest to her shoulder-blades, caught against him as she was in his embrace. "*Four? Five?*"

"--Bastard!" The epithet escaped her as her genitals buzzed.

"Don't you mean Birthday Boy?" he countered, growling the words into her ear. Hands shifting, he crossed his wrists and tweaked her nipples. His dark eyes gleamed as he studied their paired reflection. "Put your hands behind my neck...and I might lower the level."

Lifting her arms as bidden also lifted her breasts, Hermione discovered. They were a handful, not exactly large, but not small, either. He cupped them, caressed and massaged her pale curves, then slid one hand down the soft skin of her stomach. As her fingers delved through the dark strands of his hair, his fingertips stroked and slid through the coarse curls of her mound. Eyes half-closed, enjoying the feel of him embracing her, she finally frowned at him. "...Well? Aren't you going to stop it?"

"Now, why would I want to do that?"

Annoyed, definitely feeling tender down there, she snagged the hilt of her wand, pulling it free of her upswept hair. He caught her wrist even as her curls flopped into his face, loosened from the impromptu vinewood hairpin. Biting her lip, she tried to hide her smile, but he shook off her hair and glared at her for being amused at his expense. Taking her wand from her, he twisted her hair into an unruly mass on top of her head, skewered it with her wand, and drew his own from the smaller knot at the back of his own head.

Stepping back, he tapped the crease between the cheeks of her rump. But not to cancel his previous spell. "*Rectumundirenu!*"

Hermione gasped and squirmed as the level-five buzzing mixed very strangely, but not unpleasantly, with the magic that voided and vanished the contents of her rectum and bladder, cleaning her flesh.

"*One*," Severus murmured, lowering himself to his knees. Hands on her hips, he nudged her. "Lean forward. Brace yourself on the mirror."

Curious, Hermione complied. The position thrust out her backside. A nudge of her legs to separate them, a grip of her muscles to spread open the crease between, and he had enough room to lick the cleaned flesh exposed by her stance. Hermione shivered.

It was definitely an unfamiliar sensation. If she hadn't had the buzzing in the front half of her femininity to distract her, she might have felt too uncomfortable to continue. She knew that was hypocritical of her; she'd already done this exact same task to him, as Russel. But she knew from her reading that stroking a man's prostate through his thin rectal wall could give him pleasure. Women didn't have a prostate gland. And yet...

He murmured something. A number. She guessed it to be a 'three' on the scale, and was glad for it. Anything higher would've been too much for her sensitized skin, but this was enough to make the experience pleasurable. The buzzing distracted her, and kept her from being unnerved by the probing of his tongue. He tilted her hips a little more, then licked a little lower, lapping at the juices seeping from her body. That was enjoyable. The rimming of his tongue had felt good, but this wasn't nerve-wracking.

He stopped, though, and tapped her fundament with his wand. "*Lotiungere...*"

Startled, Hermione squirmed at the sudden...slick...feel invading her nethermost region. It wriggled, making her gasp. Teeth nipped at the curve of one buttock, making her gasp again. "What...?"

"Shh, these are merely my fingers, wife."

Since when did he get two of them up in there? she wondered, wide-eyed. He dragged them slowly out and in, slick with whatever spell he'd used, but slightly curved, and rotating with each thrust and withdrawal. She had never realized just how many nerve-endings existed, back there. A whispered number, and the buzzing in her flesh increased, extending all the way to the back, where his fingers gently twisted and played.

A stretching pain told her he was working another finger inside, but it didn't feel too terrible. Head bowing, hands braced on the mirror, she found herself rocking slightly backwards. Feeling the warmth of his lips on the back of her thigh, she relaxed herself into his touch. "This...isn't so bad..."

His fingers stilled, wedged deeply inside her flesh. Lithe, lean body rising, he wrapped his arm around her waist. "Stand up...now face the sink...and place your hands on the counter. Step back a little...yes, like that. Turn your head to the right," Severus ordered quietly, extracting his fingers, making her shiver as she turned her attention from the mirror behind the sink back to the one at their side. "Yes, like that...now, watch as I bugger you."

She watched as he gripped himself with his left hand and tapped with the wand in his right, casting the same lubrication charm as before. Watched as he nudged against her opening, and felt him squeezing the head of his shaft inside. Closing her eyes, she fought with herself. She wanted to pull back, wanted to push down, wanted to resist, to accept, to be a hypocrite and say this wasn't pleasurable, just nasty...but it did feel good. Disgustingly, deliciously good. At least she was very clean, back there.

Her head had shifted forward, bowing between her braced arms. Hermione dropped it a little lower and peered under her right arm. He whispered a number and the buzzing intensified, making her knees tremble. A second number, and it stopped. Leaving her with just the gliding, tantalizing, forbidden stimulation of sodomy.

Trembling in her thighs led to the buckling of one knee. Hermione repositioned herself, but knew it wouldn't be enough. Bracing her weight on her left arm, she yanked her wand free, slashing it through the air as she concentrated through her pleasure. "*Semobilim!*"

That lifted her up, but she pressed back down again. And grunted, panting as he yanked her into him, guiding her now floating body. She still had to use her hands on the counter, since each thrust threatened to bang her head into the counter if she tipped forward too far, but it allowed her muscles to quiver without having to support both her own weight and the rhythmic pressure of his actions. Best of all, she didn't have to concentrate on her own movements; the spell kept her aloft, but mobile enough to be manipulated by him.

"*Two...four...six...eight--!*"

Pleasure surged up through Hermione's nerves; she gasped, squirming and tightening around his shaft as that damned spell reactivated--but it was the thought that tumbled at the heels of his command that tipped her over the edge of her peaking pleasure. The shout of laughter that escaped her rang painfully loud against the walls of the bathroom. His rhythm fumbled, faltered, and then shuddered as her laughter-tightened muscles triggered his own climax. Squeezing her name out of him.

"*Jane!*"

Laughing madly, Hermione flopped in his grip, clutching at her bare stomach. She was still gasping for breath when he pulled out, still chuckling as he reduced the spell to zero and guided her out of the bathroom. Unable to stop giggling, she let him cast the Canceling Spell once she was centered over the bed. Bouncing onto the bedding,

she panted for breath, but burst into a new round of mirth as he settled at her side, leaning over her with his elbow propping up his torso.

"--*What* is so amusing, wife?" The growled demand sobered her somewhat, but just looking up at him, his hair hanging in black clumps that were still tangled from the vigors of their passion, made her choke and snort unbecomingly. His black eyes narrowed in warning, making her gasp out the truth.

"...Two, four, six, eight; who do we appreciate? *Snake! Snake! Yaaaaaay, Snake!* --Bahahahahaha!!" And she was off again, peals of laughter crunching her abdomen and scrunching her eyes as she laughed until her face was red and streaked with tears. Her body spasmed just as she was calming down again, but not with laughter. This time, with pleasure. Stiffening with it, she arched her back, moaning.

Her hands scrabbled for an anchor as the powerful aftershock shook her senses. One fisted in the covers. The other clutched at the sweat-damp skin of his chest. Moaning again as it passed, Hermione found enough energy to roll herself over, flopping her arm across his abdomen. Nuzzling his chest with her cheek, she sighed, mumbling into his shoulder.

"Mmm...you're bloody...*brilliant*..."

If he made a reply to her compliment, she didn't hear it; the delicious bastard had exhausted her literally insensate.

...

The screeching beep of the electric clock dragged Hermione rudely back into the land of the awake. Groaning, wondering where her wand had gone, she rolled her very stiff body away from the warm flesh that was thankfully moving to silence the blasted thing. In the quiet following the *whap* of her husband's hand on the buttons, Hermione groaned again, covering her eyes as he clicked something.

"Oh, god... I utterly and completely blame *you*...for every single ache and pain I'm feeling, this morning."

Hair tickled her forearm, which she'd draped over her eyes to block out the light of the bedside lamp. Pushing her arm off her face, he claimed her mouth in a kiss. Only after she had managed to respond for about a minute or so did he pull back and murmur, "You're welcome. But we have a potion to check, and water ."

"Mmmh," she agreed, returning her forearm to her face as she felt him move away from her. Then sat up quickly. "Oh! I have to tell you, Percy recovered enough to report!"

"What happened?" Severus enquired, opening the drawers of the bureau to extract fresh clothing to wear.

"We all saw his memories in a Pensieve," she related, pulling the covers up to her breasts. Not to hide herself from him, but because the room was a little colder than usual; wherever they were, it felt like the weather had taken a dip for the worse. Not even individual heaters in each hotel room could take the chill off a truly cold winter day. "There were three Death Eaters. A very tall, thin fellow, a flattish-chested woman who did most of the hexing, and Pettigrew, the night that Percy was attacked."

"--Pettigrew?" He struggled to clear his head through the neckline of a scarlet jumper she hadn't seen before. "That's impossible."

"I saw it for myself," she reassured him, picturing it again in her mind. How the woman had hexed Percy without any show of hesitation or remorse, how Pettigrew had watched, how the tall, thin man had held that long chain wound several times around his hand. "Ugly teeth, plump, greasy face--well, from the lips down, given they were all clad in deeply cowl'd robes--and one silvery hand. Aside from the hand, he was the exact same traitorous git I saw back in our third year. Peter Pettigrew was there at the Ministry on Christmas Eve."

He shook his head, stepping into undershorts. "Every account I've heard of Christmas Eve said that Pettigrew didn't leave the Dark Lord's side. Not for more than a few minutes. Only Bones was unaccounted for, that night!"

Long chain, merciless hex, silver hand...long chain--

"*Time-Turner!*" Hermione gasped, staring at him. "They stole a Time-Turner! *That's* how Pettigrew could appear to be in two places at once. That's why they were after Mr. Lubbock, too! He's a Chronomancer; they were trying to get their hands on a Time-Turner, back during the summer."

The navy utili-kilt slipped from his fingers, his skin paling almost to the point of looking green. "Of course... The stasis spell on the bottle--the traces of granite, and grass, mud and lichen--but what was it *used* for?"

"Severus?" Hermione asked him.

"I was given a potion to make. Part of the reason why it took longer than expected was this dusty old bottle of blood, with bits of grass, and stone, and lichen in it. I had to separate out the blood from the rest of it, to purify it before I could use it in the draught...but I didn't know the purpose of the brew. Only Bella would know--it was from one of the Borgia witch's other texts," he added, cutting his hand through the air between them in a gesture that was more disdainful than dismissive. "But he Obliviated her memory after each recital session."

"Whatever was in that book, only she had the skill to read it unharmed, as well as the right gender. But he knew. Somehow, he knew what was in there," Severus repeated. "And I have no idea what it was, or what it did. Only that the Dark Lord watched us both the whole time, and that he drank it in the end. I couldn't fake a single step. But from what you say, he must've sent Bones back in time to fetch that blood, and maybe the book, and he has a Time-Turner in his care, with Merlin knows what disastrous effects on the continuum it could trigger."

"I have to get the Time-Turner away from them," he muttered, raking his hands through his hair, "but I don't know how... It has to be done discreetly. Bones probably still has it--potion first," he ordered her, slashing his wand through the air.

Hermione gasped as one of the spare sets of clothing she had taken to storing in one of the bureau drawers leapt out and attacked her body, dressing her as she quickly flicked the sheet aside. Wriggling the leg band of her knickers through her jeans so that the soft cotton knit didn't bind, she searched for her wand. It was on the nightstand next to the radio.

"We can't let the Ministry know openly that we're trying to get it back. Not if I've any hope of getting or smashing that Time-Turner without getting caught. Certainly no mention of the device to anyone--for now, that includes the Order," he warned her.

"Not as a whole," Hermione agreed, "but I'm telling Minerva."

"Hermione--"

"--She needs to know!" Hermione protested, wishing he'd used her middle name instead. He always seemed softer, or at least more flexible, when calling her Jane. 'Hermione' was reserved for when he was being implacable. "And if nothing else, Albus' portrait should also be told. Just because he's dead doesn't mean his portrait is as dumb as a door-knocker."

"Fine. I'll check the potion, and you check the time-table and the next few steps, to make certain we're on schedule. Then you go tell Minerva, and I'll Apparate back to that hellhole and try to see what I can find."

Rising from the bed, Hermione wrapped her arms around him, taking advantage of the arms uplifted to fasten the choker around his throat. "You *will* be careful, do you hear me?"

"Jane, I am quite aware that there is only one of me, and that there is no one who could possibly replace me, if anything goes wrong." His tone was impatient, but the arms that held her close to his jumper-clad chest squeezed in unspoken comfort.

She hoped it was because he, too, was finally coming to terms with their relationship. However bizarre and riddled with perceived lies and betrayals, they had to start working together, and in more ways than just cooperation. Or love-making. Squeezing him back, she released him. "Let's get the Anima Te out of the way..."

...

Emerging from the Floo in Madam Pince's office, Hermione stumbled into a tall, lean body. Choking on the soot-dust that had accompanied her egress, she found herself steadied and set back from a tight-faced Ron. He addressed her as she dusted herself off.

"About time you showed up," he stated bluntly. "Harry and I need a little help with some of the advanced binding and loosening Charms we've been studying, but you've been off doing other things all night long. Where've you been? And why were you in Professor McGonagall's study, just now?"

He must've checked for my whereabouts with the Maurader's Map... She paused a moment, gauging how much to tell him about what she and Severus had uncovered. "Russel...told me something important, this morning. Pettigrew wasn't absent for more than a minute or two, all of Christmas Eve, from everything he'd heard. And that long chain, wrapped around the tall man's hand...we think they stole a Time-Turner from the Ministry."

"A Time-Turner?" he frowned thoughtfully. "But most everything was smashed in the...oh, *of course!* It was all just a diversionary tactic! That's why Dad's friends in the Department of Mysteries says that every single person who worked in that department was accounted for! That hooded witch wasn't from the Talismans section--she was from the Chronomancy Department! That explains why Mr. Lubbock was attacked, too, last summer!"

Hermione smiled at him, glad his freckled mind was working full-speed on the problem. She switched it to a grimace. "Yes, and Russel's gone back to try and find out more...but we can't tell anyone, Ron."

"Why not?" he challenged her.

"Because he's going to try to steal it, or smash it, without getting caught. Time is too delicate and too powerful for them to meddle with, and he thinks they've already meddled," she confessed. "He was...um...well, I can't say, because it would be too dangerous," she added, cursing herself silently for almost giving away his identity. "But he'll do what he can to neutralize the Time-Turner, as soon as he can locate it and figure out how to do so without giving himself away. We really can't afford to lose our only spy."

"Right," Ron agreed. He frowned after a moment. "...But that was this morning. Where were you yesterday?"

She couldn't help the blush that stained her cheeks with heat. "Erm...celebrating his birthday. We took in dinner and a musical, down in London. We were sort of distracted, otherwise I would've remembered to talk about all of that stuff last night with him." A yawn caught her off guard, forcing her to smother it behind her palm. "--Excuse me. I didn't get as much sleep as I could've. I'm off to bed for a while."

Reaching for the Floo pot, she cast the powder into the hearth, stating her destination. As she whirled around, green lighting up around her, she caught sight of Ron's face. It was crumpling, but the impression was too fleeting to tell if he was wincing from disgust, indignation, or anger. Spat out into the kitchen at Headquarters, Hermione waited for him to come through, to ask him what was wrong.

He didn't show. Giving up on him after a minute, she climbed the back stairs. Nothing could harm him, at Hogwarts. Still, she didn't relax until she heard the stairs creak. Clad in her pyjamas, she opened the door a tiny crack, and watched the scowling wizard stalk towards his room. He averted his whole head, not just his gaze, as he passed her door. Something had wedged his knickers in a knot, but Hermione didn't know what.

Shrugging philosophically, she retreated to her bed, nudged Crookshanks over a bit so that the marmalade fluffball would stop hogging the center of the mattress, and settled down to sleep. Whatever it was, it could wait for morning. Or rather, the afternoon. It was already morning right now.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XXIX.

Ron seemed to be off-kilter for the next few days. He sulked, glowered, and replied in terse words that he was 'fine', and that he was just 'thinking'. From the glares he sent her way, Hermione wondered if she was on his list of things to 'think' about...and worried that he'd gone and thought himself into a wrong turn somewhere along the way. Like he'd done regarding her so-called 'pregnancy', that first time around.

She discretely asked Harry what was going on, but her blood-brother could only shrug. Ron wasn't speaking to him about it, either, though the two were still sharing a room. As one day became two, then three, he gradually stopped sulking and glowering and started staring and studying her. It made Hermione uneasy. Whenever she tried to get him to talk about it, he dismissed it and moved away. But his freckled brow continued to furrow in thought, and he continued to stare at her when he thought she wasn't looking.

...

Five days after Ron's sulks began, Russel met her in his suite of rooms at the school with a frustrated look of his own. Raking his hands through his blond locks, he paced a few moments, then faced her. Hermione, ready to go up to the seventh floor to work on the next stage of the potion, eyed him warily.

A heavy breath, another rumpling of his hair, and he spoke. "There's been a break-out at Azkaban. Among others, Lucius Malfoy is back...and he is giving his son hell."

"A break-out? When did this happen?" Hermione asked, confused. There had been an Order meeting just earlier that evening, and no mention of escaped Death Eaters had been made.

"Technically, four days from now. I was very close to getting the blasted thing back, when this temporal overlap occurred!" he added, frustration etching lines in his face.

"And now I can't do anything until *after* the breakout officially occurs, to make sure I grab the *right* Time-Turner. But I've found out *when* Bones went, on Christmas Eve--the tall fellow you say you saw, that's Bones."

"...*When* he went?" Hermione asked, arching a brow.

"He wasn't present at the gathering on Christmas Eve because he was suffering from temporal compression," her husband explained. "Time-Turners aren't meant to be used to take someone back in time more than a few days. They're certainly not meant to take someone back in time three and a half *years*."

"Three and a half years!" Hermione exclaimed, startled by that thought. She wanted to know more, but a glance at the clock on the mantel warned her they were running out of time. "--Potion first, husband; explanations second--and I do want that explanation!"

Nodding, he grabbed some of the Floo powder from the pot on the mantel next to the clock, then grimaced. "Remind me to steal more of this stuff from Slughorn's supplies, as well as to make some for ourselves, in the next lull of simmering..."

It didn't take them long to transfer to a classroom hearth near the Room of Requirement, nor to conjure the Room itself. Once inside, she went to the lectern and read the next five steps. Only when they had begun those steps, Hermione coming out from behind the lectern to prepare some of the more innocuous ingredients, did he continue speaking on the previous subject.

"Time-Turners are *also* not meant to be used repetitively. As in, seven times in a row for the same set of hours. Or in this case, days. Bones is suffering once again from temporal compression...and he has aged, to prove it," Russel observed grimly. "Be very glad you were only turning back an hour or two at a time, when you used the thing yourself, in your third year."

There were times when she had turned back her own Time-Turner three and even four times...but only for a few hours each time, Hermione acknowledged. *Well, that wasn't true; I did turn it back a handful of times for eight or so hours of sleep, tucked into that forgotten storeroom on the sixth floor...but that was only duplicating myself so that there were two and sometimes three of me.* No more than a handful times had she duplicated herself up to four versions of herself in the same moment of time. *Chronomancy really is complicated, isn't it?*

As much as she was flattered and honoured and sincerely interested in following in Professor Flitwick's diminutive but skillful footsteps, Hermione couldn't deny that the work of Alphonse Lubbock had its own fascinating appeal...

Potion first, winning the war second, saving Severus' hide from the Aurors third, and then you can focus on your future career, Hermione she chided herself, returning her attention to the text of the Diary. "At this point, you should be ready to macerate the nutmeg I just grated in the mandrake sap..."

...

Ron seemed to recover in the waiting period between the actual breakout, and the news of the breakout. Admittedly, Hermione thought he still looked a little stressed, and he didn't seem to be eating as much when they gathered in the kitchen of the Black House--now the Potter House, technically speaking--but he did manage to smile at her. As far as she was concerned, a happy Ron was a good thing, scads better than a sulking Ron...but he had just as much right to sulk over her relationship with Russel, if that was what it was, as she'd sulked over the fact that Russel was Snape.

Reassuring herself it was just a last vestige of jealousy on his part--since his fit had occurred right after returning from celebrating her husband's birthday--Hermione smiled at him as she passed him in the upstairs hall. She'd had another late night working on the potion, and was ready to take a shower and relax in bed. But when she opened her door, she gasped as the sight awaited her.

Clothing lay strewn all over the place. Books had been scattered about, and her chair upturned. A withered, aged house-elf in a dirty Hogwarts tea-towel was busy pulling hairs from her hairbrush and tossing them onto a bundle of her clothes lying on her bed. "Kreacher! Stop that this instant!"

He tossed the hairbrush at her and scuttled towards her clothes; grabbing them, he vanished with *pop* of house-elf magic.

Hair, clothes--this doesn't look good!

"Harry! Harry!" Hermione shouted, craning her head back out into the hall. The dark-haired wizard jerked open the bathroom door, extracting a toothbrush from his mouth.

"Wha' is it?" he asked her, wiping at the toothpaste on his lips.

"Summon Kreacher!"

He blinked and frowned at her, but ducked into the bathroom to expectorate, then reappeared. "Kreacher, you are Summoned!"

The house-elf appeared, bundled clothes still in his arms. Harry looked up at Hermione for guidance. She faced the house-elf.

"Give me back my clothes, Kreacher! And every scrap of my hair that you stole!"

"Stupid Mudblood thinks Kreacher will obey--hmph! Mudblood has *mud* for brains!"

"Kreacher, give her back her clothes!" Harry ordered him.

The disgruntled house-elf turned and grudgingly approached her. Only halfway; as soon as he was close enough, he hurled her garments at her. Stooping to pick them up, she noted a subtle movement of his gnarled, grey-skinned hand, and realized he still had her hair.

"Give me my hair, too, Kreacher," she ordered, holding out her hand. "All of it!"

"I is not having to obey the likes of *you*!" the house-elf hissed at her, clenching the brown strands in his fist.

Harry strode forward and caught the house-elf's arm with his hand. He displayed the other palm and the crescent-shaped scar on its surface. Quickly moving closer, Hermione displayed her own crescent-shaped scar. That made the house-elf's eyes widen. Glaring at the elf, Harry snapped, "Hermione is my blood-bound sister, and as such, is heir to everything I own or control. That includes *you*! And you *will* obey her every order, from here on out!"

--Or *what*?" Kreacher hissed, narrowing his rheumy, wrinkled eyes..

Hermione, Ron, and Harry all blinked in shock. It was the first time outside of Dobby they'd seen or heard of a house-elf defying authority. The creature wasn't finished.

"Give us clothes, Master! Kreacher doesn't care!"

A sharp look gleamed in Harry's eyes, glinting like the honed edge of a knife. "Oh, no, you're not getting *clothes*. You will obey both my *and* my sister's commands...or I will order you, to take down every last portrait of the Black family, including the picture of Sirius' mother, and excepting only the portrait of Phineas Nigellus...and you will destroy what you take down!"

That made the house-elf cringe. Hermione realized that she didn't feel much in the way of pity for the beastly old retainer. A tiny bit, but frankly, Kreacher was too deliberately horrible to engage more than a scrap of her normally very compassionate nature. Looking down at him as Harry released his arm, she firmed her voice. "Kreacher, you will give back all of my hair and clothing and anything else you have stolen from me. You will also tell us *why* you were trashing my room and stealing my things!"

"I'll tell you...when I'm on my death-bed," the house-elf muttered.

"You will obey our orders and commands promptly, and you will give back everything, and tell us about your motives*now*," Harry ordered Kreacher.

Grimacing, the house-elf tossed Hermione's hairs at her feet. "Kreacher was ordered by a *Pureblood* to get clothes and a bit of the Mudblood's hair!"

"You will call her Miss Granger, and refer to her respectfully, from now on!" Harry ordered him. "Even when speaking to yourself!"

Kreacher cringed. Hermione thought that might've been going too far, but even she was tired of hearing his not-so-muttered complaints. *Serves the unpleasant little blighter right...*

"...Miss Granger," the house-elf grumbled.

"Who ordered you to get all of that stuff, Kreacher?" Hermione interrogated him.

"Gregory Goyle--who is related to the Blacks by his great-great-great-grandfather, and is a *Pureblood*," he added snidely.

"Yeah, and the inbreeding definitely shows," Ron observed, moving closer to the trio. "Why did he want her clothes and her hair?"

Kreacher ignored him.

"Why did he want her clothes and her hair?" Harry repeated firmly.

"Kreacher doesn't know...but is *happy* to serve a *Pureblooded* relation of the Ancient and Noble House of Black!"

That just got on her nerves. Hermione sighed roughly. "Listen, Kreacher; you will take your orders from only the following, authentic, genuine people: From Harry Potter, from myself, from Minerva McGonagall, and from any other person that has already been or will be placed in direct authority over you by one of the three of us, as pertaining to your duties as a Potter-Granger house-elf, or a house-elf of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry--and for your punishment, you will clean up my room, return, replace, and repair anything of mine that you stole or damaged, and have it all done by the time I get out of the shower, in half an hour. *Accio dressing-gown!*"

The worn but still serviceable rose-chenille robe from her school-days flew through the open doorway into her hand. Staring pointedly at the house-elf until he trotted into her room, she headed for the bathroom. Then checked her stride, remembering that her blood-brother was still in the middle of brushing his teeth. He smiled at her, ducked inside for a quick rinse, and gestured for her to have the bathroom all to herself. Grateful, Hermione caught him in a one-armed hug.

"Thanks, Harry. I can feel empathy for the plight of almost every house-elf out there...but *that* one gets on my nerves. And that was my *last* nerve!" she added, exasperation colouring her words.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," he agreed ruefully. "Kreacher's even more unpleasant than Snape!"

Hermione stiffened at the insult, reflexively meeting Ron's gaze at her blood-brother's comment. The redhead flushed, then paled. Letting it go, for Ron didn't seem to be heading back into sulking range, and that was all that mattered to her tired mind right now, Hermione ducked into the bathroom to have her shower. *Why would Gregory Goyle want a bit of my hair, and my clothes, unless it's to impersonate me with some Polyjuice Potion? It's possible they had a little bit of the potion left over from its usage in sixth year, or someone in Slytherin could've brewed a bit more...*

The only place Kreacher could've encountered Goyle was at the school. And someone had attempted to break into Minerva's study, in the past. But she didn't know who was behind it, nor what they were after, nor why. Without actually attending the school full-time, they didn't have enough access to what was going on there, and thus little hope of finding the answers to those particular questions.

...

The news of the prison-break--when it was noticed by the rest of the world, temporally--called an emergency meeting of the Order of the Phoenix into session. Several of the Aurors in their ranks admitted that they'd heard reports from citizens of the now missing prisoners having been on the loose before it happened, but no one could confirm those fleeting sightings. They were only slightly more frequent than the normal sort of I-saw-Lord-Thingy-lurking-by-my-rubbish-bins reports the Aurors typically received from overly nervous wizards and witches, late at night. Not that there weren't plenty of reasons to fear the Death Eaters, but Hermione listened to the reports, biting her lip as she exchanged looks with Minerva, who shook her head in negation of revealing the truth, and Ron.

Who, glowering at Hermione, stood and announced, "--I think they have a Time-Turner!"

That caused chaos. Hermione flinched, Minerva winced, and the meeting degenerated into fears of what the Dark Lord could do with such a chronomagic weapon. The Headmistress caught Hermione's eye and nodded, granting permission for the younger witch to go ahead and tell the truth. She rapped her wand on the edge of her makeshift podium, and tipped her head at Hermione again.

Standing, Hermione spoke loudly, cutting through the debate between Kingsley Shacklebolt, Tonks, and the Weasley twins, who were still babbling in spite of Minerva's attempt at regaining peace in the house. "--*Listen*, everybody! We've *known* about the Time-Turner for over a week! Russel has been trying to steal it for some time, now...but when he realized the prisoners not only escaped, but went back in time *four days ago*, he's had to wait for the overlap in time to catch up with itself, so he'll be stealing the right artifact!"

"Why hasn't he grabbed it before now?" Ron sneered at her. Several of the others voiced equal demands, siding with him.

"Because his *top* priority as our spy is remaining undiscovered! You can bet that 'Lord' Voldiefart is keeping close tabs on that Time-Turner," she added tartly, ignoring the *snerk* of barely suppressed laughter from Hagrid, seated to her right. "The moment his duplicity is uncovered, Russel's life will be forfeit--and I remind you that he has to *appear* to be a loyal, obedient Death Eater, in order to remain hidden in the heart of the enemy's camp!"

Ron flushed, then paled. Mouth tightening, he sat, leaving the aftermath of his outburst to the others. Hermione sat as well, feeling as though she were two breaths from trembling. It felt like something had just happened between the two of them, something important, but she didn't know whether she'd made it worse or better. If it was a contest of wills, Hermione thought she might've won. Anything else was still up in the air, however.

Minerva called everyone back to order. "...Hermione is right. I have known from almost the very same hour that she and Russel surmised the enemy had a Time-Turner in their possession. I have also known he has been busy seeking an opportune time to steal the Time-Turner away from the tall, thin wizard, the one Russel has named 'Bones'. We know him to be Theodric Pelsing-Groswright. We also know that he has aged considerably since the holidays from what Russel believes to be temporal compression sickness.

"Whatever Voldemort has been doing, meddling with time," she concluded, "it not only took place in the past, there was nothing at the time that we could have done to stop it from happening. *Nor* anything Russel could have done to prevent it." Peering over her spectacles, she stared at Ron until the youngest male Weasley looked away. "Not without compromising his position...and I will *not* allow his position to be compromised! He is our only window into the doings of the Dark Lord, and we literally cannot afford to give up our last opportunity to spy upon the other side.

"Do I make myself clear, Ronald Weasley?" she demanded. He glowered at her, but said not another word.

Hermione swung her gaze to the rest of the wizards and witches gathered in the meeting. "I am Russel's handler. I am his liaison to the Order. I was appointed to be so by Albus Dumbledore, whom we all trusted. The man who re-gathered this Order before the rest of the world knew that the Dark Lord had returned, preparing for the very war we are now embroiled in--and we *are* fighting back! Russel has saved many lives because of where he is, and what he is. A spy. I will *not* have his contributions downplayed, and I will *not* have the grave and life-threatening risks that he takes to make those contributions be derided and ignored!"

"...And neither will I," Minerva stated firmly in the silence following Hermione's rant. "Therefore, we shall wait, and trust in Russel's ability to secure the Time-Turner as soon as he *safely* can. For I will *not* have the identity of our only spy unveiled in the enemy's lair!"

"Do you even *know* his identity?" Ron challenged her, rising again from his seat, his lanky teen body towering over everyone else's. Save for Hagrid, but then the half-giant was just as tall when seated as Ron was when standing.

Minerva looked at him over the top of her spectacles, her tone quelling. "Indeed, I do."

"--Zen 'oo is 'ee?" Fleur Weasley asked, voicing the curiosity most everyone in the room was feeling.

"A brilliant, talented young man who once attended Hogwarts. A man..." Her gaze slid from Fleur's face to Hermione's, her voice faltering for a moment. The muscles in her jaw-line tightened, and she continued firmly, "A man whom I am willing to trust my very life with, if need be--and that is *all* any of you need know, at this time. We will leave the recovery of the Time-Turner in his hands, and in Hermione's, as our most direct contact with him. What we need to do is concentrate on finding and tracking the escapees.

"Our job at this moment is not to confront them, but to track their movements and report them to the Aurors, using Nymphadora Tonks, Alastor Moody, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Violetta Whitehall as your primary sources for passing along any information that you have--but if you have a limited amount of time, use the Dicto-Quill charm and pen a note to the Auror Department directly, and remember to sign it 'Ring of Truth'. I'm certain Hermione and Russel won't mind," she added dryly. "I want to step up our surveillance on Mrs. Malfoy, the Notts, the Hogs Head, Mr. Ollivander..."

...

She had taken to meeting Severus in his quarters at the School; he would Floo directly from 42 Spinner's End, and she from 12 Grimmauld Place. From there, they would Floo to the Illusions classroom, and walk the last few dozen yards on the seventh floor. The potion was in another of its mildly-involved simmering stages, this time requiring cod liver oil added by the teaspoonful once a night, with a stir five times counterclockwise. Once they saw to that, Hermione intended to open the door to the junk-room so her husband could peruse his mother's stash of margin-scribbled books, and she would go down to meet Ron and Harry in the library for more study.

This time, when they arrived, he flashed a grin at her as he wrapped the ribbon of his disguise amulet around his throat. "I have a surprise for you. I'll show it to you after we've dealt with the potion for the night."

Curious, Hermione held her tongue, waiting for her surprise. They reached the Room of Requirement, walked back and forth a few times, and Hermione opened the doorknob for the suitably disguised Russel. She gestured him to enter first, being a bit of a feminist, then shifted to follow him inside. The doorknob dissolved under her fingertips, and she jerked to a stop, nearly hitting her face on a suddenly solid stone wall. Bewildered, she blinked at it, lifted her hand, and ran it over the surface.

No entrance. No doorway. No Room of Requirement. Frowning, Hermione backed up, paced, and concentrated hard on conjuring the right room, the one with the Anima Te in it. No door appeared for her to use. She relaxed her mind, re-gathered her formidable will, and concentrated on forming the door to whatever room her husband had entered. Nothing happened.

That unnerved her. Somehow, she didn't think this was the surprise he'd mentioned. *It's like Harry, trying to get into the room where Draco was hiding last year she thought. But Draco couldn't possibly be on the School grounds! And the only people who really know about that trick who do have access to Hogwarts...*

The back of her neck prickled as the image of a certain glowering redhead rose in her mind. If there was a reason for Ron to glare and sulk, and then exclude her but *not* Russel from the Room of Requirement... This wasn't good. This was, in fact--

Her finger burned. The ring wrapping around it was shifting its scales, forming words. Lifting her glowing wand so that the light at its tip could illuminate the pattern, she read the words that formed.

...wouldn't she?

That was a strange thing for the ring to write. It wriggled into more lines. Hermione, glancing both ways, ducked into an empty room across the hall, lined with dusty old desks and a bank of windows glazed in blue. A whisper as she pulled out a stool and sat, and Sigurd appeared on the desk in front of her, his hide large enough to see the conversation unfurling before her eyes.

Does she know who you really are? Does she know what a sick bastard she married?

Do you really think a woman like Hermione would allow herself to be married to someone she didn't trust?

But how could she trust you, if you've been lying to her?

Ron, please; I know she's told you about the rings, how they enforce the truth between us--

--Keep your hands on your head! One twitch, and she'll be the Widow Snape! And don't think I haven't fantasized about her being the Widow Fawkeson, either!

Oh, shite. Scooping up the dragonette as she stood, Hermione demanded, "Sigurd, take me to Severus this instant!"

A planting of one golden paw, a yanking swirl of the universe, and she stumbled into the lab next to her blond-haired, kilt-clad husband. Not even the Room of Requirement could bar her from his side, apparently. Exactly as she'd hoped. Ronald Weasley did have his wand out and pointed at Russel, who was standing near the door with his hands on top of his head. The wand-sheath at his hip was empty, and Hermione could see a bit of dark wood poking out of her friend's back pocket.

That irritated her. Jerking her wand out of her pocket as Sigurd shifted onto her other arm, she demanded, "*Accio* wands!"

Both lengths of polished wood yanked themselves out of Ron's keeping. They sailed across the room to her, but she only caught one of them; Severus' ebony wand. He caught the other one in his tanned hand, Ron's wand. They looked at each other as Ron glared. Hermione offered Russel his wand, and he offered her Ron's, and when they were exchanged, she glared back at her friend.

"--Just what in the world do you think you were doing, Ron?"

Face reddening with outrage, he jabbed his finger at the killed Canadian beside her. "--He's *Severus Snape!* Greasy git of the dungeons! Black bat of the basement--*he killed Dumbledore!*"

"Pfff!" she snorted, affecting a grimace of disbelief. "Whatever makes you think that?"

"Because he's our one and only spy for the Order, because his birthday is January 9th--which the twins once told me was Professor Snape's birthday!--and because that wand is Professor Snape's wand! An ebony wand! In case you weren't paying attention to all those dissertations about wands at the exposition, last October, ebony wands are very rare in this part of the wizarding world! And because, now that I realize it and am looking at him," Ron added, flipping his hand at Russel, "he even *looks* like Snape, underneath that hair and that tan! Don't you tell me he's not Severus Snape! I'm not stupid!"

Thankfully, the older man at her side kept in his Russel persona, and didn't rise to the bait of Ron's words. Hermione felt her jaw tighten grimly. Mouth compressed for a moment, she planted her fists on her hips, still holding her and his wands. She couldn't deny his logic; those were many of the same things she had noticed, or would have noticed, in the same situation as him. "No. But you *are* an hypocrite!"

Ron blinked at her, his blue eyes wide with shock. "...An *hypocrite*? Hermione--he murdered Professor Dumbledore! And you *married* him!"

Drawing a breath to retort, Hermione felt Russel shift behind her. The touch of his arms wrapping around her made her forget what she was going to say; a tilt of her head showed that tanned mouth twisting in a smirk as he spoke. "Yes, and your wonderful, kind, caring and generous relatives *insisted* on throwing the two of us a surprise wedding on Christmas Day. How romantic."

Ron stiffened, reddening to an alarming shade of apoplexy. Hermione elbowed her husband in the ribs. Sigurd gave her a mildly annoyed look for disturbing his post, and vanished from the offending arm as she spoke.

"Stop it, Russel; that's not helping the matter," she muttered fiercely. Raising her voice, she stated grimly, "Alright, Ron, why don't we just run with this little scenario of yours, shall we? Whether or not he actually is who you're accusing him of being, let's just *pretend* that he really is Severus Snape, and see where that line of thought gets us?"

"First of all, you're an hypocrite," she repeated. "Whether or not he is Snape, you *are* one. You said to me that you'd ask Snape himself to brew the Anima Te, if you could--and you *also* said you'd trust Severus Snape to brew a potion to save Percy's life! To stand here and threaten a man you believe to be Snape, after having said those things, is very two-faced, Ron!"

Some of his colouring had eased, but it re-flushed across his face at her pointed rebuke.

"Secondly, if he *is* Severus Snape...then I *am* married to Severus bloody Snape. But regardless of *who* I am married to, I am quite happy in my marriage! If I weren't, do you really think I'd go through a legal, Church-sanctified marriage ceremony, if I didn't *want* to be married to this man?" she asserted, arching her brow. "I could have come up with a dozen perfectly acceptable excuses as to why we shouldn't have been married, that day!"

"Then why didn't you?" he demanded.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I *told* you; I'm *happy* in this marriage with him!"

"Yeah, but...that's because you don't know who he is!"

Russel spoke, his accented voice flat and implacable. "She does know who I am, Ron. She knows that I am the man who saved the Creevey family, and more than a dozen other families from attacks by the Death Eaters. She knows that I am the man who procured a salve to save your brother's life when no one else could manage the task. She knows that I am the sole source of information on the Dark Lord's movements that the Order of the Phoenix possesses, and she knows that I have Albus Dumbledore's complete trust.

"She knows that she--or even you--can ask Albus' portrait, in the Headmistress' study of this school, if he knows who I really am, and if he really trusts me, knowing all that he does about me. She knows that I am the father of our unborn child, and that I have given a considerable amount of protection to her, for it. She knows, and has known for some time...that I *am* Severus Snape."

Ron's lips parted from the shock of his adversary's freely given admission, staring as Russel continued.

"And she knows that I was indeed the only hope for a cure for your brother. I am the only hope you have for crafting this potion you need...and I am still the only hope you will have of uncovering the information the right side of the war will need to bring the Dark Lord's reign to an end. She's right, you know," he added with deceptive mildness as Hermione looked back and forth between them. "You *are* an hypocrite, if you cannot get past your prejudices long enough to see the truth of all that I have done *for* our side, in this war."

"But--you killed Albus Dumbledore!" Ron protested, finding his voice. Hermione couldn't blame him for not being able to get past that point. It had been a serious sticking point for her, too. A lump lodged in her craw. She had swallowed it down, though.

"You have my permission to go to his portrait, and ask *him* if he still trusts the man who murdered him, that night," Russel drawled, as if the subject were of no importance anymore. His tone hardened in warning as he continued. "But I would advise you, for the sake of victory, of *not* informing your other best friend of my identity. Harry must *not* be distracted from his goal. I know that he will be instrumental in the Dark Lord's defeat, though no one but Albus knew the details of how. If he is side-tracked by his blind hatred of me--"

--Blind hatred!" Ron snorted. "That's the cat calling the cauldron black!"

"...Be that as it may," and Hermione could hear the impatience being stuffed into a chest and locked away, in her husband's voice, "if he allows his hatred of me to mingle with the knowledge of my true identity, it will blind him, and he will freeze on the battlefield. You cannot have two primary targets. The Dark Lord *must* be defeated. Potter and I can come to an...*understanding*...afterwards. If both of us survive."

Hermione hoped that little sneer on the word 'understanding' was simply part of his Snape persona's cover, but knew there was still too much bad blood between the two males. Christmas had been an act on Severus' part, as Russel; Harry had simply been ignorant of the truth. "I want your word of honor, Ronald. You will not tell, hint, write, gesture, or by any look, word or deed, inform or confirm to Harry that Russel is really Snape in disguise--your word of honor!"

Closing his mouth on the protest that had been forming, Ron studied her for a long while. Finally, he sighed roughly. A hand rumbled his coppery-red hair. He looked solely at her, not Russel, and the corners of his mouth were pulled down, but he did concede.

"...You have my word. I owe your...*husband*...that much, for saving my brother's life." The admission looked like it cost him. Hermione privately approved. Not because he admitted what he should've admitted all along, but because it looked like Ronald Bilius Weasley was finally making the same difficult, maturity-forging sort of decisions that she'd had to make in dealing with the identity of her husband, too.

Thankfully, her husband was gracious in his reply. That, or perhaps it was because her elbow was still bruisingly close to his ribs. He dipped his blond head slightly. "You have my word, such as it is, that I had no foreknowledge of nor hand in the attack at the Ministry."

"Yeah, well, you did get that Salve for him," Ron grudgingly admitted. "And it worked, even if the colour was a bit funny..."

"Now that the matter of my identity has been settled, you will have to leave. We have a potion to complete," the older wizard ordered him, sounding more like Snape than Russel in the brusqueness of his tone. Plucking the younger wizard's wand from Hermione's grasp, he approached Ron, who flinched. A slight, Snape-ish curl of his lip, and he held out the slim shaft. "I suggest you further your efforts in assisting your friend to close his mind and shut his mouth. Silence and secrecy will do more to help the lot of you survive, than brash, loud bravery."

Ron accepted the handle of his wand. Hermione warily gripped her wand, waiting tensely until the redhead sheathed his own at his side without firing any hexes. He did lift his finger, though, pointing the freckled digit at her disguise-altered husband. "You'd better watch your step, though. If I hear *anything* about you mistreating Hermione--"

"--You'll what?" Russel sneered, and for a moment, he was Snape, in tone and posture, coldness and arrogance, despite his distinctly different appearance. It was a reminder that, under the affable personality he'd cultivated as the kilt-wearing Russel, the man behind the mask was still a very powerful, very formidable wizard.

Setting his jaw, Ron replied, "I'll tell my whole family who you are, *and* what you've done, that's what. An *edited* version of all you have done. There won't be a wilderness remote enough nor an ocean deep enough to hide yourself in, if we choose to come after you, all together."

"What makes you think there would be anything left of me to go after?" the older, kilt-clad wizard challenged Ron, confusing both the redhead and his anxiously listening wife.

Ron frowned. "...Excuse me?"

"You underestimate the wrath of my wife, Ronald Weasley, should I be foolish enough to 'mistreat' her. Now, go. I will not have nearly a month's work on this potion ruined because you lingered too long."

Meeting Ron's gaze, Hermione tipped her head at the door out of the room. He crossed towards it, pausing near her. "If he does do anything--"

"Wait until I *tell* you he's done something I don't like, Ron. I can keep him in line for the little things," Hermione murmured under her breath. "Your help is appreciated, but at this moment in time, not really necessary. Go help Harry. Practice your Occlumency. I'll meet up with you later."

He gave her a dubious look, but left the chamber. Hermione made sure the door was shut, wished firmly for it to be impervious to interruption, then turned to the lectern. As strange as it might be, she felt like she might actually *be* able to keep him in line with the little things. She was managing so far, wasn't she?

"...*Will* he keep his word?"

"I believe he will. When he's had a chance to get over the shock of it, he'll know it's not wise to tell Harry. Or anyone else. He does have a brain," Hermione allowed, "and lately, he's been using more and more of it. Of course, that doesn't preclude the high likelihood that he'll give me hell for all of this, and likely will try to insult you every chance he gets, until he's accepted it."

He added the cod liver oil and stirred the cauldron five times counterclockwise. "And what will you be doing, while he is denigrating me?"

"Defending you, as always."

That made him grunt. "Not 'always'. The three of you--"

"The three of us, nothing!" Hermione retorted as she checked the directions in the text. "...Cover and let stand until tomorrow's addition of oil, and then the day after is when we add the dried, crushed maidensbreath petals and skullcap flowers," she instructed, closing the Diary before she continued. "I *always* defended you, while we were students at this school. I always gave you consistent respect. Even when you didn't really deserve any." Pausing, she added truthfully, "I suppose that's why your actions last spring really wounded me. The statue of respect I'd built for you might've been made from electrum, not from solid gold...but I didn't notice the toes were still made out of clay."

Cleansing himself as he passed through the wards, he stopped just beyond them and studied her for a long moment. "I am merely a man, Jane. The proverbial clay of my flaws stretch to my chin. Accept them, or suffer disappointment. I cannot change my past. Nor will I change my ways."

Her first impulse to snort was that *hecould* change his ways. Her second thought kept her from doing so, however. For as long as the Dark Lord lived, he couldn't, *daren't* change his ways. Not overtly, and not outside of the context of one of his personae. Instead of remarking on either, Hermione shrugged. "You must do as you see fit. And I," she sighed, "must be getting back to the library."

"Not just yet." Turning slightly, he narrowed his gaze, staring at the wall behind her. A ripple in the wall turned itself into a Floo-sized hearth, with an ubiquitous pot of Floo Powder sitting on its mantel. "You and I have business down in my quarters. The Diary is closed?"

"Of course." Fetching a handful of the fine, greenish-grey grit, Hermione cast it into the flames. "Professor Snape's quarters!"

Whirling through, she caught her balance, then moved a few yards away to give him room to emerge. It occurred to her as she watched his blond locks flinging around with the force of his spin that she surely should be starting to feel nausea by now. *Of course, not every woman feels morning sickness during pregnancy, but the vast majority of them usually do...* She didn't know what being pregnant should feel like, really. *All I know is, I feel great...*

"So, what is it you wanted to discuss?" she asked her husband as he straightened and dusted off his clothes. The colourful hues of his amethyst shirt and red-and-blue plaid kilt were about as far removed from the severe, plain black of his professor's clothes as he could get. One would think that the red and blue would clash with the purple, but the lines of the plaid were small enough that it sort of gave an overall purplish cast to the wool, which the shirt matched very well. Spinning through the Floo only made it seem even more purple, albeit highlighted in a clashing green glow.

"In the bedroom," he directed her, gesturing with one hand for her to precede him.

Guessing what he wanted, Hermione smirked wryly. *Well, at least my sex-drive hasn't diminished with pregnancy. If I were morning-sick all of the time, I'd not be in the mood...but I think I'm even more turned-on now than I was beforehand, back when the only man in my bed that I knew was Russel Fawkeson.* Entering the bedroom, she flicked the logs and coals laid in the hearth to roaring life, and added a temporary Warming Charm to the air in the room, heating the winter-chilled chamber further. Only then did she start to strip off the layers of her clothes. When her husband didn't object, but instead started removing his own, she smiled again. *As I thought...*

He was thin, but there were muscles playing under that thoroughly tanned skin. Muscles, and very little hair. She only noticed when she was naked, too, when she shivered from a cold, uncarpeted patch of stone floor underfoot. Rubbing her upper arms, she shifted onto the carpeted stretch beside the bed, and smiled at him.

"So...is this what you had in mind, when you wanted me to come down here?"

"No, this is."

Hermione whipped around, shocked at the voice behind her. It came, she saw, from a fallow-skinned, dark-haired, naked version of her husband. He stood on the far side of the bed from the two of them, and had marks on his body, reddish spots where someone had suckled with their lips, and pinkish lines where someone's nails had scratched his skin. Even from the far side of the broad bed, Hermione could smell the scent of sex on his skin, and see it glistening on his loins and his chin.

"...Severus?" she enquired warily. Something else glistened. A long, deceptively delicate-looking chain, with a tiny, familiar disc in a setting that looked something like a gyroscope dangled down his chest.

Dark eyes gleamed with amusement, but it was the man moving up behind her that gave the reply. "Call me Russel, and him Severus. I'm glad to see I followed through with my idea."

"Set your alarm for fifty-five minutes from now. One turn will be sufficient. We don't need to exhaust ourselves. Or our wife," Severus commanded, smiling. It was a warmer smile than expected, though just as devious-looking as one would expect from the naked former Potions Master. As the original, Russel-version moved to comply, Severus removed the Time-Turner from around his neck, placing it on the left-hand nightstand on his side of the bed. "Place your Time-Turner on the other nightstand, over there, and remember to take it with you when the hour is through. And do not worry, when you become me, as to what you will say or do. There really isn't anything that's going to happen that would be too critical to worry about altering. Just an hour of mind-addling pleasure.

"As for you, wife...get on the bed." A jerk of his hand on the edge of the covers and they flipped back out of their way, revealing crisp, clean, white sheets. "Now."

Knees trembling at the sexy, authoritative command, Hermione crawled onto the bedding. He met her halfway, catching her arms as she rose onto her knees, and pulling her into a kiss that was almost alarming in its intensity. She could smell her musk on him, feel the damp prodding of his prick against her lower belly, struggled to adjust to the hungry thrusts of his tongue. The bed dipped behind her, and a warm body brushed and pressed against her back. Severus-as-Russel.

His hand fisted in her hair, tugging her head gently but implacably back. Severus kissed his way down her throat to her breasts, as Russel claimed her mouth with his own lips. Chest-length black hair tickled against her belly as the slightly older version licked her nipples into stiffness. Chest-length blond hair caressed her cheeks and shoulders as the slightly younger version tasted the flavour of her musk that had been left behind by his counterpart's kiss. A dew that had yet to be supped from her flesh.

The attack of two lovers, one light, one dark, and both perfect, was very arousing. Hands on her breasts, on her back, her arms, her buttocks, caressing her thighs, tugging on her hair, tickling her ribs. Lips nibbling, noses nuzzling, skin sliding, muscles flexing, they distracted her with a plethora of sensations. Somehow, she found herself lying on her side, facing the dark-haired version, surrounded by both men. When she tried to caress the male in front of her, he urged her to turn around and apply her hands to her other lover.

It wasn't easy, concentrating through their own ministrations, but she rubbed Russel's nipples, sucked on his tongue, and scraped her teeth down his throat. Hermione had come to terms with being a sensual person, first with the man she'd thought was merely Russel, and then after a struggle, with the man he really was, Severus. Now that she was in bed with both of them--and she knew they were the same man, though the blond one stayed more in-persona by smiling in between kisses--she wanted to participate as actively as she could.

It didn't help that their hands were everywhere, touching, caressing, melting her mind with pleasure. For such a normally bitter, harsh, unpleasant man, she had to admit he could take all of that negative passion and channel it into his lovemaking. Positive passion that overwhelmed her, or she thought overwhelmed her, until the dark-haired man behind her shifted her on top of her paler-haired lover. Four hands positioned them, two prying apart the folds of her femininity, two more positioning the turgid, tanned shaft prodding between her thighs. Sinking down onto his flesh with a sigh, Hermione focused on slowly riding the version Russel, forgetting about the version Severus.

Until the bastard pushed her over onto all fours, lifted one of her feet off of the bed, and licked between her toes. Instantaneous climax. Crying out, Hermione tossed her head back, leaning her upper body into the golden hands that cupped and kneaded her breasts. Severus alternated the torment between her two feet, his hair brushing against her ankles and soles. She didn't even try to ride Russel anymore, just shuddered and moaned as his counterpart played with her feet.

Grey eyes met her gaze as she came down from her sensual high. Feeling a little dazed, she slowly relaxed, licking her lips. She stiffened in the next moment, as the wizard behind her tapped his wand against her pelvis.

"Rectumundirenu."

Spell-scoured, Hermione held herself very still. Sure enough, he muttered the lubrication spell next, touching the tip of his wand to her puckered rosebud, followed by his finger. Probing her depths gently, he eased his digit inside, rocking it back and forth. That made her want to rock back into his touch. But when she did so, Russel's hands shifted from her breasts to her hips, holding her still. Rocking back onto his counterpart's finger meant rocking onto him, and he apparently didn't want that, just yet.

A second finger joined the first. Russel shifted one hand down to play with her clitoris, easing some of the pain of stretching. It helped when Severus added a third finger, wriggling his fingers a little to seat them deeply, but it also made her want to rock again. Movement would help ease the pain. They held her still, though, as he extracted his fingers, shifted closer on his knees, and slowly pressed the tip of his erection into her fundament.

Breath hissed through her teeth as he sank in, until his groin pressed against her backside. It was tight, a little painful, but so...*full*. Hermione heard herself whimpering with each pant of her lungs--and they weren't even moving, yet.

"Together, or alternating?" one of them asked. Hermione didn't realize her eyes had closed until he spoke. It came from in front of her, so it had to be Russel, the earlier version. The one behind her shifted, pressing her forward and down, until her breasts brushed his counterpart's lean chest.

"Together...to start with," the one at her back purred. Hermione shivered hard at the suggestive sound. Giving herself up to the sensations, she let them rock her hips in their hands, lifting her halfway off, then tugging her firmly back on again. The full, filling sensations dragged animalistic groans and grunts from her throat.

Opening her eyes, she blinked in startlement. For a moment, she'd forgotten that the one underneath her was blond and grey-eyed. *If anything...* her distracted mind informed her from one of the few non-pleasure-addled corners, *...this proves you're falling more for Severus than Russel...* A twist of her torso as they bounced into her, and she caught the dark-haired version behind the neck with one hand. Kissing him was a little awkward, but she tried it for a few moments, then leaned down and kissed the light-haired version.

They tasted the same, save for a lingering hint of muskiness on the older version's lips. At some point, the blond version would go down on her, suckling her nectar from her petals, so to speak. The florid thought made her smile briefly. But the visual differences between the two annoyed her. As much as it was a fantasy to have both of the dark-and-light versions of her husband pleasuring her, she wanted to make love with Severus.

She wanted to make him understand without the clumsiness of words that she really was trying to love him. Not Kind, Fun-Loving Russel, and he'd not think she was interested in Sarcastic, Bitter Snape, but the complex, whole man who lay buried within each persona. The man who was burying himself repeatedly in her, in duplicate. Concentrating through her rising pleasure, Hermione fumbled at the back of Russel's neck. Two tries, and she unhooked the velvet band. Tugging the amulet and its ribbon out of the way, pushing it under one of the pillows, she smiled down at him as his hips slowed.

This was what she wanted. The rich, golden tan faded from his skin, leaving it pale and pink-sallow from his exertions. His eyes and hair darkened, sprawled on the white sheets with increasing contrast. Leaning down again, she kissed the former Russel, the younger version of Severus Snape. Kissed the daylights out of him.

"--Alternating!" the one at her back grunted, and the two men grabbed her hips for balance, plunging in with renewed, syncopated vigor.

That interrupted her kiss, but it was alright; breathing had become necessary again. Panting over her lover, she let her hair sway and curtain his face, staring down into his jet-black eyes. Abandoning his own grip on her hips, the Severus underneath her lifted his hands to her face, brushing back her wavy locks. There was some light from the candles in their wrought iron sconces, and light from the flickering fire, but her hair had been blocking too much light to see each other clearly.

Now they could, and she discovered it was shiveringly intimate. That shiver intensified into a shudder, and from there into a bucking of her hips as her pleasure boiled up rapidly from within. Though her eyes narrowed to slits as she moaned, lost in her climax, Hermione struggled to keep her eyes open. She wanted to watch her husband reaching his own peak.

The clenching of her inner muscles seemed to be the trigger. Biting his lower lip, he strained his head back, then grabbed her waist and stabbed himself up into her body, chanting her middle name. It was very erotic, watching him climax; doubly so to feel his semen warming her depths, and triply so to feel his counterpart still thrusting into her in steady rhythm, prolonging her own bliss.

The Severus at her back convulsed, repeating her middle name in a single, drawn-out growl. More wet heat filled her as he slumped against her back, sweating and gasping for breath. Glad she was braced on all fours, Hermione concentrated on getting her breathing back to normal. It was a futile cause. Her feminine muscles contracted every few heartbeats, making both men twitch where they were still embedded in her flesh.

Severus-on-top finally pulled out, rolling onto his back next to the two of them. One arm flopped over his eyes as he continued to calm his heavy breathing. Severus-on-bottom eyed his counterpart, equally flushed, but a little less breathless; it was only his first orgasm of the evening, after all, not his second. "...Budge over."

Squirming, Severus-the-elder complied. Severus-the-younger nudged Hermione off of him, guiding her into the space between them on the bed. Twisting onto his side, he stroked her slowly cooling body with his left hand. Severus-the-elder twisted onto his side as well, removing his right forearm from his brow so that he, too, could bring a hand into play. Lying on her back as she was, Hermione merely had to turn her head to either side to see Severus Snape in all his naked, pale-skinned, dark-haired glory.

Lifting her hands, she tucked her fingers behind their necks. A tug brought their heads into range; a slight lift of her own to one side and then the other allowed her to place kisses on their lips. Soft kisses that they returned briefly. Letting her head fall back onto the rumpled pillows, Hermione couldn't prevent a laugh from escaping her.

"Something amuses you?" one of them, the one on her right, asked her with an arched brow and a faint hint of smugness; no doubt he was remembering this conversation from his younger self's perspective.

She blushed, but decided to be brave and relate the thought that had prompted her giggle. "Oh...I was just thinking, some women have a fantasy about having two men at once, and sometimes in those fantasies...the two men have each other, too. But you're both, well, *you*, and the likelihood of watching you snog yourself is very, very low...isn't it?"

Her request for confirmation was asked in a very quiet voice. A part of her really did want to see--*holy mother of Merlin!* Eyes wide, Hermione watched as the younger version cupped the back of the head of the older one, his fingers covering hers, and pulled the older Severus into an open-mouthed kiss. Right on top of her. She literally had a front-row view, since they were snogging only three or four inches above her face.

Gobsmacked, aroused, she watched the two identical wizards making out for a moment more, then they broke apart. The one on her left wrinkled his long, thin nose at himself, before looking down at her. "...I trust that satisfies your curiosity?"

"Because I--we--would rather be kissing you," the version on her right asserted, putting a firm end to the subject.

Disappointed--that kiss had been hot--but compliant, Hermione sighed and nodded.

Elder Snape peered over his shoulder, then curled himself upright, shifting further down the bed. "You take the upper lips. I'll take the lower, then we'll switch."

It took Hermione less than the amount of time Severus-the-younger spent in closing the six or so inches between his mouth and hers to realize what Severus-the-elder had in mind. Parting her thighs, she lifted her knees a little, bracing her heels on the mattress. Settled between her legs, he caressed her legs with his fingers while his counterpart caressed her lips with his tongue.

After the first flick of the other tongue against her folds, it didn't really matter who did what to her body. It was all good, as far as she cared. She had one set of fallow muscles to play with within reach, another playing with her own skin, and she let herself caress as much flesh as she could grasp, clutching and rubbing and even lightly scratching all over. Little red marks appeared in the wake of her mouth as she twisted her upper body further into her lover, kissing and suckling whatever she could reach.

One leg stretched out, the other knee rose higher, and her body managed enough leverage to reach for his penis. A tug, and he scooted up the length of her body, sitting up by the headboard. A twist of his hips, and she took him into her mouth, tasting the flavour of musk from her own flesh, drying on his shaft. He endured it for a little bit, but pulled away when she fondled his scrotum while sliding her lips over his glans. "--Enough! Switch! Switch..."

The two men switched positions. Hermione started to reach for Elder Severus' penis, then remembered where it had been. Cleansing properties of the Voiding Charm or not, he had used lubricant, and she didn't exactly want to taste that. To her relief, however, he used his wand to tap his groin. "*Virilis mundic!*"

There wasn't much of a change after the spell, just a disappearance of the glistening creme that had coated his shaft. But when he crawled a little closer, he smelled very clean, as if fresh from a shower. Grasping his erection, she guided the hot, semi-hardened flesh close enough to envelop with her mouth.

"Oh, god, yes! Mmmh, *good*..."

The alarm by the bed rang, startling all three of them. Younger-Snape scrambled out from between Hermione's leg's, the only one most able to get to the old-fashioned, brass clock. Smacking it silent, he panted for a moment, licking his lips.

His hair was a little mussed, but he had the scratch marks, love-bites, and glistening body parts from before. Picking up the correct Time-Turner, the one on the right-side nightstand, he looped it around his neck. Since he had appeared on the other side of the bed, he padded over to that side. The older Severus crawled over Hermione's body, settling onto her left side; apparently, it was an invitation, or a remembrance, for the younger version leaned over the left side of the bed just long enough to snog his wife, and slide his fingers through her cleft. Pulling back, he suckled her dew from his skin, then wrapped his hand briefly around his erection, sliding the remaining moisture across his flesh.

"Time for me to go." Lifting the Time-Turner, he gave it a single, carefully gauged twist...and vanished.

Hermione sighed, head dropping back against the rumpled pillows. "Wow..."

"Precisely."

"I suppose you're too tired to continue?" she asked carefully, still feeling a throbbing between her legs from that interrupted bout of cunnilingus.

Severus--the one and only--smirked and shifted, turning to straddle her. "A pity we have to hand in the thing."

"Well..." For a moment she had to wait while he settled into place over her, head to her groin and knees beside her ears. "I've been thinking about that. Maybe we should just keep it here, where it's safe behind the Fidelius Charm. After all, if it goes back to the Ministry, they'll only try to steal it again..."

She felt the breath of his laughter puffing against her dew-soaked nether-curls.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XXX.

Hermione didn't know if Ron went to the Headmistress' study to talk to Albus Dumbledore's portrait or not. She did know that, aside from a few tight-lipped looks around her for a couple of days, he did settle down and act his normal self again. Harry, thankfully, remained blissfully unaware of the truth behind the awkward undercurrents.

Grateful that her redheaded friend had developed enough maturity and tact to keep his mouth shut, Hermione continued working with Severus in his Russel guise as they brewed the Anima Te. When she had the time to spare in the late evenings, she visited Professor Flitwick to continue discussing a potential Charms apprenticeship with him. Of all of her future career options, that one was beginning to look more and more like the perfect match for her skills, and a career as a teacher a possible outlet for her desire to share what she learned with others.

Aside from the removal of her Velocitemplet, she didn't experience any further nausea. No morning-sickness whatsoever. Poppy's examinations, conducted late in the evenings as the weeks progressed, showed that Hermione was in the peak of her health, and having a near-perfect pregnancy. A fact which irked the mediwitch to no end, since her own pregnancies years ago--Poppy had borne two sons, long since grown and moved off into mediwizardry careers of their own--had been miserable affairs of nausea, bloating, crankiness, and general over-all misery.

It did make Hermione curious, though, as to whether or not she'd created a new Charm, the night she'd double-uncursed her husband. Lying in his bed after five and a half hours of gruelingly fast-paced preparation work for one of the potion's stages, she stared at the pages of the book in her hand. She didn't really see the text, nor the cramped writings scribbled in the margins by Severus' mother.

First, I used Fecundis Potentis, which I'd intended to create the 'most perfect' or 'most powerful' form of fertility. But that didn't seem to work, she admitted to herself. So I tried a variation, Fecundis Maximis, intended to bring the recipient to maximum fertility. That worked. Merlin, it worked to the point where he literally ripped off my jeans, Hermione thought, glancing briefly at the man reclining next to her, reading another of his mother's margin-scribbled books as he lay propped up on extra pillows conjured against the headboard. *But what if the first version did work?*

That was an intriguing idea. It was made even more noteworthy by the fact that her husband, in his irritation at being hexed, had snapped those two Charms right back onto her. *Which means, if Fecundis Potentis affected me, I was brought to my own 'most perfect' form or fertility, as well as to my, erm, most aroused form, thanks to the latter spell... The implications being that, if both of us were hit with 'most perfect' fertility, then this would be a 'most perfect' pregnancy...*

Another thought struck her. *I unfortunately don't have the time to figure this out right now, but if I can experiment on lab-mice or something, if I'm right, then our progeny could very well be 'most perfect' as well--the most perfect selection of ovum and sperm available.* A shiver ran through her. *The Fecundis Maximis could be used to counteract infertility in couples, which could raise the birth-rate among the wizarding community. That birthrate, mostly among Purebloods, but somewhat among Half-Bloods as well, has been declining because of inbreeding. Fecundis Potentis, on the other hand, would take care of the increased likelihood I've noticed for Squibs to be born among the Pureblooded sector.*

Squeezing her eyes shut, Hermione winced. *Oh, shite. I just created the perfect 'master-race' spell--and I'm about as far from racist as anyone could get! ...That is, if the spell works as I think it does. I really need to experiment with it a bit more, before I'll know for certain.*

There were potential uses for both spells: women who suffered horrible pregnancies could benefit from *Potentis*, and those who suffered from impotence and infertility could benefit from *Maximis*. But Hermione didn't want to let control of either new Charm escape her grasp. *First of all, I don't want anyone knowing how to create a 'most perfect' race of wizards and witches. Second, I don't want only one person to have Maximis cast on them at the time, and have them practically rape the other person, in their sexual haste. Not everyone has as much self-control as Severus and I do.*

Maximis could be a potent fertility Charm, however, when applied mutually on a fully consenting couple. For a few moments, Hermione allowed herself to picture a future where she was the wizarding world's equivalent to Dr. Ruth. Her mouth curved in humour as she pictured herself poking her wand around the corner of a hotel room wherein a husband and wife stood naked and waiting, zapping them both with a silent version of the spell, and closing the door quickly as the two tore into each other lustily. *But not just any couple, she decided silently.*

Too many couples--not all by any means, but still, too many of them--leap into sex without thought for consequences. Too many couples get married because of those consequences. And too many people, both male and female, just aren't cut out to be parents. Not good ones, at any rate. Severus' own parents fought, and cheated on each other, and I get the impression his father probably drank, too, as well as womanized. Maybe even beat his wife and child, when he was drunk. I wouldn't go around demanding that people who do things like that can't have children...but I definitely wouldn't want to ensure they had children, with these spells...

Anyone I tell about my new Fertility Charms would have to undergo a rigorous screening for their own sense of caution, discretion, and ethics... Maybe I could develop a spell book that, like Lucrezia's, weeded out those who were worthy of reading its contents from those who were not...though my criteria would be a bit different than hers. And I'd definitely need to experiment on lab-mice or something, to make sure my suppositions are true, rather than just theorems.

But all of that would have to wait until after the war was over. A lot of things in her life would have to wait until the war was over, really. By the start of April, it should all be over--Voldemort, the Death Eaters, Dementors sucking the joy out of the wizarding and Muggle worlds alike. At least, she hoped and prayed it would all be over.

Returning her attention to the book in her hands, she turned the page. It was a volume of basic Charms. Not a textbook, per se, but a tome of relatively simple spells. Many, she knew already, but every once in a while, she'd caught the title of one that she didn't know, yet. So she was skimming the text along with Eileen's margin-written notes. On the right-hand page, she spotted a new spell, something called the Foxfire Charm. Intrigued, she read the description.

The Foxfire Charm is very helpful when it comes to locating several similar objects. The witch or wizard can use it to quickly locate objects in, say, a messy room. One simply needs to have in one's hands one of the objects to be located--say one sock, while looking for several socks--cast the incantation, and instantly all socks within the designated vicinity will begin to glow with a phosphorescent halo. The boundaries of the charm are line-of-sight; searching for socks in more than one room would require multiple castings, but searching for rare flowers in a meadow could span more than a hundred yards...

"YESSS!" Hermione jolted upright, disturbing the dark-haired man reading next to her. Before he could do more than lower his own note-riddled book, she had scrambled out of the bed and raced for the door. Bursting into his sitting room, she found the desk, threw herself into its chair, and scrambled for paper, quill and ink, frantic to diagram her ideas. She didn't notice how cold the sitting room was until she felt a blanket being draped over her shoulders.

Thankfully, he didn't interrupt her scribbles, which would've interrupted her leaping trains of thought. Instead, he waited patiently as she muttered unintelligibly to herself, scratched out some ideas, marked down others, and finally synthesized what was in her mind. Setting down her quill, Hermione allowed herself a moment to relax, but only a moment.

"Now...to see if it will work." Craning her head, she looked up at Severus. Like her, he was clad in pyjamas, as it was too cold to lie in bed reading without them. But unlike her, he had taken the time to don a dressing gown over his nightshirt. "I need several similar objects that you wouldn't mind losing--small things, like inexpensive potions ingredients, or something."

Nodding, he lifted his wand, flicking open the glazed front of a cupboard hutch in the corner of the room. "*Accio* popcorn."

Hermione's brows rose as a jar sailed out of the cupboard and landed in his hand. She hadn't expected that. Opening the jar, he offered the dried kernels to her. Flashing him a smile, she scooped out a fistful, and nodded at the rest. "You'd better put the rest of those out of my line of sight."

Recapping the jar, he opened a drawer in the desk and hid the jar inside. Once it was shut, Hermione cast a Levitation Charm on the handful of popcorn, then cast it out into the room, scattering it through the air. Rising from the chair, she snagged the nearest kernel, held it in her palm, and began the two-part spell.

"*Fosphignilocurum!*"

The room gleamed with greenish pinpoints of light.

"*Disspeculumbustio!*"

The room exploded with multiple *pops*, like a string of firecrackers that had gone off. But rather than leaving behind fluffy white kernels, puffs of smoke hung in the air, before drifting downward as a faint, fine white ash. Grinning, Hermione dug into the desk, found another handful of popcorn kernels. Severus snapped his wrist, Transfiguring them into tiny metal washers in her palm.

Hermione, knowing he wanted the charm to work on metal, cast her own spells. Another Levitation Charm, another casting of the lot into mid-air--Severus caught and stayed her hand. Summoning a dragon-hide glove from his bedroom, he donned it, giving her a warning look. With his gloved left hand, he plucked one washer from midair, and tried it himself.

"*Fosphignilocurum! ...Disspeculumbustio!*" Again, a greenish scattering of lights, this time followed by blazing-white spots that slowly turned yellowish-orange, then dullish red, then cooled down into bits of silvery metal once more. A grin split his face, followed by a triumphant bark of a laugh. "*Ha!*"

"I take it this satisfies your need, regarding this spell?" Hermione asked, curious but trying not to show how badly she wanted to know what he intended to use it for.

Turning to her, he dropped the now cooled metal on his desk, stripped off the glove, and cupped her face in his palm. Triumph still glowed in his eyes as he caressed her cheek with his thumb. "...Eminently."

Covering her mouth with his own, he didn't give her a chance to ask anything, let alone what he wanted to do with the new spell. Not that she was complaining at the way he let his tongue do the rest of his praising. Mysterious need or not, the man certainly knew how to express his appreciation for her gift.

...

It wasn't until later--much later--that he slumped his sweating body beside hers on the bed, and asked as soon as his breathing had calmed, "So...what set you on that path?"

Hermione looked around for the book. It wasn't in sight, so she dragged her pleasantly exhausted body out of the bed. Sure enough, it was still in the living area, on the desk. Her wand was on the floor, along with her pyjama top and his dressing gown. The bottoms had made it as far as the bedroom. Scooping up everything on her way back, she sorted the clothing onto a chair, her wand onto the nightstand, and climbed back into bed with him. He pulled her into a kiss, first, then released her, allowing her to explain.

Feeling her lips split with a silly grin, she showed him the book. "*An Introduction to Helpful Household Charms*, that's what."

"What made you pick up such an elementary text?" he asked her, taking the book from her fingers with a soft frown. "I thought we were going to be looking through the later books, not something she would've picked up in her first few years of school."

"It was slotted between a couple of seventh-year texts. I didn't realize it was full of basic spells until I'd started reading it. I kept reading it when I realized I didn't know one in every eight or nine of the spells they listed."

The corner of his mouth curved up as he opened the front cover. "Terminal student."

"Perennial bibliophile, too," she retorted--and was jolted by his elbow as he sat up abruptly, eyes widening enough to show the whites all the way around his black irises. Hermione sat up quickly, too. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Tilting the fly-leaf towards her, he pointed at the writing on the dark blue-grey paper lining the inside of the cover. It was neat, but small, and scribed along the edge. **Libris ex Antonin.**

"Antonin...*Dolohov*?" Hermione asked breathlessly, her hand going to her shoulder and upper chest. She no longer bore the scar, thanks to the skills of the Healers of St. Mungo's, but she remembered the searing agony of the violent spell he had struck her down with, back at the Ministry over a year and a half ago.

"Of course. He even looks a little like my father," he muttered. "He must've seemed attractive to her, because of it...and he has been known to seduce other men's wives--Antonin killed my mother!" His face twisted into a scowl of hatred she had only seen a few times before, when he'd been yelling at Harry.

Hermione quickly touched his arm. "Calm your mind, Severus! You *cannot* go back among them with hatred for him burning in your heart. Practice your Occlumency! Which is more important," she added as he glared at her for the reminder. "Your bringing down Dolohov for your mother's murder, or all of us bringing down the Dark Lord? Which must come first, Severus?"

He didn't say anything, though his scowl deepened. Fingers curling around the edges of the book, he finally growled and flung it across the room. Hermione winced internally as the defenceless book thwapped into the far wall and fell to the floor, its pages crumpled. She eyed her husband, who had dropped his elbows to his knees, burying his face in his hands.

Concerned, she wrapped an arm around his shoulder. Grateful he didn't shrug it off, she urged him onto his back after a few moments, pulling up the covers to keep him naked, still-damp chest warm. She draped her arm over his ribs, nestling her head on his shoulder. After a moment, he twisted to face her, pulling her close. Burying his face in her hair, he breathed deeply a couple of times, then sighed heavily, as if letting go of an internal burden.

"You're right. Bringing down the Dark Arse is far more important."

Surprised he would make such a joke of Voldemort's most commonly used sobriquet, Hermione bit back a giggle. Squeezing him back, she returned, "And I'm very proud of the choices you've been making, because of it."

He mumbled something, a string of epithets she was glad she hadn't heard very clearly. Nuzzling his face into her hair, he offered, "So. You treated me to my birthday. What would you like for Valentine's Day? It is less than a week away."

"You remembered Valentine's Day?"

"It would be out of character for Russel to forget," he allowed, "though as Snape, I would rather consign the entire holiday to an acid-soaked oblivion.

"I see. So...what does Severus think of the holiday?"

A heavy sigh warmed her ear and tickled its lobe with the shifting of her hair. "I have no bloody idea. I've had one happy Valentine's Day in my entire life, if that tells you anything."

"Oh?" Hermione enquired.

"Narcissa Black let me kiss her, that day. It was in exchange for the flowers I had given her. Snow crocuses, and very difficult to find at that time of year, since they normally bloom a month later. They were a part of my Seventh Year Herbology project," he reminisced.

Hermione wasn't so sure she wanted to hear about her rival for his affections, even if she hadn't been born back when Narcissa Black, now Malfoy, had held her husband's heart. She didn't show it, though. If he wanted to open himself up to her, she would listen without judgment...or at least strive to not judge.

"But then she received a huge bouquet of roses by owl-mail; it took three owls to carry them. They were from the man her parents had just selected for her to marry, once she left school. I've hated roses ever since," he muttered under his breath.

That explains a lot, Hermione thought, remembering Harry's comment about having seen Snape blasting roses from the bushes here at the school, at one point. "So what do you like?"

He stiffened slightly in her arms. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you don't find roses romantic, and for good reason, I'd say," she offered reasonably into his shoulder, keeping him close with her arms. "You don't strike me as a chocolates sort of man, either, though I could always be wrong. What would you like for Valentine's Day? What would you find romantic?"

Severus pulled back just far enough to push her hair out of her face and frown at her. "Jane, even I know that romantic gestures on Valentine's Day are the obligation of the male!"

Her own brow furrowed. "It's not an obligation of *either* gender, but a gift of affection someone chooses to bestow upon another!"

Brow creasing further, he demanded, "--Are you saying that you want to show affection for me?"

"Yes," she drawled, with an obvious 'duhh' in her tone. "What, did you think I lied to Ron when I told him I was happy with my marriage?"

"You weren't happy when you found out who I was!" he retorted sharply.

"Of course I wasn't! I was in shock, and I didn't know at the time if I could trust you. *Both* of us made mistakes, over that whole mess," Hermione dared to remind him. "But since we've learned from our mistakes--or at least, I hope we've learned from them--things have settled down quite nicely between the two of us. Why shouldn't I be happy?" At his stunned expression, Hermione segued smoothly into her attack by lifting her hand and cupping his cheek. "*You* can be miserable in this marriage if you want to, Severus. I choose to be happy. Now, tell me what you want for Valentine's Day, and I'll see if I can procure it."

For a moment, she thought he would retreat. She really thought he would; after all, he'd done it before. But instead of rolling away, or even getting out of the bed, he inhaled, blinked, and rolled only onto his back, where he stared up at the ceiling for a moment. "...Dinner. At our hotel room, since it has a kitchen. You will provide that. I will provide the rest."

Biting back a smile of triumph, Hermione draped her arm over his chest, snuggling into his shoulder. "Deal."

...

Valentine's Day was ruined, thanks to the Basilisk Bastard. Severus--or rather, Russel--had gone out to a video rental store and picked up a stack of movies. Hermione had fixed a pot-roast in a crock-pot, something that could be allowed to sit while they worked on the Anima Te for a few hours. When they came back, they slotted the first movie into the machine attached to the television set. It was a Jackie Chan movie--all three of them were Jackie Chan movies--filled with badly dubbed lines in English, but plenty of action, humor, and even a bit of slapstick romance. Hermione would never have thought it of him, but it was good to see him laughing and relaxing and enjoying himself, even if he clung to his blond hair and grey eyes while he did so.

Unfortunately, near the climax of the first movie, he hissed and clutched at his forearm. She hadn't even had time to bring out dessert, a pear pie she'd made from scratch the previous night, after he had departed. Staying only long enough to give her a kiss, he departed. Hermione finished watching the movie, but didn't insert the other movies into the video player. It just wasn't the same. Instead, she paced, worried, and finally fell asleep in their bed.

He returned an unknown time later, waking her as he Apparated into the suite with a bang. Sleepily, she watched him strip out of his Severus clothes, and welcomed him into her arms when he slipped into bed with her. He didn't seek sex, though she half expected it. Instead, he seemed to need comfort a lot more. Much as she wanted to question him about where he'd gone, what he'd done, the things he'd seen, Hermione sensed that now was not the time to ask. What he needed from her was comfort, and that was what was he received.

When he finally settled into sleep, it was with her spooning against his back, instead of the usual other way around. Hermione was glad he didn't mind doing it this way; she couldn't quite cover his back the way he could hers, but she was about two months along, now. There wouldn't be many more opportunities in the near future for this particular position. She had to start sleeping on her side, anyway; her clothing was getting distinctly snug, as the weeks progressed.

Poppy had recommended taking things easy, insisting that Hermione remember to put her feet up for half an hour in the middle of each day--whether that was an actual daytime day, or one of her middle-of-the-night, brewing-the-Anima-Te 'days'. Molly had offered to show her waistline-expanding charms for her jeans, though she had recommended switching to dresses with stretchy shorts underneath to keep her thighs from chafing, in later months. Daphne Granger had even suggested making a girls' trip to Marks & Spencer for new things with her daughter. They'd have to arrange for an Order escort, but Hermione thought that might be nice, a girls' trip to the maternity department...

Hermione lay in bed, cuddling her sleeping husband, and wondered what he'd be like, if he let himself sink into his Russel disguise long enough to go shopping for maternity and baby things in a Muggle store. It was both amusing and disturbing to contemplate. Of course, she had no idea if he'd ever let himself do that as Severus. It definitely wasn't a Snape sort of thing to do, that much was certain. But until Voldemort was dead, truly and thoroughly, he couldn't ever completely abandon the Snape side of his life.

Assuming he would want to, once the war was gone.

And assuming they both lived, of course.

...It wasn't the best Valentine's Day of her life, but it wasn't the worst, really.

...

When Ron's birthday came, it caused a bit of a scrum in the undercurrents at 12 Grimmauld Place. Molly wanted to celebrate her son's eighteenth natal day at the Burrow,

the first one she could celebrate with him since packing him off to Hogwarts. This would allow her to invite her other sons, Harry, Hermione...and Russel. Ron didn't want Russel to come. He had kept his mouth shut on the subject of Who Russel Really Was, but he did not want Russel--Snape--at the Burrow any more than absolutely necessary.

In fact, Hermione got the distinct impression that, if he could rescind her husband's Secret-Kept knowledge of the Burrow's location, he would. Harry just thought Ron was having a resurgence of jealousy, aggravated by the fact that, the weekend just before, Hermione had gone maternity shopping with her mother and Molly Weasley, and compounded by the way Mrs. Figg was tutting over her skeins of wool, trying to pick out the softest, prettiest yarn to make a 'wee baby blanket'. A brief discussion of the problem with her husband while they were grating yam skins, and Russel sent Molly his 'regrets' in a note, stating that he really couldn't spare the time away from his duties.

The party went fairly smoothly after that, save that Ron moped with a hint of glowering in her direction now and again. Hermione suspected he was back to being jealous and resentful that she wasn't his girl anymore. Harry at least had Ginny, sort of; they couldn't have an open relationship because of the war, but they could at least long for each other. She had Russel, who was Severus Snape, and that just twisted Ron's knickers, from the way his nose would wrinkle unhappily now and again. Ron had no one. In fact, with Tonks dating Remus, and even Mrs. Figg snogging Mad-Eye Moody, the only female who drifted through Headquarters on any regular basis was Violetta, the Auror...and she'd been outed as a fancier of fellow females, thanks to Sigurd.

Hermione could have almost wished for Lavender 'Won Won' Brown to be out of school and in the Order. Just to give them all a distraction, not merely Ron. As it was, she spent most of her time at the party in the kitchen, giving him his space and trying not to shove her marital status in his face. The distance between them was putting a strain on their friendship, but in one thing, Ron and Hermione were agreed: they left Harry out of their differences entirely. No forcing him to choose sides, no arguments in front of his face. No telling him who his brother-in-law really was. The prophesied saviour of the wizarding world didn't need that kind of stress.

...

Apparating into their hotel room, Hermione moved over to the nightstand, looking for one of the Eileen-written books she had left behind a few nights ago. With the reopening of Severus' quarters at the School, they had taken to staying there more frequently, but some nights were just too cold to sleep in a dungeon, even though it was nearing the Equinox and the start of Spring. She wanted to go over one of the Herbology books she'd been reading, and found it on the bedside table.

Straightening, she turned back to the rest of the room, rubbing at the small of her back. She wasn't big by any means--there was barely even a visible bump in her belly--but the shift in her center of gravity was beginning to make itself known. Glancing across the room idly, she started to focus her mind for Apparating back to Headquarters so she could Floo back to the school. Her idle gaze spotted an anomaly in the room.

Sitting on the table was a large bucket filled to the brim, and then some, with the ugly little lumps of bezoars. Tied to the handle with a red ribbon was a note. Curiosity drew her forward, but wariness drew her wand. There was no way that Old Abe should have known where their little Muggle suite was located. No way that he could have known...wasn't there?

But it was undeniably a gallon's worth of bezoars, and then some. Prodding the note with her wand, she made it untie and unfurl itself.

My Dear Boy,

Total payment is 50 galleons, to be paid whenever. Just leave it on the table, and the house-elves will pick it up. I know I should be charging you twice as much, especially as you're in my suite rent-free, but you've been kind enough to carry word back and forth between him and me, and I owe you for that. If I didn't have to cover expenses with procuring the stones, I wouldn't charge you for them, but alas, I am a business man. Also, be mindful that the Concealment Charms on the Muggle suite will need to be refreshed on the Ides of March, so please keep that pretty little wife of yours away from the place on that date. And for Merlin's sake, keep being nice to the girl! Nothing ruins a marriage like a surly arse of a husband--trust me, I should know!

Abe

This is a Muggle suite? At the Hogs Head Inn? But, it looked so real!

Hermione crossed to the windows, peering through a crack in the curtains. It looked like somewhere in Birmingham, or Leeds, somewhere on the verge between urban and suburban territory. She moved over to the door and peered through the spy hole. The fish-eye view looked like a modern hotel corridor, with soft lighting, carpeting, and non-moving paintings on the walls at intervals. Obviously, there were some very complex charms cast on the place to make it look and act utterly Muggle. Returning to the table, she stared at the bucket of bezoars, thinking hard.

Severus has been communicating with Albus, which means he's been sneaking into the Headmistress' study without my eye upon him...an eye I promised Minerva I'd keep on him.

A pop heralded her husband's arrival. He moved up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. Then stilled, seeing the note over her shoulder.

"Reading my correspondence?"

"We're at the Hogs Head, aren't we?" Hermione returned quietly, in lieu of an answer.

"...Yes."

A connection made itself in her brain. "And Abe...is Aberforth Dumbledore, isn't he?"

"Yes." A pause, and Severus added, "I used to think you were little more than a parrot, spewing forth only what you'd read. A clever bird, but only a bird."

A soft laugh escaped her, and a scrap of melody from something her grandmother used to sing when she was a child. "'She's only a bird in a gilded cage...'. Only in this case, it's a Muggle hotel suite, and I'm not locked inside. You've been helping Old Abe communicate with his brother's portrait, haven't you? Behind my back, no less, when I'd promised Minerva I'd keep an eye on you whenever you were at the School."

"Yes, but if it helps any...Minerva knows and has sanctioned my visits to his portrait on his brother's behalf." His arms, clad in black, fine-spun wool, squeezed around her. "I'm slowly getting used to seeing him like that."

Though it was subtle, and most everyone else might've missed it, Hermione heard the twinges of pain and remorse buried in his tone. Squirming around, she wrapped him in her arms, resting her head against his frock-coat clad shoulder. He was growing more accustomed to holding her, to letting her hold him. Hermione accepted it as a positive sign in their relationship. The war would be won or lost on something as simple as this, after all.

Something as simple as love.

I love him.

She accepted that fact, standing in his black-clad embrace next to a bucketful of bezoars. She honestly loved Severus Snape. It wasn't the sex, though that was undeniably fabulous, in her opinion. It was the little things, actually. Reading quietly, companionably in bed next to him. Eating a meal over a jigsaw puzzle. Working side-by-side to prepare ingredients. Exchanging comments, some serious, some snide or amused, over the marks written in the margins of his mother's books.

The way he felt in her arms when she held him, and the way she felt when she was held in his. When she was with him, it felt like she was home, in a way that had nothing to do with owning a house. Squeezing him a little harder, she stepped back out of the embrace. "...As lovely as it would be to stand here forever with you, I should probably

head to Gringotts and get those fifty Galleons out of our vault."

"Don't go alone," Severus ordered her. "Take someone with you. Fifty Galleons is a lot to carry, and it's late."

"Harry should still be at the Hogwarts library. I'll take him," she promised. "Or Ron. I think he's over his sulks. I *hope* he's over his sulks," Hermione added wryly.

"We'll see. Jane...I do not want you in the Room of Requirement during the boiling-down process," Severus stated, studying her with a shuttered, almost Snape-like expression. "The Diary states that the steam is toxic. And though it does give a list of filtering and cleansing wards to use, you should not risk your health."

Suspecting he anticipated an argument, Hermione nodded. Her hand slipped over her lower abdomen, where the front of her jeans had been spell-expanded by an inch already. "I don't think I'll argue...but I *will* be on-hand."

That arched his brow. "Did you just contradict yourself?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. I'll just have the Room of Requirement conjure two rooms, one with a glass wall that you enter through, and the other with the cauldron and its wards. A room with two separate ventilation systems." She flashed him a smile. "I'm getting really good at directing the Room of Requirement to do what I want, these days."

"So I noticed." Hand lifting, he brushed the backs of his knuckles down the curve of her cheek to her jaw. "You are a very strong-willed woman, Jane. I do appreciate that, at times."

Her mouth curved wryly on one side. "You're a strong-willed man, Severus. The last thing you need in your life is a doormat."

Fingers under her chin, lifting her face a little, he dipped his head to hers, kissing her. It wasn't a heated kiss, just a brush of his lips over hers, a brief, firm press, and a slow withdrawal. Stepping back, he watched her wordlessly as she gathered her wits, made sure she had the book she came to collect, and Disapparated to Headquarters, still blushing.

That kiss was a very promising sign, following right on the heels of that conversation. Appearing in her bedroom, Hermione stared at the words she had written and pinned to her wall. *Love is worth whatever pain you have to suffer, whatever risk you have to take, just to know even one gentle touch from your lover*

His hand and mouth had been gentle, touching her. Initially during her plan to, well...woo Severus Snape, for lack of a better term, Hermione had wanted to guide him into accepting gentle touches from her. To feel affection and caring from her, and possibly even love, in the beginning. Definitely love, now. But he had just managed to do the same for her, though she didn't know if it was inadvertent, deliberate, or instinctual on his part.

Love is worth the pain, she thought, lifting her hand to her cheek, tracing the flesh he had brushed with his own fingers, *just to feel a gentle touch from your lover...*

...

It was done. The Infusio di Anima Te was done. Brewed, reduced, scraped, boxed, and waiting to be made into tea. The cauldron used to make it was now piled with nearly all of the bezoars purchased through Old Abe, plus a few from less clandestine resources, the area scrubbed of all concerns, and an old teapot fetched clandestinely from Trelawney's classroom by a scowling but compliant Kreacher. It was now late, but not too late, around two in the morning, and everything but the cup was ready to go.

Leaving her husband to watch over the Room of Requirement and anchor its existence, Hermione Floo'd down to Madam Pince's office. She found Harry and Ron with their heads bent over the stacks of books around them, eyebrow deep in studying offensive magics. They knew tonight was the night. In two days, they would begin the wait for an induction ceremony among the Death Eaters...and the final confrontation with Voldemort.

Ron noticed her approach first, lifting his red-gold head from his labors. He paled a little, but gave her a nod. "Is it time, then?"

"Yes. Harry, you've got the cup?" Hermione asked him.

He nodded, patting his book-bag before closing the tome he'd been studying. A heavy sigh, and he shook his head. "As much as I know we should just pour the tea and come back down here to study...I don't think I'll be able to concentrate on anything else, out of sheer nerves."

"Quite," Hermione agreed. "Well, let's get the books put away. I've got an idea on what we can do to occupy our time while we wait--we don't dare let the Room of Requirement stand empty, over the next two days," she added. "Not when there's the slightest chance of someone else getting in there and accidentally drinking the thing."

"That's the one drawback to the room," Ron agreed, stacking his books in preparation for re-shelving them. "Anyone with a strong enough will can conjure whatever they desire, in there. Even inadvertently."

"Well, I've become rather good at doing that myself, over the last few months," Hermione allowed, picking up a short pile of books that sat next to her friend.

"...Hermione? I've been thinking. I think you should go back in front of the Mirror of Erised, again," Harry offered as they headed towards the stacks. "You know, to ask it if you can where all the remaining bits and pieces of Voldemort's soul might be. Just to make sure we know exactly where to go to get to them."

"A sound strategy," Ron agreed, using his greater height to shelve the books that were higher on the stacks, while Harry crouched and took the lower shelves, leaving Hermione with the stuff at middling height. They traded books accordingly as he continued. "Of course, we have to wait until we know there's going to be a Death Eater induction ritual or whatever, so that we know when we can get at the brand and destroy it in a way that affects all of the Death Eaters, though I do wish you'd seen *what* that effect was, 'Mione."

"Maybe she can ask the Mirror about it, this time around?" Harry offered. "We could all have a second shot at it."

Ron looked over at Hermione, his expression bordering on grim as he addressed their friend. "...I don't think that's such a good idea for either of us, mate. I know my mind isn't going to be on the task at hand, if I look into the Mirror of Erised again, and I don't think yours will be, either, Harry." He returned his attention to shelving. "Hermione has a certain stubbornness, that--blind or not--allows her to concentrate completely on whatever she wants to see."

Hermione felt her cheeks flush at the implied insult, that she was insisting on seeing things in her relationship with her disguised husband that Ron didn't think were actually there.

"I think that's what got her through all of those study-schedules," Harry joked, rising and moving into another section with a handful of books.

Catching Ron's eye, Hermione arched a brow at him and mouthed, "*Are you going to behave around Russel, or not?*"

He rolled his eyes, sighed, and shrugged, mouthing back, "*If he behaves! I don't completely trust him!*"

Hermione jerked a thumb at her chest. "*Well, I do!*"

He shook his head, but said nothing more on the subject, just continued to shelve books back into place.

As soon as they were done, Hermione led the way to Madam Pince's office. Flooing to the seventh floor, they crossed to the correct spot in the corridor, and let Hermione concentrate and pace. It only took a moment to open the door. Ron gestured for Hermione to enter first.

Nodding, she stepped inside. The Room was still in its reducing configuration: two chambers divided by a vast glass window, the first one with the lectern and a tall stool in it, the other set up like a potions lab, save that all of the spare ingredients had been removed from the chamber now that they were no longer needed. The far room had a table, empty shelves, a kettle steaming over a conjured fire, a teapot, tea-strainer, a bowl of powdered bezoar grit, and protective wards scribed all over everything.

Russel had changed the dimensions of the rooms, however; the front half had been small, the back half large. Now the front half was just as large as the back, and had a sofa and two overstuffed chairs, a bookcase filled with what looked like Defence Arts books, a table with four straight-backed chairs--he was working on a brand-new jigsaw puzzle on the table--and a door labeled 'lavatory' in the corner. She had told him that the tea brewed from the poison scraped out of the cauldron would have to steep for two days, then it could be neutralized with the bezoars. Grateful her husband had both a strong will and a definite level of thoughtfulness, Hermione approached him, letting the boys enter behind her.

"Is everything ready?" she asked the blond, kilted man at the table, stopping by his side. The picture on the jigsaw puzzle's box was one of a humpback whale swimming just under the surface of the sea, with cathedral-like rays of sunlight rippling around the sea-borne mammal, and occasional schools of colourful fish. It was typical of the puzzles he favoured, tranquil, serene, with nothing human or humanoid in sight.

"Yes. I'll need to go over the safety instructions, before I can leave."

"--You're leaving?" Ron asked sharply. "Where are you going?"

"Away from here," Russel replied, fitting together a section of border. "Jane hasn't told me what this is all about, so I figured you wouldn't want me to watch the conclusion of it, either. I do want to be on hand for the neutralizing, though."

A muscle worked in Ron's jaw for a moment. "...I want you to stay."

Hermione glanced sharply at him. Russel's grey-eyed look was more subtle, though no less penetrating. "Do you?"

"Yes. This is going to take two days," Ron stated as Harry peered at the puzzle pieces.

The Boy Who Lived sat down, sorted through the pieces in the box, and put together part of the whale's flukes. Hermione wanted to hiss at Harry, *See? You have something in common with Snape!* ...since she knew Harry liked jigsaw puzzles. He'd done enough of them as a boy, stuck in that closet under the stairs more often than not. But she refrained.

"We'll have to stay in here and anchor the room against intrusion, so no one accidentally wanders in and gets hurt," Ron pointed out. "And I want to pick your brain, about the Death Eaters. About what we can expect, when we..." He stumbled, his gaze sliding to the others. He stopped when he got to Hermione, giving her a wary, questioning look that said, *Can we really trust him, or not?* Hermione nodded, lifting her hand to her husband's shoulder. He didn't move, as Ron continued. "We need to know what to expect, when we go after Snake-Face."

Russel studied the freckled wizard across from him carefully before he spoke. "...I don't want to know your battle plans. I *cannot* know what you're planning."

Ron nodded. "I realize that. But we have to know what to expect, so that we can plan something that'll work. And...if it takes place at Death Eater Central, we'll need you to, uh, somehow trick their Secret-Keeper into writing us notes on where it is. So we can get inside, if we have to."

"Getting inside 'Death Eater Central' is tantamount to a suicide mission, if you're planning on it just being the three of you," Russel warned him. Hermione squeezed his shoulder, silently ordering him to cooperate. "...But it can be done, and more quietly than if you invoked the whole Order...unless you used the Order for an external diversion. Most of the activity takes place in late afternoon and around midnight, but things are usually quietest around dawn. Draw everyone outside, and you'll be able to get into the house, once you know where it is."

"But, we don't want to attack at dawn," Harry interjected, fitting together a quartet of puzzle pieces that occasionally had a flash of orange fish swimming across their surface.

Russel frowned. "You don't?"

"No. We want to attack during a Death Eater initiation." Green eyes looked up from the jigsaw pieces with a steely edge to them that bespoke a determined man on the edge of a battle, not a mere youth playing with a puzzle. Despite his seeming air of unconcern, he'd clearly been paying attention to the discussion. "It will be your task, as our only spy, to let us know when that will be. We'll need an hour's advanced warning, half an hour at the absolute least, though the more lead-time you can give us, the better. And we'll need to know *before* the next Death Eater is inducted, once the next two days are through.

"One step at a time, though," Harry added to Ron. "I want this part of it over and through, before we proceed to the next task." His hands pieced together a few more tiles with just a little bit of sorting through the box, revealing the whole school of fish. "This is not the time to go rushing forward without waiting to make sure that each and every step has been covered. Methodical, and thorough. We'll need numbers, and weaknesses, if you can get them." A wry smile cracked the grimness of Harry's face. "And if you can steal a gallon of Felix Felicis from Snape while you're at it..."

"Your one saving grace is that the bastard hasn't had the proper facilities to brew it, so far," Russel rejoined dryly in his Canadian accent, earning a sharp look from Ron. "There are certain ingredients and materials that are very rare and heavily restricted by the Ministry, and very costly. I suggest you try stealing from Professor Slughorn's cupboards. A Potions Master of his repute might still have some, somewhere."

"I'll ask him politely," Harry returned. Hermione, knowing what he had gone through last year to get the professor's knowledge of Horcruxes, didn't think Harry was being entirely facetious. Slughorn liked the Boy Who Lived...and if he knew that his complicity would ensure that the Dark Lord died for good, at the hands of famous Harry Potter, the current Potions professor might think lending his aid willingly to be very worth his while.

"...Then if I'm to stay, then I'll handle brewing the 'tea'," Russel stated, rising from his seat.

"No," Ron countered, startling the others. "You're *not* expendable. You're our spy, and we need you alive. Harry can't do it, either, and I won't let Hermione risk either herself or...or your child." He flushed as he admitted it, not quite able to hold Russel's gaze. "I'm the expendable one, here. Tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

"You're not expendable, Ron!" Harry protested, frowning at the thought. "I'll do it."

"Harry...he's at least somewhat right," Hermione pointed out. "I'd do it myself, but that's putting two lives in danger. You can't do it, because we can't risk your life. Russel has been brewing the tea, since I couldn't risk it. He knows all of the necessary precautions to take. He'll do it."

Ron shook his head. "No. I will do it. If anything happens to me, he can still give it a try, but better for it to happen to me. I *will* be careful, I promise! Merlin, if it doesn't kill me quickly, you know Mum will finish the job..."

"I can't ask you to take the risk," Russel demurred.

"You're not asking, I'm telling. And I have steady hands. Not even *Snape* found anything to complain about my ability to pour liquids," Ron added pointedly, holding Russel's grey gaze with his blue one.

Russel sighed, though his mouth was twisted somewhere between amused, sardonic, and wry at the subtle jab. "...Then on your head, be it. I'll walk you through all of the safety precautions a dozen times, until it's ingrained. If anything happens to you, and Mrs. Weasley finds out, my life will be worth considerably less than if the Dark Lord

finds out I'm not on his side after all--your mother is a *very* scary woman."

"Isn't she?" Ron grinned. Hermione struggled not to show the happiness welling inside of her at this positive interaction between the two males. It was a far cry better than the veiled antagonism of earlier, that was for certain.

"Jane, love, would you read what we need to do next, so that we have the necessary steps firmly in our minds?" her husband asked.

Hermione had no idea what had happened to make Ron change his mind, but she wasn't about to look this particular gift horse in its freckled mouth. The boys were all cooperating--even if Harry was doing so out of ignorance--and that was all that mattered to her. Moving over to the lectern, she wished wheels onto it, and turned it so that the Diary faced the corner, away from the men. Pulling the stool into place, she sat down, opened the volume to the bookmarked page, donned the translation amulet sitting next to the book, and read what the archaic witch had written.

"Once the residue has been scraped, keep it absolutely dry until used, but do not use any spells to keep it so. When it comes time to serve to your enemy, fix them a meal of good things to eat, and serve to each of your plates. Use two pots, sized each for one cup, and a chinoiserie. Make sure you know which drawer the Anima Te is kept within. Use pin-head chai for your cup, and Anima Te for theirs, as each looks alike, and brew each one individually; keep one next to the other in the middle drawers, so as to confuse the eye. Make a straight tea, so that it looks as if nothing else has been added."

Steep a chai-sized pinch of Anima Te in a pot of water that had been brought to a boil beforehand, for at least a slow count to one hundred and sixty. Strain the liquid with a sieve pressed to the spout, to keep the scrapings inside. It may be served with cream, with milk, with honey, or even the white sugar of Saracen lands, but not the brown sugar--honour your guest with offerings of yellow cream and white sugar, to let them know they are special enough to deserve such offerings. Serve only one cup of the Anima Te, then brew a fresh pot of the pin-head chai if your guest wishes more, and serve fresh pots with each new serving to keep their suspicions low. The..."

Hermione paused, skipped over the bit that her husband didn't need to know, about the victim's soul dying after two days, and cobbled together something other than what had been written there. "The full effects of the Anima Te will be felt two days later, averting all suspicion, as the effects will be subtle until then.

"Wear gloves when serving your guests, to keep the powder from touching and absorbing into the sweat of your skin. A thin lining of dragon-hide is good to have under supple doeskin. Scour the pot, the teacup, any spoons, and the cauldron in which it was made with powdered bezoar, and neutralize any excess brewed Anima Te by pouring it over bezoar stones. If ingested or spilled on the skin accidentally, a bezoar will neutralize the nature of the Animal Te, but will in turn cause a caustic acid that will devour the entrails or dissolve the flesh of the affected person."

"Handle with extreme caution'," Ron quipped, eyes wide at the lengthy list of precautions as Hermione closed the Diary.

"You'll be wearing dragon-hide, with a Bubblehead Charm to allow you to breathe clean, untainted air," Russel instructed him, "and being mindful of all of the wards set up when you brew the tea. I'll show you how to get past them, and how to come out again with the proper cleansing spells. But...before I show you anything, I have to know why you're brewing this stuff. It's a poison, obviously, but...who are you using it on, and why?"

"Not who," Harry stated, digging into his book-bag. Hermione tensed, remembering her heart-pounding trip to the Clover Street Orphanage with Mrs. Figg. Russel glanced at her, then back at Harry. His eyes widened as he spotted the gilded, two-handled cup that Harry drew out of his satchel. "What. Here you go, Ron. And be *extra* careful. You might think you're expendable, because you're not a spy, or a mother-to-be, or the scar-bearing target of a prophecy, but you are my best mate. And I really, *really* don't want to have to explain to your mother why you dropped dead, if anything goes wrong."

"You and me both," Ron agreed, crossing to Harry and taking the cup. He paused, then moved to the other end of the table, setting it in front of Hermione. "Double-check and make sure it's still in there. I don't want to make any mistakes, either."

Nodding, Hermione drew her wand and silently cast the Soul-Scanning spell. The cup glowed sickly greens, yellows and browns, with little pulses of red. She cancelled it after a moment, nodding for Ron to take up the cup. Nodding back, he carried it towards the door into the other room.

"C'mon, then," he ordered Russel, tipping his head at the glass wall. "Let's get this set up, and walk through everything *more* than a dozen times, before we do the actual run."

"...Right." With one last, inscrutable look at his wife, Russel followed the slightly taller redhead into the other room.

Hermione sat down in his abandoned chair, watching her husband coaching Ron through the triggers for the wards erected around the teapot and simmering kettle. After a few moments, she turned to the jigsaw puzzle, needing to do something with her hands. Severus was a smart man. She'd done her best to hide which spell she'd cast on the cup, but he might be clever enough to figure it out.

If he did, and the Dark Lord learned that he knew what was happening, Severus' life would be in grave danger. Sneaking glances at the floor-to-ceiling window, she watched as the two men practiced over and over again, probably close to two dozen run-throughs, before Russel was satisfied enough to start assisting Ron into his dragon-hide gear. They were similar enough in height and build that nothing had to be altered, though Ron was almost an inch taller. For a moment, Hermione wondered if Ron would've gone out for that American sport, basketball, had he been born a Muggle instead of a wizard, and whether or not he would've been as basketball-mad as he was Quidditch-mad.

Finally, they were ready. Russel retreated behind the glass, sealing the door. Harry gave him a dark look for that, but didn't otherwise protest. Hermione resumed her seat at the lectern, repositioning it and waiting until the other two men were ahead of her, standing against the window, so that she could safely open the Diary at an angle where none of the three males could accidentally glance at the pages. Then she read the instructions again.

Her voice carried magically through the otherwise thick glass, directing Ron on what to do as he carefully measured out a pinch of the stuff in the little lock-box Russel had found to put the scrapings into. He poured in the boiling water from the kettle, and the moment he put the kettle back, Hermione began a slow count to one hundred sixty. When it was done, Ron lifted a small cloth-and-wood sieve, of the kind used in the Middle Ages, and strained the Anima Te into the Hufflepuff cup, filling it to the very brim. Setting the sieve into the bezoar-lined cauldron quickly but carefully, before it could drip onto anything, he jerked a little.

Even from their angle, they could see the yellowish foam hissing and bubbling from one of the stones at the top.

Returning the teapot to the table, he backed away from everything. Stepping through the first of the warding circles, Ron scrubbed his gloves with the bezoar powder, retreated through the second set of wards, removed the gloves carefully, then retreated again, drawing his wand to scour himself from head to toe. Retreating out of the last ward, he removed his outer wear and faced the window, pale but visibly relieved. Flashing a grin, he gave a thumbs-up to the others, his voice partly muffled by the thickness of the glass separating him from his audience. "...*Not a drop spilled anywhere!*"

Russel opened the door, letting him enter the waiting room. "Good job. So. We keep a vigil for the next two days, right? I presume in rotation?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I'm going to have a word with my wife. You two gentlemen can man the first watch. We'll be back shortly, never fear."

Catching Hermione by the arm, Russel pulled her gently but determinedly to the far end of the room, into the door marked 'Lavatory'. Ignoring the facilities, he frowned at the wall across from the sink until a hearth and a Floo pot appeared, and hauled her through the fire, spinning both of them out into his private chambers down in the dungeons. Releasing her arm, he stared at her, his tanned face tight with strain.

"That cup... That thing is a *Horcrux*, isn't it?"

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

Author's Notes: Holding your breath during this particular chapter is not recommended, as you might pass out. Remember to breathe, please--more than once; it works best, that way. ~Lotm

XXXI.

The disgust warring with dismay in his voice reassured Hermione, even as his words chilled her with dread. She hadn't wanted him to know, to keep the information out of his mind. As in, away from Voldemort. "If I denied it, you would think I was lying, and think it to be true. If I confirmed it, the Dark Lord might read about it in your mind...and if it indeed turned out to be true, or if he just sensed that you thought it was true, he'd probably kill you. That's not the sort of fate I'd like to see happen to you."

Quiet as her words were, they fell into the silence between them with crisp clarity. He studied her for a long moment, then asked quietly, "How did you get your hands on it? The wards I raised were so sensitive, even just *being* a wizard or witch near that cabinet would trigger the alarms, and alert the Dark Lord. But he hasn't been alerted."

"Try *when* did I get my hands on it, Severus. You sent me the conversation you were having with him, remember?" Hermione prompted her blond-disguised husband. "Even if I thought Russel and Snape were two different men at the time. You delayed your arrival at the Clover Street Orphanage, didn't you?"

He nodded slowly. "I hoped you would get there ahead of me, but when I saw the cup, I knew you hadn't made it. Or I thought you hadn't. But the spell that was laid on it--I was told that Muggles couldn't see or touch it, and yet a wizard or witch would die, if they touched it."

"There's three kinds of people in the world, Severus, not two," Hermione reminded her blond-haired husband. "Wizardfolk, Muggles, and..."

"...Squibs," he completed for her. "Of course. I should've seen it for myself. I take it the replacement is a Transfigured replication?"

"Correct. I used a charm to lift the lethal spell on the original, and my Squib companion replaced the cup with a duplicate," Hermione admitted. "We finished just as you entered the hall, and Portkeyed out of there."

"The Anima Te...it kills the soul, and only the soul, doesn't it?" he asked. "Because I know there are any number of ways to destroy that cup, and destroy the soul that resides within it at the same time."

"It's Helga Hufflepuff's cup," Hermione enlightened him. "We didn't think it would be right to destroy an heirloom of the Hufflepuffs like that. And when we...well, did a sort of divination, we found a way to destroy the Horcrux without ruining the properties of the cup. Which led to me needing to get into your house to get the Diary...which led to my uncovering your identity."

"I thought you didn't care for Divination," he returned dryly.

"This version has turned out to be really accurate, and, as the cause is good--" she shrugged, "--I can live with it. Though it's not exactly a standard method of Divination."

"You're confusing me," he opened his mouth to ask her a question, then shut it, shaking his head. "--No, I do not want to know. It will be difficult enough to conceal this information from him, anyway. Or rather, work out a way wherein I could have come to the conclusion on my own, and present it to him in a way that will not get me killed for voicing it.

"I really didn't want you to know," Hermione sighed. "Ignorance being safety, in this case. Because I doubt Snake-Face will care for anyone else having the knowledge to make themselves virtually immortal, save that it doesn't seem to slow or stop the aging process, unlike the Elixir of Life that Nicholas Flamel managed to brew. Which is kind of strange, because I've heard rumors that one of the things he lures in his followers with is the quest for immortality."

"It is," Severus agreed, nodding his disguised head thoughtfully. "I suppose, if I posed it as a possibility based on deduction...sought his permission to explore the idea... No, that wouldn't work. What little I know of Horcruxes suggests a murder must be committed. I'd rather avoid that, if at all possible."

"Play the humble-card," Hermione offered in a flash of inspiration. "Tell him you were thinking, and you came to realize he must have cleverly split his soul several times to ensure his survival, but that you're actually glad he hasn't told anyone," she stated as he glanced at her sharply, "because you don't think any of his followers are worthy of following that closely in his footsteps, yet. Not even yourself."

"Split his soul...into *several* parts?" he repeated warily. Grey eyes widening, he drew in a sharp breath. "--That speck of light, that came out of the Ravenclaw wand! The Dementor--it was eating part of his soul! Of course! No wonder he was so furious. He destroyed that Dementor, too. We all thought it was because the wand was broken, and destroying a Dementor is not an easy thing to do. Not even for three wizards working together, and he scared us all by doing it on his own. We thought it was a display of his power as well as his displeasure, an object lesson for the rest of us to never fail him so terribly again."

"Try not to think about any of it too much," Hermione cautioned him, nibbling her lower lip in worry.

He touched her chin with his finger, lifting her face slightly as he met her concerned gaze. "Do not fret over me. I can take care of myself. Just tell me if you know how many Horcruxes there are."

"We do know," Hermione admitted. "But don't ask me how many are left."

"No, that is something I do not at this time need to know. Besides, from Potter's confidence, I would think the number is low, or will soon be. Come, we need to go back," he stated, grasping her hand as he changed the subject. "If Weasley, knowing who I am, wants my knowledge and expertise, then I will give it to him. You'll certainly need it, to be able to plan an effective attack."

"Don't forget, you'll need to write some notes from *Snape*, telling us where to find the property, Russel," Hermione cautioned him pointedly as he reached for the Floo

Powder. "Harry is going to face the Dark Lord. It's Prophecy, and we cannot avoid it. We'd just rather do it on our own terms, if we have the choice. Not on the Dark Lord's terms."

Grey eyes met light brown, as his hand reached for the pot of powder. "I'll give you what information I can. Try not to let yourselves rush headlong into danger, as the three of you normally do."

Hermione thought of the life growing within her, of having to end the life of a large, nasty-venomed snake that had almost killed Arthur Weasley over two years ago, of confronting a very large gathering of Death Eaters, and facing Lord Voldemort himself. Rushing headlong into all of that would be nothing more than a world-shattering suicide, if they did so without any planning. "Believe me, we're not interested in doing that, this time around."

...

Hermione dozed quietly. The ticking of a clock on the wall marched in steady counterpoint to the occasional, soft, droning snores of her blood-brother on a nearby couch, and the flicking of turning pages in Ron's and Russel's hands. Ron was seated at the table, busy studying the CPR pamphlet that Russel had brought up from his quarters several hours ago, back when the quartet had gotten into a discussion of medical techniques, Muggle versus magical.

Ron had taken the Pureblooded line of magical medicine being better, stating that magical healing worked faster than more mundane means. Russel had confounded him--since Ron knew who he really was--by taking the Muggle side of the matter, pointing out that Muggle techniques worked regardless of whether one had a functioning wand at hand or not, which was the one flaw in magical healing methods. Hermione had let the two of them argue back and forth while she studied the pamphlet, remembering it to be pretty much the same as the first aid and CPR course she had studied in the summer between her fifth and sixth years, at her parents' insistence. The debate had ended with Russel challenging Ron to read the material for himself, rather than 'continuing to argue out of sheer, stubborn ignorance'. Vanity pricked, Ron had done just that.

Russel had then picked out a book to read and stretched his kilted frame out on the couch. Hermione had selected a book for herself, but she had reached the second trimester of her pregnancy, and that meant the occasional need for a nap. She'd started out curled up at one end of the couch, but now lay between her husband's outstretched legs, using his chest for her pillow, half-wrapped in his arms as he held the book propped up over her shoulder. She could hear his heartbeat under her ear, feel the rise and fall of his lungs as he breathed.

She felt rather peaceful, lying here in his arms.

Harry *snorked* and rolled over. Without his glasses, he looked both younger and older when he slept, as contradictory as that might seem. She couldn't see him right now, because her own eyes were closed, but she heard him twisting on the cot she'd conjured with a need-impelled thought. In a little bit, they'd Floo the kitchens for another round of food--

The wizard under her jerked, hissing. Snapping open her eyes, Hermione blinked up at him. He grimaced. "--I'm being Summoned. I have to go."

Nodding, Hermione crawled off of his kilt, letting him stand. He stooped over her, catching her jaw with one hand, and kissed her. It didn't soothe her worry over the fact that he now knew about Voldemort's Horcruxes. Licking her lips as he withdrew, she whispered, "...Be careful."

"Always." Straightening, he faced Ron, speaking quietly to allow the other occupant of the room to keep sleeping. "Remember the safety precautions. No one else is to be allowed in there with you, and your first priority is saving yourself. Thoughtful caution, not blind heroism, will save the day."

Ron nodded grimly. Together, he and Hermione watched the kilted, blond wizard disappear into the lavatory, no doubt to summon a hearth and Floo elsewhere. Ron waited until he was gone before speaking. "If only he could be like that, the rest of the time. Pleasant to be around."

"He didn't exactly have a choice, given the situation he was trapped in, for so many years." It was the most she could say, given the presence of her blood-bound brother. Slanting her gaze pointedly at Harry, she returned it to Ron. "I'd be like he was, too, if I had to put up with all that he did, for so long. But he's a lot different than he used to be, when he has the privacy and freedom to be."

"I'll take your word for it. I don't *like* it," Ron added bluntly, lifting the manual in his hands, "but I'll trust you, at least. I just hope you can keep him in line."

There wasn't much she could say in reply that wasn't sarcastic. Hermione settled back onto the couch. "Now that he's gone, we should start discussing our exact steps. And alternatives, in case things start going wonky, once everything starts snowballing towards the end."

"I've already given that a bit of thought," Ron told her. "Harry needs to strike a killing blow, but he can't cast the Killing Curse. It isn't within him, and he cannot wield his wand against Moldiemort without invoking *Priori Incantatem*. Which means he needs another weapon. A different weapon. And some means of distracting Voldemort's own magic, preventing him from attacking and killing Harry ahead of schedule."

"I think he should use Godric's sword."

Hermione thought about that for a moment, then nodded, twisting onto her back on the couch. "I think you're right. There's a certain parallel to it. He pulled the sword out of the Sorting Hat when he first faced off against Tom Riddle's diary-preserved memory...which we now know was when he faced off against Riddle's first Horcrux. Even though it was the basilisk tooth that destroyed the diary, the sword was there. It was the weapon he'd summoned to fight against Riddle. But...Harry doesn't know how to wield a sword."

"He can, if he uses the Weaponmaster's Geas."

Hermione rose up on her elbows at that. "...The Weaponmaster's Geas? I've never heard of that."

"I found it in an old treatise on medieval combat spells. It gives the recipient weapons expertise. Swords, knives, battleaxes... It only lasts for a short while," Ron warned her, "but it should last long enough to give him an edge. Pun intended. It comes with spell-shields, too, so he'll be able to defend himself against incoming magical attacks, though I don't know how well they'll stand up against the Unforgivables."

"Trust a boy to look up spells on medieval combat," Hermione retorted with a wry smile. She lay back down on the couch. "Thanks for being a boy, Ron."

He flashed her a grin, lifting his chin a little with mock-pride. "I come by it naturally, you know!"

She laughed. Harry snorted and woke. He squinted around the room, then fumbled for his glasses on a nearby end-table. Pushing up onto an elbow, he asked, "...Where's Russel?"

"He was Summoned," Ron told him.

"I hope it's for nothing bad," Harry muttered, rumpling his perennially mussed locks. "He's a good man. I like him."

Hermione and Ron exchanged looks. Clearing her throat, Hermione offered, "I'm glad you can like him, Harry, when you give him a chance. So. Let's discuss strategy. Ron, how much time have we got left?"

"Um...just shy of three hours."

"Good." Concentrating, Hermione willed a sword-rack into existence, with most of the swords roughly the heft and shape of Gryffindor's blade. Harry blinked, and Ron narrowed his eyes in calculation. "Ron thinks you should go in wielding a sword, rather than your wand. When we go up against Voldiedork himself, that is."

"I can't use my own wand against him, because of *Priori Incantatem*," Harry agreed. "I've been trying to figure out how to get around that. But...I don't really know how to use a sword."

"Ron has a spell that will help you wield the sword--right, Ron?"

"Right--but you need practice in it," the redhead added. "Up you get," he ordered Harry, uncurling himself from his chair. "Hermione, if you'll 'require' us up a bit of practice room?"

...

The viciousness of the interaction between the Anima Te and the bezoars had not been exaggerated by the Mirror of Erised. If anything, it had been understated. Ron yelped behind his protective gear as the first splash from the cup reached the mound. Yellow acid foamed up in an instant, hissing and snapping with a ferocity that Harry and Hermione could hear on the other side of the protective glass. Ron almost spilled the potion in the cup onto the floor, but managed to aim the drops into the cauldron. Very carefully, he poured a thin stream onto the ugly brown stones, then set the cup aside to air-dry.

Pouring the contents of the teapot just as carefully, he set that aside to dry as well. The foaming acid slowly died down, leaving behind a very shiny cauldron interior. Hermione, anxious, asked through the glass, "--Are there any bezoars left?"

"...A handful," Ron replied. "I think you got enough. I'm going to use a drying charm on the teapot and cup, since the dry version of this stuff doesn't foam up like the watered version, and I don't want to damage the cup."

Hermione gripped Harry's hand, nibbling on her lower lip from worry. But Ron, displaying a care he had rarely shown in Potions class, worked with methodical patience and precautions. He even stepped out one wards' worth, powdered and stripped off his dragon-hide gloves, and donned a new set before drawing his wand and stepping back in. If 'Russel' could have seen him then, Hermione thought he would have been very pleased with his former pupil's painstaking care. *Fifty points to Gryffindor...*

Several scrubblings and cleansing charms later, the teapot had been cleansed, smashed and banished, and Helga Hufflepuff's equally cleansed cup was carried back into the sitting area. Ron, wearing his fourth pair of dragon-hide gloves, though with the rest of the protective clothes left behind, set the cup carefully down on the table, which Harry hastily cleared of the latest, half-completed puzzle. Nodding at the cup, the freckled wizard looked at Hermione.

"Well? Go for it!"

Drawing her wand, she flicked it over the two-handled cup. "*Psycandum!*" Nothing happened. Hermione flicked her wand at Ron. "*Psycandum!*"

Ron glowed in bright pastel hues. All three of them heaved sighs of relief. Harry nudged his blood-bound sister with his elbow as she banished the spell from the youngest male Weasley. "--Hey, do yourself! Let's see if we can see the baby!"

Blushing, she flicked the wand over her stomach, repeating the spell. Her own aura flared in brilliant hues, rich and complex...save for over her abdomen, where the colours were light, pale pastels. The sort of colours one saw on infant clothing.

"Wow..." Harry breathed. He reached out his hand, then pulled it back. "Sorry, but... It just occurred to me I have a little niece or nephew in there, don't I?"

"Yeah."

"Why are the colours so pale?" Ron asked.

"There was something in the spell's description about life experiences, emotional upheavals...the baby hasn't even been born yet," Hermione pointed out, touching her slightly thickened stomach through the glow of the spell. "It's a new soul."

"You mean, Harry's aura is more intense than mine, because he's experienced more emotional upheavals than I have," Ron clarified.

"Yes. *Psycandum--Psycandum*." Hermione recast the spell on both of them. "See? Harry's had a rougher life, so his hues are darker. But it's not a bad sort of 'darker', since he's still a good person, inside. They're just more intense than either yours or mine, and far more than the baby's."

Of the three adults, Harry was indeed the darkest-hued, save for the ugly zigzag glow of his magic-made scar. Ron had patches of richer hues, but some areas were paler than others. Hermione's aura was more evenly-coloured, save for her lower abdomen.

A flash of gold, blue-green and white distracted them. Russel had appeared, the golden dragonette of Sigurd cradled in his arms. He took in Ron's aura, then Hermione's, his gaze dipping to her stomach, then looked at Harry. When his gaze reached Harry's face, his grey eyes narrowed.

"What happened?" Ron asked him, distracting him from that speculative look. Hermione cancelled the auras with a flick of her wand.

Dismissing the dragonette in a swarm of golden sparks, Russel tightened his mouth for a moment, then breathed deeply and spoke. "...Someone wanted to prove they were worthy of joining the Death Eaters. A protege of Antonin Dolohov's. They took it upon themselves to...to attack the Grangers, tonight."

Hermione gasped. Harry's fists clenched, his green gaze narrowing. "Did you know about this, in advance?"

"No. My word on it. In fact, it caused a bit of consternation," Russel added blandly. "I had previously pointed out to the Dark Lord that any attack on the Grangers would make my wife hesitate to trust me, and he needs Jane to trust me, in order for me to get information out of her. He was not pleased with the would-be follower. But, knowing the steeping time was almost up on the cup, I bartered for the Snake-Snoggler to stay his hand for the moment. I told him I could go see how badly they were hurt; if the situation was salvageable with my spouse and in-laws, I suggested to the Dark Lord that such initiative should be rewarded by inducting him into the Death Eaters...and then teaching him how to obey his master. If it had caused me problems, then the Dark Lord could torment the bastard to his liking, and all it would cause would be a short delay before his torturing."

"When he agreed my plan had merit, I attended to a small matter, then left to check on Daphne and Jeffrey. They had been whisked away to the Burrow by their Portkey pendants at the moment of the attack--your mother's been badly hurt, but she's probably at St. Mungo's by now. Your father was only bruised from landing on the Weasley's living-room floor, as far as I could tell. They were Ported away right after the initial attack...but they *were* attacked as they slept."

Fingers covering her mouth, Hermione stared at him. Harry pulled her into a comforting embrace, his arms trembling faintly. Ron studied Russel thoughtfully, but said nothing.

"I woke the Weasleys and made sure they could take care of them, then came here. I can stall things for about half an hour, maybe an hour at most. I take it the Horcrux in the cup has been destroyed?" Russel asked Hermione, lifting a hand to touch her shoulder.

Lowering her hand from her mouth, she nodded, re-gathering her wits. "Yes."

"Then you'll have only a short time to finish whatever else you need to do before the initiation begins." His mouth twisted, but it wasn't a smile. "...Presuming everything is still alright in my marriage?"

"You know it is, Russel," Hermion admitted softly, giving him forgiveness in her gaze. It wasn't his fault some idiot had chosen to attack her family...though she did wish

heartily there had never been a war in the first place, to endanger anyone.

"Do what you have to do," Harry conceded, squeezing her in his arms as he eyed her husband. "Where will the induction take place?"

"Death Eater Central. I believe you know the graveyard, Harry, but you won't be able to find it without this," Russel added, removing a slip of paper from his sporran. The three of them clustered around the paper as he handed it to Harry face-down. They turned it, and read the address written in the spiky handwriting familiar from their school years. Russel took it back after a moment, returning it to his kilt pouch.

Ron frowned. "...What'd you do that, for? We could've used that to show the other Order members where to go!"

"...That's the other difficulty," Russel murmured, his Canadian accent drawing out the words as he grimaced. "The Dark Lord summoned me because he was impatient with me. I haven't infiltrated your own Headquarters yet. If that fool hadn't been brought to him, I likely would have been punished, this visit. The Dark Lord thinks I should use this attack on the Grangers as a way to worm myself deeper into the Order of the Phoenix...and has made it a command. From the sounds of your own plans, may I infer that the final confrontation is almost upon us?"

Harry nodded, his face tight and grim. "It is, if you can get us that initiation rite in about an hour."

"I'll do what I can."

Mind racing over everything they had to do, Hermione turned to her brother. "Harry, I want you to go check on Mum and Dad. I can't do it. I need to go to the Mirror of Erised, to make sure we've covered everything, and you know that's going to take me time, even if I can direct it to show me what we need to know. If you go check on our parents, that'll be a load off of both our minds. Check on them, make sure they're alright, then meet me in the Room of Requirement.

Harry nodded, releasing her with a squeeze. "They're in the best of hands."

"Ron, you take Russel to Minerva, and...tell her *everything*," she stated carefully, as Harry concentrated, forming a fireplace in one of the walls. "Get the sword, while you're at it, since you'll be in her office. If now's the time when everything comes to a head, the Order *has* to be ready...and they're going to have to trust Russel as much as I do."

Ron waited until Harry had vanished in a verdant flare, then set his jaw with stubborn determination, staring at her husband. "Swear by your ring that everything you've just told us is the truth, *Russel*...and then I'll believe in you."

"Hermione Jane Snape. Everything I have told you since arriving just a few minutes ago has been the truth."

Hermione lifted her hand, displaying the words forming out of its scale-pattern.

Everything I have told you since arriving just a few minutes ago has been a variation of the truth.

Ron lifted one of his brows, folding his arms across his chest. "...A 'variation' of the truth?"

Russel gave him an impatient, Snape-like look. "Now is not the time to be a brainless idiot, Weasley. I obviously *cannot* tell you verbatim everything that happened!"

"--Play nice!" Hermione ordered both of them. "It's good enough for me, Ron; even a variation of the truth is still the truth. Is the truth good enough for you, or do you need more?"

Sighing heavily, Ron ran a freckled hand through his locks. "...Fine. I believe you. We'll meet you in front of the Mirror, 'Mione."

"I won't be able to stay very long," Russel cautioned both them. "I do have to return and report on whether or not the attack damaged my standing with you." He hesitated a moment, then looked into Hermione's eyes. "Jane, you said you know where all of the Horcruxes are. That you know what you have to do to destroy them... Do you really *know* where all of them are? *Every* last piece of the Dark Lord's fragmented soul?"

Biting her lower lip, Hermione nodded. Her husband closed his eyes for a moment, a display of tight-faced emotion that hovered somewhere between disappointment, pain, and grief. Without a sound, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tight against his body. She felt him trembling as she returned the embrace, and wondered what had upset him. A deep breath, and he released her. Stepping back, he fixed her friend with a hard look, looking like a mixture of Russel and Snape, for all he was still tanned and blond-haired.

"You said you will believe me, Ronald. Now I must ask you to believe *in* me, to trust me," he said quietly. Ron nodded warily, his gaze flicking to Hermione and back. Nodding himself, Russel turned to the hearth Harry had summoned. "Come. We'll wake Minerva, and rouse the Order."

Hermione watched her husband and her best friend leave, then gathered herself. Concentrating, she summoned the corridor that would lead to the version of the junk-room she needed to be able to access the Mirror. Stepping into the hall, she waited as the braziers sprung to life, then lifted herself with her Self-Levitating Charm, aiming for the corner off to the right where the Mirror was located.

Landing lightly, she cancelled the spell and stepped up to the mirror, closing her eyes against the grey, age-worn surface for a moment. Firmly focusing her thoughts, Hermione thought as hard as she could, opening her eyes again, *Show me all of the remaining fragments of Lord Voldemort's soul that we have to destroy, and where they are located!*

The greyness beyond the mirror roiled, then revealed itself. A snake slithered through frost-edged grass. Nagini. She wasn't an ordinary reptile, to be able to do that. Cold normally put snakes into a sort of torpor. Probably her master had cast a Warming Charm on her body--a fact proven, Hermione saw, as she watched the frost within a few inches of her scales melting as the serpent passed.

The image pulled back, allowing her to see that some of the grave-markers bore the Riddle name. The family plot, then.

Show me the locations of the rest of Voldemort's twisted bits of soul...

The view shifted from the snake to a cadaverously thin man; it closed in, showing that he actually had a little bit of muscle about him, but his height made him look thinner in proportion. He was tending a fire, and strapped to his back like a claymore was a shaft of dark iron. The brand.

Again, the perspective in the graveyard changed. Voldemort's ugly face came into view, surprising Hermione for a moment. She almost lost the vision, but concentrated hard. *Yes, show me the location of all the remaining fragments of his soul that we have to kill, in order to destroy him completely!*

The view shifted abruptly. Hermione, startled again, clung stubbornly to her desire even as she wondered if it was going to show her the Hufflepuff cup, despite their efforts to--

The image re-solidified, showing an extreme close-up of dark, messy hair, pinkish skin...and a darker pink, jagged, lightning-bolt shaped scar.

"--No!"

Stumbling backward, Hermione staggered into the chest Ron had brought for her to use as a seat, the last time they had been here. Sinking onto its dusty surface, she trembled at the implications. She wanted to deny it--she wanted to scream and deny it--but all of the evidence was there.

If Voldemort's followers were afraid of the Dark Mark, fearing it tied them to their master--and it did, via the Horcrux brand that had created those Marks--then the bond that Harry had held all along with the Dark Lord, the pains in his scar, the sensing of the Dark Lord's emotions, the visions... *But that cannot be right--Harry's scar didn't show up, when I demanded the Mirror show me all of the Horcruxes!*

...But it doesn't have to be a Horcrux she reminded herself after a moment. *It could be a sort of incomplete Horcrux. The prophecy said that the Dark Lord would share his power, and mark Harry as his equal...with a bit of his own soul paid in forfeit for the attempted murder. That's why Harry can speak Parseltongue. He's been leaning on a little bit of Voldemort's soul, all this time...*

And, if Voldemort was to be defeated, he *had* to be killed. Down to the very last scrap of his soul. *What was it Harry told us? '...And either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives...' Oh, dear, sweet Merlin...*

Harry has to die!

Just as the tears were stinging her eyes, Hermione heard a shout from across the cathedral-sized chamber.

"Oy! Hermione! Wake up!"

"--I'm here, Ron!" she answered reflexively, raising her voice. Scrubbing at her eyes, she added loudly, "I'll come to you!"

Hermione took a moment to gather her shattered emotions. It was the hardest thing she'd ever had to do. She loved Harry very much...but Tom Riddle had to be stopped, at any cost.

She had never once thought that those words, 'at any cost', would literally mean just that.

"*Semobilim!*" Rising up, she soared over the junk in the room, zeroing in on the doorway back to the rest of the Room of Requirement. Ron spotted her and made room for her to land. Sniffing as she did so, Hermione cancelled the charm and asked, "How long have I been here?"

"Half an hour, I think, maybe a little more. Harry's not here, yet?" he asked, using his palm to balance the hilt of Godric's sword, which had been slung around his waist on a sword-belt. Hermione shook her head, and Ron raced onward. "--You won't believe what just happened!" he told her. "We Floo'd into McGonagall's study, and caught Gregory Goyle and *Argus Filch* trying to break into the case holding Godric's sword! We thought Filch was under an Imperius cast by Goyle...but it turns out Filch was using an amulet to *control* Goyle! *He* was the one behind Goyle trying to get his hands on bits of your hair and clothes so that Goyle could fool Minerva into unlocking the case for 'you'. But since that backfired, he tried to get at it directly, tonight."

"But, Filch is a Squib!" Hermione exclaimed. "Why would he be wanting the sword?"

"Russel Floo'd down to the Potions office and broke into Slughorn's supply of potions. He brought back some Veritaserum while the portraits woke Minerva, and we questioned both of them. Goyle was just a pawn, but Argus had been promised by Lord Voldemort that if he stole the Gryffindor sword, Voldiebutt would give him the power to do magic!"

"Can he *do* that?" Hermione asked, gobsmacked at the possibility.

"I don't know. But the Headmistress locked the two of them up and called an emergency Order meeting. By this point, we didn't have much time," Ron confessed, the words babbling out of him almost breathlessly fast, "so Minerva got Russel the Secret of Headquarters, dragged him there, and made Russel say where Death Eater Central was--and *that* caused total chaos! The two of them had forgotten that you'd told the Order that the Secret-Keeper was Severus Snape, but *Moody* certainly hadn't forgotten!"

"Sigurd nipped Russel out of there just as half the group went for their wands to try and hex him. Moody's petrification spell hit Hagrid, who had been seated behind Russel, and that's when I told them that *I* knew he was Snape, and that *I* trusted him--and that *you* knew and trusted him, too. They were still arguing sixes and sevens on the matter with Minerva when I realized I had to leave and catch up with you."

The door opened beside them, Harry poking his head through. Ron and Hermione both flinched, but it looked like he hadn't heard them through the door. "--There you are! Hermione, Mum's going to be alright. She got hit with Dolohov's curse, same one as you did, so it was a bit touch-and-go, but the Weasleys got her to St. Mungo's quickly enough. It sounds like she'll be back on her feet faster than you were, back in fifth year. Dad's a bit shaken up, but otherwise fine. Did you see everything in the Mirror?"

Tears stung at her eyes again. She wanted to deny it, to wish as hard as she could so that it wasn't true...but not even the Room of Requirement could make things otherwise. Firming her determination, Hermione fought back her grief, nodding. "Yeah. Everything will be there, when we get to the graveyard. I...I know what we have to do."

"Nothing is more important than ending Voldemort's life, and with it, his reign of terror," Harry agreed quietly. Grimly. "*Nothing*. This is literally the moment I was born for."

The tears escaped anyway, along with a half-strangled sob. Ron and Harry frowned at her, as Hermione quickly willed a kerchief into existence. She sniffed and gave them a watery smile. "Odd, isn't it? Not a speck of morning-sickness or tetchiness, and...and *now* I go all water-pot..."

"If you didn't have Sigurd to protect you, I'd lock you up and not let you go," Ron told her bluntly. "But do try to duck anyway, alright?"

Blowing her nose, Hermione nodded. Scourgifying the cloth with a spell, she concentrated and tapped it with her wand. It glowed blue for a moment, then turned normal again. "There. A Portkey."

"Where will it take us?" Harry asked her.

"Russel told me once that the caretaker's house was in use, along with the manor house itself, but that the graveyard was on one side of the caretaker's place, the drive on the next, a small copse of trees across from the graveyard, and a vegetable patch across from the drive," she reminded him. "This'll take us to a spot large enough for us to touch down within the trees, which is just within the property-line. Which means we should be able to arrive unseen, since they'd be watching for people to approach from outside the Secret-Kept zone."

"Good job," Ron praised her, grasping the handkerchief. Harry gripped it as well. At a nod from both of them, Hermione drew a deep breath, and activated the Portkey. The School spun rapidly away from them. A breathless length of time later, they landed with a jolt underneath a mixture of bare, deciduous limbs and prickly evergreens. The abrupt chill in the air made all three of them gasp; they'd forgotten to bring cloaks.

Hermione quickly cast Warming Charms on their garments; her teeth were chattering by the time she enchanted her own clothes. Harry stiffened, then hissed something, grabbing Ron's elbow. Ron jerked around, yanked the sword free from its scabbard, and lunged, chopping down where Harry pointed. He caught part of the snake with the blade, and hacked again, this time severing its spine within a few feet of its head. A third whack smashed the thing's skull.

Something faint, mist-like, rose out of the body. It hung there for a moment, then dissipated. Hermione found the hilt of the sword thrust at her as Ron quickly unbuckled the belt, passing it to Harry, who dropped his book-bag at his feet to make room for the scabbard. She wiped the blade on a handful of dried leaves, trying not to think of what had to be done, and handed it to Harry when he was ready to take it. As soon as Harry sheathed the blade, while his hand was still upon the hilt, Ron tapped him with his wand.

"*Telumagistum!*" Ron whispered firmly. The faint red-gold glow from their practice sessions just a few hours before seemed awfully bright now, but it faded, absorbing into his skin. "There. Now you're ready. Now we just need to sneak up to a good vantage point, so we can see when the branding takes place. Hermione, you've practiced the right charm for it?"

She nodded. "I'll be ready."

"I've kept my father's Cloak in my book-bag," Harry told them, stooping and opening the satchel, "like Dumbledore told me to do. We can hide under this, until it's time to attack."

It wasn't easy, stuffing three adult-sized bodies under the Cloak. Ron got the worst of it; he had to hunch over painfully low, with Harry and Hermione bent over themselves to either side, their arms interlaced around his ribs, just to get the hemline to brush the ground. Shuffling forward through the trees, they reached the edge of the copse. Directly ahead of them was the caretaker's hut. Harry nudged them towards the left, where the weed-choked gravel drive lay. Hermione thought it was a good idea; the ground was frosty and would mark their footsteps, but the earth by the vegetable patch was lumpy and weedy, and might threaten to make one or more of them trip.

There were a few lights in the caretaker's cottage, but most of the action was taking place outside, in the graveyard. Popping noises. Death Eaters were Apparating into the place, preparing to witness the ceremony.

Someone came out of the stone cottage, just as they neared the gate. Wormtail. He was buttoning a robe over his garments. He'd lost a bit more of the hair on his head, leaving it almost entirely bald on top, and enough weight to make his clothes baggy, but he still had the same ratty teeth as before. And he reeked of cooked cabbage, as did the air wafting out of the house, before he shut the door. Hermione used her free hand to cover her mouth against the nausea she welled up from the smell. Thankfully the ratty little traitor moved quickly away from them, clearing the air, and allowing them to circle around to the other side of the graveyard.

Her hand jerked away from her mouth as her finger burned. There was only half a moon out, tonight, a crisp, cold, early spring night with tiny wisps of clouds high in the sky and a glitter of stars lending their own faint illumination. Twisting her hand to catch the light gleaming through the cloth of Harry's Cloak, Hermione squinted at the words that formed. Thankfully, they were short and few, which allowed them to be large.

He's ready. Are you?

The words faded. Hermione couldn't, dared not respond. Not while Harry was within hearing distance of her husband's full name. Instead, she breathed to her companions, "They're ready for the ceremony. We have to get into position!"

There wasn't much of a fence on this side of the plot. Not upright and intact, at any rate. Ron steered them towards a fallen section. "You peel off when you've got a headstone to hide behind," he whispered back as Voldemort finished greeting the last of the kowtowing arrivals he had Summoned. "They'll look for the source of your spell, when you fling it and break the brand. We'll creep up on the snaky git from a different angle."

Hermione nodded, as Voldemort addressed whatever idiot wanted to join the silently watching ranks of his masked and robed Death Eaters.

"--Now, for us to deal with you. My greatest follower tells me your rash actions did not harm his position. That, in fact, he now has access to the new Secret-Kept Headquarters of our opposition, thanks to your precipitous attack," Voldemort announced to the spell-bound and gagged man kneeling on the cold grass at his feet. "You have been taught a lesson while we waited. A most valuable lesson. To not go against my orders in any way, shape or form. Even Antonin agrees...don't you, Antonin?"

"Y-Yes, my lord," a voice replied shakily. Hermione realized it came from a Death Eater whose robes had been torn and gashed in a very familiar pattern of cuts. He was standing shakily, no longer bleeding--apparently, his master had Healed him, or had allowed someone else to do it--but he was injured all the same.

"Yes, well...now you know better than to fail to teach the most important lesson to would-be Death Eaters. To *always* follow my commands."

Hermione slithered out of the Cloak as the trio passed a large, ornately carved headstone. It had decorative Celtic knot-work around its weatherworn edge, pierced by the chisel of some long-forgotten mason. She could peer through the holes and keep an eye as well as an ear on the proceedings, if she was careful. Drawing and gripping her wand, she edged into position, listening to Voldemort ungagging his prisoner to ask the man if he would indeed always follow the Dark Lord's commands. The sobbing reply sounded very convincing.

Wherever Harry and Ron had secreted themselves, Hermione hoped they weren't in her way. She also hoped no one else would be in her line-of-fire, either; the snake-faced bastard circling around his impending minion didn't help the matter. But he finally thrust out his hand imperiously towards the tallest Death Eater.

"Brand!"

Bones pulled it from the fire he'd built on a flat gravestone, handing it to his lord with a graceful bow. The Dark Mark wrought into the end of the shaft glowed yellow-white as Voldemort righted it in his hands. The man kneeling on the ground, no longer bound, pushed back his sleeve and offered his left forearm. Voldemort shifted, and Hermione was forced to shift as well, to the other side of the headstone sheltering her. Now she ran the risk of being seen when she cast the spell, since she was on the left edge of the stone, but she had to cast her spell right-handed, if she wanted a clear shot.

Silently reciting the Charm to make sure she remembered it--now *was not* the time to forget the correct spell--Hermione gripped the vine-wood shaft of her wand; she intended to cast the spell wordlessly, if she could get away with it.

"I...I pledge myself to the Dark Lord...to follow his commands and obey...to destroy all our enemies...and to seek to defeat even Death Itself!-AAAAHH!!"

Flesh sizzled and smoke rose, as Voldemort almost lovingly pressed the brand into the screaming man's outstretched forearm. "Be apart from me no more...!"

Frangelu! Hermione shouted mentally, slashing her wand over the top of the headstone. To her relief, icy-blue energy shot out of her wand. It smashed into her target, freezing and frosting the iron instantly. Both Voldemort and his initiate yelled, jerking back from the arctic length of metal. They weren't the only ones. All of the Death Eaters standing witness in the cemetery gasped and clutched at their forearms.

The violent withdrawal of the two central figures left the Artifact without support; it dropped to the trampled, half-frozen grass, and shattered.

Yes! Hermione exulted silently, clenching her fists as she sank back behind the headstone. Then yelped and instinctively covered her head as the stone exploded, showering bits of granite everywhere. A flexible wall of gold got there first, as Sigurd materialized at full draconic size, protecting her with one of his large wings.

"--*You!*" Voldemort snarled. She peered around the edge of her guardian's wing, just in time to hear a multitude of *popping* sounds. They came from the Disapparation of several Death Eaters, as roughly a third of them fled. The others looked at each other...and several more vanished, fleeing the scene.

"*Ha!*" Disbelief melded into unbelievable joy, as Hermione gloated at the gaping Dark Lord. "Not so *loyal*, are they, once they've slipped your slimy leash!"

"*Snake!*" the Dark Lord yelled, but whatever he intended to do was diverted by the Invisibility Cloak being swept aside right in front of him, as Ron flung it off of Harry, who was drawing his sword.

"--It ends *here*, you bastard!" Harry yelled back, glaring at his nemesis.

One of the remaining Death Eaters shot a hex at Hermione, who yelped and ducked. Sigurd intercepted it with his wing and breathed fire back at the originator, who shrieked and dropped, rolling to put out the flames on her garments. Her mask fell off as she did so. Hermione cast a vine-hex, catching the mad figure of Bellatrix

Lestrangle in the tendrils that burst up out of the ground, pinning her down.

Ron shouted protective spells, guarding Harry's back as the remaining Death Eaters sought to strike both of them down. Harry slashed at the Dark Lord's throat--and the sword *clanged* against a hand upraised to block it. Peter Pettigrew smirked at Harry, his ratty front teeth all the more prominent from the act. Voldemort fell back, drawing his wand as his servant handled the threat of the Boy Who Lived. A twist of Wormtail's wrist, and the sword jerked out of Harry's hand.

"--Now!" The sharp, baritone command cut through the chaos, and Hermione's voice leapt in her throat. She spotted Snape tearing the mask from his face and casting it at the Dark Lord's feet. She didn't know what Severus wanted her to do, with that command--

A different voice answered his command, as one of the remaining figures ripped off his own skeletal, metallic mask, baring his short, pale hair. "*Fosphignilocurum! Disspeculumbustio!*"

Hermione's breath caught in her throat as her Charm linked itself to the Foxfire Charm, and every last Death Eater Mask within view burst into white-hot incandescence. Voices screamed, writhed, dropped to the ground as the masks scorched the flesh that lay underneath. Decimating the remains of the enemy ranks. Even Wormtail dropped, screaming as he clawed the burning-hot mask from his blistering skin, using his silvery hand. The sword dropped beside him, forgotten in the literal heat of the moment.

Just as he stooped to reach for it, Harry flung sideways, away from Hermione; the blow had come from Bellatrix, who had torn her wand-arm free of the vines pinning her down. Hermione snarled and cast the Stupefaction Curse on the woman, zapping the red beam of magic into the older witch's body. She jerked and slumped, no longer resisting her root-bound imprisonment.

Even as she handled the one uninjured but still loyal Death Eater, Ron flung a hex at the Dark Lord, catching him off guard just as he was about to hex the defenceless, downed Harry. The Dark Lord flew back, slamming into the ornate grave-marker that Hermione belatedly realized read, **Tom Riddle**. The Dark Lord was meeting his end practically on top of the grave of his murdered Muggle father.

Harry shook off Bella's hex, rolling over. He started to crawl towards the sword on the ground, only to realize Pettigrew had his silvery hand on the blade. Freezing in place, he stared at the man who had once been Ron's pet rat, Scabbers. For a moment, time seemed to slow, as Voldemort shook off his daze.

And then the badly blistered Peter Pettigrew tossed the blade at Harry. It slid roughly over the trampled, frosted grass, stopping just within reach of Harry's hand. Voldemort blinked in shock.

"--You *dare* betray me? *Manex Proditum!*"

The silver hand jerked and slammed into Wormtail's throat. He choked out three words, as his other hand pulled fruitlessly at his metallic wrist. "*Life...debt...Harry--*"

Blood sprayed, as the hand pinched ruthlessly inward, and jerked itself back. Tearing out the throat of the man who had betrayed his friends over fifteen years ago. Hermione winced away from the grisly sight of Pettigrew's body hitting the grass, feeling her stomach churn. She looked back quickly at Harry's wild yell, just in time to see him impaling the Dark Lord with the returned blade. Harry, face a twisted rictus of rage and grim determination, twisted the blade into the older wizard's stomach and ribs, again making Hermione's stomach twist at the violent sight.

"*Die, you bastard!*"

Voldemort gripped Harry's wrists tightly in his hands, holding the sword in place. He bared his once-attractive teeth...and laughed. The Basilisk Bastard...laughed! Hermione stared, wide-eyed. Ron, having turned to assist Snape and Draco in Stunning the remaining, badly burnt Death Eaters, peered over his shoulder in horror at the ghastly, high-pitched sound. Even Severus and Draco stopped and stared.

Harry tried to pull back, but Voldemort held him in place. He struggled again, fruitlessly. "--Why won't you *die*?"

"Because I am *bound to you*, Harry Potter," Voldemort hissed, grinning. He lifted one hand from Harry's wrists, trailing a fingernail up the side of the younger wizard's face. Harry flinched back, but his arms were still caught, keeping him within reach. "I found a potion that would tie my life-force to yours...because you carry a piece of my soul within you."

The finger reached Harry's scar and pressed it, hard. Harry screamed, wrenching his hands free. He backed up a step, and Voldemort spread his hands, the sword sticking obscenely out of his bleeding stomach. Hermione rose from her crouch, all of her attention centered on the drama unfolding before them. This, then, was what the Mirror of Erised had tried to warn her about.

"So long as *you* live, Harry Potter, I will live, too. Destroy all the Horcruxes you can find, little boy. It no longer matters. You will never be powerful enough to defeat me!"

Harry blinked, brow creasing in thought, then retorted, "You're wrong!"

Voldemort lifted his brows, wrists crossing over the blade of the sword like it was some sort of obscene, edged arm-rest. "Am I?"

"The Prophecy says I have a power that you know not!"

"What power could you possibly have?" the Dark Lord sneered.

"Love!" Harry had stopped retreating, and now straightened his shoulders. He looked like he had swallowed a living cockroach cluster, and it was going down his throat with great difficulty, but he looked determined to swallow it.

"*Love*? What power could *love* possibly give you?" Voldemort demanded, voice hissing with skepticism.

"The power to destroy you!" Harry edged closer as he made his claim, chin lifted.

"Love cannot destroy *anything*, boy! Even I know that is a pure contradiction! Love cannot destroy me!"

"No, it cannot," Harry agreed, face a rictus of determination and grief. He snatched at the hilt of the sword, jerking it free of Voldemort's body, and hurled it away from both of them. It hit the ground and skidded, stopping with the point facing towards him. "--But I love the wizarding world too much to let you destroy it! *Accio sword!*"

And Harry faced the incoming blade fully, his arms flung wide.

"--*Protego!*"

Hermione gasped, tears in her eyes, as a bolt of magic smashed into the flying sword, sending it tumbling to the grass in her direction. Sigurd didn't even flinch, still standing at her back; the blade stopped more than two yards from where she stood, no threat to her or her unborn child. Harry whirled on Snape, gaping. "You...you stopped..."

"...Well *done*, Severus!" Voldemort clapped his hands slowly, mockingly, pride and glee coating his voice like an aural version of snake-oil. "I knew I could count on you, even if you chose to betray me! You see, Harry Potter...the world loves you too much to lose you...and yet my followers love *me* too much, too."

For a moment, Severus' black gaze met Hermione's stunned brown over the shoulder of her blood-bound brother. Then he snorted, scoffing the Dark Lord's claim.

"...*Please*. I don't love you! *None* of us did."

Strangely enough, the Dark Lord took that in stride. He even snorted. "Good. Love is nothing but a weakness!"

"Love is a strength! *Accio*!" Harry tried again.

"*Protego*!" Snape shouted. Again, the sword was diverted to the side. Ron shouted a hex at Snape, slashing with his wand, and Snape countered him with his own spell. "*Protego!--Stupefy*!"

As his best friend fell, unable to deflect the red bolt of energy in time, Harry glared at Severus Snape. "Why do you keep *doing* that?"

"*Expelliarmus*!" The jolt of magic blasted Harry's wand from his hand. Hermione's heart leapt into her throat, at that, but Snape's next words, blandly delivered, confused her. "Because your sister loves you."

"--Is *that* how it is, in the House of Snape?" Lord Voldemort hissed, face tightening in sudden comprehension. "You would betray everything you worked for, just for *this*?"

Hermione realized too late, not what, but *who* the Dark Lord meant. He lashed his wand at her, and several things happened at once. But it was as if Hermione were still wearing the Velocitemple: everything slowed down with heart-stopping clarity. She flinched, even as the spell-words formed. Sigurd lowered his wing down around her, even as Harry tried to leap into the path of Voldemort's descending wand. But he wasn't in the right position to block anything at that angle--

"--*Avada Kedavra*!"

"--*Accio Harry*!"

The second spell jerked a stunned Harry Potter straight into the path of the first one. The bolt of green light hit him in the chest, dropping him. Hermione screamed and lurched toward her wide-eyed brother. Snape lunged forward, too. Beyond the young, fallen wizard, a gaping, gobsmacked Voldemort clutched at the wound just under his ribs. Blood gushed abruptly from the wound as he gurgled, then slumped, collapsing at Harry's feet.

Skidding onto her knees, Hermione touched Harry's shoulder, his green eyes staring sightlessly up into the night sky, his glasses knocked askew from the fall. She shook him, then shook him harder. "No...no...*no*..."

"Pull yourself together!" Severus snapped at her, stooping and catching her arm. "Jane--*Jane*! Cast that charm you used!" he commanded her harshly.

She glanced up at him, still unable to believe what he'd done. It was necessary that Harry die. She knew it was necessary, but knowing, and actually seeing it happen--and partially at the hand of her husband, no less... Harry's life, traded for her own--

"--Jane, *focus*! That spell you used on the Hufflepuff cup! Trust me, and cast it on Harry's scar! *Now*!"

Lifting her wand shakily, she swallowed, and cast it. "*Psyscandum*!"

Harry's body stayed cold and dark.

Her husband shoved her around. "Now, on Voldemort!"

The freely made use of the Dark Lord's name shook her out of her stupor. She gripped her wand and cast it again. The serpentine, slit-nostriled face glowed faintly with a sickly green-yellow light, undertones of muddy red and scummy brown only visible because it was night, with only a half-moon, a dying fire, and a sky full of stars to cast any light. A moment later, the aura winked out, and Severus shoved her aside.

Blinking off the last of her shock, Hermione turned to yell at him for such callousness--and found him kissing Harry's face. Taken aback, she blinked again and stared wide-eyed. Uncomprehending, she watched him shift to kneel beside Harry's arm. He shoved up her brother's woolly jumper and the teeshirt underneath, traced the line of Harry's ribs, and interlaced his hands together, placing the heel of one over the other, and both upon the lifeless sternum he had bared. Comprehension came as he pressed down rhythmically, counting under his breath.

CPR! He was using CPR--he was trying to revive Harry! Jolted out of her shock, Hermione scrambled to get into place. Pinching Harry's nose, she tilted his head up a little, pulling his jaw open. When her husband paused after a count of fifteen, she blew gently into Harry's mouth, inflating his chest twice. A lift and twist of her head to feel for any voluntary breath on her cheek, and she watched Severus compressed Harry's chest, counting with him as she waited for the next two breaths.

Figures appeared at the edge of her vision, followed by the sharp *pop* of a Disapparation. Hermione lifted her mouth from Harry's at the end of her next two breaths. Draco was now nowhere to be seen, but the members of the Order of the Phoenix had finally chosen to arrive, brought by Portkeys, apparently. They gaped at the carnage, the fallen bodies of the Dark Lord, and the badly seared Death Eaters that Draco had apparently finished binding before taking his leave with the Order's arrival.

Moody stumped over to Ron as Hermione dipped her head to give again the Resuscitation part of CPR to her blood-bound brother.

"*Ennervate*!"

Ron jerked awake with a frantic shout, voicing the last thing that had been on his mind, "--He betrayed us! Snape betrayed us all!"

Sigurd *whomped* down over the three of them, blocking the hex Mad-Eye growled and threw at Severus, sheltering the younger wizard with his wing. At that moment, Harry started choking and coughing. Severus jerked his hands away from his ribs as Hermione released her brother's nose. Their eyes met, spells sizzling fruitlessly against Sigurd's golden hide. He didn't say anything, though, just reached up and touched Sigurd's underbelly.

A smear of Portkeyed gold and he was gone, leaving her kneeling alone next to Harry's head.

Chapter 32

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XXXII.

Her spell-bound brother coughed again, lifting a hand weakly to his battered ribs. She returned her attention to him. "Shh! Shh--easy, Harry! Just lie there. Don't try to get up..."

"Bastard!" Moody swore, stumping as fast as he could on his wooden leg over to them. "He betrayed Harry? I should've tried harder to kill the bastard!"

"He didn't betray Harry!" Hermione snapped at the aging Auror. "He *saved* Harry!"

Ron gaped at his friend. "--Hermione, Snape betrayed us! He stopped Harry from killing himself!"

"Snape..." Harry mumbled.

"And by *doing* so, he was able to pull Harry into the path of the Killing Curse, saving me!

"--Bugging arse!" Mad-Eye swore vehemently. "I should've killed him the moment I saw him!"

"Moody! In *doing* so, he was able to *then* bring Harry back from the dead, because Harry didn't have a huge, gaping chest-wound!" Hermione snapped, glaring at the two wizards. "*CPR*, Ronald! Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation! You just read a bloody pamphlet about it!" she shouted at her freckled friend.

"Yes, but he *killed* Harry! He didn't *have* to kill Harry!"

"Yes, he *did*! And I would've done it myself, if I could! Killing Harry was the *only* way to destroy the last fragment of Lord Voldemort's soul!" Hermione drew breath to argue more, but Ron paled abruptly.

"--*Is* it gone?" he demanded quickly. "*Really* gone? Cast the Soul-Scanning spell!"

Hermione gripped the wand she had dropped near Harry's shoulder in order to have her hands free for CPR assistance, and cast it again over her brother. "*Psycandum!*"

The glow of his aura sprang up from his body. It wasn't as strong as before, but then its owner had just gone through a very harrowing experience. There was a bit more in the way of red in his aura...but when Ron crouched and pushed Harry's fringe back from his face, two proofs met their eyes. One, the lightning-bolt on his forehead glowed with the same healthy-toned hues as the rest of him, and two...when she cancelled the spell in soul-deep relief, the scar had faded visibly to a jagged white line. No longer was it visibly pink with lingering freshness. A bruise mottled his forehead from where Voldemort had jabbed Harry with his finger, but the scar was just a scar, now.

Seeing the proof that the Dark Lord's taint was forever gone from her blood-bound brother, Hermione relaxed back onto her heels. Until Harry tried to sit up, groaning with pain at the effort. She quickly pushed him back down. "Don't try to get up, Harry. You've probably got a couple of cracked ribs from the CPR. Just lie there until we can get you a Portkey to St. Mungo's."

"Snape..." Harry breathed. She started to answer him, but realized his eyes were closed and his body was limp, now. He had passed out. His chest still rose and fell, thankfully. Pressing her fingers under the left side of his chin revealed his heartbeat to Hermione, relieving her further. It was slow but steady, and not too weak, all things considered. The Boy Who Had Lived now lived again, thankfully.

"Rest, Harry," Hermione breathed over her brother as more bodies started Apparating into place all around them, Aurors coming to help with a battle that was thankfully now over. She patted his shoulder, doing her best to relax her own battle-drawn tension from her body. "You've earned it."

...

Daphne Granger looked like a pallid angel, lying against the hospital sheets. Hermione's father had pushed a second hospital cot up against the edge of his wife's bed, so that he could hold her hand as he slept. He still wore his pyjamas from home, his face haggard with worry. The attack that had been only two hours ago, Hermione realized, but Jeffrey Granger looked like he had aged two years in that time.

He woke as his daughter's shadow came between him and the light from the nurse's station in the distance. Rousing, he started to ask who it was, then subsided with a look of deep relief. Instead of speaking aloud, he whispered her name, releasing his wife's fingers so that he could hold out his hand to his firstborn. "Hermione..."

"Hullo, Dad," she whispered back. "How's Mum?"

"Shh. Sleeping off a potion. I'll tell you about it, but not here." Releasing her hand, he rolled out of his bed, shrugged into a hospital dressing gown, and nodded at the door by the nurse's station. "I think the tea shop is still open..."

Normally, Hermione didn't think her father would wander anywhere in just a hospital dressing gown and his blue cotton pyjamas, but he'd been snatched from his bed by the Portkey amulet she'd made for him, along with her mother. He didn't even have slippers with him. Taking pity on him, she snatched two facial tissues from the box on the nurse's station, and Transfigured them into a pair of slippers. He gave her a grateful look and a one-armed squeeze, then slipped into them and let her lead the way up to the top of the hospital.

The cafe was nominally closed, but the tables were still available, and there was a pot of coffee and a pot of hot water available for the use of the hospital staff. Hermione filched a pair of cups and two teabags, and steeped both of them a cuppa as she settled across from her father. She had a lot to tell him, too, about what had just happened, but wanted to know what he and her mother had gone through. "So, what happened?"

"There was a flash of light that woke me, and I heard your mother scream, and then we were jolted away, spinning and rushing. I hit my head, landing hard on the floor, and blacked out. When I came to, your Russel was crouched over me, prodding me awake with his wand. He called for Arthur and Molly, and Bill and Fleur came down, too, and they all exclaimed over Daphne..." His hand clenched on his tea mug, and he bit his lower lip. It was an act of uncertainty Hermione hadn't seen in him in a long time. "I didn't understand half the jargon the doctors here said, after we Floo'd to this place, but...I knew she was in a bad way.

"It didn't take them long to fix her up, though. Just poured three potions down her throat, and she was conscious enough to say that she couldn't remember anything about the attack. She'd been asleep. They gave both of us something for the pain, and that was when Harry showed up, just as she was falling asleep. Whatever they gave me wasn't as strong as her potion, though.

"She clutched his hand until she nodded off, and he asked me and the Healers some questions, and told me that we'd been attacked by Death Eaters, apparently." Reaching across, Jeffrey gripped his daughter's hand, removing it from her own steaming mug. "Those Portkey pendants you made us saved our lives. Even if I did end up with a headache because of them," he joked weakly. "And then he said he had something really important to take care of, that you were helping him with it, and that the two of you should be by again soon.

"So, here you are...now, where's Harry? And Russel, for that matter?" Jeffrey asked her.

Hermione bit her lip. It was her turn to explain everything to her father. She squeezed his hand, then released it, cupping her mug as if the brownish contents held the secret to life, perhaps even to the universe. "You know about the war..."

"Yes. I gained a lump on my head tonight, because of it," Jeffrey Granger joked lightly.

"We, erm, had the final confrontation, tonight. It's over. It's over," she repeated, as if that could solidify the fact of Lord Voldemort's death. But...it wasn't over. Severus had fled, and she didn't know how to integrate a known Death Eater, a seeming traitor, and an undeniable murderer back into her life. Someone would eventually tell Harry that Russel and Severus were one and the same, and the truth of that particular matter would tear her sense of family apart. Or rather, tear Harry's sense of family apart.

She already knew which one she'd choose between the two of them, if she had to; she just wished there was a way where she wouldn't have to choose at all.

A warm hand covered her wrist. She looked up into her father's sympathetic brown eyes. "Can you tell me about it?"

Hermione bit her lip, wondering how much to censor. "The attack on you...started the whole snowball rolling, I guess you could say. At least, for the final phase of the war. But it's really complicated. You see, Russel is really..." No, that wasn't the way to start. "It's like this... No, erm... Daddy, it's *really* complicated, but Russel's true identity is going to cause a whole lot of fuss and bother, because a lot of people don't know the truth about him. He's a spy, but they think he's a traitor. A real traitor...when all along, he's been a for-pretend traitor. I *know* this, in my heart."

"Because you love him," Jeffrey stated. He smiled wryly at her surprise. "I may only get to see you in the summer and the occasional holiday, but I know you. You're so much like myself and your mother, a mix of both of us. You love as fiercely and protectively as any lioness, I think. Appropriate, given your School House mascot."

"Yeah, I love him," she agreed. "And because of that love, I want a happy ending for him. For *us*. But...a lot of people hate and revile him, who he really is. They don't know who he really is, just what they think he is...and Harry... Harry is one of those people who hate the person he thinks Russel's true identity is. Outright hates him. Which means the moment Harry finds out who Russel is, he'll go ballistic. He might even snap at me, because I've known for some time who Russel is, and Harry might see it as a sort of betrayal. But Harry needed to focus on the Dark Lord, and that's the main reason why I never told him," Hermione confessed. "I didn't want him getting his priorities mixed up."

"As it was...the final confrontation was tonight...and it was messy. He...um... I know you're going to find this hard to believe, Dad," Hermione stated, searching for the best way to explain, "but the Dark Lord found a way to split up his soul--a very evil way to do it, since he had to kill others to make such Dark Magic work. And one of the pieces of his soul ended up lodged, kind of like a splinter from a bomb or a grenade, in Harry's scar," she said, managing to find the right sort of analogy she needed to make her Muggle father understand.

He nodded slowly. "...I think I understand."

"Well, to kill Voldiedork, we kind of had to kill all of the pieces of his soul...including the one stuck to Harry. And that meant..." Swallowing, she forced herself to go on. "That meant Harry had to die, too."

Jeffrey stiffened, staring at her in dismay.

"He was all set to kill himself with a sword, but Russel intervened, and stopped him from doing it. That kept the Dark Lord alive, because he'd used his magic to tie his remaining life-force to Harry's well-being." At her father's confused look, Hermione realized she'd left something out and quickly added, "Um, Harry had already stabbed Voldemort with the same sword, but there was magic involved, and Voldemort couldn't die so long as Harry continued to live. Since Harry is loved by a lot of people, Voldie thought that no one would want to kill Harry, and thus he would remain alive as long as Harry lived."

"But Harry wanted to end the Dark Lord's reign of terror, and was willing to give up his life. Only Russel stopped him...and..." Her father's fingers squeezed her own, shifting from her wrist to her hand. She squeezed back. "The Dark Lord cast a spell that ended up killing Harry. Quickly and cleanly, and without any wounds. It was actually meant for me, but...Russel cast a spell that pulled Harry into the path of the Killing Curse, so that he died instead of me."

Jeffrey jerked his hand free, sitting back with a gasp.

"--Once the Dark Lord died as well, because he was still horribly wounded and all," Hermione rushed to reassure him, "Russel and I started CPR on Harry, and he came back to life without any of Voldemort's taint on him--by doing it *that* way, Russel saved Harry's life!" she emphasized firmly while her father struggled to absorb her words. "If Harry had impaled himself, like he'd planned, we wouldn't have been able to bring him back from the dead because of the wound."

"Russel *saved* Harry...but no one understands that, because Russel and I were the only ones still conscious when it happened. You see, there was a bit of a fight, and a bit of sabotage against all the other Death Eaters, then it was just down to the four of us, and the Aurors and the Order members showed up just as we revived Harry. Well, five, actually, but Draco did his part to sabotage the other Death Eaters, and then left just as the Aurors arrived. *After* it was all over, so they never saw what really happened."

"It was all a bit of a mess, and someone accused Russel of betraying Harry, and the others turned against him, and he...well, he fled," she confessed unhappily. "I think I know where he went, but unless and until the truth is known about him, until people accept what *really* has been happening, with him...he's going to remain an outlaw because of everyone's perceptions. And I don't know how to fix the whole mess of it. But I love him...so I have to try."

"Where's Harry right now?"

"He's being fussed over by some Healers, who are trying to repair the torn ligaments and cracked ribs from the CPR we gave him," she admitted. "If I'm lucky, they'll give him a sleeping draught, so I can have some time to track down Se...my husband, and try to work out a way to get his side of the story known, so that people will maybe change their opinions about him. But I had to check on you and Mum, first. I would've come earlier, back when Harry came by, but I had to check some last-minute information before heading off to face down the Dark Lord. But at least it's over--the war, I mean," she added with a weak smile. "The dangerous part is over. The hard part for some of us lies just ahead, but the war is technically now over."

Jeffrey leaned forward and caught her hand again, squeezing her fingers. "Whatever happens, Hermione, you'll still be our daughter. Even if your brother chooses to close his ears because of his antipathy for whoever Russel is. And so long as he treats you and our grandchildren well...Russel will still be our son-in-law, and will be welcome in our home. If *you* believe in him, that's good enough for me."

"...Unless he proves otherwise," her father admitted dryly. "He and Harry might not get along, but Russel's done well by us, your mother and me. I've seen him looking at you when he thought no one was watching. He'll want to do right by you, I'm sure of it."

"Thanks, Dad," Hermione breathed. She squeezed his hand back, then sipped at her tea. "...I should go find him, soon."

"Yes, you should. Let him know he has your support," her father added, patting her wrist. "Husbands need to hear that from their wives, in times of strife. Just as wives need to hear it from their husbands, sometimes."

...

Hermione Apparated from St. Mungo's to Headquarters. The house was remarkably quiet, no doubt because most everyone was still out there at Riddle Manor, helping the Aurors clean up the place, or watching over the badly burned prisoners being transferred to the hospital. She was tired; the let-down of the battle's aftermath had sapped her energy, on top of a long vigil watching the Hufflepuff cup soak in the murderous tea they had made.

But she paused to check on Crookshanks, rubbing his flanks as he twined himself around her ankles, made sure he and the other cats in the house had plenty of food and water so that they wouldn't be neglected in all of the excitement, and Floo'd from the kitchen to 42 Spinner's End. Whirling out of the fireplace, she caught her balance, then yelped and ducked. Books were sailing off the shelves, startling her.

The horizontal rain of flying tomes slowed to a trickle. Uncovering her head cautiously, Hermione peered around the room. Draco Malfoy was the one who had made the books leave the shelves. Her husband was shrinking each stack that Draco collected, and packing them into a box. Both men stared at her, but only Draco gripped his wand defensively. She quickly considered her options, and attacked first.

"You did a *marvelous* job with that spell, Draco. If you ever turn yourself in, or get captured, they'll go a lot easier on you if they know how you turned against the others so spectacularly. But then, that was *your* plan all along, wasn't it, husband?" she asked Severus. He glanced at her, and shrunk the waiting stack with a tap of his wand. She supposed he didn't have any Shrinking Solution on hand, which was why he was resorting to 'foolish wand-waving'.

"Husband'. You actually admit to being married to him?" Draco challenged her, pointing at the man behind him.

"Why not?" Hermione countered calmly, though her heart was beating a little too fast for true calm. "I am. And quite happily."

That made Draco scoff. "As if! Do you really think he could be *happy*, married to a Mu--"

Even though he wasn't facing his former teacher, some instinct made Draco cut off what he was saying just as Severus shot him a dark look.

"...Uh, that is... You're a *Muggle*-born," Draco enunciated with a wince that was half grimace. "And the best friend of the Boy Who Won. We're fugitives, in the eyes of the law. You could hardly go strolling about, arm-in-arm, with him!"

It was weird, having a conversation with Draco on the very point she wanted to argue with her husband. "That's why I'm here. You'll always *be* fugitives, until you have your chance to testify. In an open court, with the truth spread far and wide--and the truth is, Draco, without you casting that spell I created, we would have lost. Even after most of them fled, when the Dark Mark brand was destroyed, there were still too many of them for our side to have prevailed. But you decimated their ranks! Your blow allowed Harry to attack Voldemort virtually unimpeded!

"And what *you* did," she added, looking past Draco to her husband, who had flicked another row of books off the living room shelves. "You saved Harry's life, and helped him kill Voldemort at the same time. You're both *heroes*."

"You're delusional. *No* one would call us such," Severus muttered, shrinking and packing the stack he had gathered.

"That's because no one knows the truth, yet!" Frustrated, knowing he would only continue to stonewall her on this subject, Hermione sighed and rubbed her head. "Look-- stay here, until I get back. This place is still Secret-Kept, so you'll be safer here for the time being than making a run for it, if nothing else. I'm going to go set things up, and when they're ready, we'll get everything--*everything*--straightened out."

He didn't stop packing the box. Sighing roughly, Hermione concentrated and Apparated back to Headquarters. Tired as she was, she had a lot to do, and convincing her husband to reveal all that he'd done was only the start of it. A fistful of Floo Powder, and the young witch stepped through to Madam Pince's office.

A glance at the clock on the wall showed that it was not quite six o'clock. Dawn had lightened the sky beyond the windows, but only the earliest risers would be up by now, stirring in their dorm-rooms. Hermione nibbled her lip in thought, then Transfigured a scrap of paper from the librarian's desk into a cup, scooped some Floo Powder into it, and stated firmly, "Kreacher, you are summoned!"

The age-withered house-elf appeared abruptly in front of her, glowering at her, but obedient to her summons. "What does Miss want?"

"Lead me to the entrance of the Ravenclaw dormitories," she directed him. He snorted, but trotted out of the office. She had to walk quickly to keep up with him, but it didn't take long to reach a portrait of an alchemist witch, with bubbling retorts and steaming alembics. "Now, gently wake up Luna Lovegood and tell her that I need to see her immediately, Kreacher. Tell her I'm waiting just outside the Ravenclaw portrait."

He *popped* away, in that peculiar ability house-elves had to Apparate within Hogwarts. Hermione decided that house-elves must somehow be exempt from the Anti-Apparation wards, to be able to do that. It was the only possible explanation. Waiting, she paced a little, stifling a yawn with her free hand. Finally, she saw the portrait swing open, and the wide-eyed blond poked her curly head through.

"There you are. Luna, I need your father's help."

Blinking, Luna stepped through. Her blue eyes still bulged a little more than most, but she had grown up a bit over the several months since Hermione had last seen her. "What can my father do for you?"

"I need him to contact all of the journalists he knows, and have them be ready to watch the trial of the century. Not just the ones who write for *The Quibbler*, but all of the other wizarding journals, too. Here--this is Floo Powder. You can contact him through the Floo," she told Luna, handing over the cup. "I know it's not allowed in the dormitories, but this is an emergency. I'll let you know when and where the trial will be, as soon as I myself know."

"The truths that are going to come out at this trial will make an actual, live, Crumple-Horned Snorkack look as interested as a flobberworm, in comparison," Hermione stated dryly. "Lord Voldemort is dead, and Severus Snape is going to turn himself in." That made Luna's eyes widen and bulge even further in interest, but Hermione didn't say anything more, just headed back for the library with a wave over her shoulder. "--Thanks, Luna!"

...

A visit to a sleepy but dressed Professor Flitwick let her into his parlour. By the time Hermione was done giving him a terse explanation of the end of the war, and all of the other soul-carrying items, not just his Rowena Ravenclaw wand, he was wide-awake, looking as if someone had poured a pot of coffee directly into his veins. Hermione made her way next to the dungeons, where she encountered Professor Slughorn in his office, rifling through his end-of-midterm exam papers. He hid them when she entered, then relaxed, seeing who it was.

"Miss Granger! You know, I was *very* disappointed in your not continuing in your seventh year at this institution!"

"I'm sorry, Professor," Hermione apologized, "but events made it necessary. Now, I need your help. You're the only one who can do what I need done, because you're the only person I know with so many valuable contacts."

The florid, fat wizard made a noise of protest under his breath, but he sat back in his chair with a pleased look all the same. "Well! What sort of service could I provide, and what would be the cause?"

"I need you to contact people in the Wizarding Wireless, and have them attend the most sensational trial that will ever happen in this century--possibly in this millennium! I don't know anyone who works in wizarding radio," she admitted honestly, "and if anyone *does*, you'd be the man to know."

"Well! Well...yes, I know a Hufflepuff who's one of the announcers... What trial is this?" he asked her. "Surely not...not You-Know-Who?"

"No, he's dead," Hermione returned quickly, almost cheerfully. Slughorn gaped at her, and she grinned. "I saw it happen less than an hour ago. No, I need full, broad,

unlimited, unrestricted media coverage of the coming trial--if you have any other journalist friends, do let them know."

"Miss Granger--*whose* trial will it be?" he insisted, as she turned to walk out of his office.

"Severus Snape's trial, of course!"

He spluttered, frowned, and looked indecisive. Hermione guessed what was going through his mind: Severus was a fellow Slytherin, but Severus had also killed their employer, Albus Dumbledore. She took the indecision out of his hands.

"Anyone who is *anyone* will be at that trial, and you and I both know it. Snape's trial won't be just front-page news; it'll be a whole Special Edition of *The Daily Prophet*, because of what he knows, and what he's going to tell. So, will you do it?"

His mustache twitched. "Save me a seat, Miss Granger. And seats for the whole of the wizarding world media! Just one question--who captured him?"

She grinned again as she exited. "I did!"

Her grin faded as she closed the door. Crossing to the other side of the corridor, she summoned the door to Snape's quarters and stepped through. The short passage was still cobwebbed and dusty, but the lights lit in the room beyond as she entered. Resting here was not an option, however. Scraping through the remains of Floo Powder in the pot, she lit a fire with her wand and cast the greyish-green grit onto the flames. "Ministry of Magic!"

Whirling through the emerald flames, she emerged in a shaken beehive of activity. It was just past six, but Ministry employees were arriving left and right, some still struggling into their clothes. No less than four witches and a wizard were still in curlers, the former with their hair falling down as they bustled for the lifts, the latter with his beard tangling with his robes in his haste. Whispered and murmurs and even shouts of excitement and disbelief swirled around her, as the word spread that Lord...Thingy...was dead. *They can't even bring themselves to say his name, yet* she thought with a wrinkled nose. *I wonder how long that'll be.*

The guard eyed her as she stepped up to him. "Name and wand."

"Hermione Granger." She held still as he scanned her with an Artifact, handed over her wand when requested, and waited patiently as he weighed it and handed her a receipt for it.

"You'll get that back when you're done, Miss. Where are you headed?"

"The Law Department. I'm looking for the Department Head."

"You'll want Priscilla Philliston; she just got in about two minutes ago. Fifth floor."

"Thank you."

She felt a bit naked without her wand, but she still had Sigurd to protect her, and that thought comforted her. This was the most dangerous part of her quest, after all. If Madam Philliston, chief witch of the Wizengamot judges, didn't like what Hermione had to say, Hermione might need a fast way out of there. The lift that opened for her was crowded, but she managed to squeeze herself into a corner, calling out her floor number. Someone pressed several destinations for the others, and the lift ascended away from the main floor.

Memos zoomed inside on the next floor, hovering overhead, then zoomed out again, only to be replaced by more. The enclosed space rang with the babble of a dozen excited voices. Grateful when the magical voice of the lift announced her floor, Hermione squeezed herself free, breathing deeply as she stepped into the halls of the fifth level. Signs pointed her towards the International Magical Office of Law, which turned out to be very busy. More signs pointed the way to Madam Philliston's office, but a familiar voice, and a familiar, leonine head, made Hermione duck back out of direct sight.

Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic, was discussing something with Madam Philliston. Hermione needed to talk to the woman without the Minister knowing that she--Hermione Granger, best friend of Harry Potter, the Boy Who Had Defeated Voldiebutt Again, Huzzah--was in the building. Well, without letting him know she was there before she had talked to the witch in that office. Afterward, he could know she was in the building. Casting about, she spotted an empty cubicle and edged into it. Snagging a piece of stationery and a quill, Hermione thought for a moment, and wrote out a note.

Minister Scrimgeour,

I know where D. Malfoy is currently located. Meet me in the entry hall downstairs, in front of the statue of the house-elf, and I'll tell you what I can.

H. Granger

Folding the note into an aeroplane shape, she enchanted it to fly, then launched it and ducked behind the cubicle wall. Half a minute later, she heard an exclamation from the nearby office, and saw a tuft of silvery mane hurrying along the corridor between cubicles. He had taken the bait.

It wasn't a lie; she did know where Draco was located. And she *would* tell the man what she could: that Draco was located in a Secret-Kept location. Not being the Secret-Keeper, Hermione couldn't tell him *where* that was...but she could tell the odious man all that she could. Admittedly, Rufus Scrimgeour was a better Minister than Cornelius Fudge had been, but that really wasn't saying much, considering how bad Fudge had been. One of the things she hoped to do with her machinations was blast off the lid of Scrimgeour's policy of persecuting, rather than lawfully prosecuting, anyone involved in the war. She wasn't going to hold her breath, but she was going to hope and strive for the best possible outcome.

A real life with her husband, where neither of them had to hide from the law.

Stepping out of the cubicle, she slipped through the partially open door of Priscilla Philliston's office. Madam Philliston had been appointed the Minister when Madam Bones had been murdered. Hermione suspected the woman was a crony of his, or at least someone Scrimgeour thought he could direct, if not outright control. What Hermione had gleaned from the transcripts of the trials that had taken place was that Priscilla Philliston was much like Barty Crouch Senior had been, back around the time she'd been born. Strict, almost harsh...but somewhat fair.

If she was allowed to be.

Hermione suspected the Minister put a lot of pressure on the Law Department to hold 'prisoners' until the Ministry could dig up actual evidence against them. But once they actually went to trial--which explained why Stan Shunpike was still languishing in captivity; there was not a single credible scrap of evidence against him--justice prevailed. Closing the door quietly, Hermione studied the older woman.

Philliston sat at her desk with her head bowed over something she was writing. Her face was seamed lightly with the lines of later middle-age; given the longevity of wizards and witches, she was probably in her seventies or older, but looked like she was in her early fifties at most. Her hair was a short, bushy mass of steel-wool grey curls, something like what Hermione fancied her own might be, if she ever cropped it that short at that age.

The witch wore a sort of cross between dress robes and a Muggle skirt-suit, long, flowing lines in dusky rose with a pink blouse underneath, and had a couple strands of polished garnet chips strung across her chest. The combination looked approachable, save for the stern frown-lines age-worn into her brow. Finishing what she was writing with a flourished signature, she looked up at Hermione. "Can I help you, or are you just going to stand there?"

"I want to arrange a date for a trial."

Phylliston set her quill down and sat back, lifting her brows. "Really? Since when does the Department of Magical Law bow to the dictates of...well, since I don't know you, I can safely say, the dictates of a total nobody?"

"My name is Hermione. As in Hermione, best friend of Harry Potter."

Priscilla's hazel green eyes sharpened, and she sat forward again. "Hermione Granger? Word has it you were *there*, last night!"

"I was. And Tom Marvolo Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort--" she watched the older witch wince visibly at the openly-spoken name, "--also known as You-Know-Who and Lord Thingy and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named...is indeed thoroughly and *completely* dead, this time around. I Soul-Scanned the body myself, as he died," Hermione confirmed dryly. "But I'm not here to discuss that. Not directly, at any rate."

"Why are you here, then?" Phylliston enquired, arching her brow skeptically. "I trust it's not to waste my time?"

"No, I'm here to arrange for the trial of the century. Now that Moldiebutt is dead, who is number-one on the Law Department's hit-list of people you desperately want to put on trial?" the younger witch asked, certain she knew the answer.

The older witch's mouth compressed briefly. "Severus Snape, I suppose..." Her eyes narrowed abruptly in comprehension. "*You* know where he is?"

Hermione chose her reply carefully. "He is in a Secret-Kept place. As I am not the Secret-Keeper for that particular Fidelius Charm, I cannot tell you where that is. Nor can I lead you there, obviously. But I can and will bring him to you, on the day and at the time that you appoint for his trial...if you agree to give him a fair trial."

"Not good enough!"

"Then you're not getting him...and your chance to enact a true justice will fall by the wayside," Hermione shrugged with deliberate carelessness.

"Who do you think you are, to make such a demand? If you know where he is, then either you hand him over to the Department of Law, or you will find yourself in contempt and imprisoned for obstructing that law!" Priscilla Phylliston argued, slapping her hand on her desk.

"--*I'm* not Rufus Scrimgeour, for one," Hermione retorted, planting her hands on the Department Head's desk. "*I'm* not the one still holding Stan Shunpike prisoner, *more* than a year after his incarceration, *without* a fair, and just, and *prompt* trial. When will Stan, a lack-wit attendant for the Knight Bus, have his *fair and just trial*?" she demanded pointedly. "When Scrimgeour's other lackeys succeed in digging up something to pin on him that you and I both know *isn't* there? ...Or when they *manufacture* it, to justify holding him so long without seeing to any of his long-violated civil rights?"

The older witch dropped her gaze to the side; Hermione leaned closer, pressing her advantage.

"Who am I, Madam Phylliston? I am the *only* person who can get Severus Snape to come quietly. Peacefully. You can try to hunt him down, hope and pray he leaves the safety of the Fidelius Charm protecting him and goes somewhere that you can spot, track, and catch him...but you're not going to win. He has layers of protection on him that you cannot even guess. Ways of escaping and eluding even the most talented of Aurors. And even if the Aurors could circumvent those protections, he won't go without a fight. You and I know that it would be a very nasty fight.

"With Dumbledore and Voldemort--" again, Priscilla flinched, "--both dead, he is the most powerful and dangerous wizard alive. But *I* can bring him in. Peacefully, as I said," Hermione repeated, straightening.

"How?" Phylliston challenged her, giving her a scathing look. "You're just a girl!"

"I have my ways. Do you want to set the trial, or not?"

"Not good enough! Tell me how you, a girl who should still be in school, can bring in the Ministry's Most Wanted Wizard, now that Lord...Thingy...is dead," the older witch demanded.

"Fine." Hermione glanced behind her, double-checking to make sure the door was still closed. Leaning over the desk, she looked into the other woman's eyes. "I was Hermione Granger. For a while, I was even 'Granger-Potter'. Harry and I are now blood-bound siblings; we adopted each other magically last fall," she explained as Priscilla gave her a puzzled look. "But I also got married, this last winter. I am now Hermione Snape. Wife of Severus Snape. And I'm the only hope you have of bringing him in to answer for what he's done. Literally answer, in a court of law, in a *fair and just trial*.

"Whatever the outcome, whatever his answers may be, he must answer the questions that all of us have--and you'll be a fool if you make it a closed trial," Hermione added quietly. "Everyone loved Albus Dumbledore. Everyone needs to know the truth of what Snape did, and why he did it. Part of the bargain is letting the media into the courtroom to record every single word, and share it with the rest of the wizarding world. You promise to do that, and I promise to bring him. No wand, no Veritaserum antidote, just a peaceful, immediate surrender to the wheels of justice. With no waiting and rotting in a jail cell, or having his civil rights conveniently 'forgotten' without everyone being satisfied by full and due process that only an open trial could give to the wizarding world."

"If this is true," Priscilla murmured, hazel eyes pinning Hermione with a calculated look, "if you really *are* his wife--a fact which I sincerely doubt--why are you offering to turn him in?"

"Because, by law, a wife cannot be forced to testify against her husband in a court of law," Hermione hedged very carefully, skimming over the truth by the letter of what she said, but implying a different spirit. "But nowhere does it say she can be *prevented* from testifying at his trial, either."

Madam Phylliston sat back and pondered Hermione's offer. She tapped a manicured nail on her desk blotter, straightened a sheaf of papers with the edge of her finger, then spoke. "...All of this is predicated on your claim that you are his wife, that you can find him, and that you can bring him in. Without his wand, and without any Truth Serum Antidote in his veins. Yet how can you prove what you say, without actually bringing him to me? I'm not going to arrange a trial until I know he's in custody."

"He will be. In my custody. As for proof..." Hermione resisted the urge to bite her lip. She also kept her hands on the desk, and did not reach for the slight swell of her abdomen. Her bargain might have been very Slytherin in its cunning, but sealing it would take every ounce of her Gryffindor bravery. "I am willing to lay my life on the line, for my word of honor. I am willing to take an Unbroken Vow...if you are willing to do the same.

"I will bring you the genuine Severus Selenius Snape, former Potions and Defence Against the Dark Arts professor of Hogwarts, alive, wandless, with no Veritaserum antidote in his veins, and as peacefully as can be expected, to the time and place of his trial. If *you* will swear the Unbroken Vow of granting him a fair and just trial, open to all, wherein the verdict will *not* already be pre-decided by anyone. Not by you, nor by any pressure from Minister Scrimgeour, nor pressured to pre-decide his fate before the trial begins by anyone else. A *full* as well as fair trial. You will agree to not allow anyone to make a mockery of the law, in this matter. No shortcuts, no attacks to end his life, nor torturing confessions out of him, and no censoring anything that he or any witnesses brought in to testify might say.

"If you want Severus Snape--if you want the *truth* of everything that has been happening since *before* I was born...you're going to have to lay your own life on the line."

Priscilla stared at Hermione, a young witch barely one fourth her most probable age. Silence stretched between them, broken by the rhythmic ticking of a small clock on one corner of the desk between them, and by the hubbub of voices in the corridors and cubicles outside. A knock interrupted their tableau.

"Enter!"

"...I have the preliminary reports from the first Aurors on site last night, Madam," a dark blond wizard in his mid-thirties stated, entering the room. He glanced at Hermione in curiosity as he handed over a folder, giving her a brief greeting. "Hello, there... Is there anything else you need at the moment, Madam?"

Priscilla took the papers without looking at them. Her gaze remained on Hermione. "Yes, St. James, there is one more thing you could do for me, right now..."

...

Hermione had almost forgotten about Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic. Accepting her wand from the guard in exchange for its receipt, she headed toward the Floo hearths on the far wall. A shout made her jump as she crossed the busy hall.

"You! Stop right there, Miss Granger!"

"Oh, Minister Scrimgeour," Hermione greeted him, blinking as he stalked at her like a lion chasing a hyena from his kill. "I'd almost forgotten about you."

He reddened a little at the insult, but Hermione didn't take it back. "You said you were going to tell me where I could find Draco Malfoy! Talk!"

"Actually, I said I knew where he was, but only that I'd tell you what I could," Hermione corrected him. "Draco Malfoy is currently hiding in a Secret-Kept location. I *can* tell you that much, though not where that location is, given the nature of the Fidelius Charm." He growled and she smiled sweetly at him. "But I wanted to inform you that, if it weren't for Draco Malfoy's timely assistance last night, we would not have won against the Dark Lord and his followers."

"What?" He blinked at her.

"Oh, yes! Draco Malfoy, in coordination with myself and a trusted liaison, cast a very nasty spell that sabotaged the most dangerous forces of the Death Eaters, last night. He literally burned the masks off their faces," she stated, gesturing vaguely at her head. "Well, except for Bellatrix Lestrange. I had her pinned to the ground without her mask, which is why she wasn't burnt. But, without Draco's assistance, we would most assuredly have lost, last night. Instead, with his help, we defeated Lord Voldemort for good!"

Scrimgeour flinched at the name, as did several of the people passing around them. Hermione lost her patience with the sheep-like lot. Hands planted on her hips, she took care of the problem in the most direct manner possible.

"**VOLDEMORT!**"

The shout rang through the Entrance Hall, freezing passers-by and silencing conversations.

"For Merlin's sake, people, it's *just a name!* And trust me--as I was there--he is most thoroughly and completely dead!" she chided all of the wide-eyed wizards and witches around her. "Obliterated! Disintegrated! Every last, fragmented scrap of his rotten, murderous soul has been hunted down and wiped off the face of the planet! *Voldemort!* ...Get over it!"

Turning, she headed for the hearths lining the wall, intending to head home. Scrimgeour grabbed her arm, stopping her. A shimmering, golden hiss made him release her abruptly; Sigurd had materialized with his relatively small, dragonette form draped across her shoulders, but with his teeth bared in a draconian snarl even after the Minister had removed his touch.

"...Is there a reason why you were manhandling me, Minister?" Hermione enquired coolly as he eyed the artificial beast warily.

He gave her a dark look, his leonine eyes visibly calculating the chance of successfully holding her at the Ministry, versus the implications of that old-fashioned ring-guardian still perched on her shoulders. "You left the scene of the attack, Miss Granger. You still need to give your statements and deposition to the Aurors."

"Oh, I will. In two days' time, Minister Scrimgeour. In the meantime, I have more important matters to attend." Dismissing him in a glance, she headed towards the fireplaces.

"--I'm not finished with you, Miss Granger!"

"For today, yes, you are!" Grabbing a handful of Powder, she cast it into the flames and stated, "Honeydukes, Hogsmeade!"

There was no other hearth she could think of that *wasn't* in a Secret-Kept location. Once she stumbled out of the hearth, however, Hermione lingered only long enough to orient herself, concentrate, and squeeze her way to 42 Spinner's End. She *banged* into the living room, just in time to see the last section of books being reduced for travel. The sight of her husband still doggedly packing made her tighten her mouth.

"Put them back, Severus. They're not going anywhere. Neither are you," she added as he glanced up at her. Draco wasn't in view at the moment, but she thought that wasn't a bad thing.

"I am packing, because I am leaving. England has lost its appeal...and I will not be bottled in my own house for what's left of my life, like Black was." He returned to his shrinking and packing.

Hermione could sympathize with him, on that point. She'd seen how tense and unhappy Sirius had been caged at 12 Grimmauld Place during her fifth year. "You don't have to be."

That made him lift his gaze sharply, warily to hers. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you have an appointment in two days, at one o'clock in the afternoon. An appointment to clear your name."

He snorted, a scoffing sound well-suited to his long, thin nose. "And where will this miraculous name-clearing take place?"

"Courtroom Ten."

He stilled, hands ceasing mid-stacking of the miniaturized books he was placing in the trunk on the table. "I am not appearing in court."

"Yes, you are. I've made the appointment, and you will be there to give testimony on your own behalf," Hermione stated patiently as he placed the last few tomes into the metal-edged case.

"--It would be a *mockery* of a trial!" he shouted, shoving the trunk away from himself. It scraped heavily across the worn table. Brow furrowed deeply, he lifted his fingers to the bridge of his nose, pinching the taut muscles there. "...I don't have time for this. *We* don't have time for this."

Hermione wasn't about to give up. Not considering what was at stake. She perched herself on the age-worn arm of the chair near the hearth and folded her arms across her chest. Her breasts protested a little, growing more sensitive week by week as her pregnancy progressed. She *would* prevail, in bringing him to justice. True justice. For the sake of their small but growing family, she had to succeed.

"'We' as in you and I, or 'we' as in you and Draco?"

He flicked her an inscrutable look. "You pledged me two children...but you also ruined my potion. I can hardly impregnate you with the second one from long-distance. Not

even I am that talented a lover."

She glared at him. "I am *not* raising *our* child in the kind of unstable environment to be found in a life on the run! Merlin's pink arse, Severus! The Death Eaters found and killed Karkaroff within a year, when he ran! What makes you think either of us would live much longer than that? He was one man, easily hidden! We're two people, with a baby on the way. Not even the Potters could hide forever, all those years ago!"

He flinched, at that. It wasn't a very visible flinch, but she knew him, and recognized the twitching muscles for what they were. A wince. He closed the lid of the trunk and latched it.

"Severus, I cannot leave. And I cannot let *you* leave. We have to stay! We have to go to that trial! The truth must be *exposed*!"

"The truth will be known when Albus leaps back to life!" he snapped impatiently at her. "--Do you see Albus here? *Do you?*" Black-clad arms spread wide, indicating the bare-shelved room, full now only of shabby furniture and the two of them. "I will not go to Azkaban! Yes, I may deserve it, but I find that, now that I have survived the end of the war--against all possible odds, I'll admit--that I am *disinclined* to throw away my life like that! Or my soul! You can bet the current Minister will welcome the Dementors back to Azkaban with open arms, so long as I'm the very first bastard they Kiss!"

"The trial *will* be just and fair--" Hermione stressed.

Again, he snorted, scoffing her claim. "--As if! I'll be dragged before the Wizengamot, drugged to my eye-teeth, asked meaningless questions for which I cannot give accurate answers, and you expect them to let me go free?"

"More than just your testimony will be exposed!"

"None of it will matter!" he half-yelled at her, thumping himself in the chest. "I am Severus Snape, murderer of Albus Dumbledore, Public Enemy Number One, now that the Serpentine Arse is dead! If I fall into the so-called 'justice' of the Ministry of Magic, I'll be crucified!--At least on the run, you'll still have a husband, and a father for our child!"

"What kind of a life is that, for a child?" she countered sharply. "Never knowing where his or her parents will be getting their food, never being able to stay long enough to make friends, constantly afraid that the 'bad men' will come and take their Daddy away?--And what about me? I'd be an accessory to your evasion of the law! Do you really think they'd let *me* go free?" Hermione challenged him, rising off of the padded arm of the chair as she thumped her own chest with her fingertips. "Don't even suggest that my 'pristine' record as a student and my participation in bringing down Voldemort would save me! By the time they caught up with us, all of that would be forgotten under the weight of being known and wanted fugitives!"

Hands resting on the lid of his trunk, he stared through it for a long moment, then shifted, grasping the handle of the boxy luggage. "...I am leaving, Jane. I am not staying here to be paraded before the wizarding world, vilified and reviled, spat upon, sneered at, and thrown to the Dementors as my sole thanks for all that I have done. Either you will come with me, or you will stay behind. I am *leaving*."

From the set of his shoulders, the look on his face, she knew he was determined. There was nothing more to be said...save for her last possible chance at convincing him. Letting herself sigh shakily, she ran her fingers through her hair, smoothing it down as he pressed the edge of one of the bookcases, revealing a hidden staircase.

"...Fine. Then I will go write my last testament and will. I'll give you my key to my Gringotts vault, too. You'll probably have to send someone else to pick up the money, unless you hurry and go now. Madam Philliston, Head of the Department of Law, already knows that I'm your wife. She might think to set a watch on who accesses my vaults."

Severus turned, frowning at her. "What are you babbling about?"

"Well, if you're leaving, then I'll have to set my affairs in order."

He blinked. "...Your affairs in order? Hermione, you're not dying!"

Folding her arms under her breasts, she arched her brow. "You're determined to leave, Severus, with or without me. We both know you're better-trained at magic than I am, and that Sigurd won't allow me to stop you, since he obeys you in preference over me. There is nothing I can do to stop you from leaving, and not appearing at that trial...and when you do not appear peacefully for your trial, wandless and without any taint of the antidote for Veritaserum in your body...I will have broken my Vow to Madam Philliston.

"Because I promised her that you *would* appear at one o'clock in Courtroom Ten, two days from now. Wandless, antidote-free, and as peacefully as can be managed."

His lips parted, jaw slack with shock at her admission.

"I pledged these things in exchange with Madam Philliston pledging an Unbreakable Vow of her own: that you would have a fair, just, and full trial, one wherein your verdict was not pre-judged before all of the testimony possible had been heard. She has agreed to *not* let Minister Scrimgeour's own opinions sway the decision of the Wizengamot, and has promised that she will not tolerate any shenanigans that will turn your trial into a mockery of justice. On pain of her own self dropping dead.

"...But then, she doesn't have to worry about that, does she?" Hermione enquired softly. "Her Vows only become pertinent if I manage to fulfill my own. And with you leaving, I drop out of the picture, and she is automatically freed of her obligations. Shall I leave my key on the table, here? I'll have to go back to Headquarters to get it, first. And I wouldn't mind a chance to say one last goodbye to my family and friends--"

"Hermione--" he breathed, staring at her. She hoped the stark look in his dark eyes was anguish, maybe even guilt, but he was across the room from her. Keeping her voice calm, quiet, she cut him off gently, shaking her head.

"...Don't bother, Severus. I told you I was willing to give our marriage a real chance...but I'm not going to force you to stay, if that's obviously not what you yourself want," she prodded him dryly. On the one hand, she hated herself for manipulating him like this. On the other hand, she knew it was absolutely necessary. "A marriage on the run isn't a real marriage. Not as far as I'm concerned. But I guess I'm the only one willing to strive for a chance at a real one."

"--A very *slim* chance!" he dismissed derisively, scowling at her.

"It's no smaller a chance than we had of defeating Voldemort!" she retorted. "And we *did that*!"

"This is not the same thing, Jane!"

"Slaying the reputation everyone believes about you is no different! Yes, it is a difficult task, but I have absolute faith in who you are, Severus!" Hermione argued. "I am willing to bet my *life* on who you really are, and what you've really been doing all along!"

"And the life of our child?" he challenged her, dropping the trunk back onto its table as he closed the distance between them. His hands closed around her elbows, gripping her firmly, but not bruisingly hard. "How can you risk him or her?"

"How can *you* risk our child, by walking away from your chance at being a free man?" she returned pointedly. "If you walk away now, it'll only be a hundred times--a *thousand* times--worse, if and when you *do* want to clear your name. These things must be nipped in the bud *now*. I am giving you that chance!" She searched his dark gaze, hoping she was getting through to him. "You are *not* a coward, Severus Snape. You never have been, to me. I cannot believe it takes more bravery to walk into a

courtroom, wherein the chief witch of the Wizengamot knows she would drop dead if she allowed your trial to turn into a pointless circus, than it did to tell Sigurd to stand down and to crawl to the Dark Lord's scaly feet and kiss them, the night he tortured you!"

For a moment, it looked as if she had gotten through to him. Then he closed his eyes and pushed away from her, turning away from her. "--I cannot believe you swore an Unbreakable Vow!" Severus whirled to face her, his expression as black as his clothes. "How could you be so stupid as to swear your own life away?"

Lifting her chin, she met his gaze steadily. "You did the same--and I suspect with even less knowledge of what you were getting yourself into. Ron told me last year that Harry overheard you talking to Draco about the Unbreakable Vow you'd made to help him. The Vow that ended up forcing you to take Albus' life in Draco's stead. But it also sounded like you initially didn't know what Draco had to do! Why should I, going into this *fully* knowing what I was swearing, be more foolish than you?"

"--I *knew* from the start what Cissy was asking me to do!" Severus countered, startling her with the admission. "I read her mind, here in this very room--seated in that very chair as she knelt in front of me, begging me to help her only son!"

Hermione blinked at him. "Then...why did you go through with it?"

He grimaced, instead of speaking. A breath, and he paused again. Turning away, shoulders stiff, he sighed heavily after a long moment. All of the tension drained out of him, but not in a good way. In a defeated sort of way. It wasn't a good look for such a normally proud wizard.

"...You've won, Jane. I will go to the trial, as you bartered I would. Wandless, without any antidote...and without fighting anyone. It won't be much comfort to me when Madam Phyllistion drops dead, as she inevitably will...but it might be a last, amusing thought for the Dementors to drain away. An aperitif of sorts, before they feast on my soul."

Unsure what had made him change his mind, Hermione pressed the matter. As much as she wanted to believe him, she'd gambled her life, and the life of their child, on his agreeing to her plan. "Swear it upon the ring, and I'll believe you."

A sound that could have been a growl escaped him, but he lifted his hand, touching thumb to ring. "Hermione Jane Snape. I swear that I will go to my appointed Wizengamot Trial in two days' time, wandless, peacefully, and without any trace of an antidote for Veritaserum in my veins!"

Hermione checked the pattern forming from the scales etching her ring.

...I swear that I will go to my appointed Wizengamot Trial in two days' time, wandless, peacefully, and without any trace of an antidote for Veritaserum in my veins.

"Thank you, Severus," she breathed, closing her eyes in relief. His terse reply snapped her eyes open again.

"Leave me."

It was the same tone he had used when she'd cursed his genitals just over three and a half months ago, telling her in the bathroom of their hotel-suite to get out of his sight. She wanted to stay, to try and heal the breach between them, but Hermione knew now wasn't the moment for such things. Clinging to her faith that enough testimony in his favour could be exposed at the trial, she nodded and turned to face the hearth.

"I'll come back to check on you tomorrow."

A scoffing grunt was his only reply.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XXXIII.

Headquarters had become a party-zone, when she returned. Lupin was passing around mugs of champagne that Fleur was hastily Transfiguring into proper flute-glasses, Moody was kissing Arabella, and the Weasleys were celebrating by cheering on Ron as he related everything that he knew. Moody was the only Auror present, in fact; Hermione suspected it was because he was technically an ex-Auror, and wasn't needed at the battle-scene or at the Ministry to assist the others in handling the prisoners.

Her arrival, spinning out of the hearth, went unnoticed only for a few moments. Voices died down as soon as Ron spotted her and stopped talking. The others turned to look at what had captured his attention as Hermione dusted off her clothes.

Moody released Mrs. Figg, peering at Hermione with both his normal and his magical eye. "--About time you got here, girl. You've a lot of explaining to do!"

"I don't *have* to explain anything to you, Alastor!" Hermione snapped, exhausted and cranky and just wanting to lie down and sleep and dream that everything had been straightened out and fixed, and that a happily-ever-after awaited her and her husband.

Unfortunately, Severus was right. The trial was a slim chance of restoring his reputation in the eyes of the wizarding world, and gaining his freedom by it. And unfortunately, she was right as well. Life as a fugitive was no way to live. Not in the long-term sense, anyway.

Bracing herself with a deep breath, she continued. "...I will explain things to you as a *courtesy*, but my energy is low, my patience is short, my nerves are frayed, and if I hear even *one* nasty comment about Severus Snape from *anyone*, I will hex that person's skin inside out!"

Pushing her hair back from her face, Hermione struggled to calm herself with a deep breath.

"...Now, do you have any questions?"

The others exchanged glances. It was George Weasley who dared to ask, "So...Russel--your *husband*--is really Severus Snape?"

"Yes," Hermione admitted.

"--How long have you know he was Snape?" Fred asked her, frowning.

"Since mid-December, when I tried to steal the Lucrezia Borgia Diary from his personal library. That's why I was out-of-sorts," she added in an aside to Ron. "I wasn't pregnant at the time. I was just trying to cope with a major shock."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Molly demanded. "Christmas Day--you *knew* he was Snape, and yet you still let us marry the two of you?"

Hermione folded her arms across her chest. "I *like* him." Her words, crisp and hard, silenced the mutterings of the others. "Hard as it may be for the rest of you lack-wits to understand, Severus is a complicated man. Partially because of the life he has been forced to live all these years, but there *are* parts of his personality that most people haven't been able to see, parts that are actually *enjoyable*! There is as much of the fun-loving, easy-going Russel in Severus, as there ever was the stick-up-his-arse aspects of Professor Snape! And he has been *loyal* to Albus Dumbledore this entire time!"

"Bollocks!" Mad-Eye swore at her. "How could he be so *loyal* if he killed the old man?"

"Because he had no choice!" Hermione shot back, feeling her temples beginning to ache. "He knew he had to do whatever it took to appear to be of the Dark Lord's loyal followers. He had to take an Unbroken Vow to do so, and when Draco failed to kill Dumbledore, he did what he had to do to survive and continue to spy upon Voldemort! We only *had* the one spy! Severus knew his position among the Death Eaters was a resource too powerful to be thrown away by letting himself drop dead!--And before you make an hypocritical arse of yourself *whinging* about Albus Dumbledore's death, that was *one* death, compared to the *dozens* of lives he has saved *since* he killed Albus, and in doing so, gave himself the chance to stay firmly and safely hidden in the enemy's lair!"

"...Somehow, I suspect *Albus* wouldn't think his life was a piss-poor trade for the safety and well-being of so many others!" she finished bitingly.

The laceration of her retort silenced the others with a wince. Hermione grimaced, herself. Lifting her hands to her temples, she massaged them gently, breathing deeply.

"...Now, if you don't mind, I have a raging headache, and I need to go lie down. If you have any questions, I suggest you save them for the trial."

"What trial?" Arthur asked her, frowning in confusion.

"Severus' trial. Two days from now, one o'clock, Courtroom Ten. Go early, and save yourselves some seats, if you want to know the truth," she added bitingly. "*If* you actually want to know the truth of anything. If you want to continue to wallow in your misperceptions and disbelief, keep your gobs shut around me!"

Ron touched her arm as she turned towards the back stairs. "Snape's been captured?"

She shook her head, then regretted it, rubbing at her forehead again. "No. He hasn't been captured. I have convinced him to turn himself in. He'll be there in the courtroom the day after tomorrow, at one o'clock in the afternoon. Now, please excuse me. I've had a very long night!"

...

The door to her bedroom banged open. Hermione squinted against the light streaming in from the hall. She'd cast a blackout-curtain charm on the window in her room to give her enough blessed darkness to sleep, but a glance at the clock showed she had only slept for about an hour. Peering at the doorway helped her somewhat; the bastard responsible for waking her up resolved itself into a furious Harry Potter.

"How *could* you?!" he demanded without preamble. Hermione, shading her eyes against the light from the hall, guessed without effort what he was ranting on and on about. "Ron says you've known who he was for months--for *months*! And you *married* him!"

"*Yeah*, I married him!" she shot back, lifting her head from her pillow, glad she'd donned a pair of pyjamas loose enough to fit over her slowly thickening waistline. It would've been awkward confronting him, if she'd been sleeping more comfortably as she usually did these days, arse-naked. "I married a man who has saved *more* lives than he could ever have taken--the man who saved *your* life, Harry, when you tried that stupid piece of self-martyrdom with that sword!"

"--And I suppose you'll claim that he took no pleasure in assisting Voldemort to kill me?" Harry demanded, spreading his arms. "I heard him Summon me right into that spell!"

Shoving up on her elbow, Hermione yelled back, "And yet here you stand, *alive* and being a blind-headed arse! He *wouldn't* have been able to bring you back if you'd bled to death with a piece of metal shoved through your heart!"

Harry wasn't listening to her. "If it's the *last* thing I do, I'll see him pay for what he did to me, and to Albus *and* to Sirius, too!" he growled at her, jabbing his finger at her face. "That man is a cold-blooded murderer, and he deserves the Kiss for what he's done!"

Hermione grabbed her pillow and hurled it at him as Harry whirled and stalked out of her room.

"--Get your head out of your arse, Harry Potter, and take a look at what's *really* happening around you!" she shouted as the pillow hit the edge of her doorway. "He saved *my* life with that little maneuver, you know! He saved *two* lives, plus your own!" Harry tried to slam the door shut, but the pillow got in the way as she yelled at him one last time. "The world doesn't revolve around *you*, Harry Bloody Potter! It revolves around the *rest* of us, too!"

He kicked her pillow back into her room and slammed the door hard enough to make the window panes rattle. Dropping back onto the mattress, she lay there for a moment, head pounding, heart hurting, then grabbed her wand and Summoned her pillow. It smacked into her head, making her grimace from the stupidity of the blow, for all it didn't actually hurt her.

As she plumped the feather-stuffed pillow angrily, a scratching noise at the door made her stiffen. Three scrapes, and three scrapes more had her re-aiming her wand. Opening the door with a zap of magic, she let Crookshanks in, then closed the panel far more gently than her blood-bound brother had done. The half-kneazle cat trotted over and leapt up onto the bed, nosing at her stomach before padding closer so he could nuzzle her face. Hermione endured the cat-hairs that tickled her nose, scooping her Familiar against her with an arm.

"At least *you* like Severus, Crooks," she muttered into his fur as he mrraowed and settled down next to her. Petting him helped to calm her headache. Not all of her heartache, by any means, but most of her headache. "Or at least, you liked him while he was being Russel..."

...

Hermione had never been inside Courtroom Ten, but she did know it was on the same floor as the door into the Department of Mysteries. Since that particular adventure was thoroughly branded in her memory--as many of her escapades had been, starting with that mountain troll in the girls' lavatory in her very first year as a young witch--Hermione spent some time crafting herself a Portkey that would take her to the spot in the corridor just past the Department of Mysteries door, up against the wall. Doing so would allow her to materialize without anyone getting in her way. She adamantly refused to travel with the others, given how they kept wanting to argue about Severus with her, even going so far as to retreat with a change of clothes to Severus' Secret-Kept house the day before the trial..

Her husband's face had been grim and drawn when she had Apparated into his bare-shelved parlour, but he hadn't thrown her out. In fact, he had pressed his finger to her lips to keep her from saying a word, and had pulled her up a hidden set of stairs to his bedroom. Once the door was shut, he had taken her to his bed without a sound other than a quickly applied Silencing Charm to protect his houseguest from overhearing. Without a sound, other than the sort of soft moans, shaky gasps, and breathless chant of her name on his lips as their lovemaking demanded. Every time she had tried to speak, he had hushed her. With his finger, with his eyes, with his lips, permitting nothing to be communicated between them other than slow, sweet, aching pleasure that lasted all night long.

She'd woken late the next morning and had gone downstairs to find Draco cursing at the Muggle stove, trying to cook a rasher of bacon and a skillet of eggs. Apparently, given his awkward attempts to poke his wand at the food, he didn't know how to cook the magical way, either. Stepping into the breach, Hermione saved the meal.

They'd worked together uneasily, Draco tensing first when he undoubtedly thought she was going to sneer at him with the superiority of her Muggle-born skills at such things, then when she drew her wand, no doubt thinking she would hex him. But she merely demonstrated some of the spells Molly had taught her, assisted during the more tricky bits of frying tomatoes for piling on the slices of bread browning in the toaster--apparently that particular Muggle machine was the one Draco could manage correctly on his own--and allowed him to serve her a plateful of food without any comment on the burnt bits. Severus joined them at the start of the meal, but didn't say much.

A brief discussion between Hermione and Draco left the younger wizard at 42 Spinner's End. He knew he had to face the law at some point, but Hermione didn't have the same pull with him that she did with Severus. Of course, she also thought it was prudent that the Secret-Keeper for her husband's house remained out of the reach of the Ministry for the moment, just in case things went completely southward during the trial. They'd need a place to retreat to, if they had to flee.

It didn't prevent her from asking for Severus' wand, just before she left. Nor from her pocketing it, before grasping the completed Portkey. She had pledged that *he* would arrive at the trial wandless. Hermione hadn't pledged a thing about *herself* arriving unarmed. It was one of the reasons why she choose to arrive by Portkey. If she'd arrived the regular way, she would've had to go through the wand checkpoint, and she wasn't about to give either her vinewood or his ebony shaft to the Ministry. Temporarily could become permanently all too easily, if Scrimgeour decided to bend the law against them.

But arriving by Portkey didn't give her a chance to realize just how crowded and noisy the corridor would be, when she arrived so abruptly. Blinking at the noise and light of what looked like a hundred wizards and witches trying to cram themselves into the courtroom, Hermione was grateful she'd picked the far end of the hall to arrive. Only back here did she have room to appear un-jostled--and this was half an hour before the trial was scheduled to start! As it was, she had to join the throng, worming her way forward with twists of her shoulders and jabs of her elbows.

Twice, Sigurd manifested. He appeared at half his usual dragonette size, draped over her shoulders like a gilded, living stole, but still hissed menacingly at whoever had tried to grope her through the crush of bodies. He stayed on her shoulders after the second time, hissing and snapping his teeth in mock-threat, and once even blowing a miniature blast of fire, startling the wizards and witches around her. That cleared up a bit more room for her to work her way forward. A Ministry worker at the entrance called out that there was now standing-room only as she squirmed past, but Hermione wasn't going to seat herself in the upper tiers reserved for the observers.

She worked her way down the narrow steps carefully, reaching the ground floor and the cleared space in the center of the court, where the chair for the defendant sat all on its own. Sigurd had vanished from her shoulders once she was free of the press of bodies near the top; hopefully he wouldn't have to reappear, later. The less he was noticed, the better, in her opinion. Looking around as she descended the last step, she took in the amenities.

The lowest row behind the encircling wall was reserved for the law-clerks. Above it, a long, podium-like, raised platform stood in front of the chair, which was the judicial bench where the lead witches and wizards of the Wizengamot would sit. And the defendant's chair itself, of course. Harry had described it to her after his own experience in here at the start of his fifth year, along with how the manacles could spring to life and chain a prisoner in place.

Undoubtedly, Madam Philliston would activate those chains on Severus. An unpleasant thought, but Hermione knew it would be a necessary act. Not because her husband would resist, but because public sentiment against Severus Snape would demand it.

There were no other chairs within the circle of the lowest encircling wall, no place disparate from the rest of the room for witnesses to sit. Wizarding trials weren't quite like Muggle ones, since Veritaserum could be used to ascertain the truth of a matter. Witnesses could be called, either by the Wizengamot or by the defendant; the defendant could have a barrister as legal counsel, but one wasn't automatically provided, unless specifically requested. Hermione hadn't asked for one, for Severus. She didn't want any legal double-speak clouding the facts that were about to come to light...though if things went southward, it was always an option.

No, Veritaserum was all that they would need. She hoped. Well, that and a lot of testimony from various witnesses might help.

Drawing her wand discreetly, Hermione moved over to a section of wall to one side of the interrogation chair, fished a kerchief out her pocket, and Transfigured it into a padded chair for herself. Her actions caused a small swell in the noise of the chattering voices around her, but she did her best to ignore everyone else. Seating herself, she crossed her legs, folded her hands in her lap, and tried not to fret as the remainder of the hour progressed.

She had chosen to borrow and wear one of her mother's trouser-suits. Daphne Granger was just a little bit thicker around the waistline than her daughter, which suited Hermione's blossoming figure just fine. The dark blue gabardine of the slacks and the jacket went well with the lighter blue scoop-neck blouse she wore. It was a very Muggle outfit, visually, but Hermione wasn't going to hide who and what she was, anymore. She was a powerful, intelligent, Muggle-born witch, and proud of it.

A brief check of her old-fashioned pocket-watch let her know the time; she had borrowed it from her father's dresser top at the same time as her brief visit to her parents' yesterday to pick up her clothes. Five minutes to one. A snap, and she closed the watch-case again.

A door opened behind the Wizengamot bench, and the plum-robed wizards and witches who sat as judges in all such trials filed into the room. Everyone stood respectfully, Hermione included. When they had seated themselves and everyone else had settled, she remained on her feet. Black trainers, with a sort of boot-look to them. Comfort was more important to her than stylishness, when it came to her feet; the slacks weren't too bad with the shoes.

Madam Philliston, looking imposing--and a tiny bit like Madam Hooch, with that cap of steely-grey curls, and her black, formal judge's robes reminiscent of teaching robes--picked up her gavel, rapped it sharply on its wooden anvil, and stared straight at Hermione. "...Well? Where is he?"

Hermione checked her watch again. Three minutes to go. "It's not quite one o'clock. But he'll be here."

"For *your* sake, he'd better be," the chief witch warned her. "If you want to live."

Their odd exchange caused a soft murmur of confusion in the crowd.

"I have absolute faith in his punctuality," Hermione replied as clearly and calmly as she could. "He will be here. And then it will be your turn to uphold your own word. For your own sake, I sincerely hope you succeed."

Sitting back down, she crossed her legs again. A touch of her thumb to her ring with her left hand, watch held in her right, and she muttered under her breath, quietly enough that not even the law-clerk behind her could have heard. She wanted to keep the presence of the rings low-key. Not that they could be removed from either his or her finger forcibly, but she didn't want anyone trying to cast counteractive magic against them.

"Severus Selenius Snape..." a check of the watch, making sure of the time, a careful, sub-vocal pitching of her voice, "...you are summoned."

A blur of gold and black appeared in the room. It resolved itself into her husband, one hand cupped over the other. Most of the room gasped at his sudden appearance, some of the more nervous souls even shrieking a little, clutching at their neighbors. Hermione caught a glimpse of a miniature, metallic-gold dragon cupped between his hands, no bigger than the souvenir-style statuette Harry had received of that Hungarian Horntail he'd fought against in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. But it was only a glimpse, for Sigurd vanished a moment later as he lowered his hands.

Severus Snape gave the Wizengamot bench a slight, mocking bow as the wizards and witches up there stared down at him. He had arrived in what looked like his best frock-coat, trousers and boots, his hair clean and brushed and neatly tied back in a queue with a black velvet ribbon. His skin was still sallow, his nose too long, his lips too thin and his eyes too dark, but it was undeniably him. Without his teaching robe fluttering around him, he didn't look quite so imposing when he turned crisply and strode to the waiting chair.

Dropping into the chair, he crossed his legs, braced his elbows on the armrests, and steepled his fingers together, as if this were nothing more serious than a Hogwarts staff meeting.

Madam Phyllistion cleared her throat. "Uncross your legs and put your arms on the rests, if you please, Mr. Snape."

His lip curled slightly, but he complied. "As you wish."

The manacles *snapped* into place around his ankles and wrists, pinning his arms and legs to the heavy wooden chair. Madam Phyllistion cleared her throat. "...I wish to state, before this trial begins, that I am under an Unbreakable Vow to ensure that true justice will be enacted this day. No pre-determined decision as to the defendant's fate has been made, and no opinions voiced to this moment shall be taken into consideration. This shall be a full, and fair trial, with ample opportunity for questions to be asked and answered, for witnesses to be called forth and heard, and none of this trial shall be censored from the media, lest I drop dead.

"However," she stressed, as that caused a swell of astonished murmurs around the room, "this court proceeding will *not* be turned into a circus, nor a mockery of justice, either! *Anyone* wishing to remain and observe this trial shall be on their best and most respectful behaviour, or they will be cast out of this chamber and banned from returning. I *will have order* in this courtroom!"

Her words echoed slightly as she snapped them as sharply as if she had banged her gavel again, proving how quiet everyone had become.

"With that having been said," she continued, actually picking up her gavel and rapping it loudly against its base, "thus begins this Criminal Hearing on the Fourth of April, into the offenses committed against wizarding law by one Severus Selenius Snape, residence...currently unknown, previously Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland.

"The Interrogators shall be: Priscilla Almandine Phyllistion, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; Rufus Tiberius Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic; Kenneth Rigel St. James, Assistant Department Head of Magical Law Enforcement--"

"--What?" Rufus Scrimgeour interjected, his greying head turning sharply towards the woman at his side. "The third judge should be my Under-Secretary!"

"It is the right of the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to select the three judges required by law in a case such as this. To ensure a fair and just trial, it was decided that a judicial interrogator should be selected," Priscilla returned coldly. "Rather than a *political* interrogator. This is a matter of offenses against the law. Not of politics."

"You cannot speak to m--" he started to protest, but she cut him off.

"--If you continue to speak out of turn, Minister, I shall have to hold you in contempt of these proceedings, remove you from this panel, and replace you with a more decorous legate from my department!"

"I am the Minister of Magic!" he protested.

"And I am the Chief Witch of the Wizengamot! This is a Court of Law, not a political rally--and the law is *very clear* about how these proceedings are to be handled!"

The Minister narrowed his leonine eyes and leaned close. Hermione strained to hear his words. Only because she was seated so close, and at an angle to read his lips, could she make out what he said. "*Madam, you are two sparks away from being removed as Head of your Department!*"

Priscilla Phyllistion's mouth thinned into a line so compressed, her lips vanished for a moment. Unlike his, her voice was *not* quiet when she gave her reply. "...Minister Scrimgeour, for the contemptuous act of *threatening* a judge sitting on an active case, you are hereby suspended from all participation in acts of justice enacted by the International Confederacy of Wizards, and the Wizengamot of Great Britain. Your legal authority as Minister does *not* extend to ruling over this case! Bailiff, remove him from the bench!"

Hermione twitched, wanting nothing more than to jump up and cheer as the witch *cracked* her gavel onto its anvil. Scrimgeour scowled and shook off the hand of the wizard reaching for his arm. Rising, he gathered his robes about him--then stopped as the bailiff held out his hand for them. Glowering, he peeled off the outer robe, with its distinctive, silvery W over one breast, and tossed it into the man's hand. Moving away from the bench, he stepped down onto a higher tier and glared one of the spectators out of their seat.

"--No political shenanigans, whatsoever, shall be tolerated in this hall. This is a Court of Law, not a bloody American circus!" Smacking her gavel once again, Priscilla twisted to look at the fifty or so plum-robed bodies behind her. "...The Wizengamot calls Alphonse Girard Lubbock as a neutral party to be an Interrogator. Mr. Lubbock?"

Hermione bit her lower lip. She couldn't let that happen. Standing, she cleared her throat. "...With respect, Madam Phyllistion, Mr. Lubbock cannot be considered a neutral party."

Priscilla peered down at her with a frown. "Why ever not? He's an Unspeakable, and four times as old as the defendant. As far as I know, the two have never even crossed paths!"

"Mr. Lubbock's life was saved by the actions of Severus Snape, spy for the Order of the Phoenix, on the day of July...13th, I believe," Hermione stated, puzzling out the dates in her head. "Or whenever it was that he was attack by those Death Eaters, last summer."

"Madam, if I remember the incident report in question correctly, it was *your* actions that saved Mr. Lubbock's life, according to the Aurors investigating the incident," Priscilla returned skeptically.

"Yes, but I was acting solely based on information passed to me by Mr. Snape, who was still acting as a spy in Lord Voldemort's camp."

More than one wizard and witch flinched at the Dark Lord's name; some openly shuddered, others blanched.

The Head of the Law Department sighed. "...Very well. Dolores Jane Umb--"

Hermione coughed into her hand. Loudly. At the other woman's lifted brow, she explained, "Miss Umbridge is a colleague of Mr. Snape's. Former colleague, I should clarify...and they did *not* get along. In her defence, such as it is, I should point out that Miss Umbridge did not get along with any of her colleagues at Hogwarts, but she would still not be considered a neutral party."

"Fine. Professor...no, they're still colleagues, too," Phyllistion half-muttered to herself. "Ah! Mercia Medea Thistledown-Pliny. Would you kindly--"

A baritone voice interrupted her. "--I'm afraid I saved her granddaughter's life during a cauldron explosion in my classroom, eleven years ago. She was most appreciative, and considered herself to be nearly in life-debt to me, if merely on her sole descendant's behalf," Severus stated in a bored tone, shocking the room with the admission.

"Her treacle tarts were terrible, however. I chipped a tooth on one of them."

Priscilla blinked, and peered up at the matron in the benches above her. "Is this true, Mercia?"

The other witch nodded slowly, though she shot Severus a dark look for insulting her baking.

"Phred Janus Smythely?" Madam Philliston tried next, checking a scrap of parchment she had brought.

An elderly wizard rose from his seat with the aid of a cane and bowed at the waist, shaking somewhat as he straightened. "I am afraid I must decline, Madam, as I have been informed that young Snape, there, spared the life of Miss Kelsey Jenkins, this last autumn. She was a former pupil of his, and recognized him during a raid. She told me that it appeared to her that he purposefully bolluxed said raid, deliberately setting off the Muggle alarm-ward thingies of her home, which scared off the other attackers, and I am far too grateful for her continued existence to consider myself a neutral party in this case."

The dark blond man seated beside Priscilla, Kenneth St. James, frowned up at the old wizard. "--Who the devil is Kelsey Jenkins? You don't even have any children living in this country, Phred!"

"She is the Muggle-born Healer who cured me of a mis-brewed potion accident, just before Christmas. Caught me just as I collapsed on the pavement outside St. Mungo's, trying to go for help. We all know what Death Eaters did to Muggle-borns, and Muggle-born witches," he added bluntly. "If it weren't for *his* sabotage, my Healer wouldn't have survived unscathed. She wouldn't have still been around later on to scrape me literally off the sidewalk, and I wouldn't have lived to be sitting here right now. So I suppose I owe him a partial life-debt, too."

Easing back down into his seat, the elderly man braced his hands on his cane, adopting an almost regal air of finality in his posture. He would not consider himself a neutral party, and that was that. Hermione struggled to keep her expression neutral, but it was difficult when what she longed to do was crow at these positive testimonials.

"This is ridiculous!" Minister Scrimgeour exclaimed, disgust lacing his tone.

"--I'll quite agree with you, on that," Madam Philliston added, as the enchanted quills scratched away at their scrolls, recording everything that was being said. She peered at Hermione again. "I suppose you'll next say that even Percy Weasley, one of our junior law-clerks, cannot count either, because he's young enough to have been one of Mr. Snape's students!"

Percy, pale and still lacking freckles, but no longer swathed head to toe, rose, swallowed, and addressed the head of his department. "No, Madam. He was a brute in the classroom, personality-wise, utterly unfair to those students not Sorted into his own House...but he knew his Potions inside and out. I *could* be considered neutral, if that were all...except I am informed that he is also the same man who brewed the Eiterubrenner Salve that saved my life, after I was attacked here at the Ministry on Christmas Eve. He apparently concocted a functional variation on the Salve that did not require fresh buggane bile. Without that Salve, I would have died. For that...I owe him my life."

One of the Wizengamot wizards rose in his seat, peering down at Percy. "I was told that particular variation was concocted by a blond wizard, not a brunette!"

A different Weasley stood, this one seated at the end of a whole row of them a few benches up from the law-clerks. "That blond gentleman was Snape in disguise, sir."

"--Ron!" Harry exclaimed, yanking on his friend's arm with a frown. Ron sat back down again, and the two young men glared at each other. Harry faced forward with an affronted jerk away from Ron, a scowl pinching his brow.

The unidentified wizard cleared his throat. "Well, it doesn't matter if he was in a disguise or not. I must take myself off the list of neutral interrogators, too, as the recipe we received anonymously was for a Salve we can use on extreme burns year-round. Normally, that's something we haven't been able to do in the winter months, because of the hibernation period of the bugganes, over on the Isle of Man. In fact, that Salve variant has already saved a total of three more lives--I want *that* on the record," he added firmly. "He may have killed Albus Dumbledore, but if he came up with that recipe, then he's saved at least four more people because of that new potion!"

"--Is there no one here among the Wizengamot who has no regard or disregard for Severus Snape?" Priscilla demanded.

A short, wrinkled, white-haired figure rose from her seat with a ponderous groan audible even to Hermione, seated all the way down on the central floor. It clearly marked the woman's very advanced age even before her age-seamed face was visible to all. "...I have neither regard nor disregard for him, Madam Philliston. I will confess that I do remember his outstanding O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s," the familiar witch stated in a firm, slightly loud voice, "but I am of a mind that it is a man's words and his actions, and the harmony or dichotomy between the two, that shows who and what he truly is.

"Test scores only show possibilities. And I have not had any close contact with young Mr. Snape there, save in passing through Hogwarts once a year on my way to oversee the Ordinary Wizarding Levels, and the Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests. But then, I usually sat at the other end of the Head Table from him."

"Madam Marchbanks," Philliston acknowledged with a bow of her steely-curved head, and now Hermione could place where she'd seen the very elderly witch. A woman who had once claimed she had presided over Albus Dumbledore's own tests ages ago, if Hermione remembered right. "Your impartiality in the scholastic exams is legendary. I trust you will apply it to this proceeding?"

"You may. Erm...you'd better get on with it, Priscilla; don't wait for me to get down there, as it'll take me through the whole starting invocation to navigate the stairs," Madam Marchbanks added as she started making her way slowly towards the stairs. "I'm not as spry as I used to be."

"...Very well. Chief Investigators are: Priscilla Almandine Philliston, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; Iantha Marie Marchbanks, Head of the Ministry's Department of Educational Standards and Madam Chairwoman of the Hogwarts School Board of Governors; and Kenneth Rigel St. James, Assistant Department Head of Magical Law Enforcement. Court Scribes are Percy Ignatius Weasley, and Malynda Merriweather Brown. Are there any witnesses for the defence?"

Hermione stood up again. "Hermione Jane Granger-Potter Snape, chief witness for the defence. Others--" She had to pause as the revelation of her married name caused an uproar in the courtroom. Those who were still were members of the Order of the Phoenix, for the most part, wizards and witches who had learnt of the marriage the night of the final confrontation. After Madam Philliston banged her gavel to restore order, Hermione added, "...Others may be called as needed, Madam, depending upon where these proceedings end up going."

"...Yes, as I think we've already seen," Priscilla returned dryly, glancing at Percy, who was overseeing the scribbling quills on his side of the courtroom. Across from him sat the other scribe, Malynda, a short-haired brunette with oval, gold-rimmed spectacles who was overseeing the quills on her side as well. "I thought you were going to testify against him, not for him."

"I'm here to testify, period, what I know," Hermione corrected. "Whether that evidence comes out for or against him will make itself known on its own merits."

"I see. You may be seated, Mrs. Snape. Mr. Snape," the grey-haired witch stated briskly. "As your wife's continued presence among the living indicates, you arrive before us without any antidote to Veritaserum within you. I trust you will not struggle as the Truth Potion is administered to you?"

"So long as it was brewed *competently*, no," he sneered.

"Horace Fenton Slughorn, Professor of Potions, Hogwarts. You have the Veritaserum the Wizengamot requested?" Priscilla enquired, checking one of the papers in front of her.

"Right here, Madam Justice," the bald, mustached, portly professor stated. He patted his breast-pocket as he rose and made his way down the steps of the courtroom, passing the vial to a bailiff in the plum robes of the Wizengamot. "Just three drops per hour will do it!"

The man slanted the Minister of Magic a quick look. Hermione wasn't sure she'd really seen it, until he uncorked the bottle as he stood at Severus' side, held the other wizard's jaw open--and shook a very large splash of the liquid onto Severus' tongue. Severus choked and spat out the liquid, snapping his teeth at the fingers trying to pinch

his lips shut and thus force him to swallow the lot. He spat again as he was hastily released, working his mouth to clear it of the excess Veritaserum. Unfortunately, the liquid landed on his chest, soaking into his shirt. He was too tightly tied down by the chains to spit the potion clear of his body.

"--What are you *doing*, man?" Slughorn protested loudly, stopping mid-climb back to his seat. "An overdose of Truth Serum could *kill* him! *Accio* Veritaserum!"

"Rhys Llewellyn!" Philliston snapped, banging her gavel upon the desk as Snape spat past his arm two more times, though the last time with a sluggish edge to his efforts. "You are in contempt of the *proper* procedures of this court, and are relieved of your duties!--Then *next* person who steps out of line will not only face charges of obstructing justice, but potentially a sentence of three months in Azkaban!"

Another bang of her gavel, and she brushed back a lock of her hair from her flustered brow. Collecting herself, she glanced at Hermione, then returned her gaze to the man chained into the chair. Severus had slumped back in his seat, his body relaxing beyond its normal visible self-control. Veritaserum darkened his clothes, and a line of liquid glistened on his chin. With his wrists pinned to the chair, he couldn't wipe it away. Eyes closed, head lolling, he looked like he was fighting off the urge to sleep.

"Mr. Snape, are you alright?"

His eyes struggled open. "Nnnh...fffff...fucking *idiot* gave me ennnnnnough stupid Potion to kill that Umbridge*cow*..."

More than one throat choked on a hastily suppressed laugh; more than one pair of shoulders shook.

"...Though she looks more like a...ffffrog," he over-enunciated after a pause. "Or a really, *really* ugly toad..."

"He's been overdosed, for certain," Professor Slughorn observed dryly. "But I think he spat out most of it. If he starts rambling and won't shut up even if you tell him to, it's a sign that he's on the verge of *veritapoxia*, and will need some of the antidote, or risk brain damage. Another sign would be his face breaking out in spots ranging from green to purple in hue, so you should watch for that, too."

"...Duly noted. Thank you, Professor. Mr. Snape, please state for the record your true, full name," Mr. Kenneth St. James directed him.

"SSSeverus Selenus Snnnape," he slurred, shaking his head slowly.

"Do you have any aliases?" St. James enquired.

Severus snorted. "Mmmany."

"Please state all of them, for the record," the slightly younger wizard directed.

"Russssel Fawkessson...Rorrick Ferguson...the Hhhalf-Blood Prince...Greasy Git...Black-Hearted Bat...Bastard of the Dungeons, Snivellus, Snape the Ape, and That Bastard Traitor." His diction had recovered somewhat, though he still sat with his head lolled against the high back of the chair binding him in place. "Oh, and 'Cupid'," he continued in an almost absentminded aside, "and 'Oh God! Oh God! Oh Severus! Oh God!' Of course, if you'll give me a moment, I could probably think a few more things I've been called through the years..."

"Er...that won't be necessary, thank you," the Assistant Head dismissed awkwardly, as Hermione suffered a hot-flash of embarrassment. She was glad she had only brushed out her hair, not pinned it up; that allowed her to duck her head forward enough to let her locks hide most of her face.

"You're most thoroughly *not* welcome."

Hermione bit down on her lip, trying not to laugh. As un-funny as the situation was, her husband did have a wicked sense of snark in him. She bit a little harder, sobering, as the meat of the trial began with a quelling look from the chief witch of the bench.

"Mr. Snape," Philliston stated coldly, "you are here to answer the following charges: The killing of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. Conspiracy to commit said murder. Conspiracy to admit Death Eaters onto the grounds of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. Conspiracy against the Ministry of Magic. Evading arrest on two counts. Casting the Unforgivable Killing Curse. Casting the Unforgivable Cruciatius Curse. And direct complicity in the death of Harry James Potter."

Hermione gripped her hands together in her lap. She wanted to leap up and defend what she could of all of these accusations, but she knew the trial had to unfold at its own pace. Clinging to Priscilla's promise for a *thorough* Hearing, she kept silent. As did most everyone else, waiting with bated breath to hear his replies.

"Mr. Snape, you are accused of casting the Killing Curse, a known Unforgivable, upon your employer, Albus Dumbledore, the night of May 23rd of last year, causing him to lose his life. Did you successfully cast the Killing Curse upon him, on the night in question?"

"Yes."

His simple, straightforward answer caused a swell of noise from the crowd. Philliston tapped her gavel once, staring the watching crowd back into silence.

"Did you conspire or plan in any way in advance to commit the murder in question, before the night of May 23rd?"

"Yes."

"With whom did you conspire?" Madam Marchbanks enquired, finally settled into her seat to the left of Philliston.

"With Narcissa Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestranger, Draco Malfoy, assorted other Death Eaters, Lord Voldemort himself, and..."

"And...?" St. James prompted him.

"I cannot say."

Hermione frowned at that.

"What do you mean, you cannot say?" the wizard seated to the right of his Department Head asked, frowning at Severus.

"I mean, I cannot say! What sort of an imbecile is seated on the bench for my trial, when he cannot understand a simple, three-word sentence constructed in the English language?" Snape demanded, his voice strong and rigid, but his body slouched and lax, chained in place.

St. James' cheeks coloured a little, but he continued doggedly. "Explain the nature of this conspiracy to commit the murder of Albus Dumbledore. How did it come about?"

"Voldemort--the snake-faced arse--fought with Albus Dumbledore, two summers ago. The battle took place just after the end of the school year. In that battle, Albus destroyed a ring he had located and stolen from one of the Dark Lord's hidden caches. That ring, I have since learnt, contained a Horcrux created by Tom Marvolo Riddle, the self-styled Lord Voldemort."

Severus' explanation caused several gasps, but as he continued undisturbed, everyone quieted down quickly to hear the rest of his long-winded confession.

"At the time, I do not believe Voldemort knew that Albus knew about the ring being his Horcrux, only that it was a powerful Artifact that used to belong to Salazar Slytherin. With the ring's destruction, Voldemort decided that Harry Potter was a less dangerous target, and that he had to eliminate Dumbledore once and for all. He selected a

newly-made Death Eater, Draco Malfoy, to handle the deed discreetly for him, since that was his preferred method of dealing with those more powerful than him. Draco's mother and aunt were both there at that particular meeting, though I was not.

"I only learnt of what happened when Cissy and Bella showed up on my doorstep shortly afterwards, so that Cissy could beg me to help her only son, to spare his life. She was distraught, and so I deliberately and silently invoked Legilimency, and learnt in that moment that Draco's mission partially was to ensure Dumbledore's death, though I could not detect the rest of the matter without the risk of her realizing I'd used a spell to scan her mind. Due to other information that I already held, I agreed to allow myself to be bound by an Unbreakable Vow to assist Draco, and if Draco failed, to complete the Dark Lord's loathsome task. By doing so, I quelled the doubts in both Mrs. Malfoy and Mrs. Lestrange about where my true loyalties supposedly lay.

"Draco Malfoy made two pathetic attempts to kill Albus Dumbledore, using means that I have since learnt he knew at the time would most likely not get the cursed necklace and the poisoned alcohol into Albus' actual hands. And, on the night of May 23rd," Snape finished in a sneer, "Draco proved he was definitely not a killer, and in fact realized he was in over his head beyond all contestation, when he could not bring himself to kill Dumbledore. Upon request, I cast the Killing Curse, blasting Albus off of the tower, and consigning him to his pre-arranged fate."

That was a rather peculiar way to put it Hermione pondered.

"You said 'due to other information that I already held', Mr. Snape," Priscilla interrogated him. "What did you mean by that?"

"I cannot say."

That caused a ruckus. Marchbanks picked up the gavel this time, cracking it smartly on the desktop of the bench. Quiet resumed in the courtroom.

"What was this other information you held?" the elderly witch pressed, rephrasing her colleague's question.

"I cannot say."

"*Why* can you not say?" Madam Marchbanks insisted doggedly.

"I cannot say that, either."

"--Well, what *can* make you say?" Priscilla demanded impatiently, as the witches and wizards around them grumbled in disbelief.

Severus didn't resist the Truth Serum. His reply was prompt, succinct...and familiar. "An eye-witness must tell Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, that Lord Voldemort is dead."

Chaos exploded. Hermione gasped, hand going to her mouth. Half a second later, she smacked it against her forehead, then slid her fingers down and covered her mouth again. *Of course! The most important witness of all!* She started to rise out of her seat, but it would take too long for her to go to Hogwarts and come back. The roar of the watching crowd was too strong to be silenced; the three judges on the bench looked like they were going to let it die down on its own. Mainly because they were just as shocked and confused.

"--Kreacher!" Hermione hissed, lowering her hand quickly. "You are Summoned!"

The ugly, wrinkled house-elf *popped* into existence in front of her with a scowl. He had on rubber gloves covered in soap suds, and an apron tied over his tattered tea-cozy. His voice was barely audible in the din. "What does Miss want?"

"Kreacher, I want you to fetch--without harming it or its occupant--the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, from Headmistress Minerva McGonagall's office at the school and bring it to me along with a portrait-stand. Immediately!" she added as the ancient Black servant glowered at her.

The house-elf winked out of sight. A few people had noticed the briefly summoned creature, but it wasn't as stirring a subject as her husband's bizarre answer. Priscilla finally banged the gavel on the bench, silencing everyone.

"Mr. Snape, I realize you are under the effects of Veritaserum, and are therefore telling the truth. But Albus Dumbledore is *dead*! No one can tell him anything!"

"Do you think I do *not know* that, you oblivious twit?" he snapped back. "*Any* hope of getting the whole truth out of me is gone, right along with the bearded old bastard himself!"

"Mr. Snape!" Priscilla banged her gavel at his outrageous statement. Before she could say anything more, a portrait *banged* into the courtroom. It wavered, tottered, then was hefted up into the air as an easel flicked into existence. Hopping up and catching the descending frame with a spryness belying his advanced age, Kreacher wrestled the portrait into place, sneered at Hermione, flipped her a rude gesture, and vanished again. The Chief Witch of the Wizengamot stared at the portrait. "What the..."

"I call Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore as a witness for the defence!" Hermione stated briskly, seizing the brief, stunned silence of the chamber for herself as she rose from her chair. Crossing to the portrait, she dragged the easel around so that it faced somewhere between Severus and the judicial bench, and looked up at the keen-eyed, silent former Headmaster. "Headmaster Dumbledore, I personally watched the final scrap of Lord Voldemort's festering soul fade and vanish in the early morning hours of April 2nd. He is most assuredly dead. Severus Snape and I both watched him die."

Albus' painted eyes closed, his shoulders slumping in what looked like relief, but only for a moment. Light burst out of the painted canvas, blinding her. Stumbling back, Hermione shielded her face as the spectators shouted in confusion. Philliston banged her gavel several times...and then a stunned silence fell over the courtroom. Lowering her arm, Hermione squinted at the silhouette easing itself free of the large, gilded frame. The glow died down, and Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore brushed off his purple robes with his hand.

The left one, that was; the right one was still blackened from his duel with the Dark Lord nearly two years before. In fact, as he turned to face her fully for the first time, Hermione could finally see a matching blackness mottling the skin of his throat and the underside of his jaw, where it disappeared into the bushy whiskers of his waist-length beard. It had been hidden all this time by the way he had been painted seated at an angle, in his portrait. A portrait that was now not only empty of his image, but empty of everything else, too. The canvas was as white and fresh as if newly-constructed, untouched by gesso, let alone enchanted oils.

"...Thank you, Mrs. Snape. I was wondering when you'd remember to do what I told you had to be done. I was hoping one of you would fulfill the necessary conditions for my release. Ah, Severus. It's good to see you again, though I could wish they hadn't chained you in place." He stepped forward, then stumbled. Hermione rushed to catch him. She felt his muscles trembling as she took his arm over her shoulder. "Sorry...I seem a bit weakened by my two-dimensional vacation. And I don't seem to have my wand with me, though from the sounds of it, Filius had a wonderful time with it at the exposition--would you be a dear girl, and conjure me a chair, Hermione?"

"Of course." Drawing her wand as she balancing him against her shoulder, Hermione Transfigured the painting and its easel into a padded chair much like her own. He was real, he was alive--she had felt his heart beating, felt the warmth of his body and the trembling of his muscles as she assisted him into the chair--and he had a *lot* of explaining to do. "Perhaps if *you* could explain a few things, sir?"

"I have to do something else, first. Could I borrow your wand for a moment, Mrs. Snape?" he asked her politely.

"Of course."

Handing it over, she watched as he flicked it. "*Convocum Aberforth*!"

A yelp, and a swirl of plain brown robes heralded the abrupt tossing of one of the witnesses from near the very top of the courtroom amphitheatre all the way down onto the floor at its centre. Catching himself with a twist, Old Abe glared at his brother as he righted his robes. "I was right *here*, you bearded imbecile!" the gap-toothed, balding bartender snapped. "All you had to do was ask!"

"We have to do these things in the proper order, Abe," Albus chided him. "Lord Voldemort is dead. You have heard these words from an eye-witness, a witch who was there. It is time for you to release me from my Unspoken Vows."

"Hmphf." Straightening his robes, Old Abe bent over, plucked Hermione's wand from Albus' fingers, and flicked it briskly. "Albus Dumbledore, I release you from the Unspoken Vow I have placed upon you! Be free, now, to speak of that which you could not say before! *Liboratio!*"

Light speared through the courtroom once again...but not from the portrait, and *not* from Hermione's wand to Dumbledore's wan, aging body. Instead, the light poured *from* Albus into the vinewood shaft clenched in Aberforth's hand. Albus gasped, groaned heavily, then clutched at his heaving chest as the light ended a moment later, looking like he was finally able to take a full, deep breath for the first time in a great age. *Which*, the stunned Hermione conceded, *was probably the case, given he'd been locked up in that painting. From the sounds of it, he had all of his greatest secrets locked up, too...*

Struggling to control his breathing, Albus slumped for a moment, then straightened in his chair. Holding out his hand imperiously, he accepted the wand from his brother, who grunted, then leaned over and embraced him fiercely. "I'm glad you're back among the living, you old arse-headed git!"

"So am, I, you smelly old goat-herder," Albus retorted, squeezing him back. Shoving him away, he cleared his throat. "We'll have a little time left for a reunion later. Business first!"

"And beers second, eh, you old pisser?" Old Abe snorted. "You never *did* have your priorities straight..." Tugging on his plain brown robes again, he made his way back up into the stands without another word.

Rising shakily from his chair--Hermione hurrying to help lift him up--Albus lifted his wand over the younger wizard chained in the chair. "Severus Snape, I release you from the Unspoken Vow I have placed upon you! Be free, now, to speak of that which you could not say before! *Liboratio!*"

Again, light streamed into Hermione's wand. This time, it came from Severus Snape's chest...and with it, the spell extracted an horrific scream of pain, of rage, of soul-deep agony that had him writhing against his bonds, as if in the grip of the Cruciatus Curse instead of some mere Vow. It ended, the scream and the agonized writhing and the outpouring of light, just a few seconds later. Severus slumped in his chair, panting heavily. He blinked, staring around him with wild eyes...then burst into tears.

Sobs shook his shoulders, heaving, gasping, gut-wrenching sobs. The bodies crammed into the courtroom watched in astonishment as Severus Snape, Cold-Hearted Bastard, cried in public. Hermione's fingers clenched hard enough to drive her nails painfully against her palms, but she held herself grimly in place. Instinct said now was not the time to try and soothe him. Not when the undiluted truth was her only hope of getting him out of this trial alive. Draping a weepy wife all over the man--however much she longed to show her support for him--would only risk thoughts of her own emotions being used to manipulate the Wizengamot.

The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth was the only weapon she had, right now.

"...What in Merlin's sweet name is *going on*, here?" Priscilla Philliston finally demanded, as Severus' weeping subsided.

"I'd be happy to explain everything, Madam Philliston," Albus stated, looking like he'd regained some of his strength with the weight of that spell of his brother's lifted from his shoulders. "It all began--"

"I'm sorry, Albus--if you *are* Albus," Priscilla interrupted him, "but until I know that you *are* Albus Dumbledore, I cannot take your word for anything!"

"...I see. Well. As this is a court of law...*Accio Veritaserum!*"

Hermione quickly caught the bottle winging its way down from Professor Slughorn's waistcoat pocket, afraid that Albus might fumble it with his trembling fingers. Uncorking it, she passed it to him. A lift of the bottle, a tilt of his head, and he carefully poured just a little over three drops onto his tongue. Taking back the bottle, Hermione corked and pocketed it, then helped him to sit down as the drug took effect. Discreetly reclaiming her wand, she returned to her own seat, moving it slightly closer to the judicial bench so that she could see what was happening a little better.

"Well. At least you're cooperating, whoever you are," Madam Marchbanks observed as the elderly slumped a little further, his bearded head lolling. "Wake up, young man, and tell us your true name!"

"My name, you daft bint, is Severus--"

"Not *you*, Mr. Snape!" Marchbanks corrected him. "I want the name of the other young git, from the one in the comfy chair! What is your full name, Albus, *if* that is who you really are?"

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XXXIV.

Severus snorted, but subsided. Albus spoke in his place. His voice fell on the suddenly quiet hall with remarkable calmness, yet with a tangle strength that belied his fragile appearance.

"My name, Iantha, is Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. The Albus Dumbledore, former Chief Wizard of the Wizengamot, and former Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for nearly the last thirty-eight years. And if you want further proof, you presided over my N.E.W.T.-level tests as a junior examiner back in '62. 1862, to be precise.

"You wore a hoop skirt--the latest in Muggle fashion--in a lovely shade of periwinkle blue that brought out the violet blue of your eyes, and you carried a lace parasol dyed to match the exact same shade as the ruffles of your gown. It looked quite fetching on you; half of the seventh year males could hardly concentrate on our Transfiguration exams, because of it. Myself included."

Madam Marchbanks blushed a little. "--That's the real Albus."

"...Right, then. You tell us what the ruddy blue blazes has been going on, Albus," the Head of the Department of Law demanded briskly, fixing Albus with her hazel green eyes. "And don't take all day about it, either! Start with that spell you and your brother were casting."

"The Unspeakable Vow was cast upon Severus Snape by myself just shy of 22 years ago, on the night of June 17th, 1978," Albus stated briskly. "His mother had just been murdered by unknown Death Eaters, and though he himself had just joined their ranks, seduced by various promises, rhetoric and double-talk, he realized he had made a mistake in doing so, and was willing to turn himself into a spy amidst their ranks on my behalf. In order to do so, I had to put him through an intense course of Occlumency training to protect any stray thoughts and emotions from surfacing, and I had to cast the ancient Unspeakable Vow, to prevent him from saying through either free will, accident, or coercion, anything about certain aspects of the bargain we had just struck."

"Included in this bargain was an ancient Fides Oath ensuring his loyalty to me, and through it, an enchantment-enhanced vow for him to obey my commands when I addressed him as 'Severus Snape', thus providing an extra layer of control over the spy I was sending into Tom Riddle's ranks. For all of the following years since that night, Severus has served me loyally, faithfully, and fully as I have asked him to obey. But as the Wizengamot knows the testimony that was given on his behalf for the previous war with Voldemort, and as I suspect the main reason why he is here in this courtroom once again is to answer for the charge of my murder at his hands, I shall address those questions immediately."

"Please do," Philliston agreed dryly, as the enchanted quills scribbled madly away, recording everything being said. Not just the quills tended by Percy and Malynda, but the quills wielded by the fifth estate of the wizarding world, reporters from *The Daily Prophet*, *The Quibbler*, *Witch Weekly* and other such journals, and the magical equivalent to microphones from the representatives of the Wizarding Wireless Network.

"I had suspected for some time that Tom--Lord Voldemort," Albus explained, "had split his soul into the murder-created abominations known as Horcruxes. More than one, in fact. Upon tracking down one of these abominable Artifacts, a ring once owned by Salazar Slytherin, I found myself embroiled in a wizarding duel with Voldemort himself. After destroying the ring at the cost of a grave injury to myself, and parting in a mutual retreat from my adversary, I sought out Severus' company, and discussed my situation with him. I did not mention the Horcruxes to him, as that would have taxed even his phenomenal ability to conceal his thoughts and feelings, but I did warn him to be on the lookout for any objects that the Dark Lord had an unusual interest in, or any specific locations he might suddenly visit, that sort of thing."

"Shortly after that conversation, Severus contacted me, and told me that Narcissa Malfoy had bound him in an Unbreakable Vow to assist Draco Malfoy in attempting to end my life, among other matters. He did not want to go through with it, but because of his Fides Oath to me, Severus had already sworn to take whatever steps were necessary to appear to remain a loyal Death Eater in the eyes of both Lord Voldemort, and his fellow Death Eaters. Which Mrs. Malfoy and Mrs. Lestrange were, themselves. Because of this Oath," Albus warned the entire courtroom, "every action as a Death Eater that Severus has undertaken since it was cast upon him at the tender age of eighteen...is *my* responsibility to bear."

"He has simply been following my orders all along. As *any* soldier must follow the orders of his superior, in a war."

"--I knew it!" a voice shouted from the stands, startling everyone. It belonged to Cornelius Fudge, seated halfway around the room from the Weasleys, but on the same tier. "I *knew* Albus Dumbledore had been secretly creating an army all along! Proof positive, from his own lips! He took the Veritaserum! You know it's the truth!"

"Mr. Fudge, seat yourself immediately!" Philliston snapped, banging her gavel. "I remind you all to keep your outbursts to a minimum. This is a Hall of Justice, not a Hall of Tabloid Gossip!"

"I want to know something!" The new voice came from Harry Potter, who rose from his seat, his fists clenched at his sides. "If Snape was your spy on Voldemort since his school-days, then why was he spying on *you* and Sibyll Trelawney, that night at the Hogs Head, when the Prophecy about myself and Voldemort was given? Why did he spy on *you*, and then turn that information over to Voldemort?"

"...A very good question, Harry," Albus returned smoothly as Priscilla lifted her gavel to bang it again. She set it down as he continued. "Severus, would you care to answer that one?"

"No, I would not. The brat clearly just wants to foment the sentiments of the crowd against me, until he can form an unstoppable lynch-mob ending in my cold-blooded murder...for which he will escape unscathed like a sweet-smelling rose growing in the midst of a pile of turds."

Harry flushed a deep red, at that. Madam Marchbanks, on the other hand, bit her lower lip, snorting with the effort to contain a laugh. "How *truthfully* spoken...if highly inappropriately phrased. Watch your language, young man."

Albus sighed heavily. "...Just answer the damned question, Severus Snape!"

"*Bastard*," Severus retorted, but complied. His eyes gleamed as a pair of jet-hued slits as he spoke. "I had been tracking down Albus to give him a report. When I learnt he had gone to the Hogs Head, I followed and asked Aberforth where he was. Abe took me upstairs to see him. That was when I overheard the start of the Prophecy."

"When I realized what I was hearing was an obscure reference to the Dark Lord's downfall, I hurried to get away. Aberforth assisted me, but we were spotted by patrons, and he collared me and dragged me back, enacting the deception that he had caught me eavesdropping and was chasing me out of his inn, before deciding to let the people I was spying upon confront me for my duplicity instead. It was one of those rapidly made changes of plan, the sort that you just go with the flow."

"Since I had been spotted by others of Abe's rather dubious clientele," he continued dryly, "I had to explain to the Dark Lord why I'd been lurking and had gotten caught in that corridor. I still wasn't as practiced then in the art of Occlumency, and could only put my own twist upon what little I had overheard."

"--I would like to point out that the Prophecy in question *did not* address anyone by name, other than references to the Dark Lord," Albus stated. "I state this because Severus was under the obligation of a life-debt to James Potter, which has since been transferred to Harry Potter, James Potter's son."

"What is this Prophecy, exactly?" Priscilla asked, frowning at the elderly wizard. "I keep hearing about it, but no one knows the exact text, save for perhaps you. What is it, Albus?"

Tipping his head back slightly, the bearded wizard frowned, then recited, "...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not. And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies."

The words, recited so blandly, seemed almost silly, but their impact went deeper than merely the ear.

Albus continued his tale. "After both Neville Longbottom and Harry Potter were born on the last day of July, I realized who the Prophecy potentially referred to, and had both the Longbottoms and the Potters go into hiding...but the Longbottoms were caught and tortured into madness by Barty Crouch Junior and the Lestranges before their safety could be secured. The Potters were put under the Fidelius Charm to hide them."

"It was believed at the time that Sirius Black was their Secret-Keeper, but instead, they chose to make Peter Pettigrew their Secret-Keeper, since Sirius believed that Voldemort would go after him as the most likely target, and never think that someone as weak-willed as Peter could be trusted with such a task. Unfortunately, as we learnt

much later, Peter was secretly already a Servant of Lord Voldemort's," Albus stated, oblivious to the hissing of indrawn breath, and the rustle of clothing as the wizards and witches around the room flinched from the forbidden name, "and faked his own death, cutting off his own finger as well as killing several Muggles in the effort to frame Sirius Black. The ruse and sacrifice allowed himself to escape and hide as an unregistered Animagus for many years, before returning to the Dark Lord's service.

"And I would like to point out that, because of something the Ministry only *believed* to be true, a very good man was incarcerated *without* a full and proper trial, and without the truth-telling effects of Veritaserum assisting in getting to the bottom of that particular mess," the aging wizard told everyone bluntly. "Because Sirius Black was wrongfully imprisoned by the thoughtless, frightened mob that ruled over the Wizengamot at the time, the real accomplice in the murders of James and Lily Potter went free, and was there to assist in resurrecting his master thirteen years later. Do not make that same mistake again, here and now. *None* of you know the full truth in this matter, save for myself and Severus.

"That is why we are supposed to have the *due* process of law," Albus finished firmly. "To prevent innocent men from being incarcerated for crimes they did not commit."

"--But he *killed* you!" Harry shouted, hurrying down the stairs next to his seat, his hands balled into fists again. Hermione hoped and prayed his wand had been confiscated on his way into the Ministry, watching her blood-bound brother warily as he continued his accusations. "I *saw* him do it! He cast the Killing Curse on you, and knocked you over the parapet of the Astronomy Tower!"

Bang! "--Mr. Potter! Step one foot on the floor, and I will hold you in contempt of this court!" Philliston snapped. Harry stopped a few steps from the bottom and moved no further, but he didn't retreat, either.

"Severus Snape, kindly explain the string of events that happened on that night, as you knew them," Albus instructed his former colleague.

"Bastard," the black-haired wizard retorted, but complied. "I had only recently learnt of Draco's second task, repairing the Artifact known as the Vanishing Cabinet, to allow the Death Eaters to invade the school. He had lied to me out of fear of me, and said he wasn't near finishing that aspect of his task, so I was caught off guard as to the timing of it. But when Filius Flitwick came running to me with reports of Death Eaters in the halls, I knew what I had to do. First, I Stunned Filius, so that he couldn't muck things up with any interference."

"...Severus, how could you?" squeaked the diminutive wizard seated up among the Wizengamot benches.

"Quite easily. You're almost as gullible as a Hufflepuff, when it comes to trusting your friends," Severus returned with too much honesty. "Be glad I made sure you fell on a temporary Cushioning Charm, so that you weren't injured. I then activated a Locational Map that Albus had given to me, noted where Albus and Draco were standing, Summoned Aberforth with one of Fawkes' feathers, and popped my head through the Floo to tell Poppy Pomfrey to be ready and waiting for Old Abe at the base of the Astronomy Tower. I then Floo'd to the nearest unoccupied classroom, raced up the stairs, and arrived just in time to see Draco utterly failing to kill Albus.

"I had already argued myself blue in the face to try and wriggle out of this moment, but Albus had reactivated that damned Fides Oath out in the Forbidden Forest some days before. I would rather have failed and dropped dead, but he begged me to follow through, that night on the Tower. So I tapped into my hatred of what he was making me do, and knocked him off the Tower with the Killing Curse, and took charge of Draco Malfoy, with the intent to navigate him through the mess he'd just created, shredding his reputation among the Death Eaters, in the hopes of keeping him alive. Which I have since managed to do."

"Why were Madam Pomfrey and Aberforth Dumbledore summoned to the bottom of the Astronomy Tower?" St. James asked him. "What happened then?"

"Apparently what was supposed to happen, of course. Though I wasn't exactly in a position to witness those things firsthand," Severus retorted. "Poppy and Aberforth were to catch his falling body. Poppy was also to have brought Fawkes with her, whereupon she was to have traded the phoenix for Albus' body. Aberforth was to Transfigure the phoenix into a likeness of the Headmaster body after it having died and smashed itself on the ground, while she hustled Albus' real body into the dungeons via a secret entrance on the grounds not far from the Tower, where she was to have performed a Muggle life-saving technique, CPR, or Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation, upon him in the attempt to revive him from his death. Which, as you can see for yourselves, obviously succeeded.

"It was a long-shot, but it was all we had as a defence against Draco's geas for one of us to kill him. If I had let one of the other Death Eaters attempt to kill him, it might not have been a clean death," Severus stated as the room erupted in a swell of startled murmurs.

"How did you know that this Muggle thing would work?" Philliston asked him, incredulous.

"I didn't," Snape confessed bluntly, his face still bearing that slackness that said the Veritaserum was keeping him from struggling. But his voice continued to hold at least three-quarters of its characteristic bite. "I was acting on faith, as well as under the pressure of the Fides Oath I had taken. Try not to forget that, nor that all of these things are only suppositions, based on what I knew the plan would be, and confirmed on my observations of all that happened afterwards."

Albus took over. He, too, was looking relaxed under the influence of the Truth Serum, but he had taken a much smaller dose of it, and it showed in his responses. "Once Aberforth Transformed Fawkes into a replica of myself, one that looked as if I had indeed smashed into the ground from such a long fall," Albus continued for him, "he rejoined Poppy and assisted her in reviving and healing me. But I was too ill by then to remain among the living.

"As a part of our Plan B, he instead enchanted me into a portrait likeness of myself, and arranged for it to be displayed in the Headmaster's office, making it seem as if I was permanently dead. The terms of the *Trump la Vie* enchantment he used were very strict; I could only be released by the eye-witnessed confirmation of Lord Voldemort's death, or the eye-witnessed confirmation of Severus Snape's death."

"Why those two deaths?" St. James asked him, marking something on a scroll in front of him. The question seemed casual, but there were many faces in the tiers of the chamber that seemed just as curious to know the answer.

"If Voldemort died, then the war would be over, and Severus would need my assistance in clearing his name, as you can see for yourselves by my presence here and now," Albus stated blandly, before continuing with more vigor. "If Severus died, then the war would be in grave danger of being lost, and my services would be needed to hopefully compensate for the loss of our most powerful tool. Knowledge garnered straight from Riddle's lips, by the carefully listening, painstakingly hidden ears of Severus Snape. I am here to defend him because everything he did, he did at my command...and everything that he did saved many more lives than any that he injured in the course of his obedience to my command. Many more innocent lives than the Ministry and the rest of the wizarding world has yet to realize."

"But he *killed* you!" Harry protested fiercely, clinging to the back of one of the law-clerks' seats. "He murdered you! If it weren't for Snape, you wouldn't have died! He used an Unforgivable on you!"

Albus lolled his head to that side, craning to look over his spectacles at his former student. "Actually, Harry, that's not true. Yes, he *technically* killed me, but you see, I was already dying, that night. I still am, in fact."

"You... *what*?" Harry gaped, taken aback. "But--how can--*why*? *How*?"

"By poison, of course. Don't you remember, Harry?" Albus prodded him, his gaze dull and his voice incongruously light. "*You* forced it down my throat yourself, the night of May 23rd. Back when we were at that seaside cave."

Pandemonium. Harry's eyes widened so much, Hermione could see the whites all the way around. He paled and looked at the shouting, questioning, cursing, confused crowd of wizards and witches around him. "I didn't--I *never*--I *didn't* do it!"

"Order! *Order!*" Madam Philliston demanded, banging her gavel repeatedly against its anvil. It took over a minute for the furor to die down. Only two voices remained: the soft chuckling of the black-haired man bound in chains to the heavy wooden chair in the center of the floor, and the frantic denials of the black-haired young man standing a

few yards away on the steps of the courtroom tiers.

"--I didn't *do* it, I swear! I never would have! He's always been like a father to me! I wouldn't *ever*..."

"...Isn't it fascinating, Potter," Snape sneered with bitter sardonicism where he slouched in his seat, "how *quickly* public opinion can turn against even a so-called *hero*? I've been working to end this war, suffering for *decades*, and that is the reaction I have always received. I told you years ago, boy, that fame isn't everything!"

"Silence, Mr. Snape. Mr. Dumbledore, please explain yourself!" Priscilla ordered him.

"It's quite simple, Madam Philliston. If Severus hadn't killed me in such a quick, painless, and resurrectable manner--sparing me from a potentially worse fate at the hands of the Death Eaters gathered there, saving his own life from his Unbroken Vow, and protecting our sole pipeline of information out of the enemy encampment--the poison that young Harry poured down my throat certainly would have done the job in a couple more days.

"Which it still will do, technically speaking. Unless Poppy has figured out a cure in the last couple of hours, a cure which she has searched for fruitlessly in the past eleven months since my death and partial resurrection, and utterly failed to find...I will die in less than two days, by her best estimate," he stated.

Again, chaos reigned. Madam Philliston banged her gavel several times, calling for order. It came with a general grumble, the noise dropping down to a few murmurs and the rapid-fire scritchings of quills against pages of notes being taken by law-clerks and journalists alike.

"...But, *why* did he poison you?" one of the witches of the upper ranks of the Wizengamot called out.

"Because I ordered him to!" A huff of impatient breath ruffled Dumbledore's beard. "Do you really think such a kind-hearted boy as Harry Potter would have it within him to deliberately poison anyone?"

"I didn't *know* it was poison!" Harry protested. "*You* ordered me to make you drink that glowing liquid we found, so we could get at the locket. *You ordered* me to feed you all of it, because it was the only way we *could* reach that locket!" He looked at the trio of judges. "We thought it was one of the Horcruxes, a locket that used to belong to Voldemort's mother, another heirloom of Salazar Slytherin's, like the ring! But it turned out to be a decoy planted by Regulus Black. We found the real locket and...and...Hermione destroyed it by dragging it between Ron and a Killing Curse cast at him by Bellatrix Lestrange, but long before that, we thought the one in the cave was the real Horcrux! It wasn't until after Professor Dumbledore died that we realized the locket we'd retrieved from that cave was a fake!"

"Yes, and the liquid resisted all attempts to be moved away from the locket, save for an attempt to drink it. I suspected the potion in that bowl was a poison the moment I realized it had to be drunk to be removed from blocking our way to the locket," Albus confirmed. "A pity the locket wasn't real... But I knew that the Prophecy demanded that Harry live long enough to face down Riddle in a final confrontation, and as there was only two of us, I knew I had to be the one to drink it. So I ordered Harry to feed it to me, and to keep feeding it to me until it was gone."

"But I didn't know it was a poison!" Harry protested. "I knew it had to be bad, but...all I did was what you *told* me to do!"

"Irony, isn't it?" That came from Snape. He lolled his head to the side and smiled an almost Russel-style smile at Harry. "I did the exact same thing that *you* did, you little twit, following Albus' orders oh, so obediently, and still, *you* try to crucify me for it! I always knew you were an hypocrite."

Harry flushed, his hands fisting and rising. To Hermione's relief, Priscilla whacked her gavel on the bench in front of her again. "Mr. Snape, try to hold your tongue!"

"Your lack-witted lackey gave me an overdose of Veritaserum, madam, so I cannot do so figuratively, and you yourself chained me to this chair, so I cannot do so literally!" he snarked at the Head of the Law Department.

"--Be silent!" she amended, briefly flustered as she glared at him. He subsided, and she returned her attention to Albus, smoothing back her steely-grey curls. "So you are saying, Albus, that if Severus Snape had not killed you, on the night of May 23rd, you still would have died by a poison administered to you by Harry Potter? One that he only administered upon your own orders?"

"Yes," Albus agreed, nodding his head limply despite the strength in his voice. "Of course, no one here would even *think* of prosecuting Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived Twice! He was just following my orders...and if he hadn't followed *all* of my orders, including the one to seek out and destroy the remaining Horcruxes, we'd still be battling Riddle, rather than sitting in this courtroom, today... But if you cannot prosecute young Harry for following my orders, then you *cannot* prosecute Severus for doing the exact same thing."

"But I was never a Death Eater!" Harry protested.

"You hypocrite!" Hermione snapped, bolting to her feet as the quills scratched madly away, and the cream of the wizarding world crammed into the courtroom listened avidly. "You *forgave* Draco Malfoy because you witnessed him unwilling to kill Albus Dumbledore--and yet Draco *joined* the Death Eaters, and *agreed* to not only try to kill the Headmaster, but to help the Death Eaters invade Hogwarts--an act which he *succeeded* in doing!"

"Severus joined the Death Eaters when he was no older than Draco, and he realized at the same age that he'd made a monumental mistake in doing so, that he was in over his head! How is *that* any different from Draco?" she demanded, pointing at her husband. "Severus Snape, at least, worked his arse off after he realized his mistake, risking his life over and over and *over* to bring back information for Albus to use!"

"Draco sabotaged his own efforts in trying to remove the Headmaster by proxy, and he couldn't do it directly in the battle at the school. And when the final conflict came, he cast the defining spell that crippled the remaining Death Eaters beyond any threat to us, allowing us our chance to slay Voldemort as well as giving himself a chance to redeem what he had mistakenly done earlier--but how does *that* compare to the dozens of lives that Severus has saved over the last few *decades* of his life?"

"You are an O-Level Arse, Harry Potter-Granger! How many lives did *you* save? Sure, we can speculate that you saved plenty of lives when you were a baby, when the first part of the Prophecy came true," she dismissed scathingly, "and speculate how many more you saved by offing the bastard again for good, two nights ago--but the numbers of lives that Snape has saved are cold, hard *facts*!"

"*You* had a Prophecy guaranteeing that it would come down to just you or Voldemort. The only thing Snape had on *his* side for twenty long years was a level of courage and determination that would've made Godric Gryffindor himself weep for the awe of it!"

The silence following her words poured into the space between her and Harry. She watched his face crumple, watched his hatred of Snape warring with the shame pricking him at her words. Softening her tone, though not her message, she added the final blow.

"Harry, you're mad at Snape because you *want* to think it's Snape's fault that Sirius rushed here to save us from those Death Eaters, two years ago. *I* think you're blaming him because you're afraid that if you don't, you'll have to blame yourself. It was *your* decision to come here, after all, and that set the whole chain of events into motion...and you don't want to take responsibility for luring an innocent man whom you admired to his death. But Sirius was an *adult*," she emphasized. "He knew what the risks were. He knew he had to practice self-control and stay hidden to keep himself safe. He *chose* to come here. But even then, it wasn't his fault. He didn't throw himself through that gate-thing. Bellatrix Lestrange did that. She could just as easily have thrown *me* through that thing!"

"And if she had, it *still* wouldn't have been Snape's fault, *or* your fault! Nor my own, but the fault of the Death Eater who did the throwing! A true adult accepts responsibility

for their actions...but you also don't accept what's not your due, because that would be an injustice. It is *also* an injustice to place blame where blame isn't due! And don't you *dare* demand that I choose sides between the two of you. *Whichever* one of you forces me to choose sides, *that* is the idiot whose side I will *not* choose! I don't *have* to choose sides, if I don't want to!

"You are my brother. Severus is my husband. Albus is dying, and Voldemort is dead! *Get over it!*"

Priscilla Philliston cleared her throat. "...As *fascinating* as your lecture has been, Mrs. Snape, I must ask that you seat yourself and *besilent*. This is the trial of Severus Snape, not of Harry Potter, nor Draco Malfoy--nor of yourself or anyone else, for that matter!"

"My apologies, Madam." Reseating herself, Hermione folded her arms under her breasts. She could feel her limbs trembling with overwrought emotions, but it looked like she had *finally* gotten through her blood-bound brother's thick skull that two plus two did not equal five anymore.

"Accepted," Priscilla grunted. Then sighed heavily. "We *will* have a hearing to determine Harry Potter's complicity in Albus Dumbledore's death, since if Mr. Potter hadn't force-fed Mr. Dumbledore the poison mentioned, he would not be dying at all. But not right now."

"Actually, that's not quite true," Albus corrected her, stirring a whisper of questions among the throng watching the drama unfolding in the courtroom. "If Harry had *not* administered the poison guarding the pseudo-Horcrux...I would *still* be dying. *That* is the other reason why I felt it was acceptable for me to go ahead and drink a liquid I suspected to be a lethal poison."

The whispers swelled to a hubbub. Philliston reached for her gavel, and the crowd quieted on its own. They really didn't want to be thrown out of this live-action soap opera. "...Explain yourself, Albus."

"It's quite simple." He lifted his blackened right hand. "I had blocked a rather nasty hex cast at me by Riddle, the summer before last, but had not managed to banish his curse. Seeking a way to dispel the enchantment, I realized that it had to have a target, so I thrust the ring, which I was wearing for safe-keeping, into the magic. Voldemort increased the spell's pressure to attack at the same moment, and it engulfed my hand, cursing it as well as the ring. The backlash of the ring being destroyed rebounded back at Voldemort, who whisked himself away to safety, ending our battle. But I was not left unaffected by the outcome."

Pushing up the sleeve of his robe, he displayed his arm, blackened as far as the eye could see. Hermione was on the wrong side of the chamber to see all of it, but she did watch him shift from pushing up his sleeve to pulling down the collar of his purple wizarding robes. That displayed the spot of blackness she had seen earlier, replete with a tip of his head. From the gasps and blanchings of the wizards and witches across from her who did have a decent view, Hermione could only guess how bad it looked when not concealed by his robes.

"...As you can see, it has spread from the initial impact-site of just my hand. Indeed, unlike the poison in my veins, it has continued to grow independently of my suspended incarceration in my brother's portrait-spell," he continued calmly, releasing his neckline and straightening the front of his robes with languid hands. "At the rate it is spreading, it has been estimated by Madam Pomfrey that I would have only two, may be three more months to live. It is a magical disease of the skin, you see...and once it reaches my mouth, it will travel down my throat, infect my digestive tract...and invade my lungs. Killing my ability to breathe.

"As with the poison I ordered Harry to give to me, I would have died anyway, regardless of what Severus Snape did to me on that night at the School. And, like that poison, there is no known cure for my ailment. But unlike the relatively swift and somewhat painless death I will now face because of that draught, I would instead have slowly suffocated to death over a matter of weeks, because of the initial ring-damaging curse. Harry could not have murdered me through poisoning me upon my own orders, just as Severus could not have murdered me through obeying my orders.

"I was *already* dying."

Stunned silence met Albus' words.

"...And *that* is the information I knew about," Severus dryly, cooperating thanks to the Veritaserum in his veins. "I knew he was dying when Mrs. Malfoy and Mrs. Lestrange came to my door, two summers ago. When I learnt Draco Malfoy was to try and kill him. I thought Albus would die faster than young Mr. Malfoy could come up with the twisted courage to kill him. But he lingered...and I had no choice. *I* would rather have *died*," he snarled, his face bland but his voice impassioned, "than have harmed a single hair of his bloody, long beard...but I gave my Vow to do anything it took to appear to be loyal enough to remain a Death Eater, just so I could pass information on to Albus.

"And when he fell, whether by Malfoy's wand, my own, or by the disease claiming his hide, I had already been instructed to pass my information on to the successor Albus had selected as my contact and liaison with the Order of the Phoenix. Which I did."

"Who was that contact and liaison?" Madam Marchbanks enquired.

"Jane, of course."

"...Who?" St. James asked, frowning in confusion.

Hermione lifted her chin, drawing everyone's attention back to her. "*I* was his liaison, Mr. St. James. His 'handler'. And I would like to point out, before you cast any aspersions on my own loyalty, or silly accusations of my harboring a known fugitive, that *I* was the one who convinced Severus to turn himself in! I have *always* intended to have him come here before the Wizengamot, and prove his innocence in a court of law."

"--Innocence!" Minister Scrimgeour huffed cynically. "The man cast Unforgivable Curses! You call that *innocent*?"

"Do you charge soldiers who are ordered by their superiors to fire upon the enemy with accusations of murder?" Hermione shot back heatedly, twisting in her seat to glare up at the bushy-haired wizard. "No. You do *not*. You have heard Albus Dumbledore's Truth Serum-forced testimony that *he* ordered Snape to pretend to be a Death Eater, and to remain one by any means necessary, and you have heard an equally Serum-forced confession that Severus Snape has been compelled by his Oaths and his sense of duty to obey.

"You have also heard him testify that Albus had placed Severus under the Fides Oath--and I've heard about this one," she added, jerking her thumb against her chest. "It doesn't just demand that the Oath-taker follows the commands of the Oath-giver faithfully, it forces that person to obey. If they resist, it activates a Karma Curse that practically jinxes their every move for a month! In some documented cases, the results have been *worse* than death!"

"He *should* have dropped dead!" Harry argued from her other side. "*I* would have, rather than harming a single hair on Dumbledore's head!"

"And yet, when the poison in that bowl visibly and audibly tormented me, you forced even more of it down my throat, Harry," Albus' voice chided him.

"--Hypocrite," Severus snorted, as Harry started to protest again.

"I quite agree," Albus concurred.

Harry flushed. His mouth opened a couple of times, but nothing concrete escaped. An arm stretched out, snagged Harry by the back pocket of his jeans, and dragged him onto a stack of papers and books for a makeshift seat. Despite his lack of freckles, there was no mistaking the stubbornness of a Weasley as Percy glared him into silence. Priscilla Philliston cleared her throat and checked her notes.

"Mr. Snape, after the night of May 23rd, who knew that you were wanted by the Ministry of Magic for the murder of Albus Dumbledore, and knew how to contact you, or where you could have been found by Ministry Aurors?"

"--Objection!" Hermione snapped, but it was too late; her husband was already answering.

"Nearly every member of the Order of the Phoenix, every member of the Death Eaters, Aberforth Dumbledore, and every person present in this room."

Noise exploded as protests rang out. Philliston banged her gavel several times until the room quieted. "Explain yourself, Mr. Snape!"

"You asked me an incredibly stupid question with no time-span or codicils modifying its limit, and did so while I am still heavily drugged by the Truth Serum that genetic imbecile tried to use as an impromptu poison. What I told you was the precise truth you asked for, you woolly-minded bint."

That earned him a scowl and a bang of her gavel. "Mr. Snape, you are perilously close to being in contempt of this court!"

"I am perilously close to not *caring*."

Giving both him and Hermione a frustrated look, Priscilla cleared her throat. "I will rephrase the question. Between the night of May 23rd of last year and...March 31st of this year," she selected for a date, "and excluding the Death Eaters and their leader, who knew where you, Severus Snape, could be found or how you could be contacted?"

"Aberforth Dumbledore, Albus Dumbledore, Poppy Pomfrey, Hermione Jane Granger-Potter Snape, some Hogwarts house-elf, and Ronald Weasley."

"--You knew who he was?" Harry hissed up at Ron.

"More to the point, why didn't the lot of you turn him in, if you knew how to contact him?" Minister Scrimgeour demanded, glaring at Hermione.

"...Because you *don't* throw away your only spy," Ron retorted, his look conveying the addendum, ...*you git*, with silent, freckled contempt. "Believe me, I was tempted! But I'm not stupid enough to lock up the only source of information we had on the Dark Lord's movements, nor was I so stupid as to turn in the only man who could successfully brew the *Infuzio di Anima Te*"

"And what is that?" Mr. St. James enquired.

"The Soul Tea," Hermione answered for him. "It was created by Lucrezia Borgia, and written down in her Diary. It's a very Dark potion that resembles tea leaves when crafted properly, and which slowly kills a person's soul over the span of two days, once administered to its victim. The only antidote is a bezoar, but the Anima Te reacting with the bezoar creates an acid strong enough to partially dissolve iron, let alone flesh, making it doubly lethal."

That caused a stir. Scrimgeour looked smugly pleased to hear a confession that Snape had crafted a Dark Potion, but strangely, Harry looked worried. Marchbanks arched one of her age-whitened brows.

"Why ever would he brew something like that?"

Hermione wasn't about to let herself or her friends off the hook for this one. "Because Harry, Ron, and I asked him to brew it. And we *did* it--" she asserted loudly over the swell of comments among the witnessing witches and wizards around her, "--because it was the best way we could find to kill the Horcrux that Voldemort had lodged inside of the legendary but lost cup of Helga Hufflepuff! Using the Anima Te to destroy the Horcrux allowed us to leave the rest of the cup's properties intact," she continued as the crowd fell silent again. "And yes, I admit that I brewed it myself. Or rather, I tried to, on my own. I wouldn't ask anyone to do such a deed without first making the attempt myself."

"I failed several times before I thought to contact Severus for the task. The Anima Te is so complicated, only a Potions Master or a Potions Mistress could possibly succeed in brewing it safely and successfully--and just so you know, every last speck of the poison has been thoroughly neutralized. And the only soul that Tea touched was the piece of Voldemort's soul lodged in the Hufflepuff cup. Isn't that right, Severus?"

It was a calculated question on her part. She hadn't taken Veritas serum--indeed, as a pregnant witch in the second or later trimester, it was prohibited--but Severus was thoroughly drugged. He responded to her question just as she'd hoped.

"Absolutely. We were very paranoid about our precautions, including several wards to prevent the Anima Te from being moved out of the Room of Requirement, on top of the standard cleansing and containment rune-circles. Only Voldiedork's soul was imperiled."

Most of the witnessing crowd flinched at such freely made use of the Dark Lord's name by both Hermione and Severus...but some snorted at the rude appellation Severus had used.

"If we hadn't brewed the tea, we couldn't have guaranteed killing that particular Horcrux," Hermione pointed out. "Just like all of the others that we destroyed."

"Heavens--how many of the abominable things were there?" Madam Marchbanks demanded.

"I'm not quite sure, three or four," Snape answered, at the same time that Albus replied, "Seven, including Voldemort."

"*Nine*, if you count all of the missing pieces of Voldie's dark soul," Hermione corrected both of them. She ticked them off on her fingers, going into detail on each one. The wizarding world media was hanging on their every word, after all. "Starting in the order that they were destroyed, we have Tom Riddle Junior's Diary, which was behind the whole Chamber of Secrets mess five years ago, unwittingly landing in Ginevra Weasley's possession after it was deliberately passed to her by Lucius Malfoy; Harry killed it by stabbing it with the tooth of the basilisk that lived in the Chamber. Next was the Slytherin ring that destroyed Albus' skin; he plunged it into a curse thrown at him by Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort."

"Then there was Slytherin locket, which was stolen by Regulus Black and substituted with the fake one mentioned earlier; the real one was recovered by Harry, Ron and I, and during the battle at the wand exposition, I used a time-accelerant spell to drag it into the path of the Killing Curse that had been aimed at Ron Weasley by Bellatrix Lestrange--"

Iantha Marchbanks snorted, then coughed, and finally laughed outright. "...Oh, my goodness! One of the Dark Lord's top Death Eaters destroyed his own Horcrux? Ahahahahaha!"

There were several wry smiles at that, even a few faint laughs, but the subject was just too serious. Hermione cleared her throat and continued. "Yes, well, it is ironically amusing, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," her husband muttered. Hermione let it pass, since he couldn't help joining the conversation. A thought struck her.

"Oh! I forgot--*before* the locket, just before it was destroyed, the Ravenclaw Horcrux was destroyed."

"The Ravenclaw Horcrux?" Priscilla enquired, lifting a brow.

"Yes. Voldiebutt had some bug up his nostril about using artifacts from the Hogwarts Founders for his Horcruxes. He had used Rowena Ravenclaw's wand to host one of the fragments of his soul," Hermione explained, "but it shares a phoenix-feather from...um...Gullveig. That's the same phoenix feather as was in the core of Albus' own wand."

"When the two were tested together to prove the authenticity of the wand, *Priori Incantatem* eventually forced the soul-fragment out...whereupon it was pounced on and devoured by one of the Dementors sent by Lord Voldemort himself to retrieve the wand back into his possession. That was the *other* piece of highly amusing irony in that battle," she finished. "Right after that is when Mrs. Lestrange cast the Unforgivable at Ron, which is when I destroyed the locket-Horcrux."

"...Right," the chief witch agreed. "By my count, that's only four Horcruxes. The others were..."

"The next was the Hufflepuff cup, which I've already described," Hermione related. "Then, just the other night when we went to confront Voldemort one last time, Ron Weasley slew Nagini, the pet snake of the Dark Lord. This was the same snake that had struck Ron's father two years ago, while Arthur Weasley was trying to protect the Department of Mysteries from a sneak Death Eater attack on the Hall of Prophecies.

"That was during the time that the Ministry was refusing to acknowledge Voldemort's return, despite Harry's eye-witnessed testimony, and Severus Snape himself willingly showing Cornelius Fudge the returning strength of his Dark Mark as proof of Riddle's return. Mr. Weasley was guarding the doorway to the Department of Mysteries under the orders of Albus Dumbledore, so that Voldemort couldn't steal inside and learn the full text of the Prophecy concerning his possible defeat at Harry's hands.

"There have been a *lot* of people whom have risked life and limb over the last two decades--and whom have had to go around the Ministry's willful blindness--in order to prepare for and fight against the return of Lord Voldemort," Hermione cautioned the raptly listening Wizengamot. "Not just Severus Snape. And they *all* did so on Dumbledore's word. He wasn't the only one following orders for the good of people who neither knew nor would full appreciate his efforts on their behalf."

That was a deliberate slam on her part against the Ministry and the previous Minister, but she also wanted to point out that Snape's actions were just one of many such orders being handed out.

"Your conjecture is irrelevant to the matter," St. James chided her.

"I rather think it is," Marchbanks countered. "Motive, after all, is an important part of determining whether an accusation of murder really is murder, or if it was a case of self-defence."

"I would have to agree with Madam Marchbanks," one of the other Wizengamot members offered.

Priscilla nodded. "Albus, approximately how many people were following orders that you had given in regards to this second insurgence by the Dark Lord, orders that bent or even outright broke the law?"

Albus let his head loll back as he thought. "Approximately...53, I think. Or maybe 55. Somewhere above 50, at any rate."

"How cognizant were you of the illegal activities of your...followers?" Philliston asked him.

"Very. I did my best to keep track of all of the members of the Order of the Phoenix and their doings. I accepted that it was my responsibility to keep a tight reign upon any potentially illicit activities."

"And how many of Mr. Snape's illicit activities did you know about?"

"As many as he told me, of course. Severus, how many did I know about, before my demise?" he asked, head tipping towards that side of his padded armchair. The wizard chained to the other, hard, wooden chair snorted.

"All of them. Including the ones afterward, in our clandestine face-to-face meetings. You compelled me to confess all of my crimes, you bastard. Oh--I almost forgot: I killed you. I thought you should know about that. I didn't have the balls to say it to your face earlier," he added dryly. His eyes were closed, his face was slack, but his voice was as snarky as ever. If the moment hadn't been so serious, Hermione might've snickered. As it was, she bit her lower lip, listening.

"Why didn't you have the balls?" Madam Marchbanks asked. Hermione wasn't the only person who choked on their own breath. One just didn't hear such a bluntly phrased question coming out of the mouth of such a withered old witch every day.

"Because I was ashamed of what I had done. I was no better than Pettigrew, in that regards, betraying one of my very few friends. Even if the bearded bastard ordered me to do it."

Quills scratched madly all across Courtroom Ten. A glance into the stands showed Rita Skeeter literally trembling with wide-eyed excitement behind her rhinestone-accented glasses. Hermione repressed the urge to smirk. The way how two of the woman's curls on her forehead were quivering, they kind of looked like insect antennae...

"I didn't order you to do it; I pleaded with you," Albus countered. Rustlings and murmurings filled the courtroom as people whispered at that revelation: it wasn't murder, it was suicide. Hermione bit her lip almost hard enough to draw blood, to keep from crying out at that confession. This had to clear her husband of all...well, at least of the *first* murder charge. And given that he'd revived Harry personally after killing him, that couldn't exactly be called murder, either!

"You never released me from the Fides Oath!" Severus retorted as she started to relax. "Not even your death released it, just transferred it to Jane!"

"A Fides Oath isn't like an Unbreakable Vow, Severus," a squeaky voice asserted from the tiers of Wizengamot seats. It was the voice of Filius Flitwick, seated on what looked like a Transfigured, ladder-backed lab stool. He didn't bother to stand, since it would've only rendered him invisible to the rest of the room. "It wouldn't have killed you to refuse!"

"No, but it would've made my life nine times worse than the living hell that it had already become, thanks to my swearing to spy for the bastard," Severus stated, his voice tinged with bitterness. "And I could not guarantee a quick and clean death for Albus at the hands of any of the other Death Eaters. I remind you I was under orders to do whatever it took to remain in the foul graces of the Dark Lord. Dropping dead through the auspices of a violated Unbreakable Vow conflicted with those orders.

"I refuse to be held responsible for your angst over the fact that, by raising my wand against my mentor upon his own agreement and order, I managed to kill the proverbial two birds with one stone: I gave Poppy and Abe the chance to revive Albus, and cemented my position among the enemy. I cannot help if it I am the only person with the bollocks to do whatever is necessary to ensure that evil is destroyed--even if it isn't morally *pretty*," he sneered.

"Why do you keep calling Albus a bastard?" someone else asked; Hermione didn't know who at first, only that it was a female voice. It came to her after a moment that the speaker was Minerva.

"Because he is one in the figurative sense, for demanding all that he has of me."

"We will get back to that point," Philliston countered, quelling the rustling of their audience with a firm look. "Er...that is, to the Oath and so forth. Continue with the list of Horcruxes, Mrs. Snape. It might not entirely have anything to do with Mr. Snape's trial, but I will not deny the wizarding world this chance to learn the full truth of this whole matter, and Lord Thi...Lord *Voldemort's*," she enunciated carefully, if shudderingly, "motives, methods, and madness are an indirect case of cause-and-effect, I believe."

Hermione re-gathered her wits. "...Thank you. The Horcruxes are actually very pertinent to the matter of how the charge of attempted murder of Harry Potter-Granger came about," she resumed briskly. "Anyway, after we killed the snake, we kept out of sight and crept over to the graveyard, where the Death Eaters were having an initiation ceremony. The seventh Horcrux was the enchanted brand used to put the Dark Mark on Riddle's followers. That was how they could Apparate; they were Side-Along Apparating to Voldemort's side, via the assistance of that speck of his soul tied into the magic of the brand."

Rustles, murmurs, and soft exclamations of surprise greeted her words. As did Albus' voice, edged with surprise. "He used his own Horcrux to allow others to Apparate to his position? How incredibly clever... Disturbing, given that an Horcrux can only be created by deliberately killing someone else, but very clever. But I was led to believe that

Riddle wanted to create seven fragments of his soul, not eight; seven is the stronger arcane number, after all."

"I think he only created Nagini after the Diary was destroyed," Hermione offered. "With the Diary destroyed, he had only six fragments, which is the weaker number. With the snake enchanted, it created seven extant Horcruxes again."

Albus' head lolled in an approximation of a nod. "Yes...that could be possible."

"And the eighth Horcrux?" Priscilla asked her. "I'd also like it if you could explain how you achieved the number nine, while we're at it."

"I'm getting there--" Hermione started to explain.

"Wait, she didn't say how the seventh was destroyed," St. James pointed out. A few of the Wizengamot members above and behind the three at the bench nodded as well. "She should tell us that one, so it's not left out."

"*Frangelu*. A Seventh Year Charm. The brand shattered from the extreme cold," Hermione revealed. "After that, it was just a matter of taking out Voldemort himself. Except a few other things happened first. The moment the brand was destroyed, about a third of the Death Eaters outright fled, and a few moments later, about another third of them fled as well. I suspect that the destruction of the brand, timed to the induction of a new Death Eater, severed the magical ties of the Dark Marks, binding the Death Eaters to their leader. And that the first group had been compelled to serve either by spell or by fear, while the second group probably decided it would be prudent to leave."

"That still left nearly a dozen Death Eaters around us, including Bellatrix Lestrange, Peter Pettigrew, Severus Snape, and Draco Malfoy," Hermione stated. "Severus, why don't you tell everyone what happened?"

"Potter attacked the Dark Lord, and Pettigrew intervened, grabbing the sword of Godric Gryffindor that the boy had appropriated for the final confrontation, since Potter and Voldemort's wands would only invoke *Priori Incantatem*," he explained dryly, factually. "I ordered Draco to use the spell Jane had created for him, and he gladly sabotaged the remaining Death Eaters by casting a modified version of the Forging Charm on all of the Death Eater masks within range. It was his way of making up for the stupidity of agreeing to allow the others to invade Hogwarts, and so forth. Then the two of us started Stupefying and binding the Death Eaters, along with Ron Weasley, while Harry stabbed Voldemort in the stomach."

"Unfortunately, I had been compelled to craft a potion over the turn of the new year for the Dark Lord, one that took advantage of the final piece of Voldemort's fragmented soul," Severus admitted. "A fragment that was not a Horcrux, but which existed all the same."

"What fragment was this?" Priscilla enquired.

"The soul-fragment that was lodged in the cursed scar on Harry Potter's forehead. A fact I realized just as we finished using the Anima Te to destroy the Horcrux in the Hufflepuff cup. Jane used some sort of soul-revealing mediwitch's charm to determine whether or not the Horcrux in the cup had been destroyed, and had apparently used it upon herself and the other two, and that was when I noticed the disparity of his scar, and realized it matched the colour of the soul trapped in the cup before it was destroyed. And then the Dark Lord said that his life was now tied to Potter's, and that so long as Harry Potter lived, he himself would never die."

"At the time of its creation, I did not realize what the potion was for, but that moment was when I realized that Potter had to die, if Voldemort was to be destroyed. By my hand, if necessary."

Chapter 35

Chapter 35 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XXXV.

Snape's flat declaration caused an outburst of noise from the tiers of witnesses. A lot of it consisted of denials, some of it threats, and much of it was expressed in terms of disgust and even vulgarity. Hermione eyed her husband in dismay. That was a bit more of a confession than she'd thought he would make, even accounting for the effect of so much Truth Serum upon his tongue.

Priscilla Philliston banged her gavel several times, before the rest of the watching wizards and witches quieted again. "...Explain your last comment, Mr. Snape."

"It is simple enough, even the Wizengamot should be able to understand," he retorted. "Of those remaining awake and unbound at the moment of final confrontation, only the Dark Lord and I had ever killed anyone. It takes a distinct amount of unpleasant internal fortitude to kill for the first time. After that, it does get easier, albeit not by much. I also had other motivations. The stupid, scarred prat was attempting to kill himself by impaling himself on the Gryffindor sword, a very messy way to die. I was already preparing to cast the Killing Curse upon him, when he tried to impale himself."

"--See?" Harry demanded. "He wanted to kill me!"

"One would *think* that, blood-bound as you are to my wife, Potter, some of her genetic intelligence would have rubbed off onto you in the last half-year!" Severus sneered, his face slack but his emotions cutting through his words. "I had the existence of Albus in his portrait to help me realize that Muggle CPR was capable of reviving someone struck down with the Killing Curse--a most ironic cure for a wizarding ailment! If I had let you stick that damned sword into your gullet, my wife--*your sister*--would've gone into a decline of grief! And I remind you, I owed your father my miserable life! Killing you would've brought the weight of that obligation crashing down on my shoulders, killing *me* in turn!"

"But, if you'd dropped dead," Harry pointed out almost viciously, with the kind of edge in his voice that said he wouldn't have minded that at all, "then you wouldn't have been able to...save me."

Hermione bit her lip against the urge to cry out. Her stupid, idiotic brother was *finally* on the verge of knocking sense into himself, since nothing she or anyone else had said to him seemed to be making any lasting headway. Clenching her hands into fists in her lap, she listened as Severus replied.

"My hope was that, with Jane and Ronald having studied that CPR pamphlet mere hours before, and with Jane being thoroughly Muggle-born, one of the two would've thought to try the technique upon you!"

"--Hold on," Philliston interrupted. "I'm missing something, here. You said that Mr. Potter was *trying* to impale himself on the sword?"

"Yes," Severus sneered, his lip curling briefly, though the rest of his face was lax from the Veritaserum. "Apparently it is far more *noble* to be a self-sacrificing martyr to a cause, when one knows one has to die, than to allow someone else to assist in their requisite suicide!"

"So then how did Harry Potter really die?" Priscilla asked, bewilderment colouring her voice.

"Lord Voldemort objected to my reason for stopping Potter from slaying himself in such a stupidly messy way. He attempted to cast the Killing Curse on my wife, and I Summoned Potter into the path of the Curse to block it from reaching her. I think the indirectness of his death is the reason why the life-debt did not backlash onto me at that point, but I wasn't about to let Jane die--again, a proverbial case of two birds with one stone, because Potter had to die to kill our nemesis.

"When Potter dropped dead, I met my wife over his body, and had her confirm his death via her soul-scanning spell, then instructed her to cast it upon the Dark Lord, who had finally succumbed to the wound Potter had given him. We both witnessed the aura of his soul extinguishing. When it was gone, fulfilling the Prophecy, I commenced CPR upon young Potter. Jane, realizing what I was about, assisted me with the resuscitation half of our efforts as I performed the pulmonary part. That was when the Aurors and the members of the Order of the Phoenix started to arrive."

"He forgot to mention that he'd Stupefied Ron to keep him from interfering," Hermione added. "Severus, Draco and I were therefore the only three direct witnesses to Voldemort's death. Everyone else had been Stupefied."

"How *convenient*," Scrimgeour scoffed. "Two Death Eaters and a school girl, the only witnesses to the Dark Lord's death!"

"*Hellooo*, Truth Serum, here!" Hermione retorted, slashing her hand in her husband's direction.

"*You* haven't taken any!"

"She's *exempt*, you petrified piece of shite-up-your-arse." More than one person choked at the insult, and the Minister bristled, his face reddening with apoplexy. But Severus Snape wasn't through. "Women who are in their second or later trimesters cannot be administered Veritaserum, without endangering the life and development of their child. She is also correct. She, Draco Malfoy, and I were the only ones awake at the time of the arsehole's most fortunate demise."

"If you want proof that the Dark Lord's reign is at an end, just look at Harry's scar," Hermione interjected, standing and pointing at her brother. "It's always been red in the past, as if it were newly-made, even though it's been sixteen years. But now it's white, faded." She crossed to the chain-bound chair and unbuttoned the black sleeve and white shirt, pushing it up to bare his forearm. "Look at the Dark Mark on Severus' arm--or any of the others who bore it! Nothing but old, pale lines, rather than the burning black of before!"

"And before you open your mouth again and insert your foot, *Minister*, I ask you, where were *you* when most of the battles of this war were being fought?" Turning, she looked at the others filling the chamber. "Where were *you*? What were *you*, and *you*, and *you*, and *you* doing to contribute to Voldemort's downfall? Before you choke on your toes again, I will point out that, aside from the Aurors, only the Order of the Phoenix ever did anything useful towards the war-effort!"

"You can sit there on your sanctimonious arses all day long, if you like, but *we did something*. And because *we* were willing to do that something, this war is now over! In fact, when it came down to the crunch, the only people who were there at the end were Harry, Ronald, Severus, Draco, and me. Against over sixty Death Eaters, plus Voldemort himself...even though we'd *told* the Order and the Aurors where and when they needed to be. I'm glad they arrived, but they could've arrived a bit sooner, rather than bickered over the source of their information until they were blue in the face!"

"You expected us to trust a man we'd thought had murdered Albus in cold blood!" a voice called out from the upper tiers. From the rasp of it, Hermione recognized Mad-Eye Moody.

"No, I expected you to trust Ron, Minerva, and me! And that's another thing that Severus Snape did," Hermione continued, looking up at the judges' bench. "He was Voldemort's Secret Keeper. We wouldn't even have been able to *get* to the snake-faced git without Severus' cooperation! *Full* cooperation," she repeated, emphasizing that point. "Why would he cooperate, unless he was firmly on our side? He had everything under his control, if he had really been a Death Eater at heart!"

"And yet he joined their ranks, didn't he? Mr. Snape, explain why you joined the Death Eaters," Priscilla ordered him.

"--And why you chose to spy for Albus," Iantha added quickly.

"I joined because I was bullied and tormented by everyone but a select few among the Slytherins, when I went to Hogwarts. Those few befriended me once they realized how smart I was; they wanted to capitalize on my intelligence, and I was grateful enough, I believed their rhetoric about the superiority of the wizarding world, and wizards versus Muggles. My own father was a Muggle who thought he could hack being the husband of a witch...but he couldn't. They constantly got into fights, he distanced himself from me, and then he cheated on her, and she retaliated by cheating on him. So my home life was equally miserable. And my mother, never all that affectionate, was a near-stranger to me once I started attending school.

"When she was made the Defence Mistress, I thought my mother and I could get to know each other, but she pushed me away, saying it wasn't proper, that she didn't dare show favouritism," Severus recited. His tone was cold, calm save for a trace of lingering bitterness. "So when I was offered a chance to belong, to join a group that was going to overturn the bullying of others and seize power, I took the chance."

"When was that?" Kenneth St. James enquired.

"January 9th. It was a Hogsmeade weekend, but I slipped away with my friends, Apparated to a meeting, and took the Mark."

"Why did you agree to spy?" Madam Marchbanks repeated.

"Because my mother was murdered by Death Eaters. I came to suspect that her lover at the time was a Death Eater, but never knew who it was until recently; I now have reason to suspect Antonin Dolohov. She must have uncovered something about his allegiance, and he most likely killed her to keep her from telling tales.

"But at the time, all I knew was that my mother had been brutally raped, tortured and murdered, and that the Dark Mark flew over my family home...and that the Dark Lord had promised our families would be set up as nobles, above the touch of the rabble comprising the rest of the wizarding world. Having my illusions shattered so brutally, coupled with Albus' frank discussions of what was really happening at the hands of the Death Eaters, made me change sides.

"The price he demanded for the sin of having taken the Dark Mark and then spied upon him at the school was that I should then *spy* for him."

"Is that *all* you did, between joining and turning spy?" Marchbanks quizzed him. "Just spied on Dumbledore's movements?"

"Spied, and bullied a few Gryffindors and such, though mostly in secret and I was doing that anyway. But I imagined what I could do to them when Slytherins came to power."

"You didn't have to pick on them, you know!" Harry's voice called out harshly. "And don't say it was because of that trick Sirius pulled on you, with the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack!"

"It wasn't just that, you lumbering, anesthetized brainstem. You saw the memory yourself, when you invaded my Pensieve, and raped my privacy! But you missed the part

where your *beloved father* ripped off my undershorts, baring my genitals for all to see. If that wasn't enough, he was in the middle of shouting a Shrinking Hex when Professor Murphy showed up, stopping him and setting me free. James Potter *ruined* my chances at having a social life with that humiliation, until my seventh year! Plus that little trick his *friend* pulled on me, luring me unwittingly into a werewolf's lair. He and Black were always egging each other on! And yet *I* was the one who ended up owing *him* a bloody life-debt, for it!"

The silence that followed his growled accusations was an uncomfortable one. Albus spoke, filling the void after a dozen seconds. "...Madam Philliston, could you please tell me exactly what charges Severus is facing? I'm afraid I wasn't here for that part."

Priscilla Philliston cleared her throat, accepting the list that her Assistant Deputy sorted out and handed to her. "...The killing of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. Conspiracy to commit said murder. Conspiracy to admit Death Eaters onto the grounds of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. Conspiracy against the Ministry of Magic. Evading arrest on two counts. Casting the Unforgivable Killing Curse. Casting the Unforgivable Cruciatus Curse. And direct complicity in the death of Harry James Potter."

"Well, we've established that yes, he did kill me, but it was willingly engaged at my own insistence. And as there are no laws against assisted suicide in the wizarding world, the first two charges will have to be dropped, along with the Killing Curse charge. As for conspiring to admit Death Eaters onto the School grounds...I knew about it beforehand, though not the timing of it. I had some plans laid in place to alert the Order to come to the School's rescue--which they did--but will admit that we were caught off guard as to the abrupt timing of it.

"And I accept full culpability in Severus casting the Unforgivable Cruciatus Curse. I authorized him--and indeed, *ordered* him, under the auspices of the Fides Oath--to do whatever it took to appear to remain a loyal Death Eater, up to and including the Unforgivables, if he found himself in a position where it was necessary. This same order of whatever-it-took included evading arrest, if things ever came publicly to a head between his guise as my Potions Master, and his disguise as a Death Eater. So again, I am responsible for coercing Severus Snape into committing the actions that he undertook.

"And lastly, we have heard testimony--Prophecy-backed testimony," he emphasized, "that Harry Potter was carrying a piece of Tom Riddle's soul. In order for Riddle to be vanquished and Lord Voldemort to be no more, that piece of soul had to be destroyed. I wish to re-emphasize on his behalf that Severus immediately began the resuscitation of young Mr. Potter-Granger the moment Voldemort was truly and finally dead...and you have heard his testimony that it was already his wish beforehand to revive Harry, despite the hatred he still holds for Harry's father and his father's friends.

"It is a common practice among Healers to stop the heartbeat of the patient for about a minute, essentially killing them, when treating them for an exposure to the poisonous sap of the Venemous Pitcher-plant of the upper slopes of the Hoh Rainforest, over in America. Yet they are not charged with murder for doing so. Because their intent is to shut down the damage incurred by the sap, which reacts to moving blood in the patient, scour it from the body, and then they restart their patients' heart.

"Alas, those particular Healing techniques do not work in the face of the magical residue left in the wake of the Killing Curse," Albus demurred. "But the principle was sound enough for Poppy and I to consider it a worthwhile risk, once Severus came to the two of us with his dilemma from two summers ago. And since it worked with me, Severus was willing to risk it with young Harry.

"Now, all of these charges have been addressed, and negated. As soon as you acknowledge this fact, I will gladly remand myself into the court to stand trial for my own culpability," the former Headmaster finished calmly. "For it was I who orchestrated all of these crimes, and it is therefore I, and I alone, whom am responsible for the consequences thereof."

"...Not just yet, I'm afraid," Philliston countered somberly. "Those were just the major charges. Other questions have arisen which now need answering. Such as the whereabouts of Draco Malfoy. If he was on 'our' side, by the end, why hasn't he turned himself in, just yet?"

Severus snorted. "When are you going to free Terrence Willard? Or Manfred Pattenkins? Alisha Stout? They may have been Slytherins, but they were no more a Death Eater than Albus! And I *know*. I know *all* of the Death Eaters! I can even tell you which ones were under the Imperius Curse for real, and which ones were only faking it, both in this war and in the previous go-round!"

That caused a stir. One loud enough that Priscilla banged her gavel. "--Why didn't you tell us this before, when you were last brought before the Wizengamot?"

The hint of rolling eyes in his tone was palatable, though his actual eyelids remained shut. "We just finished *telling* you that I was under magically bound orders to do nothing beyond what Albus bid me to do or say. I only told the Wizengamot as much as he commanded that I should, and no more."

"But, you were tested under Veritaserum, last time! How is that possible?"

"For one, the Unspeakable Vow is capable of acting as a very specific form of antidote. For another, I didn't *know* all of the Death Eaters' identities, the first time around! It was only after I killed Albus that I was raised to right-hand-man in status. Stuck as I was in Riddle Manor, having to attend the Dark Lord as well as keep out of sight as a wanted man and as the Dark Lord's Secret Keeper, I had plenty of opportunity to see everyone who came and went for most of the last year-plus."

"Recite that list of known Death Eaters, please."

Hermione twisted her hands together in her lap. If any of those people were here in the courtroom... *Sigurd*, she thought very strongly as she touched her thumb to the band of scaled gold girding her flesh, *protect Severus! At the expense of my own life, if need be!* She thought her ring felt a little warmer than usual, but didn't see any visible changes in its appearance. But before Severus could speak, a witch stood up from her seat on the third tier, interrupting him.

"--I'll 'out' myself, thank you very much! I'm Sarah Jennings, Unspeakable, and I was under the Imperius Curse. I'm...I'm the one who cast those hexes on Percy Weasley."

"Is this true, Mr. Snape?" Priscilla asked him.

"Yes, she was a Death Eater, and yes, she was under the Imperius Curse," Severus agreed.

"...I was under the Imperius Curse, too!" That came from another witch, a veiled, pale-skinned brunette who looked vaguely familiar to Hermione.

Severus snorted. "No, you were not, Cissy!"

"I--I beg your pardon? I'm Mary Pilsington-Gentry!" the witch quickly protested.

"You're Narcissa Black. I'd know your voice anywhere! The only thing *you* regretted was embroiling your precious son in the Dark Lord's schemes. Even so, you didn't go to the Aurors, or to Dumbledore for help. You came to *me*. A fellow Death Eater. You didn't want the scheme to kill Albus stopped. You just wanted your son to not get caught!"

"Severus--please!" she called out as two of the bailiffs converged on her seat in the fifth tier ringing the courtroom.

"You choose your bed long ago, Narcissa," he dismissed coldly. "Satin sheets, embroidered with the Malfoy crest!"

The bailiffs grabbed her arms. One of them waved his wand over her body, scanning her for glamours. Something at her throat glowed, and he unclasped a necklace with a carved stone pendant. Colour drained out of her hair and back into her skin, returning her to a lightly tanned, golden-haired witch. It was a variation, Hermione realized, of the same pendant-glamour that Severus had used in his Russel-disguise.

"Severus!"

His face twisted slightly, and if he'd had full control of his muscles, Hermione suspected it would've been a rictus of rage, maybe even grief, as he shouted, "*Lie in it until you rot!*"

Marchbanks picked up the gavel, banging it sharply on the bench as the bailiffs carried the struggling witch out of the courtroom.

"Back to the list of Death Eaters, if you please--and this time, Mr. Snape, indicate if you knew whether they were under the Imperius Curse, or were coerced by other means, such as blackmail or bribery, or if they were willing followers or even full believers in the Dark Lord's party-line--and go slowly, so the court scribes can keep up." Her gaze, framed by wrinkled skin, was still hard enough to pin the whole room. "And if you're a Death Eater in disguise, or a former one, whether willing or not, *if* you surrender peacefully at this time, the Wizengamot will grant you some leniency when considering the weight and length of your crimes.

"You will *all* be tested under Veritaserum. There'll be no mob-driven railroading while *I'm* a member of this bench!" Another bang of the gavel, and she looked pointedly at the defendant. "Well, Mr. Snape? Begin your list!"

Hermione discreetly conjured a pitcher of water and a glass. Pouring herself some, she sipped at the liquid, waiting. When Severus' voice faltered after the twentieth Death Eater, she approached him, shushing his protests and feeding him some of the liquid. One of the bailiffs shifted forward to stop her, but a hard look from her brown eyes stopped him. She moistened Severus' mouth twice more during his recital, glad the bailiff had backed down.

One by one, as Severus spoke, roughly a dozen former Death Eaters rose when they were named, and allowed themselves to be taken into custody. Hermione memorized who they were. She was still just as incensed over Stan Shunpike's unlawful imprisonment as her blood-brother. Though she'd given up trying to free house-elves--most of whom didn't want to be free, she had been forced to acknowledge--she had not given up on campaigning for better treatment of them. Fair trials for everyone was now also on her List Of Causes To Champion.

Only one person resisted arrest. Dolores Umbridge. In fact, she attempted to Apparate out of the chamber, then tried to craft herself a Portkey even as the purple-clad witches on either side of her grabbed for her wand, stopping her. Hermione nearly bit through her lip, stifling the urge to shout, "Yesss!" as the plump toad-woman was stripped of her Wizengamot status, spell-bound hand and foot, and levitated out of the room like a pink-sweatered blimp. For a moment, Hermione wondered if the sight before them was anything like Harry had seen when he'd accidentally inflated his Aunt Marge with a bit of uncontrolled--but highly deserved--magic.

"...And Bellis Morgan, who attempted to join the Death Eaters on the night of the Dark Lord's demise, and whom was responsible for the attack on my in-laws, Mr. and Mrs. Granger. I think he was joining with enthusiasm, originally--Antonin knows how to pick out the sadistic psychotics from the usual sort of lowlifes. But after his punishment for threatening my position as their son-in-law--which would've called my position as a disguised spy among the Order into question--I don't think he was quite as willing as before. But he still was willing, and he acted on his own impulse when he chose the Grangers as his would-be victims."

A voice spoke up from the lowest tier. It belonged to Harry, who had folded his arms across his chest as he perched on his stack of books and papers. But he wasn't glaring at Snape. Instead, he was glaring at the Wizengamot, and at Minister Scrimgeour. "...Is that *all* of the Death Eaters, Snape? Not just the ones that you could identify?"

"That was all of them, from the time I first joined all the way through to now. Those that are still alive and on the loose or in Ministry captivity," Severus confirmed. "Once I became Voldemort's right-hand man, and was living most of my time in his stronghold, I was able to see and learn the names of everyone who was accounted a Death Eater."

"Then you would be able to say for certain if someone was *not* a Death Eater?"

"There is the faintest, slightest chance that someone could be one without my knowing it...but I even knew who most of the spies among the Ministry were, though Voldemort was careful about keeping those secret."

"So then you could say with near-absolute certainty that Stan Shunpike, former conductor for the Knight Bus...*is not* a Death Eater?"

"Stan Shunpike is *not* a Death Eater. He is instead a home-educated yokel with far fewer brain-cells than an unholy mating of Neville Longbottom, Vincent Goyle, and a Hufflepuff-bred Squib. Had he even applied to be a Death Eater, he would have most likely been killed for the insult of it. As were Hildegard Johnston and Boris Dubnjachek, both of whom had a few more neurons to share than that idiotic conductor."

"...Perhaps the Ministry, now that it has been *enlightened*," Hermione stated carefully, letting the edge in her tone cut through the murmurs rustling around the room, "should release poor Mr. Shunpike...and *pay* him remunerations for the damage to his reputation, his employment, and the loss of his wages, his friends and family, and access to his home."

Scrimgeour started to protest, but Harry cut him off just as sharply as his blood-sister. "--I think that's *more* than fair, considering that Stan's civil rights have been *violated* for nearly two years--don't even bother!" Harry disparaged, wrinkling his nose at the lion-haired wizard, who was sputtering. "You said the wizarding community needed to feel as if the Ministry was doing something about all those Death Eater attacks, but all you did was lock up at least one innocent man--and Merlin alone knows how many others! And you were *given* the knowledge of who was doing something, and what they were doing, about the war.

"If you hadn't had your head wedged up your politically-cushioned arse, we could've ended all of this a lot sooner!"

"*Language*, Mr. Potter-Granger," Priscilla chided him firmly.

"Sorry, Madam," Harry apologized. For a moment, his gaze met Hermione's. Then his cheeks flushed, and he ducked his head, avoiding her eyes.

Hermione turned back to her husband and gave him a last sip of water, then offered some to Albus. She had to hold the cup for him; Veritaserum had rendered his muscles too lax to hold anything safely, though at least he was free to help guide the cup to his lips. Retreating to her seat, she settled and waited for the next phase of the trial.

St. James cleared his throat. "How many people have you killed in your lifetime, Mr. Snape? Not including the deaths of Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter-Granger."

"Seven."

A ripple ran around the room. Hermione cleared her throat of the tightness that had seized it. "Describe why you did each one, and its circumstance."

"Two were attacks on fellow Death Eaters; I had the opportunity to stab them in the back while their guard was down, and arranged matters to look as if they'd been caught in a wizarding duel. The other five were brutal mercy killings of Death Eater victims."

"--'Brutal' mercy killings?" Marchbanks questioned.

"I used hexes to brutalize the bodies, mostly after the killing blow. I would also dissect the bodies of other victims and take away pieces, claiming they were needed for Dark Potions."

That roused consternation from the witnesses in the room. Priscilla's grey eyebrows shot up towards her hairline. "Why ever would you do such a reprehensible thing?"

"To disguise myself among the others. I didn't care for rape, preferred not to kill, but had to make myself into just as much of a monster as the rest of them. Carving up cadavers and making off with the pieces was the least heinous crime I could think, yet one of the most gruesome."

"What did you do with the...er...remains you had harvested?" the Healer from the beginning of the trial asked, the one who had asked about the Eiterubrenner Salve.

"I cremated them, for the most part, as soon as I could guarantee I was alone and unobserved. Unfortunately, twice I had to use...bits...in actual Dark Potions. One of which was a bit of blood preserved from when Potter was kidnapped at the end of his fourth year. That potion caused his life-force to sustain the Dark Lord's, at the end. At the time, I didn't know what the potion was for, and wasn't in a position to hesitate over making it, let alone refuse."

"And did you enjoy it?" Harry asked him. Hermione could've smacked him for being so hard on her husband, but she clung to her faith in Severus' better nature.

"Not particularly. Most of the time I was trying not to vomit on my victims. But I did pretend otherwise. I was under orders to 'fit in', whether I wanted to or not."

The three judges behind the bench swayed together for a whispered conversation, then Philliston cleared her throat. "Where is Draco Malfoy?"

"In a Secret Kept location," Severus revealed flatly.

"Who is the Secret Keeper for that location?"

"Draco Malfoy." A huffing sound that could've been a sardonic laugh escaped him. "So you'll not be able to drag him off to your dungeons to have his rights violated like you did everyone else, up until now."

"Up until *now*, Severus," Albus emphasized. "But now that they have heard the truth, they will exonerate you for all that you've done, and set you free. And now that the truth is in the hands of the whole wizarding world, you'll be hailed as one of the greatest heroes of this war--"

"*Bullshite!*" The vulgarity all but exploded from Severus Snape's lips. It was loud and harsh enough that Hermione wasn't the only person who jumped in their seat. "They're not going to exonerate me! They're going to revile and crucify me! Pretend all you want, Albus; it won't matter what you think of me! It only matters what the mindless mob of *social opinion* thinks! In these people's eyes, I am a man who joined the Death Eaters, and committed numerous crimes among their band! I have tortured and killed, and even desecrated the dead!

"Yes, I even had the gall to do this while teaching their*precious* children, while they went about their precious, self-centered lives, picking their nostrils and pretending that they're so much better than me because they didn't have the guts to do shite about this war. *Oh, protect me! I'm helpless!* ...even though they're all big prats with *wands* and *magic* to defend themselves," he sneered, his facial muscle twitching in the effort to match the scorn and loathing in his voice. "And now they sit there on their sanctimonious arses around me, looking down their self-righteous noses at me, *judging* me! They didn't do what I did--they didn't have the *bollocks* to do what I did! And yet they *think* they're superior to me..."

His head lolled, his eyes cracking open with a struggle. Dark irises stared bleakly into the stands. He aimed his gaze towards the Minister of Magic, and curled his lip with some effort.

"But these arse-wipes don't want to *hear* that. They want to pretend that they're *good* and *kind*, *fair* and *just*." If words were venom, his were poison shaped like lemon-sherberts, sour-sweet, hard and brittle, yet crumbling under pressure. "If they can imprison some poor, witless sod and rape him of his legal rights for nearly two bloody years just because of a *rumor*, how much more of a prize am I, the genuine article?

"Who *cares* that I was under spell-enforced orders?" he disparaged. If he'd been free, Hermione suspected he would've slashed his hand through the air in emphasis. "It wasn't the Imperius Curse! I didn't *have* to do it! I could've picked my nose like the rest of this hypocritical lot, and whinged about how *scared* I was, rather than being braver than a fucking Gryffindor for actually *doing* something about our predicament!"

She flinched at the vehemence in his words, but at least she knew she could take comfort in having played a major role in bringing the war with Voldemort to a close. More than three-quarters of the room were neither Order members nor Aurors. And the Order Members, at least, were perfectly ordinary wizards and witches, just like the rest of the room...only they'd had the courage to do something about their predicament. The rest hadn't, and deserved to hear whatever her understandably bitter husband had to say. If not quite in the way he was saying it.

"I could've wanked myself in my superiority at being morally*normal*, rather than clinging more fiercely than a Hufflepuff in my loyalty to a man that none of these sheep in wizards' robes are fit to look upon, and following his vision of *how* to win the war they all cowered from! And I could've wiped my arse with *The Daily Prophet* and its Ministry-spun lies, like nearly everyone else in this chamber, rather than thinking for myself like a Ravenclaw, and using those same wits to stay alive in a position so perilous, one wrong *look* would've gotten me killed, time and again over the last two decades!

"But *no*," he sneered, lolling his head the other way, his eyes rolled halfway up under their heavy, drugged lids. "I'm a *Slytherin*. I had the ambition to try and haul myself out of the misery and suffering that everyone else heaped upon me...and for *one childhood mistake*, I am to be vilified, and sneered at, and spat upon by a mob of idiotic ingrates who think they've earned the right to be morally superior to me!"

"Severus!" Dumbledore's voice snapped, cutting through the younger wizard's diatribe. "If you would just give them a chance--"

"--Like the chance they gave me the *last* time I was here?" he scoffed. Severus twisted his head as well as his face, glaring at his former colleague. "I gave them my testimony, at your order; I gave them names, and places, and thought that I'd get recognition for my efforts, and acknowledgement for the danger I was in! Every time that snake-faced bastard punished me with Cruciatius, every time he cut me and burned me and then healed me, only to cut me and burn me again for my failings, I *clung* to the thought of the way people would treat me, once they knew what I'd done! That I'd be respected for my sacrifices, and given the place of honor my sufferings should have earned.

"But *what* did they do to me socially, Albus?" he demanded, twisting against his bonds. "Tell everyone what they did to me! *Remind* them of what they are!"

Under the effects of Veritaserum, Albus was forced to respond with too much candor. "They reviled you. They pushed you away, they looked down upon you, and if I hadn't been able to guarantee you a position at Hogwarts, I knew they were going to blacklist you from a respectable career."

"*Exactly!*" The exclamation rang off the rafters, far overhead. "I found the last of my illusions shattering with that little revelation. I knew that if I continued to spy for you, I'd only suffer even worse at their prejudiced, hypocritical hands! But you know what? I'm *ready* for them. I've known all along that if I survived the war, and Voldemort lost, I'd be tossed to the wolves and torn to pieces for the amusement of the wizarding world. That I would have suffered untold years more of being a social pariah for doing the right thing, simply because it was the wrong thing in their eyes, and god alone knew what I'd have to suffer when Voldemort returned. And yet *I went back*!"

His words were like watching a proverbial train-wreck. No one protested and no one moved as the truth, the unvarnished truth spilled from Severus Snape's lips. Hermione tasted something salty-metallic, and realized she'd bitten her lip hard enough to draw blood. That wasn't what made her eyes prickle with tears, though.

"...You're only wasting your breath, Albus. They don't have the capacity to forgive me for what I've done. It doesn't matter that I have paid literally in blood and tears to protect them, time and again. They can only see me with short-sighted, narrow-minded vision." His eyes closed again, his features slackening, dropping the struggle to show his hatred with his face as well as his voice. This time, though, it was from an exhaustion that matched his tone. "I am Severus Snape, Bastard Traitor, and the murderer of Albus fucking Dumbledore. I deserve to die...and frankly, I'm rather tired of living, so if you'd just get on with it, I'd thank you for it.

"Bring on the Dementors. I'm sure they'll *behave* themselves for you, once they've supped away my soul."

Silence followed his words. The kind with a terrible, shame-riddled, guilt-laden weight to it. One voice broke that silence. An unexpected voice. Hermione twisted her head,

peering up at Ron as he stood.

"...Is that it? That's your big speech? 'I've labored and suffered, and all I've got to look forward to now is an ugly death, so bring it on'?" Ron demanded, incredulity colouring his words. "What about your wife? Doesn't she mean *anything* to you?"

Hermione held her breath as that dark head lolled her way. She wasn't the only one waiting for his answer; she could all but feel the weight of Harry's glower behind her back. Felt the quivering of Dicto-Quills waiting for his answer. His dark gaze met hers, dull from the drug in his veins, his face pale and sheened with sweat, slightly mottled.

"She is my goddess. The last good thing in my life... I would give her everything...the moon, the stars, the sun...the world itself, if I could...but these self-centered bastards don't give a damn about what I want. No one else does, save for Jane and Albus."

"Severus..." Hermione murmured, staring at him, mind numb from her swirling emotions. Grief at his self-loathing, elation at his feelings for her, embarrassment that her husband, such a private man, was stripping himself so awfully bare under the effects of the Veritaserum in his veins.

His eyelids dipped, then struggled upward again, his face growing visibly blotchy. Greenish, even. "Promise me...promise you won't take off my ring. I don't want you unprotected...I don't want..."

"He's going into Serum Shock!"

Hermione jerked at the exclamation; it came from Horace Slughorn, her former Potions professor. She peered at her husband, whose face was indeed mottling with greenish spots. Slughorn rapped out a name, a summoning command, and a house-elf clad in a Hogwarts tea-towel appeared in the witness stands. He ordered it to fetch the antidote, but Hermione couldn't really process the words. Veritaserum Shock was serious. If the blotches progressed from green to blue, Severus' brain would be increasingly at risk for damage; if the spots on his face turned purple, indelible harm could result. And the larger the dose, the faster the colour-change occurred.

A large bulk hustled past her, pulling her out of her seat by sheer force of anxiety. Thankfully, the house-elf *cracked* into existence next to the balding instructor mere seconds after he reached Severus' side, handing over a tiny bottle no bigger than the one in her pocket. Prying at the younger wizard's eyelids, Slughorn checked his condition, then uncorked the bottle.

"Open his mouth," Slughorn instructed her.

Hermione hurried to comply, tipping back her husband's head. Fingers on his jaw coaxed his mouth open. A careful tip of the vial, and five drops fell into his mouth. Slughorn righted the bottle and waited. Hermione tried not to fret, but those greenish spots seemed to be turning ever so slightly teal...but they started to fade, and she sighed in relief.

Slughorn eyed the younger wizard. "If he hadn't overdosed in the first minute of being poisoned, he shouldn't have overdosed now." Frowning, he slid his gaze down to the nearly-dry spot on Snape's frock-coat. "Of course...the potion soaked through his clothes, after he spit it out! It's a skin-contact potion, as well as an ingestible one. It just works fastest when placed on the tongue. Use your wand, Miss Gr...Madam Snape," the portly wizard corrected himself with a flush, "and Scourgify his robes, will you?"

Grateful for the antidote he had summoned, Hermione did as she was bid, drawing her wand and cleansing Severus' chest.

"Mrs. Snape...how did you get in here with that wand unchecked?" Priscilla Philliston asked her as Slughorn checked Severus' pupils again.

"Portkey. I only Vowed Severus would come here wandless. I never swore that I would." Hermione held Severus' mouth open again as Slughorn administered two more drops. "And it has been rather handy in helping *you* keep control of this courtroom, so kindly keep any hypocrisies on the subject to yourself."

Strangely, that made Severus smile. His eyes were mere slits, but he smiled at her as the last faint tinge of green vanished from his skin. "That's my Jane... Claws like a lioness..."

It was a rather Russel-ish smile, yet not in the same sense as the easy charm he'd adopted when wearing that persona. It was...warmer than that. His gaze slipped down her cheek to her mouth, and a slight frown pinched his brow.

"You hurt yourself..."

"Two more drops, I think," Slughorn asserted, and Hermione coaxed his mouth open. Severus wrinkled his nose, smacking his lips a little at the taste. He rolled his head away from both of them.

"...No more. If they cannot handle the truth, I'll not be the only one suffering for it."

Hermione felt relief at the snark in his retort, even as she felt grief for his predicament. Lifting her gaze to the bench, she found herself staring at a now huddled Wizengamot, conversing with each other with sibilant yet unintelligible whispers. She wanted to demand that they set him free, that they give him a verdict of forgiven-and-forgotten...that they give him what he had earned, even if it fell far short of what he deserved.

But Severus' words were true. The wizarding world had reviled him once before, and his crimes at the time had been forgivably few. Even with Albus Dumbledore alive--at least for a few days more--it was unlikely they'd exonerate him for the other crimes he'd confessed to while under the potion's influence. She didn't think they'd give him a Dementor's Kiss, nor a lifetime in Azkaban...but a few years in wizarding prison, with or without the Dementors' presence to drain the happiness from his life, wasn't palatable, either.

The whisperings slowly ceased as witches and wizards ceased talking and eyed the trio at the bench expectantly. Madam Philliston drew her wand, flicked it, and a shimmering curtain of magic wrapped itself around the Wizengamot tiers. It was some sort of Silencing Sphere, for the steel-haired woman's lips moved, asking something, yet no sound reached across the barrier. A few of the purple-robed set eyed each other. Philliston asked something else, and one or two hands lifted, but only hesitantly. They lowered just as hesitantly, and their owners shook their heads. A third question, and a forest of wand-hands rose into the air.

Dialogue ensued. Unfortunately, there was enough of a shimmer in the curtain to obscure the lips of the Wizengamot members. A whisper close at hand distracted Hermione from the silent, secretive drama unfolding on the other side of that coruscating wall.

"...I want you to promise me you will not remove my ring. *Promise* me that, Jane," Severus beseeched her under his breath. His black gaze caught and held hers when she looked down at him. "Whatever happens, keep that ring on your finger. So long as you're the mother of my child, and bearing my ring, Sigurd will continue to protect you."

"Severus--"

"*Promise me*," he repeated, his tone quiet but fierce.

"I promise," Hermione returned, meeting his eyes steadily. She wanted him to know she meant it, that it wasn't a coercion. Cupping his cheek with her left hand, letting the metal rest against his flesh, she emphasized her vow. "I will *never* take it off. Nor let anyone else remove it. Not until after I'm dead."

Head twisting, he pressed his face into her palm. "Don't ever die..."

The curtain fell.

Reluctant to leave him, Hermione straightened, letting her fingers slide from his skin. For a moment, he looked lost without her touch, bereft even, then his face tightened

slightly, hardening back into its usual stony mask. There was a sluggishness about his features that said he was still firmly under the thumb of Veritaserum, but at least he was more alert and responsive, now.

Standing next to the right arm of Severus' chair, Hermione faced them with her shoulders back and her chin level. Her husband might be chained in place, awaiting the fate of a wizarding war-criminal, but she'd face them down with dignity and pride. Hand dropping to his shoulder, she resisted a flinch as Madam Philliston cracked her gavel against its wooden platform.

"This chapter of the International Confederacy of Witches and Wizards, being the Wizengamot of Great Britain, and being a duly authorized body of judicial law...hereby grants Severus Selenius Snape a full and unconditional pardon for *all* of his past crimes. With a quorum of more than 45 wizards and witches of the standing body of the Wizengamot, it has been decided to further extend this full and unconditional pardon to any international crimes he may have committed in his past. This decision will be lodged and filed with the ICWW within twenty-four hours, and all charges will be dropped and stricken from his records."

"--*What?* You can't do that! I object!" the Minister of Magic protested, shoving to his feet.

"Sit down, Rufus," Priscilla dismissed.

He didn't sit. Instead, his face reddened with rage. "That man is a *criminal*, and has made a mockery of everything the Ministry stands for!"

"I said, sit down!" she snapped. "Or I will hold you in contempt of court!"

Scrimgeour looked down his nose at her. "This trial is *over*, Madam! You have no jurisdiction over me!"

Philliston leaned his way, bracing her forearm against the bench. "This trial isn't over until it is *closed*, and it has *not been closed*. Rufus Scrimgeour, I find you in contempt of this court, and remand you into custody until a suitable recompense can be decided and settled--and you do *not* have the authority to countermand my orders!"

"The Law is the *Law*, and I am sick and tired of you and your predecessors conveniently circumnavigating it!" she snapped. "--In fact, I'm going to order you held in judicial custody pending a full investigation of all of the laws you have encouraged to be broken or overlooked during your tenure as Minister! Given your Deputy is probably just as culpable as you are, I'm ordering his arrest and retention until these matters have been investigated on his behalf, too!"

Iantha Marchbanks peered at her fellow judge. "There's a slight problem with that, Priscilla. That leaves no one in charge of the country."

"--I'll take over the role!"

"Sit down, Cornelius--*you'll* be investigated, too," Priscilla warned him dryly. "Very well; the Deputy Minister's arrest shall wait until the matter of Scrimgeour's own culpability in willfully ignoring the due process of law has been settled. However, if he tampers with evidence on his or his superior's behalf, it will go all the harder for both of them. Professor Slughorn, we'll need more Truth Serum, if you have it--and I'd like you to administer the doses yourself when you can, so we don't have another incident like this one," she stated, tipping her head towards Severus.

"I'd be happy to oblige, Madam, provided my teaching schedule permits it," Slughorn agreed, nodding his head. Hermione dug into her pocket, extracting the vial of Veritaserum she had confiscated earlier. The rotund, balding wizard smiled at her in thanks, tucking the bottle into his robes.

"I'll make *sure* your schedule permits it," Minerva McGonagall's voice called out, as the witches and wizards around her started chattering about the unexpected end of Severus Snape's criminal trial.

Dumbledore's voice cut through the noise. "Madam--if I may have a moment of the court's time to address a legal matter?"

Philliston arched a brow, but Marchbanks beat her to it. "Go ahead, young man. What did you want?"

"Given that I am about to expire in just a few days, I would like to finalize the remaining few matters of my estate," Albus stated. That silenced the room. As soon as full quiet fell, he continued. "My personal effects, clothes, wand, gadgets, and assorted doo-dads have already been distributed among my family and friends. But there is the matter of my properties, accounts, stocks, and so forth that have been held in trust for me during my absence from the wizarding world. I would like to dictate their disposition, as a sort of verbal Last Will and Testament. With all of you as my witnesses."

"I'm a bit disturbed after hearing the testimony and your claim of full responsibility for all the acts of your followers," St. James stated. "But...you may proceed."

"Good. I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, being of sound mind and under the influence only of Veritaserum, hereby name Severus and Hermione Snape as joint-heirs to all of my remaining properties, all all of my stocks both Muggle and wizarding, and my various bank accounts, currently held in trust for me by officials of Gringotts. And I wish to state for the record that I am proud of Severus, and his efforts." A pause, then he added politely, "...Thank you."

Astonishment held the crowd silent for a few seconds, before they erupted in noise. Hermione had no idea what sort of inheritance that was, but she knew she would've traded it all for Albus to have lived out the rest of a normal wizarding lifespan. As it was, there was just one more thing to do. Hermione cleared her throat. She did it again, loudly, but the sound was lost in the hubbub. "--Madam Philliston?"

"Yes, Mrs. Snape?"

"Are you going to let my husband go?"

"What?--Oh!" A flick of her wand, and the chains rattled free of Severus' arms and legs. "Terribly sorry about that. If you came here by Portkey...then you'd better get out of here by Portkey, too, if you can. I suspect it'll be a bit of a crush, in a few moments--thus ends the case of the Law vs. Severus Snape!"

Her gavel cracked down on its wooden plate. Considering Severus' state, versus the crowd of people eyeing the two Snapes down on the floor, Hermione agreed. She started to haul Severus out of his chair, but someone interfered. It was her brother. He stopped in front of her husband, his fists balled at her side, his mouth compressed in a tight little line. Severus subsided in his seat, rubbing at his wrists.

Hermione tried to run interference between the two. Now was not the time for a confrontation. "Harry--"

"I have some questions I want answered, before he goes anywhere! He's still under the effects of the Veritaserum, right, Professor?"

Slughorn nodded. "Yes, yes. He'll be under the influence for up to twenty-four hours. I'd say about eighteen to twenty. But he's no longer in danger from a toxic level of truth."

"Good. Snape!" he ordered, facing the older wizard in the chair. "Why did you *really* marry Hermione?"

"--Harry, this isn't the place or time!" Hermione hissed at him. Of course, her husband answered him anyway.

"Because the circumstances of her donning my ring necessitated it, and because it made things more convenient for us to communicate, because it established a greater level of trust between us, and because I loved her, you hypocritical git."

Harry flushed, his gaze slipping to his blood-sister's, but he firmed his expression and asked the next of the questions burning on his mind. "...Do you still want to kill me?"

"No," Severus snorted, looking at him from under heavy lids. "Knock some sense into you, yes. Kill you, no."

"Do you... Are you going to keep hating me because of what my father did?"

"No. You're a prat all on your own, but I've given up hating you for your father's crimes against me. It wouldn't be prudent, considering I'm stuck with you as an in-law."

That seemed to make Harry flounder for a moment. "Then...then why do you keep calling me names?"

Lax though many of his muscles were, Severus still managed to roll his eyes at Harry. "Because you're a colossal, hypocritical idiot who doesn't think before he speaks, who leaps before he looks, and whom applies double-standards left and right."

Harry's face all but burned, it was so red in reaction to that. His fists clenched, but he didn't strike or anything. Instead, he glanced again at Hermione before stating, "But...you were nice to me as Russel. Was all of that a lie?"

"No. You were actually being tolerable for most of the time."

The younger wizard's shoulders slumped, a bewildered look in his eye. "...Do you hate me, then?"

"I hate your wasted potential, I loathe your attitude problems, and I despise your carelessness. You are an irritant, in your bouts of thoughtlessness," Severus informed him. "Unfortunately, I have been forced to see other sides of you in my Russel guise that make me feel pity and compassion for you. I don't entirely like you, but I don't entirely hate you...though I can almost admire your Slytherin-like interrogation of me while I'm unable to guard my tongue."

Harry chewed on his lower lip for a moment, then blurted out, "...I don't want to be your enemy anymore!"

"Good."

"Then...you'll behave?" he asked his former nemesis.

"Only if *you* will--and I remind you that if *we* war with each other, *she* gets caught in the crossfire."

"--I want a word with you before you go, Severus!" Pushing her way past the bailiffs guarding the bottom of the steps, Minerva strode up to them, her formal navy robes fluttering around her. "Now that you're exonerated for your crimes, I was wondering what your plans for the future were. In specific...would you ever be able to come back and teach at Hogwarts? Potions, Defence...whichever you'd like."

Severus lifted his eyes to hers. "You want me to teach, again? Go back to a school where the students remember me as the killer of their beloved Headmaster?"

"Well...you should probably take a little break, first. Let the word of your heroism and suffering spread out a bit. And give the older ones a chance to graduate and move on to other things--how about a sabbatical?" she offered him, patting his arm. "You never took one, you know, and you're due one every seven years, which means you're due two of them. You'll have to take this year off without pay, of course, but how about you take the next two years off *with* pay, and then come back to work for me? At least, consider it," she added with a hopeful look.

"I doubt he'll go back," Harry scoffed under his breath. "He never liked teaching."

"Shows what *you* know, *Harry*," Severus retorted. "I liked teaching more than I disliked it. I mostly disliked idiots who picked their noses before handling potions ingredients, contaminating their draughts, and who didn't know the differences between commonly used homonyms in their poorly written essays. But I liked educating my students. When they bothered to learn."

"But I don't know what I'm going to do, Minerva. As soon as this damned potion wears off, I'm going to want to hex anything that moves, excepting only my wife. And if all of you don't mind, I would like Jane and I to find a Secret-Kept place far away from the lot of you, so that I never *have* to answer another question truthfully ever again!"

"...And on that note," Hermione murmured, hauling him to his feet again, this time successfully, "we go! Sigurd, take us home."

"--Wait! Wait, I need an interview!"

The last thing Hermione saw as the golden dragonette materialized, intertwined around her and her husband's arms, was a very frustrated Rita Skeeter trying to push her way past the burly wizard bailiffs guarding the ground floor.

She smiled as Sigurd whisked them away.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

XXXVI.

'Home' turned out to be their Muggle-themed hotel room. Severus stumbled and swayed on landing, most of his muscles still drugged enough to make him look like he was in a semi-stupor. Hermione staggered with the effort of keeping him upright. Trying to guide him over to the bed, or at least to the padded bench, she found herself struggling with his weight as he aimed for the bathroom instead. A sluggish grimace, a mumbled request for help as he swayed on his feet, and she steadied him while he used the facilities. After they'd washed their hands, he allowed her to guide him out and around to the bed.

Flopping onto his back, Severus stared at the ceiling for a moment, then closed his eyes. "...We cannot stay here. Someone will track us down. This isn't a secure position. But...not my London house. Draco needs to be told what happened, but I don't want him anywhere near me while I'm like this."

"Okay," Hermione agreed. She had seated herself on the edge of the bed, but now stretched out next to him, cuddling up to his side. "Sigurd..."

The dragonette appeared half on Severus' stomach, and half on the arm she'd flung around his waist.

"Take us to Severus' bed at Hogwarts."

A swirl of gold accompanied a dropping sensation, and a jolt that made her squeak. Light filtered down through the one tunnel-like casement window set high in the wall over one of the nightstands. Squeezing her husband, Hermione extricated herself from his side, sitting up and tugging her clothing straight. She would eventually have to return the pocket-watch and her mother's dress-suit, but right now, she had a different task to attend to.

Removing his wand from her clothes, Hermione tucked it into his hand. "Here you go. I'll just nip off to tell Draco you were exonerated, and advise him to turn himself in--maybe even with the same deal we had--then I'll come straight back. Do you need anything before I go?"

"Water. And for you to come back."

Hermione nodded and rose, retreating to the bathroom. She came back with a glass of water for him, setting it on the bedside table. A stoop allowed her to plant a kiss on his brow, then she straightened and headed for the sitting room hearth. "I'll be back shortly!"

A grunt was his only reply.

A casting of the grey-green powder, a whirl through the verdant flames, and she stumbled out onto the hearth-stone at 42 Spinner's End. This time, when Draco came through the archway from the kitchen, he didn't try to hex her. Instead, he peered past her, then folded his arms defensively across his chest.

"...Well?"

She flashed him a grin. "Pardoned of all crimes, British and International!--And you'd better start thinking about how you're going to get yourself out of the mess that you're in, too," she added, sobering. "Maybe we can set up the same deal for you--just have you arrive in time for your court date, rather than let you languish in some cell, somewhere."

The pale-haired wizard eyed her warily. "Why are you willing to help me?"

"Well, I don't think I'd take an Unbreakable Vow for you," Hermione pointed out dryly, "but I can tell you do repent at least some of what you did, and it's a start. That...and Severus wants to help you."

"Ah. Enlightened self-interest," he translated, giving her a tight smile.

"That, and I'm just an annoying sort who likes to help others. Oh...erm," Hermione sought for a way to tell him what had happened. "Your, ah, mum... She was at the trial, and was...unmasked, so to speak. She's been arrested. I'm sorry."

He looked away, avoiding her sympathetic gaze. "I've received an owl from my father. He Apparated away before I burnt everyone, following Mother." A hand lifted from his chest, rumpling his normally tidy platinum locks. "If I...if I turned him in, do you think that would help?--I'm a Slytherin," he added quickly, pinning her with narrowed grey eyes. "I look out for *myself*, first and foremost. *They* dragged me into this mess, with all their rhetoric and prejudice. I shouldn't have to keep supporting them in their idiocy. Nor pay for their mistakes."

"No, you shouldn't. And they shouldn't have placed you in the position of having to make the choice of yourself and your own needs over your feelings for your own family," she agreed with what she hoped was a candid sort of sympathy. "But they did, and you're having to deal with it. If you want me to work a deal with Philliston, just let me know. I'll, um, drop by tomorrow--do you need anything, before I go?" Hermione asked politely. "Food fetched from a grocer's, or something?"

Shaking his head, Draco gestured vaguely behind him. "The icebox is full enough. Where's Severus?"

"Hiding from the rest of the wizarding world, in another Secret-Kept place" she confided. "One of the Minister's lackeys tried to poison him with an overdose of Veritaserum. He's been given enough of the antidote to counteract it, but he'll be utterly truthful for at least eighteen more hours." Rolling her eyes, Hermione allowed herself a soft laugh. "You should've seen him. He called the Minister a 'piece of petrified shite-up-your-arse!'"

Draco choked on a laugh. "--He didn't!"

"Oh, he did--and you would've loved what he called *Harry*!" she added, laughing. "Let's see...what was my favourite... Ah, yes: a 'lumbering, anesthetized brainstem'."

For one second, Draco Malfoy gaped at her in shock. Then he doubled over in laughter so loud and hard, it echoed off the bare, book-stripped shelves around them. Wheezing, he straightened only to sag against the edge of the archway. "Oh...I would've *killed* to have seen that!"

"Well, I'm sure it'll be in tomorrow's paper," Hermione agreed. "Now, if you don't need anything fetched, I need to get back to my husband and keep an eye on him, just in case he has a relapse." She couldn't Floo out of here while he was still within hearing range--one of the drawbacks to all of the hearths she knew belonging to properties hidden under the Fidelius Charm--but she could Apparate. Hesitating before she left, she offered a polite, "Take care, Draco."

He eyed her with a puzzled look, but nodded after a moment. "You, too. *Mrs. Snape*. That's the only reason why I'm tolerating you, of course."

"So you say," she smiled wistfully, hoping that one day the prat would get past his own lingering prejudices and attitudes. A pop took her to the empty kitchen at Headquarters, and a cast of more powder into the hearth, accompanied by a prodding of her wand, whisked her back to the hidden apartment in the dungeons of Hogwarts.

In her absence, Severus had stripped off his clothes and donned a nightshirt. She didn't even know he had one, until she walked into the bedroom and watched him pulling the bedclothes over his legs with an unsteady hand, pillows piled behind his back so that he could sit. His dark eyes slanted warily in her direction as she approached the bed.

"How are you feeling?" Hermione asked, curious.

"Vulnerable, cold, physically tired, emotionally exhausted, and in need of pampering. Are you going to take ruthless advantage of my condition?"

Hermione felt the corner of her mouth curving upward. "Perhaps. I do have some questions I would like answered."

That earned her a sour look. He drew a deep breath and let it out roughly. "Will you at least give me the courtesy of answering some questions of my own with equal honesty? Through the rings, since you cannot safely imbibe Truth Serum even if we had any."

Considering his offer carefully, Hermione finally nodded. "...Alright. That would only be fair. But let me get comfortable, first."

Leaving the bed, she rummaged through his wardrobe, finding what looked like another nightshirt. Disappearing into the bathroom, she used the facilities and changed out of her clothes. Though it was still barely mid-afternoon, their sleeping schedule had been topsy-turvy for some time. Hermione suspected the following conversation might end up almost as exhausting as the trial had been. Especially when she considered the interrogation she wanted to give to him.

Dressed in his nightshirt, with the cuffs rolled up and the hem closer to her ankles than her knees, Hermione padded back into the bedroom. Severus had piled some pillows at his side, leaving room for her to join him. But Hermione wasn't interested in sitting up. Climbing into the bed, she snuggled under the covers next to him and settled on her side, facing him.

The pillows still propped her up, but she wasn't exactly sitting. Instead, she leaned forward and tucked her head onto his chest, wrapping her left arm around his waist. The slight curve of her stomach was beginning to get in the way, but for now, it wasn't that much of an impediment.

His own arm tentatively curled around her, pulling her just a little closer. Content, Hermione rested for a moment, then asked, "Is it true? Do you love me? Right now, I mean."

"Yes. I love you right now."

Hermione waited, but he fell silent. His body felt tense, too, as if braced for a blow that might or might not hit. Craning her head, she looked up at him. "...Well? Aren't you going to ask me?"

"Fine. Jane...do you love me?"

The question was softly spoken. She guessed he was afraid of the answer. Rolling away from him, Hermione pinned his arm behind her back. A touch of her thumb to her wedding ring, and she stated, "Severus Selenius Snape, I love you."

Her finger warmed, as did a spot behind her shoulder-blade. He tugged on his arm to pull it free. Hermione pressed it further into the pillows. "Hermione, get off. Get off my arm!"

"Nope. Sorry." She waited until the metal returned to its normal, ambient temperature, then sat up, freeing his limb. Pulling it against his chest, he frowned at her. It wasn't much of a frown, considering his muscles were still lax from the drug, but if he'd been in full control, she decided it would have been a full-blown scowl. Seasoned with a touch of hurt feelings, perhaps?

"I suppose that was another 'punishment'?" he asked her darkly. "Some sort of retaliation for...for what I stupidly did to you?"

"Sort of. But it's more like a lesson in Gryffindor ingenuity," Hermione corrected him as she twisted onto her side again. This time, she didn't cuddle up to him, but left a small gap between their cotton-clothed bodies. "Sigurd, you are summoned."

The dragonette appeared between them, sprawled partly on her legs, partly on his.

"Sigurd, there was a time when Severus, here, said that he loved me, while activating you. Please display to him what his true answer was, at that time."

Black eyes widened as words uncurled themselves from among the scales on the dragonette's reptilian hide.

I did love you.

"When...? How...?" he asked, glancing at her in confusion.

"I was washing dishes at Headquarters one night when a message came through from you. I didn't feel the ring growing hot because the water was warm. I only caught the tail end of it, and in desperation, I summoned Sigurd and asked him if he remembered what it was, and if he could repeat it for me. After you left me, the day I revealed your identity, I asked Sigurd to show me what you'd really meant, when I was tied down and couldn't see it for myself.

"I realized I'd broken your heart, when I read that," Hermione confessed quietly. "I didn't know then that you had one to break, and I'd broken it. For that," and she touched her thumb to the ring as she spoke, forming new words on Sigurd's hide, "I am sorry."

I am sorry.

She was grateful all she had to do was touch her thumb to the ring to let her words be known, now that Sigurd had manifested; it would rapidly get tedious if she kept having to state her husband's full name. Severus lowered his gaze, then looked away. Guessing he thought her little trick of laying on his arm was retaliation, Hermione kept her thumb pressed to her wedding band, and stated, "Severus Selenius Snape, I love you with all of my heart."

Slowly, reluctantly, he turned his head back just far enough to glance at Sigurd's writing-marred hide.

I love you with all of my heart.

Sigurd looked even more feline than before, with that narrow-eyed look of contentment that only a smug cat could evince. If he'd had fur instead of scales, Hermione knew he'd be purring, with that kind of look on his draconic little face. She looked away from the guardian, glancing back at her husband. "...That reminds me. Just how smart is Sigurd, anyway?"

Her husband wiped surreptitiously at his face, and it was only then that Hermione realize he was crying. Sniffing to clear his long, thin nose, he shrugged. "Family legend claims the ring-guardian is nearly as smart as his wielders. I suspect John Dee crafted the thing to draw most of its powers and its intellect from its wearers. That would be the most efficient use of resources."

Scooting a little closer, Hermione resumed her original position, with her head pillowed on his chest and her arm around his waist. To her gratification, he wrapped both arms around her, this time. But as much as she wanted to bask in the glow of his love, and the relief that what she thought was her love for him was indeed a truth-confirmed love for him...they still had other things to discuss.

"So. When did your planned seduction of me turn into an honest seduction? The first time around," she amended. "Before my curiosity got the better of both of us."

"I'm not sure. I think when we danced. Or maybe when I first sat down next to you. Or it could have been our first kiss." Again, he shrugged. "I knew for certain I had to save you from that Dementor, and I realized I'd fallen for you at some point during the exposition weekend."

"Did you hide the truth of your feelings from me as a punishment, that night?" Hermione asked.

"Partly. I didn't want you mocking my feelings any further than you already had, either."

She squeezed his ribs a little, and cast about for another subject. "Did Voldemort really know about your plan to use the rings with me from the very beginning?"

"No. Albus and I decided on that months before his death as an option for contact, should I have to kill him myself. I only told Voldemort about it after I learned that Draco was to fix the Vanishing Cabinet and allow the Death Eaters onto the school grounds. I swore to him that if the boy balked, even slightly, I'd kill Dumbledore myself, rather than risk Albus using his magic against the rest of us. I convinced him that Albus trusted me, as his spy among the Death Eaters. That he'd never believe I'd allow him to die, let alone do the deed myself.

"The Dark Lord warned me that my value as his spy among the Order of the Phoenix was too high to throw away, and that was when I revealed to him the betrothal-rings, and that I'd selected you as intelligent enough to be of use, yet gullibly naive enough to be duped into believing I was someone else. And I told him that since they were enspelled marriage-rings, I was willing to take you as my wife, albeit in disguise," Severus revealed dryly as she listened to the steady thumping of his heart. "I said that, given you were the brightest and most powerful witch I'd seen in nearly two decades of teaching, I was interested in sowing you with my seed, and having you give birth to powerful, intelligent children who would be half-bloods. That I'd raise them to obey me, and to honor the Dark Lord, and believe in the superiority of wizards over Muggles.

"After Sigurd awoke and defended you, he guided me through the preparatory steps of the fertility potion you later destroyed," he confessed. "His object was to gather enough gametes to have you bearing up to a dozen children, whatever happened to me, thus guaranteeing both our superior genetics would not be lost due to the war,

since Sigurd would protect the mother of my children. And that many witches and wizards would be powerful allies to add to his cause."

Hermione snorted at that. "Didn't he realize I'd never allow him to 'add' them to his ruddy cause?"

"The plan was to kidnap them and give them to his other followers to raise, should anything happen to me."

"Yet, you told me that you were only going to wait until there was enough collected for three children, not a full dozen," Hermione reminded him, suppressing a shudder of fear and anger at the thought of anyone trying to take her future children away from her. There was more than one reason to be glad that the Dark Lord was now irrevocably dead.

"I'm not that enamoured of imitating Arthur Weasley." The flatness of his tone sprang from honesty, not the effects of the drug in his system. "An heir, yes. One or two siblings, so the child would not grow up lonely, yes. More than that, no."

Tilting her head, she looked up at his face. "Do you truly want children of your own? Will you be a good father to them?"

"Yes, and I have no idea what kind of a parent I will be toward them. I'm terrified of turning out like my own father, a drunkard, an abuser, and an adulterer."

Lifting herself a little, Hermione looked into his eyes. "Severus, if you can be Russel, then you can be a good father. All you have to do is *not* be whatever you don't want to be. Just be the opposite! You do have good instincts, under all that foreboding, repressive angst."

A sound escaped him. It could've been a laugh. From the gleam in his dark eyes, Hermione thought it was a laugh. She snuggled down again, and continued her gentle but ruthlessly expedient interrogation. There was no sense in wasting all that perfectly good Veritaserum drugging him, after all. *And that's not Slytherin of me; that's just sneaky female of me...*

"So...when did you fall for me the second time around, and why?"

"Right after it sunk in that you were telling me the truth, the day you said I could Polyjuice myself into a Goyle, smash myself on the head with a lump hammer, and I'd still be Severus Snape, to you. When you said you were still attracted to me, even though I was a surly bastard...and when you said you'd rather die than live in a world run by Voldemort, I knew I still loved you, and that I didn't want to lose you. I knew I'd be taken from you--I was *supposed* to be taken from you," he amended, his tone wry, "--but I didn't want you taken from me while I still lived."

Hermione pinched him, making him grunt. "Don't you *ever* leave me, you idiot. Spit in the eye of Death Himself and come back to me, if you have to. Alive, by preference," she added. "Sleeping with a ghost would be a bit too chilly for my tastes."

"Agreed. So long as you agree to the same."

"Agreed."

"So...you love *me*, and not just Russel? Even if I...even if I were to resume teaching, nasty personality and all?"

"Yes. *However*," Hermione stressed, "Voldiedork is now safely dead, the stray Death Eaters are being rounded up, and after your two-year sabbatical is over...if you go back to being a teacher, you don't have to be quite such a nasty bastard. *Do* you?"

"That was an excellent wifely scold," he mock-praised, then sighed. "I don't know. I can only try. The weight of nearly two decades of bad habits would be against me."

"I'd be happy to scold and encourage you in turns, if it'll help," Hermione offered, and felt his arms squeezing her briefly around the shoulders.

"Tell me why you agreed to bear my child."

Fair was fair. Touching her thumb to the ring, she let him study whatever Sigurd said. She knew what was the truth. "Because you wanted it, because it was an agreeable deal in exchange for the potion...and because I wanted your child. Both for the sake of our child, and for the sake of our future as a family. I wanted to give you something to look forward to, something to hope for. You'd led me to suspect you didn't think you'd live past the end of the war. I wanted to give you something worth living for."

His arms tightened again, and his head turned and dipped, brushing his lips against her curls. "You did...and I just surprised myself with the truth. I honestly expected them to kill me, or as good as kill me, either sucking out my soul, or throwing me into Azkaban and throwing away the key. I was still resigned to my fate, though." Another huff of amused breath, and he added, "I neglected to reckon with the power of your sheer, blind optimism, and staggeringly good luck."

A question rose in her mind, almost randomly. "Out of curiosity, Severus...how soon after I knew your true identity did Lord Voldemort know that I knew?"

"After our little baby-making bargain. I didn't dare go to him and tell him that you'd figured it out, beforehand. I waited in the fear that you'd denounce me to all of the others in the Order. I'd have gone back to him only to face some punishment worse than the last one. That's presuming I could have talked enough circles around him to make him believe I was still useful, that I could still salvage my relationship with you somehow."

"And our rings," Hermione reminded him, thinking of something else. "Was I still your student when you thought of using them as a sort of back-up plan, should you have a falling out with the Order?"

"Yes. But of course, if I'd had a falling out with the Order, it would have to be such a huge cock-up on my part, I'd no longer be a teacher, by the time I had to use the rings as my backup communication plan...as was the case," Severus reminded her.

"You did what you thought was right, and you did what you thought was best, given your circumstances," Hermione reminded him mildly. "Next question: what was your original Lesson Number Two, the one I pre-empted?"

An actual laugh escaped him, at that. "*Your* Lesson Number Two... I had it all planned out, after I knocked you unconscious and took care of your friends' possible worries. I'd tame you to my hand, you see, and then teach you to go after what you wanted...and I wanted you to want *me*. I wanted you to fall back in love with me, though I knew that learning my identity had ruined your first round of love. I'd shattered your heart...like you had shattered my own."

Twisting her head a little, Hermione pressed a kiss to his cotton-clad chest. Covering it with her cheek, she hugged him. "Forgiven. If you'll forgive me?"

"Forgiven," he agreed.

They rested in silence for a while, but Hermione couldn't help but think of more questions, as she lay with him in the quiet of his dungeon-level bedroom. "...Do you really think my first name is an ungainly mouthful?"

"Yes. I'm not particularly fond of Severus or Selenius, either, though calling me 'Russel' would just re-invoke the lie of my deception to you...and I will not deceive you anymore. Even in public."

"In public?" Hermione enquired, puzzled.

"You ordered me to tell you the truth when in private, and as Albus had arranged for the onus of the Fides Oath to transfer to you, once he died...I had no reasonable choice but to obey. My life didn't need to be ten times more hellish than it already was by that point, trust me."

"Is the Fides Oath still active?" Hermione asked, curious. "*That's* the reason why you asked me to tell you that you could lie when others were around, because you were compelled by my order to tell the truth in my presence...isn't it?"

"Yes, and yes."

She bit her lower lip for a moment. It was so tempting to keep it...but it wasn't the right thing to do. "How do I remove it?"

"It would require Albus' assistance, since he is the one who bound me into its magic, and that would have to be done before he dies. The Fides Oath is one of the few pieces of magic that lasts beyond the caster's lifetime. It is like the Fidelius Charm, in that the caster does not maintain the presence and effectiveness of the spell, but rather, the person it is cast upon."

"Ah. Well, Severus Snape, you have my permission to lie to me if necessary, once the Veritaserum wears off...but I would prefer to hear nothing but the truth from you, from now on."

"You mean that I should tell you anyway when your hair is being unruly that I think it looks like an exploded hawk's nest?"

She pinched him, for that. His body might have been relaxed from the potion overdose, but she could hear the deliberate humor underlying his question. "Behave. There's nothing wrong with being tactful, Severus Snape, and you can and should be as tactful as needed. Don't make me make it a Fides order."

"Thank you."

The slightly sarcastic edge to his reply made her smile. There were many other questions she wanted answered, why he called her a puzzle the first time they'd made love, why and when he had tried to cut the Dark Mark from his arm, and where and when he got his hands on the Lucrezia Diary... She suspected he'd stolen it either from Voldemort or Bellatrix Lestrange, most likely shortly after the Dark Lord's first fall and the insane woman's imprisonment in Azkaban. There would have been time and freedom for him to have done it then.

And of course, the infamous romance-novel reading he must have done, whether it was a one-shot meant to help him figure out how to seduce her, or if he was a closet romance reader; Hermione knew he wouldn't admit to the latter one easily, if it were true...

But what she asked instead was a different question. "Severus...when we confronted Minerva in her office, just before she learned your identity, I called Albus a bastard, and you...well, you pounced on me, and ravished me. That was a rather odd reaction to have, wasn't it?"

"You clearly agreed with me that Albus was a manipulative bastard. I loved you very much, in that moment, and I needed to express my love for you." He gave her a moment to grasp that, and twisted to face her, pressing up against her. His upper hand slid down her waist, shifting to cover the curve of her expanding waistline. Mouth pressing against her temple in a warm, lingering kiss, he murmured, "You are my wife, the mother of my impending son, and I will love you whenever and wherever I please."

Hermione covered his hand with her own. "Then that leaves us with only one last important question."

"Mm?" He didn't bother to vocalize his question, just kept pressing his lips in an incremental path across her forehead.

"What happens now?" she asked him quietly, closing her eyes. She didn't even know what she was going to do with herself, aside from bear his child, figure out what sort of finances their former Headmaster was bequeathing to them, and calculate how much of an income they had to make to support their small but growing family.

"Now? I make love to my wife, and my wife makes love to me."

"No, I meant *after*," Hermione chided him impatiently, rolling her eyes behind their closed lids. "Shagging you to within an inch of my life is a given. I meant...what are we going to do with ourselves? You're a free man. Everyone knows what you have done. What you've suffered. They have, or soon will, forgive you for what happened...and you'll probably be almost as famous as your lightning-scarred brother-in-law, for all that you've sacrificed."

"Oh, god--say it isn't so!" he swore, abandoning her forehead. Glancing up at him, she caught his nose wrinkling in disgust. A lift of her head, a shift forward, and she kissed the tip of it. That distracted him out of his horror.

"Sorry, Severus. There were four people pivotal to this war. Voldiebutt, Harry, Albus, and you. You're a hero, and now everyone knows. I'm afraid you're stuck with the job," she reminded him with less than perfect sympathy. "I suggest you learn to live with it."

"And you," he reminded her. "There was also you, pivotal to all of this."

That made Hermione shake her head. "I wasn't nearly as important as you, Severus."

He rolled her onto her back and slid over her, pinning her wrists to the bed. Sigurd vanished in a swirl of sparks, making room for his master. With that curtain of dark hair falling around them, released from its queue, Severus reminded her of that forceful December morning when she'd uncovered his identity. Her heart skipped a beat, but in excitement, not fear. She didn't fear him anymore, and that realization made Hermione light-headed. She feared accidentally hurting him somehow, but she didn't fear her husband. She loved him.

"If I say you are important, my dear Jane," he growled softly, pointedly, "then you *are* important. More so than my life...and I will be heartily glad when this damned Serum has worked its way out of my veins, so I can stop sounding like some brainless, love-struck, sappy little twit!"

Hermione smirked at him, She also lifted her hips, rubbing their groins together. "Well, you're certainly not *little*."

His eyes darkened with desire, and his mouth captured hers, closing the last few inches separating them. But as pleasurable as this was, Hermione wanted something different. She wanted to kiss her husband, yes, but she wanted to be in control. Freeing one of her hands from his grip, she tapped him on the shoulder for his attention even as she sucked on the tongue thrusting into her mouth. It took a few thumps, but he finally lifted his head.

"...*What?*"

"My play time, not yours," Hermione purred, and managed to push the surprised wizard off of her and onto his back. Rolling over him, she braced herself with one knee between his thighs, closed her eyes, and concentrated hard. Wandlessly willing their nightshirts to Apparate three feet to the left. A soft *bang*, and she felt nothing but warm, male flesh against her skin. Opening her eyes, Hermione grinned. "That's better."

Swooping down, she met his lips with her own, as they parted for speech. A brushing of their mouths was followed by a firmer press, a perfect angling, and the meeting and parrying of their tongues. She loved kissing him. Sometimes they hurried through it, interested in other things, but whenever she wanted to go slow, he was usually willing to comply.

Sometimes it was even a tease, an appetizer, a preview of what might come with the main course. This time was no exception. Ignoring the hands stroking over her shoulders and ribs, the way how his palms held and cupped her breasts, Hermione thoroughly snogged him. No matter how optimistic she had been, how much she had prayed, she knew today's trial could have gone southward. Badly southward, and quite possibly so for both of them. But it hadn't. The truth, clichéd though it was to say it this way, had set him free.

Leaving his lips behind while he kneaded her nipples, Hermione explored the contour of his jaw. She could feel hints of stubble, though he had probably spell-shaved

himself right before attending the trial. A kitten-lick to that little hollow below his bottom lip, between it and his chin, made him twist his head, trying to recapture her for a kiss. Hermione briefly allowed it, but returned her quest, following the line of bone from his chin to his ear, before ghosting back again over the angle of his cheek.

One of his hands abandoned her breast, fisting instead in her hair. This time, their mouths met with open, impatient heat. Hermione rubbed against him, letting the softness of her breasts and the curve of her stomach brush over his chest and abdomen. The soft moan of appreciation that escaped them ended their kiss on a gentler note than it had begun. Opening his eyes, Severus looked up at her as she saluted the tip of his nose.

"My wife..."

"My husband," she acknowledged, and kissed him again. This time, when she left his mouth, he accepted her detours passively, in the sense that he didn't draw her back to his lips. There wasn't much that was passive about him as he moaned softly and arched his sternum into her explorations, save for what the drug in his system continued to impose. His hands stroked her shoulders languidly, but approvingly.

In reward, she nuzzled the tiny pebble of his nipple, and the soft, sparse ring of hairs guarding it. The gasp she elicited when she licked in a broad, firm stroke made Hermione want to smirk. It was hard to do so while lapping him like a cat trying to get the last bit of shredded cheese out of a bowl, though. And he was like cheese to a cat, to her. Sarcastic or sweet, he was hers. *Which, of course, deserves a reward...*

Flicking his other nipple, she teased it for a little while, then licked her way down over the curves of his ribs and the passion-taut expanse of his stomach. His erection bumped against her breasts as she settled between his thighs, but it wasn't her goal. Yet. Instead, she teased and tormented the divot of his navel, rimming it with her tongue, nipping its edges with her lips, suckling its depths. All the while, his rigid shaft rubbed awkwardly against her shoulder and throat, leaving little trails of dampness where the tip of him brushed her skin.

A ragged, impatient groan tore itself from his throat. Hands fisting in her hair, Severus pushed her head lower. "Oh, for god's sake! Stop trying to kill me, woman, and put me out of my misery!"

The contradiction in his complaint and demand made her choke on a laugh. Grinning, she nuzzled his manhood with her nose, then brushed it with her lips. He groaned impatiently, so she gave it a long, slow lick, then another, and another...until it was wet enough, she sucked his erection into her mouth. It was his turn to choke, though not from laughter.

The taste of him, warm and salty and musky, made her mouth moist with saliva; the feel of him, warm and hard yet velvety soft, encouraged her to grasp him at the base as his hips flexed with helpless need. His words brushed over her, drenched in an honesty that was as much equal pleasure as Veritaserum. "Oh god, yes... Merlin...sweet, sweet woman--Jane! Oh, god!"

Hermione suspected he was going to be incredibly vocal, thanks to the Truth Serum. The sound of his voice was turning her on, too. Not that she wasn't already aroused, by any means...but each deep-chested groan as she suckled up and down, swirling with her tongue, made her hotter than before. He might look a lot closer in appearance to Vulcan, the dark-haired, scarred God of the Forge...but he had the voice of Eros, God of Love and Passion.

Hungry for him, needing to be filled by him, she abandoned his groin, releasing it from hand and mouth. He whimpered and tried to push her back down to his erection. Brushing his hands out of her hair, Hermione straddled his hips, grasped his shaft, and positioned him in the right place. Slowly, she sank onto him, impaling herself. His hands clutched and caressed her hips.

"Oh god, yes...ride me, use me, *love* me!"

"*Severus*--ah!" Ambushed by her orgasm, Hermione shuddered, letting her head drop back. His hands slipped around the tops of her thighs, until his thumbs were free to press against her nether-lips, massaging the secrets they hid. It prolonged her pleasure and encouraged her to flex her thighs and ride him.

Circling her hips with each down-stroke, tracing a figure-eight, made him whimper again. Brow furrowed, eyes squeezed shut, mouth open and panting...he looked delicious. Like he was being tortured by the imprisonment of her body. Panting, Hermione increased her speed, then changed her rhythm. As she sank down, she paused and *squeezed*, clenching her inner muscles. Once, twice...the third stroke-and-squeeze broke him. His hands grabbed her hips to pull her down into the fast, hard flexing of his own.

"Oh--*fuck!* Jane, Jane, Jane! God, I love you! Oh, god--goddess! Goddess! Goddess! *Love!* Ah, love, Jane, *love!*"

Shuddering again in pleasure, triggered and fed by his own, Hermione slumped onto his chest, panting and sweating. His arms wrapped around her, holding her in place and soothing any worries she might have had about being too heavy. It wasn't easy for her to cling back, though she tried, snuggling her cheek against his throat.

A stray thought crossed her mind, making her giggle. Severus grunted, a sound of enquiry. Grinning, she explained, "You said, 'Love, Jane, love!' ...and I was just thinking, 'Tell me how you *really* feel!'"

"Baggage," he growled, and nipped at her ear.

That reminded Hermione of something. Hiding the urge to smirk against his jaw-line, she asked, "So...just how hot and bothered *does* it make you, when I nibble on your ear?"

He groaned and rolled them over, settling her on her back and bracing himself over her so that he didn't put too much pressure on her abdomen. Between kisses that started at her throat and ended at her navel, her husband explained, "As hot...as a cauldron...about to explode... I need to taste you, wet with your desire, dripping with my seed, carrying *my* child...mother of my future son...bride of my heart, joy of my life...please, tell me I *am not* sounding like a complete and utter fool?"

Considering her words carefully, Hermione replied as he gently parted her thighs, "If it is considered foolish to make me, your wife, melt into a puddle of lust, and feeling utterly loved...then I wish you would be a fool every day for the rest of our lives." A pause on both their parts, hers for emphasis, his before delving into her exposed folds, and she added, "...Twice on Sundays would be nice, come to think of it."

A chuckle escaped him. "I don't think I have that much stamina for compliments when I'm not drunk on Veritaserum...but I would like to try, now and again. Mmmh, goddess, you smell divine..."

With the first lap of his tongue, and pausing only for an accompanying, hungry moan, conversation fell by the wayside.

...

The knock on the door roused and confused Hermione. The room was Severus' bedchamber in the dungeons of the school, yet someone had knocked on his bedroom door. *House-elves wouldn't knock...would they?*

Sliding out of their bed, Severus scooped his nightshirt from the floor and pulled it over his head as he padded to the door. Making sure the covers were pulled high enough for decency, Hermione watched as he aimed his wand with his right hand and touched the knob with the left. His precaution was perhaps leftover paranoia...but when the door was opened, revealing a gaunt, familiar, silver-bearded wizard in purple robes being supported by a sorrowful-eyed Poppy, it was more of a shock than a politely knocking house-elf would have been.

They'd stayed more or less in bed for the last fifteen hours, sleeping, eating from trays ordered from the school kitchens, making love, and trying to figure out what to do with their lives, now that the war was over and both of them were free to do as they pleased...if they could only figure it out. It was now morning on the fourth day after the

end of the war. From the look of him, with dark circles bagging under his eyes, a sickly yellow-grey cast to his skin, and a tremor visible in his limbs, it was quite possibly the last day of Albus Dumbledore's life.

"...I came to have a word with you, my boy," he stated without preamble. Without much strength in his voice, either. It wavered noticeably as he continued politely. "I don't mean to intrude like this, but I'd like to talk with you about a few, final things before I take my leave of everyone--I'll just wait for you out here," Albus added, gesturing with a shaking hand in the direction of the sitting room hearth. "Hermione is welcome to join us, if she desires."

Turning from the door, he allowed the school nurse to assist him out of Hermione's line of sight. Severus shut the door, raking his hand through his locks. The drug in his system had eased some of its grip in the last several hours, or perhaps he was just compensating better for the laxity it imposed on his muscles...but he still managed to look unhappy at the prospect of facing his former employer and eldest friend.

Hermione shrugged off the covers, rising and dressing in silence as her husband did the same. Whatever the former Headmaster had to discuss, she wanted to be at Severus' side, giving him her silent support throughout. From the way he pulled her into a kiss as soon as she had buttoned her blouse, she suspected he knew. And by the way he kept hold of her hand as he opened the door again and led them out into the other room, she suspected he also appreciated it.

Poppy had seated Albus in a chair by the hearth, and had enchanted a good-sized blaze in the fireplace, letting it radiate its heat on the ailing wizard. She stood behind his chair by a little ways, close enough to lend assistance if he needed it, yet far enough away to give something of an illusion of privacy. Hermione wasn't surprised to see that the school nurse had access to Severus' quarters; it made sense for her to be able to go anywhere in the school...and she'd known of Severus' relative innocence all along, anyway.

Allowing Severus to settle both of them on the settee across from their former Headmaster, Hermione spoke first. She avoided the question with only a negative answer, the one if there was something, anything that could be done to stop his deterioration. Instead, she asked a different one. "Have you, erm, had a trial, yet?"

"Yes; that was yesterday. After reviewing all that I had done," Albus confessed, seeming a little stronger now that he was settled into Severus' armchair, "and my willingness to pay for those deeds and directives with my life...and the outcome of all my and my agents' activities...the Wizengamot has seen fit to absolve me of all legal responsibility." He smiled a weary but benign smile, his blue eyes glimmering with a hint of their usual twinkle. "It seems someone wisely pointed out to them that you do not call a soldier a murderer after he marches off to defend his home. Which I have done.

"Severus..." His gaze fell on the man tucked beside Hermione. Some of his good humor faded. "Severus, I am truly sorry for all that my machinations against Riddle put you through. When I saw the two of you interacting, after Hermione came to grips with your identity...I confess I hoped that you had found a source of reward for all of your suffering. And after hearing her spirited defence of you, yesterday...are you happy, Severus? You deserve to be, you know."

Long, lightly callused fingers tightened around her own. Glancing at her husband, Hermione watched his mouth tighten for a moment. Releasing a sigh, Severus answered truthfully. It wasn't as if he had a choice, after all. "Yes, I am. And I will continue to be happy...once I have mourned for you. I don't want you to leave me again."

The look the former Headmaster gave his equally formal employee was a chiding one. Even his voice, quavering until now, sharpened a little in rebuke. "How many times have I told you, Severus, that death is but the next logical step in an old man's life? We live, we learn, we love, we grow old, and we die. Once we are dead, we move on to the next great adventure, whatever that may be.

"But, if you wish to keep a part of me around...name one of your children Brian, after me?" Albus asked both of them. "I never did like my other names as much as that one, but Mother insisted that it just wasn't wizardly enough to replace my first name."

Hermione smiled at him, though it was somewhat tremulous with the thought of losing the affable old wizard again. He'd always seemed to be a bit like her Muggle world's legends of Merlin, to her. His own unique man, once she came to know him better...but Hermione thought Merlin would've approved of Albus Dumbledore. "If not the first name for our son, then it'll be his second one, I promise."

Albus' brows rose at that. "...A son? Good heavens, Severus! Why didn't you tell me that earlier, when we were chatting in our little clandestine wizard-to-painting meetings?"

"--I advised them to keep silent," Poppy Pomfrey offered from her place behind his chair. "There was still a war on, you know...and having figured out that 'Russel' was Severus, based on his interest in Albus' portrait, I knew there might be those who would go after his child, if Severus' identity became known. Especially a son. There's a few Dark Spells out there involving unborn, first-born sons, you know."

Hermione used her free hand to cover her abdomen. She didn't even want to think about anything harming their child. "As it was, I was getting to the point where it was harder and harder to conceal my condition, so I had to agree with her."

"Ah. Well...then the only thing left to discuss is the disposition of my remaining assets," Albus agreed. "I know it's not going to entirely make up for all that you've suffered, Severus, but you've always been like a son to me, and I refuse to take 'no' for an answer. Poppy, the scroll?"

Madam Pomfrey stepped forward, offering a rolled parchment to Severus. Lifting a skeptical brow, Severus untied the ribbons holding it closed, and opened the paper. And then frowned, unrolling it some more...and finally just let the bottom spindle drop from his hands...where it promptly rolled down his lap, leapt off his knee, and bounced across the floor. Almost to Albus' purple-clad feet, in fact.

Hermione's eyes widened. "What is this?"

"A listing of all my stocks and rental properties, plus some private lands I picked up through the years. You'll find everything in order, of course," Albus smiled benignly.

"All of this is yours?" Severus asked skeptically, equally taken aback.

"Actually, the majority belonged to my old partner, Nicholas Flamel," Albus confessed. "But it's now going to be yours, and I know he'd be proud to see you rewarded for your long suffering. I want you to enjoy it, Severus, Hermione. Now, I have more visits to make, while I have the strength to make them... I should last through the evening, so I hope to see the two of you at Headquarters, tonight--that's an order, Severus," he added. "I will lift the Fides Oath at that time. Seven o'clock, and please do not be late. Poppy says I have until ten, for certain; after that, it's up to the heavens as to when I go."

The younger witch and wizard stared, taken aback at the long list of assets, while Poppy assisted Albus out of the chair and through the door.

...

The former House of Black had a strange air about it, when Hermione and Severus arrived by Floo. Partly a lingering revel over their victory in the war, and partly a living wake for the former Headmaster, everyone had eyes that glittered with a mixture of relief and grief. And there was definite tension in the bodies of those who saw Severus...but no open hostility.

After a bit of pleading and bullying on her part, Hermione had managed to coax her husband into wearing a sort of compromise outfit: his black-and-grey kilt, and his sapphire blue shirt. The shirt went even better with his black-and-pale colouring than it had with the blond-and-tan version of himself. It invoked memories of Russel, without denying that he was still very much Severus. And, in a show of solidarity, Hermione had Transfigured herself a matching calf-length skirt and blouse. The his-and-her outfits had made him wrinkle his nose briefly, but he said nothing against it.

The first persons to approach Severus and clasp his hand were the twins. George and Fred even gave him respectful nods, and murmurs of appreciation for what he had done. The next was a wan-looking Remus Lupin, who muttered something in Severus' ear that made him first blush, then mutter, "...Forgiven." But what it was about, Severus didn't say, and Hermione carefully didn't pry. And when the former teacher allowed Arthur Weasley to shake his hand, he found himself pulled into a hard, back-

slapping embrace that widened his eyes in alarm and made Hermione hastily bite her lip against the urge to laugh.

But it was the confrontation between Severus and Harry that had her heart leaping into her throat. It happened in the hallway, on the way to the parlour to say one last goodbye to the wizard who had watched over them all. Harry stopped them in front of the door to the library, his jaw tense and his shoulders set.

"I would like a word with you," he stated stiffly, gesturing at the open door beside him. "Please...sir."

If Hermione hadn't seen Ron inside the room, his expression anxious but encouraging, she might've been worried about her blood-brother's terse and not exactly friendly tone. Nudging her husband into the room, she let Harry close the door behind them, giving them a modicum of privacy. Elsewhere, the clink of glasses and an occasional burst of laughter could be heard, but the library itself was quiet at the moment.

"What did you want, P...*Harry*," Severus corrected himself carefully, audibly striving to *not* snark at the younger wizard.

"I..." For a moment, Harry seemed at a loss. He ran his hand through his hair as Ron joined him, and let out a sigh when Ron nudged him in the shoulder. "Look, S...*Severus*... There's a lot of, erm, bad blood between us. But we're stuck with each other, and I don't want to put Hermione in the middle of our fights. And...I owe you my life, and I was too angry to admit that, earlier, and I'm sorry for the trouble I caused."

Hermione's hands were curled so tight where they hung at her sides, she was surprised blood wasn't dripping from where her nails bit into her palms. She waited breathlessly for her beloved's reply. Relief coursed through her when he dipped his dark-haired head.

"As am I. You aren't your father. I was...an arse," Severus managed to say with some semblance of stiff dignity, though little pride at that moment. "And I apologize for it."

Harry held out his hand in peace-offering, and Severus grasped it. Ron did, too; when his ex-teacher clasped palms, the redhead tightened his grip a little. "...Forgiven and forgotten, sir...erm, Severus. But if you ever do anything she doesn't like, I'm *still* going to sic my whole family on you."

"I'll try to remember to leave something for them to torment," Hermione retorted dryly. "*If* he ever does something I really don't like."

The two younger wizards laughed. Severus rolled his eyes in a pained look. Happy, Hermione kissed him on the cheek in reward for holding his tongue.

"Hey--none of that!" Ron ordered the two of them, paling a little at the thought. "It's bad enough to know there's a new Snape on the way. I *don't* need to see any of how it got started!"

"...And that's *my* cue to leave," Harry muttered, looking a little green himself at the idea.

Both young men left the parlour. They were replaced by Alastor Moody, who stepped inside with a wry smile. "There you are, Severus. I was hoping to catch you for a word or two about that disguise-amulet you wore. The same one that Mrs. Malfoy wore. You both managed to dupe me with that, and I want to know if there's any counter to its identity-changing properties."

"I'll leave you two to talk," Hermione offered, patting her husband on the arm. Stepping outside, she headed for the parlour. To her surprise, Priscilla Philliston stepped out of the parlour just as she reached the door. "Madam Philliston!"

"Mrs. Snape," the head of the Wizengamot acknowledged. "I wanted to talk to you about Draco Malfoy. Since you seemed to know where he might be, that is. I'd like to arrange a trial for him. Erm...no Wizard's Oaths, mind you, but...if you can just promise that he'll show up on time, and is willing to take Veritaserum without an antidote, I'll make sure he gets a fair trial."

Hermione smiled. "I think I can manage that. And thank you for doing your best to keep your word."

"Yes, well, I finally had the opportunity to make the Ministry responsible for its actions--oh, and that reminds me. Stanley Shunpike has been released and awarded five years' worth of wages, in recompense for his rights being ignored and violated," Philliston added. "That was poorly done of us. I'm glad I could set things right." The grey-haired witch flashed a smile. "Once I got Rufus out of the way, that is."

"I'm glad you could, too. I'll tell Harry; he'll be happy to hear the good news. Thank you." Shaking hands with the older witch, Hermione ducked into the parlour, where Kingsley was telling a funny story of his adventures while working for the Muggle Minister.

Severus slipped into the room at some point. Hermione became aware of his presence when he slid his arm around her as she listened to Minerva making Albus laugh with a tale of Hogwarts from several years before. And then, at some point while Tonks was relating one of her silly accidents from during her Auror training...Albus Dumbledore passed away. As she brought her tale to a close, the Metamorphmagus looked over at her former schoolmaster with a grin...and they all realized he had slumped into the corner of his armchair with his eyes closed, his skin grey and waxy, but with a smile still curving his bearded mouth. The sight sobered them, but that smile kept away the worst of their grief.

Hopping off the arm of the chair she was perched on, the pink-haired Auror touched his throat with her fingertips, then sighed. "Wotcher... He's gone off ahead of us, he has. Goodbye, Albus," Tonks stated, kissing the wrinkled brow. "See you later, eh?"

It was, Hermione decided as she wiped at the tears on her cheeks, the best possible way for anyone to die, really: surrounded by the laughter of one's friends.

Epilogue

Chapter 37 of 37

It began with a letter, and a secret. Was it madness to trust? Was it a secret salvation? Or was it all just lying on a ring, in the end...? (***HBP SPOILERS***)

EPILOGUE

A mangled piece of fabric hit the floor. It crackled with magic, cleaning and folding itself, before levitating back onto the bed. Growling under his breath, Severus Snape attempted to pleat the folds of his great-kilt one more time. He gave his wife a dirty look as she sat at her vanity table, pinning her curls up in a chignon. They were still decidedly unruly when left loose, but the softly rolled style suited her face rather well, these days.

Another growl presaged the black-and-grey tartan being tossed to the floor once more...and another flick of Hermione's wand fixed it and returned it to the bed. Sighing roughly, her husband sat on the bed next to it, rumpling his hands over his hair. "Why the bloody hell did I ever agree to do this job?"

"Because you're the best man for the position, my love," Hermione encouraged him. A light application of perfume, and she rose from her seat and crossed to him.

Stooping slightly, she kissed his brow, then pleated his kilt with her own hands. Silently bidding him to stand, she wrapped and held the folds in place while he belted them over his undershorts, then arranged the throw of the rest to go up over his black dress-jacket. He wasn't Scottish, but he still looked fabulous in a kilt. It had taken her quite a lot of bartering to get him to wear it for his big day, here at the start of a new term at Hogwarts, the renowned British School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

"I should have said 'No' to Minerva," Severus muttered as he adjusted the hang of the silver-fitted, black-furred sporran she had given him for their anniversary. "We could still be on a beach in Cancun, if I had only stood my ground against her!"

"Where you'd still be complaining about the sand, the sun, the saltiness of the surf, and how bad the Muggle beer tastes, even if you squeeze a lime over it, first," Hermione retorted as she pinned the throw over his shoulder with a brooch. "I know you all too well," she added, adjusting a final fold before lifting into her toes to kiss his cheek. "You love to complain and pretend you're a curmudgeon...but you haven't fooled anyone for a long time, now."

She moved to kiss his cheek again, and he turned his head in time to capture her lips with his own. For a few moments, their minds lingered on the soft, hungry taste of each other's mouth, his flavoured with cinnamon toothpaste, hers with a mint gargle. But time was fleeing, and he released her with a regretful sigh.

"...I would love to turn you over the foot of our bed, and share a few minutes of bliss with you," Severus murmured, catching her hand in his so that he could press a kiss to her palm. "But we haven't the time. Don't forget the scroll of new students' names."

Just as disappointed, Hermione sighed and picked up the scroll. Arm in arm--she was clad in a midnight blue that complimented his black robes--she walked with him out of their quarters. Already, they could hear the arriving students, brought by thestral-pulled carriages from the railway station down on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. The first-years would be arriving in a little bit by boat, punted there by Charlie Weasley, who had taken over Hagrid's job after Hagrid had decided to join Olympe Maxime at Beauxbatons. For now, the broad corridor leading from the front entrance to the Great Hall was filled with the chattering voices of second- through seventh-year students.

"I could've gone back into Potions research this year," Severus muttered as they walked down a side-hall towards the teachers' entrance into the dining chamber. "I could be doing a dozen more interesting things, than this."

"Minerva didn't want anyone else for the job," Hermione reminded him, patting his arm before she opened the side-door for him. "Suffer, for being the best at what you do."

If he snorted, the sound was lost in the din of students finding their House tables and settling onto the benches. Hermione smiled at Harry, the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, as she passed his place next to the head chair. He'd spent a few years as an Auror, after marrying Ginny but before deciding he wanted to teach. And of course, she herself had replaced Filius as Charms Professor, though another professor had taken over the duties of the Head of Ravenclaw.

Harry leaned across Severus, ignoring the wry look the older wizard was giving him. "Pssst! Did you remember the Sorting Hat?"

Hermione closed her eyes in disgust at herself. "Oh, bother!--I'll be right back. I was hoping to have a bit of fruit before they got here. I'll have to meet the first-years on the steps, as soon as I get back--save me an apple, will you?"

"Sure."

It didn't take her long to go up to the portrait-lined study, nor long to fetch down the Sorting Hat again. It grumbled to itself as she dusted it with a flick of her wand, but settled down as she approached the stairs to begin the speech she had first heard as a tremulous young girl, all those years ago. A spot of red hair in the crowd made her smile and think of Ron; he'd all but abandoned wizarding life for a while, immersing himself in the Muggle chess masters' world. He was back, though, and settled with a woman he loved far more than he'd ever liked her. She was happy for him.

"May I have your attention?" Hermione called out in a firm but welcoming voice as she smiled down at the students. Two of them pushed each other, glaring, but a quelling look from her and the boys settled down. "You are about to embark on a seven-year course of intense study in what it will take to become competent wizards and witches. You will not go through these Trials alone, however. Instead, you will be Sorted into one of the Four Houses of Hogwarts.

"They are Gryffindor, known for those who are athletic and brave; Ravenclaw, renowned for their intelligence and creativity; Slytherin, filled with those who are ambitious and cunning; and Hufflepuff, home to those who are loyal and true. You will eat with your House, sleep in your House, and win or lose points for your House, based on your good behaviour...or your misconduct," she added, staring pointedly at the two squabblers from earlier. "At the end of the year, the total calculated points from merits, demerits, and Quidditch match totals, will determine which House gets the honor of holding the House Cup for the next year. Are there any questions, so far...?"

There were a couple, easily answered. When they were ready, Hermione directed them into the Great Hall, where they filed with wide-eyes past the tables of students, until they stood before the Sorting Stool. Reading from her scroll, Hermione dropped the Sorting Hat onto each head, smiling at those sorted into her own House, Gryffindor, and nodding politely in encouragement to all the others. When it was through, she tucked the stool and the Sorting Hat to one side, and resumed her seat at her husband's side. He waited politely until she was settled, then rose.

"Welcome to another year of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. As the older students may remember," he intoned, his rich, dark voice filling the chamber, mesmerizing the students seated at the four long tables stretching out before him, "I have been selected to be your new Headmaster; for the new students who may not know me, I am Professor Severus Snape. Professor Draco Malfoy will be taking over my duties this year as your Potions Master, and Madam Hermione Snape shall be my Deputy Headmistress. The Forbidden Forest is forbidden, just as its name implies, and visits to Hogsmeade are restricted to third-years and older, presuming your parents or guardians have signed your permission slips.

"If you have any questions...this is a feast, not an interview. Save them for tomorrow, when my office will be open every week-day for the two hours between the end of your last class of the day, and half an hour before the start of supper."

A pause as he let his dark eyes rake over the crowd, his demeanor just stern enough to quell fidgeting bodies from becoming unruly. Hermione smiled indulgently. After nearly twenty-six years of marriage, he was still intimidating from a distance, and had been a positive dictator in his class, though he had softened outside of class-time. And it never hurt to have the students just a little bit fearful of him, to ensure that they respected and heeded his authority.

Still, it was a relief to see his mouth curving in the same indulgent smile he had once reserved for their children, and now usually gave to their grandchildren. He had every right to be happy, and proud of his standing as a husband, a hero, a father, and the second-ever--and frankly, far more popular than the previous--Slytherin Headmaster.

"...Let the Welcoming Feast begin!"

The End