

# The Lost Chamber

*by pyjamapants*

When Rose and Hugo Weasley are involved in a prank that sends Scorpius Malfoy to the Hospital Wing, Hermione is summoned to Hogwarts. What she finds there calls for investigation.

## The Prank

*Chapter 1 of 8*

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Disclaimer: The characters and settings in this story are lovingly borrowed from J.K. Rowling.

Special thanks to DreamyDragon\_73 and AnnieTalbot for their incredible beta work. This story originally posted at the sshg\_exchange. I'll be posting new chapters every three days or so.

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HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY

Headmaster: Severus Snape

(Order of Merlin, Second Class,

Platinum Cauldron Recipient, International Society of Potioneers,

Council for Development of Higher Wizarding Education)

September 12, 2022

Mrs Weasley,

*The cherubic brats known by many as your children were involved in an incident this afternoon that sent an unconscious Scorpius Malfoy to the Hospital wing. While I am pleased to find Slytherin in the lead for the House Cup due to the epic loss of points experienced by Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, Mr Malfoy's condition is intolerable. Your offspring are seemingly immune to all efforts to make them restore young Mr Malfoy to his former state of health. Since you are normally so eager to interfere in your children's formative education, I expect to see you in my office post haste.*

Severus Snape

*P.S. If you dare mention appropriate schoolbook selection while at Hogwarts, you will almost certainly owe me a Charms master.*

~\*~

The ashy remains of Snape's letter settled onto Hermione's desk, sprinkling over the teetering stacks of files. Only the threat of avalanche and subsequent beheading by paper cut kept Hermione from banging her head against the desk.

She bristled at the accusation that her children were behind a prank, much less one serious enough to land someone in the Hospital Wing. Normally, their cousins teased them to no end about their uncanny ability to spoil everyone *else's* mischief. Hugo because he was too practical for such silliness. Rose because she was too Quidditch-obsessed to risk botching practice schedules or, horror of horrors, games. The one and only time Rose had raised a wand to anyone had been when James Potter had thrown a Dungbomb into the Slytherin locker room and missed two weeks of practice for detention.

She rubbed her temples. Granted, their unblemished records had tarnished last year. Their marks had slipped a bit, and they'd been caught out together after curfew numerous times. To hear Hugo tell it, the first time it was a toss-up as to who'd been more horrified. Snape had come thundering up the stairs to the Astronomy Tower, already flinging accusations that the students he'd caught were sneaking out for a snog. Rose had frozen, mortified by the suggestion of doing *that* with her brother. Hugo swore that Snape had actually turned green. He had teased his sister about it all summer. Well, all summer until Hermione had badgered Hugo into telling her why Rose ran to her room every time Hugo asked if she'd decided about taking N.E.W.T. Level Astronomy.

The joke had actually been one of the high points, a return to normalcy, in a rather long summer the first without Ron. The hols had been no walk in the park, but they had certainly fallen short of the predicted boundary testing, squabbling, and daily bouts of tears that Hermione had dreaded. Her children were hurting, but they were healing as well. Her leave from the Department of Mysteries had helped. So had the trips to the seaside when being in the house, with its constant reminders of Ron's absence, had grown too overwhelming.

So why this departure from their usually stellar behaviour? And why now?

Hermione sighed and shoved two stacks of reports together, each buttressing the other. The paperwork had already kept for three months. It would keep longer. She sent an appropriately apologetic memo to her supervisor, not that Mr Klandestin would care. She only ever saw him when they bumped into one another in the Ministry archives. Grabbing her cloak and handbag, she marched out the door.

She was stopped by what seemed like dozens of people welcoming her back to the Ministry. Handshakes, hugs, inquiries about the children, invitations to dinner, reminders about committee meetings. It was a relief to finally reach the Apparition point. Leaving the Ministry behind for the wilds of Scotland had never been so welcome.

Hermione stepped away from the Apparition point outside Hogwarts' gates, shaking the Ministry stress from her shoulders and beginning the trek up the hill to the castle. It was a gorgeous day, and despite the nasty errand that had liberated her from her paperwork, she soon found herself thoroughly enjoying the trip. The crisp, autumn leaves crunched under her feet. The forest glittered with golds, oranges, and browns. The air was brisk, but it lacked the damp chill that would soon arrive. The sun hovered over the horizon, an hour or so from setting.

The idyllic scene shattered as she looked up the path ahead. Draco Malfoy thundered towards her, jaw locked and fists clenched. He ground to a halt two feet from her, his breath whistling through clenched teeth.

"I've learned to tolerate the sneers, audible whispers, and derision from the general public, Weasley. Until now, I thought I'd done a rather good job of shielding my son from most of it. For some stupid reason, I'd expected you to raise your children to be above pranks like this."

Hermione bit her tongue, trying to think of how badly she might react in such a situation. Malfoy was worried about his son, and it was only natural that he vent his stress somewhere. Seeing as she was parent to the accused, it was only right that she take the brunt of his wrath.

Malfoy continued his rant, "Merlin, we've served on countless committees together, and I really thought you were committed to a better world *foeveryone*. Or is this just a matter of their father's influence?"

That comment was low, even for Malfoy, and it ignited the defensiveness she'd suppressed. "And how are you so certain that my children are at fault here, Malfoy? You're awfully quick to accuse them."

"Oh, right, blame Scorpius, even though he was the only one without a wand in his hand. A Malfoy *and* a Slytherin. Winning combination there. Naturally he's to blame."

She gritted her teeth. "I'm not blaming Scorpius either. Look, Malfoy, I don't want anyone in the Hospital Wing. The sooner I get to Hogwarts, talk to Rose and Hugo, and figure out what happened, the sooner we can reverse whatever has happened to Scorpius."

Draco stepped aside. "Well, I wouldn't want to keep you. You looked like you were in such a hurry to get to the castle. Be careful not to let the chirping birds delay you again." He stalked off.

She resumed her trek up the hill, desire to put distance between her and Malfoy propelling her otherwise leaden feet. Some people Draco, Percy, her mother if they spent more than six hours together had an uncanny ability to make one feel like one was still an awkward twelve-year-old. Shrugging back into the forty-something persona and trying to forget the thirty-year-old package of insecurities felt like Polyjuice wearing off. There was no bone creaking or the yawn of shrinking and stretching skin. But that hardly made a difference. Both left the same bad taste.

When she finally reached the castle doors, the sunset bathed the landscape in pink and orange. She lugged the front door open, dismayed to see that the last trickle of students was leaving the Great Hall after dinner. It was much later than she'd realised. Though it was just as well that dinner was over. It wasn't as if she could have barged into the Great Hall in the middle of the meal.

Hermione trudged, shoulders slumped, towards the gargoyle guarding the Headmaster's office. She fished in her handbag for a potion, struggling against the headache blooming behind her temples.

The gargoyle guarding the Headmaster's office interrupted her search, "Hermione Weasley?"

"Yes?" she answered automatically, her arm elbow-deep in her bag. She jerked it out and slung the handbag over her shoulder again.

"The Headmaster has been awaiting your arrival." The gargoyle gestured, and the passage to the Headmaster's office opened.

She didn't so much walk up the stairs as haul her feet up every tread. Leave it to Snape to make entry to his office as arduous as possible. Gone was Dumbledore's moving staircase. Frankly, it was surprising Snape hadn't replaced the gargoyle with a sphinx.

Stopping at the threshold to the room, she took in the office. Despite the number of visits she'd made since being in school herself, it was still a shock to see the changes Snape had made. He'd removed the assorted baubles and wizarding devices that had made the office so identifiably Dumbledore's the curiosities that had distracted every visitor. She was certain she had stumbled across some of them in the Department of Mysteries' inventory. All that remained were the shelves and shelves of books. Snape had supplemented the existing collection with his own and transformed the office into a library that rivalled the Special Collections area of the Ministry Library. A well-worn leather sofa sat in front of the fireplace, making it obvious where Snape spent his free time.

She swallowed the growing lump in her throat. The same sofa where she'd held the kids as she'd told them their father had died.

"Tea, Hermione?"

She jerked her head and looked at Snape for the first time. He had risen to greet her from a desk that seemed a mile away. Ron's voice chided her teasingly for thinking of Snape without his honorific. Years of active participation in her children's education had levelled the playing field. No, Snape was Snape. On the rare occasions when he was acting cordial, he was Severus.

She approached the desk and the two wing back chairs parked in front of it. "Yes, please." She settled into the chair, trying not to think about who should be sitting in the chair next to her.

Snape levitated a tea cup and plate of biscuits to the table separating the chairs.

"Thank you for finally gracing me with your presence. I was beginning to think I'd have to cast a Locator Charm and hunt you down myself."

And here she'd thought he seemed sympathetic. She sighed. "I ran into Draco on the way to the castle. We had... words."

Snape's mouth quirked momentarily before it was masked by his tea cup.

Best to get this over with. Snape liked small talk even less than she did. "So, what exactly were the circumstances surrounding this incident that sent Scorpius Malfoy to the hospital? Draco accused Rose and Hugo of drawing their wands."

"And you assume that your children are innocent of any wrong-doing?"

She took a sip of her tea while trying to construct a sentence that wouldn't garner comparisons to a cornered lioness. "It does seem out of character, but the last year hasn't exactly been easy for them." There. Well said. She grabbed a biscuit.

"And here I expected a blazing defence." Snape plucked a piece of shortbread from his plate. "Your children are being uncharacteristically reticent about the events, but the best I can determine is that Mr Malfoy and your children encountered one another in the dungeons. Constance Zabini was in the vicinity and heard Rose yell, 'No!' She rounded a corner to find Rose panicking, standing over Scorpius with her wand drawn, and yelling at Hugo to run to the Hospital Wing."

Hermione chewed slowly. The shortbread tasted like ashes. "Will Scorpius be okay?"

"Scorpius is unconscious, but he shows no signs of injury, per se, and Poppy assures me that his health is not endangered." Snape poured another cup of tea. "The only indications that anything is wrong are the horns sprouting from his head."

"Horns? Scorpius Malfoy has horns?" Hermione tried to swallow the smile that twitched at the corners of her mouth.

"Yes. Horns. Do try not to laugh. It's unbecoming."

She might have felt embarrassed were it not for the faint glint of amusement in Snape's eyes. "May I speak to Rose and Hugo?"

"Surely you didn't think I invited you here for tea and chit-chat. At the moment, Rose and Hugo are serving detention, but they should return here shortly."

She refused to feel chastened by his sarcasm. Snape offered to refill her tea. Accepting the new cup, she settled back into the chair. "Horns. No wonder Draco was so angry."

"Yes, life following the war has been rather challenging for most families who claim former Death Eaters in their tree. Having seen so much scorn, they're quite inclined to take offence when something happens. After all, it's usually meant."

*And usually deserved*, she thought, taking a well-timed sip of tea.

Snape continued, "Though we've managed to keep things rather safe within the castle walls. Even Quidditch accidents are at an all-time low. Nothing this generation faces is hardly so dangerous as getting petrified by a basilisk or turned into a cat."

"I seriously hope that isn't your metric for measuring safety within the school. Beauxbatons is suddenly much more attractive."

Hermione was spared Snape's retort by the shuffling of trainers up the stairs. She stood, turning around to greet Rose and Hugo.

They froze at the top of the stairs. "Mum? Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine." The kids relaxed and walked towards her. "Headmaster Snape just owled about the incident with Scorpius Malfoy."

Rose and Hugo froze again, midstep.

"Headmaster, is there somewhere I can take them to speak in private?" she asked. *Please let it be in private.*

"There's a conference room you can use." Snape gestured to a doorway at the back of the room.

"Thank you, Headmaster."

She followed her children into the room, taking a deep breath as she closed the door. Where to even begin? She marshalled her courage and turned to face them.

Her stomach lurched. Rose's blotchy cheeks, sullen expression, and crossed arms made her the mirror image of Ron at sixteen. She diverted her attention to Hugo, scrambling to keep her composure. Hugo's attention darted about the room.

"Are you two all right?" she asked, deliberately softening her voice.

Their heads jerked towards her. "Yes, Mum," one of them mumbled. Gazes returned to the apparently fascinating rug.

Right. The direct route then. "Rose, Hugo, what happened to Scorpius?"

"We already told Headmaster Snape. We don't know," Rose said, her arms shifting into a tighter knot.

"Yes, but that was the Headmaster. I'm your mother. I'm inclined to be more forgiving." Nothing. No response. Just floor gazing. "I just want to help you get this sorted," she offered.

"Mum, I don't know what happened to him," Rose pleaded, tears crowding the corners of her eyes.

"But, you were both there. How can you not know anything? Was someone else there? You know you don't need to protect them."

"There wasn't anyone else there, Mum," Hugo said in a voice she could swear was an octave lower than when they'd said goodbye at King's Cross.

"Well, did you exchange words with Scorpius before whatever happened... happened?" Hermione didn't miss the nervous flicker of Rose's eyes at Hugo.

"Mum," said the creature with the voice of a rugby player who'd replaced her son, "Just believe us. We've always told you the truth. We don't know what happened to Scorpius."

An awkward moment of staring passed, and she found herself wishing Ron were there to assist. He'd always been able to ferret out whether the kids and their cousins were up to something or whether it really *had* been the ghost of Uncle Fred behind the mischief. But Hugo was right: they didn't lie under direct questioning.

Rose broke the silence. "Mum, can we go? I've got a Transfiguration essay due tomorrow."

'That I haven't started yet' went unspoken.

Hermione sighed and nodded. She opened her arms to embrace her children before they left. Hugo towered over her. Rose shrugged out of the hug prematurely. Then she was left alone, leaning against the conference table and wondering when her kids had grown into mini-adults, so very independent from their mum. And when the aftershocks of Ron's death would finally stop. It seemed that every time she righted herself, got things on an even keel, and settled back into the new 'normal', something like this would broadside her, thumbing its nose at the Ron-shaped hole in her life that she was slowly patching up.

Pausing to collect her wits before she faced Snape again, she examined her surroundings. The room was anchored by a massive table that could easily seat twenty and probably expanded to seat more. A side table stood at the end of the room with a pitcher and glasses on top. And the perimeter was ringed with more bookshelves, each containing countless versions of staff rules and records books and every edition of *Hogwarts, A History*. She ran her fingers across the volumes, barely restraining herself from plucking the first edition from the shelf.

At the end of one bookcase, she spied an open door and ducked inside. Thank Merlin. Snape's tea had run its course rather quickly. Actually, she wouldn't be surprised if his tea service had Diuretic Charms to force nervous students to own up to their misdeeds sooner rather than later.

Straightening her robes, she left the conference room to find Snape sitting at his desk, quill slashing on parchment. Looking up over the rims of black, metal-framed reading glasses, he set the parchment aside and folded his glasses, tucking them inside his robes. He sat back in his chair, waiting for Hermione to speak.

"They're hiding something, but I don't think it has anything to do with Scorpius's injuries," she said, trying to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

"I suspected as much," Snape grumbled.

"What? Don't tell me you..." She couldn't even say it. The thought that Snape would rummage around in Rose or Hugo's mind was too nauseating to voice out loud.

Snape actually rolled his eyes at her. "I don't make a habit of practising Legilimency on my students."

Oh. She flopped into the chair, a wave of weariness washing over her. "So, do you have any theories about what happened?"

"I wish I had even one. I'm at a loss. More tea?"

"No," Hermione said, more loudly than she'd intended. Snape startled a bit, and Hermione continued speaking to cover her gaffe. "Could you take me to where it happened?"

"Certainly," he replied, standing and grabbing the cloak that hung from a peg on the wall. "If you have a cloak in that bag of yours, you might want to wear it. It's rather chilly where we're headed."

She reached into her bag, fingers fumbling over the Headache Potion that had eluded her earlier, and grabbed the stiff, utilitarian cloak that lurked at the bottom. A discreet charm banished the wrinkles and bits of handbag detritus that assuredly clung to it.

It was nearing curfew, and as they walked the corridors, they passed dozens of students returning to their dormitories. They didn't greet him with the same affection her classmates had given Headmaster Dumbledore, but it wasn't hard to spot their respect for him. She'd have never imagined it twenty years ago, but Severus Snape was a welcome part of Hogwarts, and he wore it well.

The herds of students thinned as she and Snape wove their way through corridors and down stairs to what had to be the dungeons.

"Where are we? This doesn't look familiar."

"This section of the castle was discovered during the reconstruction, though we didn't find it useful until the wave of offspring from your generation. Trust me, once James Potter arrived, the castle couldn't have been large enough."

Hermione laughed. His friends, his family, and the *Daily Prophet* suspected that Harry's first-born was his favourite child, and even he had been happy to send James off to school.

They arrived at the intersection of two corridors and Snape's footsteps slowed. He turned left and stopped four strides in. "This was where it happened. Scorpius was here. Rose and Hugo there. Constance Zabini came from that direction." He gestured down the corridor from whence they'd come.

Hermione cast several spells. "That's odd. There's a good bit of residual magic here, but it doesn't have a specific locus of generation." Even odder, the spells showed that Scorpius had indeed stood *there* and Rose and Hugo *there*.

She walked up and down the corridor, blanketing the area with an array of Detection Spells. Snape watched her, arms crossed.

Focusing on the area where her children had stood, she cast another volley of spells. Not a bit of recent residual magic was detected.

"Why would the children have been down here? What else is nearby?" she asked, now blanketing Constance Zabini's route with a round of spells.

"Some of the N.E.W.T.-level classrooms are in this portion of the castle, but that doesn't explain Hugo's presence."

She flicked her wand impatiently in her palm and walked the corridor again. She froze and turned to look at Snape. "How is it you knew exactly where Rose and Hugo were standing?"

Snape's lips pursed. His eyes narrowed. "Because Constance Zabini showed me where they were standing."

"Well, yes, but *how* did she remember the location so precisely? The spells showed they were standing within a foot of where you pointed."

Snape grunted. Hermione was about to raise her wand to cast more spells when a variation in a stone on the wall caught her eye. Crouching, she ran a hand across the wall. "There are runes here," she said, her finger tracing the markings. "Is æsc nyd ur æsc, peorð rad ós, dæg is gyfu nyd eh, æsc peorð eh rad is tiw."

IF+NF·LRF·MIX+M·ÆCMRIT

"Don't read them out loud," Snape hissed, panic choking his voice. He let out a sigh when nothing seemed to happen. "Ever the know-it-all, aren't you? Can't resist showing off the contents of that fuzzy head?"

"Oh, shut it, Snape." Knees creaking, she stood. "Is this common? Are there runes elsewhere in the castle?"

"I believe there are some across the door from what used to be the Room of Requirement."

Goosebumps skittered up her arms. Hermione glanced behind her and barely suppressed a gasp. An open doorway, one that had assuredly not been present before, beckoned them. She started towards it, arrested by Snape's hand on her shoulder.

"Perhaps some caution before you go barging in?" A bevy of spells leapt from Snape's wand. "I believe I understand why your department keeps you desk-bound rather than sending you in the field."

"Do you think the spells I cast earlier were just performance art?" she asked.

"The room seems to be safe." He motioned for her to enter behind him. *Lumos*"

The room was enormous, easily the size of the Great Hall. Despite its location underground, it was dry and comfortable, if not exactly warm. The walls were criss-crossed with runes, and a closed door stood at the far end.

Hermione tried to remember to breathe. This could take days, if not weeks, to untangle, translate, and puzzle through. Trying to affect an air of nonchalance, she said, "Well, this will certainly keep Professor Babbling occupied."

Snape walked over to a wall and squinted at the markings. "Unfortunately, Professor Babbling has a full schedule and a publication due date nipping at her heels. She might be able to consult, but something of this magnitude is a bit more than she could tackle at the moment."

"I suppose I could find out if there are Department of Mysteries personnel who could be assigned the task," Hermione offered.

Snape turned to face her, his expression blank. "Are you trying to imply that you're interested, Mrs Weasley?"

Hermione tried not to grin. "Yes. Yes, I am."

"I'll have the house-elves prepare you a room." At Hermione's look of shock, he continued, "What? You'd lose a good hour or two a day commuting... longer if you run into Malfoy on the way."

She ignored the not-so-subtle jab at the end of his explanation. "Thank you. That would be helpful. I'll owl my supervisor the details." Her mind began racing with the excitement of solving whatever mystery this was. Her thoughts tumbled excitedly from her mouth, "I don't think he'll have any protests, but I'll offer to get caught up on my backlog when I need a break from research. I should be able to tackle some of the paperwork in the evenings. I'll grab a stack or two when I run to the office to pick up some sources."

Snape cut her off, "Very well. I shall expect progress updates. Either dinner or tea time will do. If you require assistance translating, I could ask Bathsheba to send some seventh years."

Snape ushered her back into the hallway and began casting wards on the corridor. If it weren't for the student lying unconscious in the Hospital Wing, she'd have suggested that the quantity of wards were overkill. Finally, Snape finished and turned to her. "The wards will admit only myself, you, or anyone accompanying either of us. I'll take you to the castle's guest quarters."

She'd barely uttered, "Thank you," before Snape was off, stalking down the hall, leaving her to scurry to catch up with him.

Snape led her through countless hallways and flights of stairs. After the fifth turn at a nondescript intersection past innumerable nondescript doorways, she gave up being able to find her way back without assistance.

They stopped in front of a surprise nondescript door. Curved at the top. Round, brass handle on the right-hand side. Just like the hundred other doors they'd passed. The Founders must have ordered in bulk.

Snape gave her a curious glance, as if he'd just put together the most simple of puzzles where she'd been unable. "Did you eat dinner tonight?"

"No, I didn't. Your summons interrupted my afternoon."

Snape tapped the end of his wand against the door handle and gestured for Hermione to do the same.

"I'll have a house-elf bring something to your room."

"Thank you," she replied, oddly touched that he should notice such a thing. "Can you tell me how get to the Owlery from here? I'm still not entirely certain where we are."

"Mrs Weasley, surely you don't think the Hogwarts staff wastes time trekking across the castle to the Owlery when we need to send correspondence. Give your letter to a house-elf."

"Oh, right." Perhaps it was past Snape's bed time.

"Should you require anything, do let the house-elf know."

And with that, Snape was gone.

## The Runes

### *Chapter 2 of 8*

When Rose and Hugo Weasley are involved in a prank that sends Scorpius Malfoy to the Hospital Wing, Hermione is summoned to Hogwarts. What she finds there calls for investigation.

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*Mr Klandestin,*

*I'm sure you recall that I've been at loose ends trying to find a project to spark my interest since my return. I believe I've stumbled upon just the project here at Hogwarts. I'll leave my initial research proposal on your desk this afternoon when I stop by to pick up several references and set up the WPN. If I don't start tackling some of that paperwork, I won't be able to find my desk when I return. I'll need security clearance to discuss the project with the Hogwarts staff and discuss any generalities with individuals regarding resource acquisition. Level three clearance should be adequate.*

*Oh, and if possible, could you ask one of the interns to track down my copy of Kern's Approaches to Alphabet Identification? It looks like someone borrowed it during my absence, and I suspect I'll need it.*

*Thank you,*

*Hermione Weasley*

~\*~

Hermione followed Mosey, the slowest house-elf who ever lived, through the corridors, back to the site of the magical room she was set to investigate. True, Mosey's slow shuffle gave Hermione the opportunity to sketch out a map. But if the elf didn't pick it up a notch or two, they wouldn't get there before lunch. She idly wondered whether the Marauder's Map showed these rediscovered parts of the castle. She scribbled a note to write to Harry later, assuming he'd made good on his promise to reclaim the map after Snape threatened James with removal from the Quidditch team if he didn't stop sneaking out after curfew to explore the castle.

Trudging after the elf, she yawned. The morning coffee hadn't quite kicked in to compensate for the late night she'd spent working through her research proposal. But the fatigue was worth it. Merlin, it felt good to have a project again. She'd been drifting since Ron died. Before the kids had come home for the summer, she'd assisted her colleagues on research here and there. But nothing had captured her interest. Returning to her office post-hols, she'd been desperate for something, anything to wipe away her growing restlessness. She'd been stagnant for nearly a year, and it was time to pick up the loose ends she'd left lying around, both personally and professionally, and start moving on.

Finally *finally* they arrived at the familiar intersection. Snape's wards radiated and prickled at her skin, but she was able to pass them without incident. She bade farewell to Mosey as she knelt to examine the runes inscribed in the hallway. The rune alphabet here was familiar enough, and she transliterated the runes, grinning when a Latin phrase appeared. Hopefully, the room would follow suit. She'd woken at four from a dream well, nightmare really about translating seventh century Welsh to Gaelic for cross-text comparison during her first year as an Unspeakable. She appreciated a good challenge, but some projects crossed the line to torture.

She looked over the sentence, digging in her bag for her Latin dictionary to confirm the translation. "The door opens for the worthy," she mumbled. She glanced at the doorway. The room's entrance stood open. Had the door stayed open overnight or had it opened for her? Or for Snape? If it was Snape, then she was lucky it had stayed open. After a couple days of trudging down here to grant her access, Snape probably would have demanded that the house-elves set up a cot and a chamber pot and lock her in until she'd figured out how to reverse Scorpius Malfoy's condition.

Ignoring a moment of heart-stopping panic that the door would decide to close once she entered, she stepped into the chamber, cast *lumos*, and squinted at the nearest wall. She would need to grab some of the lanterns from the office. Otherwise, she'd emerge from the project blind and with a searing case of tendinitis in her shoulder. She grumbled. The runes within the room deviated from the alphabet sets with which she was most familiar. Of course the room wouldn't behave so nicely.

Hermione pulled a piece of mottled-grey, spell-neutral parchment from her folder. She would need some examples to take to the office when she picked up her reference materials. While she could, theoretically, bring her entire set of resources back to Hogwarts, it was generally not the done thing to take all your texts with you. Inevitably someone would come looking and tattle to the department head that you'd taken Scribing's *Runes of the Renaissance* when clearly your project covered mid-fourth century runes. For all their professionalism under most circumstances, her colleagues tended to act like spoiled toddlers when it came to sharing rare texts.

She began sketching the runes along the western wall of the chamber. For the most part, the alphabet was familiar. But here and there, the name of a rune niggled at the back of her mind. She'd seen these before, but she couldn't quite place where. Hardly surprising, since it seemed every hundred years or so, some witch or wizard saw fit to adopt their personalised rune alphabet. More often than not, the changes weren't adopted by the general wizarding public. But occasionally, the additions stuck, especially when the glyph proved useful to the world at large, such as the mid-fourth century inclusion of the glyph for potion or the sixth-century addition of runes signifying wands and charms.

She skimmed the wall for additional key examples. Her eyes blurred. She was thoroughly unsurprised to find that the wall was completely covered; she'd suspected as much during her cursory examination the night before. Not a square inch of the wall was clear. She stepped back a moment, flipping her parchment over to the other side.

Following the path of one sentence, she slashed a line on the parchment to illustrate its placement on the wall. One of the symbols she'd sketched earlier wasn't an unfamiliar rune at all. It appeared where her original line intersected a skew rune line. She took another step back and stared at the walls.

They were criss-crossed with intersecting lines of runes. This would certainly be a challenge. Her stomach swirled with a mixture of awe and nausea. Transcribing one rune over another was rarely practised, as the results were fairly unpredictable. Whoever had designed this chamber had built a very powerful magical device.

Glancing at her watch, she gathered up her materials, separating the map of the castle she'd drawn before shoving the remaining materials into a folder and back into her handbag. She walked to the chamber doorway and cast a glance back at the room. It was blanketed with runes. The floors were empty, but all four walls and the ceiling were covered. Best to grab a copy of Petrus Pingo's *Drawing Pictures with Words*.

She grumbled as she walked up the stairs. The plan to visit her office during lunch meant she was dodging students on their way to the Great Hall. She blanched as she heard mutterings about the Hospital Wing, Scorpius, and "that Rose Weasley." She had to figure out what was going on with that room.

Finally, she reached the castle doors. Unwrapping a sandwich that Mosey had given her that morning, she left the castle grounds and headed down the hill, mulling over the chamber as she walked. The quantity of runes in the chamber made the room a rare find. For one, the sheer time involved to carve even a single phrase into stone typically lent itself to concise speech. Secondly, most witches and wizards had no use for such a significant and long-lasting display. Despite the sun, she shivered. It was powerful, and it lurked in the bowels of Hogwarts. Not a happy circumstance at all.

She ground to a halt and nearly dropped her sandwich. A chamber. In Hogwarts. Previously hidden. And some unseen force that had attacked a student. She'd have to ask Snape for access to the Chamber of Secrets.

She wrapped up her lunch, restoring the Preservation Charm. There was no way she could continue eating at the moment. Not with her stomach cartwheeling down the hill in front of her. She took off for the Apparition Point again, her feet pounding against the path as her heart hammered against her chest.

Hermione snorted to herself. If the room had been designed by Salazar Slytherin, it was odd it would have attacked one of its own. Though she wouldn't put it past Slytherin to want to thin the herd if any of his precious snakes were stupid enough to consort with Gryffindors.

Digging in her handbag as she hurried down the hill, she grabbed a Dictoquill and the list she'd started the night before. The quill and parchment hovered behind her as she barked out things to do. Write to Harry to see when he could come to open the Chamber. Grab the two Parseltongue texts that she knew Artemis Powell had stashed in his office. Arrange for an intern to help with the more basic tasks; there was no way she could risk involving any of the students in the translation efforts.

By the time she reached the Apparition Point, she was out of breath and had a list of tasks covering three feet of parchment fluttering behind her.

Thank Merlin, the department seemed fairly empty when she arrived. And bless Mr Klandestin. The copy of Kern was sitting on her chair. She conjured a box, setting it on the floor next to her bookshelves. She began placing texts into the box, continuing to dictate tasks to the Dictoquill. Ask Snape for access to the older editions of *Hogwarts*,

a *History* to see if there was any information on that portion of the castle. Write to Artemis Powell for a copy of his research on the Chamber of Secrets. Prioritise a list of tasks for the intern.

She reviewed the books in the box. Yes, yes, she had what she needed with the exception of the texts she needed to grab from her colleague's offices. She conjured another box and began levitating the stacks of memos and forms into it. Oh, and she couldn't forget to set up the blasted WPN tray. All the convenience of not having to ferry paperwork down to the Ministry Archives with the press of a wand. When the damned things worked.

The unfortunate drawback of coming during lunch was that Ministry Technical Support was on lunch break too. The Wizarding Private Network was cranky on a good day, and configuring one to work between London and Scotland.... She groaned. Maybe if she left a note for Jerry with the settings of the one she was taking with her, then he'd check that the one here at the Ministry was set correctly and verify that a test message was received. Best not to replicate the Pinkerton catastrophe with confidential memos being redirected to the *Daily Prophet*.

She flipped over the wooden tray and trailed the tip of her wand over the series of runes on the back. The tray blinked green. With luck, that would be all that was required to configure it. Setting the tray on top of her box of books, she looked over her list. She'd be ready to return to Hogwarts once she grabbed those other sources. And dropped off her research proposal. And wrote the note to Jerry. She cast a quick Shrinking Charm on the box and tucked it into her handbag.

She stopped at the threshold to her office, forcing herself to take a deep breath. She couldn't afford to have scurrying thoughts. After all, this was research. She needed to shed the adrenalin and force herself to focus. If she was too hurried, she'd miss a detail.

Never mind the fact that something dangerous had been uncovered at Hogwarts. Never mind that Rose and Hugo were there.

The last of her errands run, she left the Ministry, Apparating to her house. Belladonna greeted her at the door, yapping and meowing as she wrapped around Hermione's legs. Hermione reached down to scratch her familiar's head. "Sorry, sweets, but you're on your own again for a bit. I'll owl Ginny and see if she can't pop in to see you."

Belladonna followed her to the bedroom, hissing when she saw Hermione pull out the suitcase. After trying to burrow under a stack of jumpers in the suitcase, she slunk off to sulk.

Hermione cast Refilling Charms on Belladonna's bowls and left for Hogwarts, glad she'd be climbing the hill for the last time. She wouldn't call herself out of shape, but hills weren't exactly part of her daily routine. She forced herself to slow down as she walked back towards the school. Straining a hamstring wouldn't accomplish anything.

Pulling her to-do-list from the bag, she skimmed over it as she walked, casting a Highlighting Charm over the more critical tasks and trying to decide how to best spend her afternoon. Snape would want to meet again after dinner, and she needed to make sure she had her thoughts in order before seeing him. A research plan then. And a flurry of letters to line up the additional resources she would need.

She reached the castle doors and made her way to her room. Her journey ground to a halt, and she grit her teeth in frustration. She would have to get a copy of the class schedules so she could better time her comings and goings. She didn't have time for this, and she didn't particularly want students to know she was here.

"Mum?" a voice called from the sea of students. Hermione turned to see Hugo headed towards her. "Has something else happened?"

Hermione tried not to wince as several students turned to look at her. "No, Hugo. I'm just here for some research." It was the truth. A bit watered-down, but the truth nonetheless.

"Research? Really?"

It was adorable sometimes, how similar her son was to her. At the moment, however, she needed to curtail his enthusiasm for all things library-related. The middle of a stream of students was not where any discussion of the chamber needed to happen.

"Yes, Hugo. Research. But I need to get going, and you need to get to your next lesson."

Hugo waved and rejoined the herd which carried him up the staircase to what used to be the corridor where Arithmancy was taught. For all she knew, Quidditch tactics were taught there now. Except that Hugo was headed there, so Quidditch wasn't a likely topic. Well, that and the fact that, despite Rose's constant whinging, one couldn't take Quidditch courses.

Hermione waited for the traffic to subside and then returned to her quarters. Perhaps this year she'd make that contribution to the Hogwarts Building Fund so they had the resources to widen the corridors. She shucked her shoes once the door was shut and tossed her handbag and cloak on the foot of the bed.

Curling up on the bed, she pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment and her box of books. Tearing off a piece of parchment, she scribbled a quick note to Jerry, double-checking that she'd used the proper codes to direct the message to him rather than a file cabinet somewhere in the depths of the Ministry Archives. Setting the WPN tray in front of her, she placed the parchment inside and tapped her wand against the clump of runes that spelled 'send' on the side. The parchment disappeared. Now she just had to wait for Jerry's response.

Sorting the books into piles as she went, she removed them from the box, occasionally reorganising a stack. An hour later, she had a research plan, an enormous crick in her neck, and a veritable fortress of musty texts.

She would need to brush up on Elder Futhark forms versus Anglo-Saxon and Younger Futhark runes before she returned to the chamber. A brief consultation with Kern's had indicated she was dealing with an alphabet that was pre-twelfth century. The nagging thing about pinning down the alphabet was that the exercise was more about what characters you *didn't* see.

She decided to switch gears and grabbed another sheaf of parchment from her handbag. Time to tackle some of the correspondence she'd assigned herself in her list of tasks. She settled back against the headboard, propping her parchment against her knees.

She finished the fourth letter and stretched to ease the ache growing in her lower back, making one of the stacks wobble when she moved. She reached over to straighten a teetering tower of texts. Her room was adequate for a guest, but it didn't particularly suit her research.

Perhaps Snape could recommend somewhere else in the castle. The library would work, but its resources wouldn't be needed. The first thing she'd done after being accepted into her mastery program was line her bookshelves with copies of all the runic texts the Hogwarts library carried. Besides, she knew Hugo practically lived in the library, and she didn't want to infringe upon his space. Or put up with the whispering that was sure to accompany her presence.

Mosey popped into the room. Hermione jumped, upsetting a stack of books. Mosey twisted her hands in her tea towel. "Missus Weasley, I am sorry to be startling you, but Headmaster Snape is requesting that you meet him in his office for dinner, since you have not called for dinner yet."

She glanced at her watch. Eight. How was it possibly eight o'clock already?

"Please call me Hermione, Mosey. I'll go to his office directly. Could you owl these letters for me?" She handed over the letters and restacked her books.

Mosey took the letters with a grin, and Hermione found herself smiling in reply. Mosey asked, "What is you wanting to eat for dinner?"

Oh. She had forgotten that staying at Hogwarts would bring a welcome departure from digging through the fridge before giving up and getting take-away. Her stomach growled. "Could I have shepherd's pie?"

Mosey nodded vigorously, and Hermione grinned as she left her room for the Headmaster's office. When she arrived, she found Snape sitting at a square table, roast and veg in front of him with a steaming shepherd's pie on her side. The elves were certainly efficient. And considerably faster than the Indian restaurant in the village.

Snape seemed to favour silence over dinner conversation. This shouldn't have been a surprise, really. It wasn't as if he had a reputation for social niceties, and Hermione tried to recall if she ever remembered him chatting with the other professors during mealtimes when she was a student. Still, it wasn't an awkward silence; he wasn't glaring at her or anything.

She was finishing her last bite when Snape startled her. "So, how is your research progressing? Do you have any theories on what has happened to Scorpius?"

Hermione took a sip of water. "I spent most of the day gathering resources and drafting a plan for how to proceed. And I don't have any theories. It wouldn't be proper research protocol to approach this with a theory in mind."

Snape snorted. "That line would be more convincing if you hadn't sat up three inches taller after I asked you the question."

She forced herself to remember that this Severus Snape, the one she knew in her adult life, considered himself rather clever when he managed to get under her skin. She ignored the barb and continued, "I'm still trying to narrow down the time in which the room was created and its exact purpose."

Mosey popped in and began clearing the table. "Will you be having coffee, Headmaster?"

"Yes, Mosey. Thank you," Severus answered before gesturing for Hermione to continue her progress update.

"The spells I've cast don't indicate any signs of spectral activity or curses. It's possible that Scorpius activated a ward that dissipated once it was triggered. But my experience and the layering of the runes within the chamber lead me to believe that something within the room attacked Scorpius. That room is protecting something."

Snape grimaced and grabbed the coffee pot that Mosey had delivered, pouring a cup of rich, dark roast into both their mugs. "I don't suppose there's any chance this will proceed quickly."

"Only if I get lucky or the Ministry sends me a fleet of interns to aid with the translation. The number of runes in that room is staggering." She braced herself for the next exchange. Snape was not going to take it well. "I do need to ask you to grant me permission to open the Chamber of Secrets."

It was Snape's turn to sit up taller. "Really, Mrs Weasley. No theories? Mysterious underground chamber that's involved in a student attack. It must be Slytherin's fault, of course."

Hermione ignored his use of her formal name. Only Snape could make something as simple as a name into an insult. "Severus Snape, I am not laying the blame anywhere, but yes, the Chamber of Secrets naturally came to mind. It's an underground Hogwarts room that's opened by speaking a coded phrase. I just want to have a look and see if there are any similarities in the two chambers. One of my colleagues led the research on the chamber following the war, and I'd like to know if I should contact him to see if his research might save me some time."

Snape's feathers seemed to unruffle a bit. "Very well. Owl Potter and I'll arrange for access to the chamber. Seeing as that particular toilet was only used for nefarious purposes." Snape's stare bored into her, as if she would feel guilty for mischief from twenty years prior. "We've warded it so that students cannot use it."

"Thank you, Headmaster." She relaxed into her seat, sipping the coffee. She'd have to ask Mosey to deliver this brew in the mornings. It was divine, and Hermione suspected it was considerably stronger than what she'd had that morning. Perhaps Snape was immune to caffeine at this point. She'd be up half the night. She drank anyway. It was too wonderful to turn down.

She watched as Snape closed his eyes, inhaling the coffee's aroma. He smiled ever so slightly before he took a sip and opened his eyes to find her watching. She raised her mug in salute. "Is there somewhere in the castle where I could set up my research materials? There isn't a desk in my quarters, and I'd rather not use the library."

"Not looking to wrestle students away from the tables by the rune section?" Snape asked, looking smug at his barb.

"I'm not looking forward to carting Ministry-regulated texts all over the castle and wasting time setting things up every day," Hermione retorted.

"Touché, Mrs Weasley. You may use my conference room if you like. I'll have the gargoyle grant you access to the room whenever you need it."

Well, that was a bit more generous than the abandoned classroom she'd expected. "Won't you be needing access to it?"

Snape let out a short bark of laughter. "Hardly. You can't imagine that I call meetings on a regular basis."

"Oh, I thought that perhaps with what's happened to Scorpius, you might have a more heavily scheduled calendar than usual." She'd expected he'd be updating the Board of Governors, at least, with news of her progress.

Snape's posture stiffened. "Draco has asked that we keep the situation as private as possible."

Hermione tried to keep her jaw from dropping. "That's... rather generous of him."

"You may not believe this, Mrs Weasley, but Draco is a good man. And he seemed to calm down quite a bit when I told him you had abandoned your work at the Ministry to work on this case full time."

Hermione stared at him for a moment. "That was rather kind of you, Headmaster. I was just returning to work. It wasn't as if I had a project to abandon."

Snape shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, well, Draco needn't know that. My exaggeration got him off both our backs. More importantly, it will keep Astoria from nagging me."

Hermione snorted. Nothing like a Slytherin to kill at least three birds with one stone. And Snape probably had another three objectives tucked away that he simply wasn't admitting.

Snape continued, "Besides, as a school governor, Draco understands what would happen if word was to get out that a pure-blood had been attacked, purportedly by the children of war heroes. We've made significant inroads at improving relations between houses within the school, and we like to think that some of that tolerance has begun to trickle out into the rest of the world. A setback on that front is to be avoided."

Hermione wasn't sure what to say. She was rather glad not to have her children at the centre of public spectacle, but she found herself chafing at the way Snape politicised it. He was right, though. There were some who would perceive it in those terms. She wondered if that fundamental cause of the war would ever be resolved.

She looked up to find him glaring at her. Wonderful. She'd waited too long to respond and now he thought her a complete prat.

"Mrs Weasley, I must say good night. I have some preparations to complete for tomorrow's classes," Snape said.

Hermione thought Snape could have been a bit more creative in his brush-off. It was hard to believe that someone who had taught for forty years still had significant preparation to do for his classes.

She looked up to find Snape studying her. "We're covering tailoring potions for the magic level of the recipient. I need to review the potions that the students have selected for their experimentation."



"That's rather advanced," she said, realising too late how idiotic she sounded. She was rather jealous of her kids. She'd have done anything to learn such theory at their ages, not to mention its application.

"Yes, it is advanced. And that is why I need to prepare for it. Good night." He gestured for her to see herself out.

Still a bit shell-shocked from the abrupt dismissal, Hermione returned to her room. She flicked her wand at her door and heard the lock click. Trudging inside, her spirits perked a bit at seeing the bright green parchment she recognised as Jerry's. At least the WPN was working. After dealing with a cranky Snape, she wasn't sure she had the patience to wrestle a cranky network as well.

She flopped onto the bed and toed off her shoes, Summoning a pair of pyjamas and wincing as soon as the spell left her mouth. Dammit. The pyjamas had been packed on the bottom. She tore her eyes away from staring at the canopy and turned her head. The *Accio* had performed with all its usual grace. Her clothes were scattered in a two-foot radius around the suitcase.

The last of her energy sputtered and died. Her eyes blurred. The stupid clothes could wait until the morning. For a moment, she considered changing into her pyjamas using a spell, the way she'd done when the kids were little and too exhausted or contrary to dress by hand. She sighed. She wasn't *that* pathetic.

Groaning, she hoisted herself off the bed and grumbled her way over to the bathroom, dragging the pyjamas behind her.

With her nightly regimen of dental care completed, she crawled back onto the bed. Curses. She'd forgotten to grab her book from her night table at home. Flipping through the rest of the post, she pulled out a letter from Harry. Thank Merlin he had responded more promptly than he usually did. She glared at the letter, imagining Snape's commentary if they'd had to wait for the Great Harry Potter to respond to his fan mail so she could proceed with her research. Settling into bed, she propped herself against the headboard and unfolded the parchment.

One paragraph in, the crease between her brows had vanished.

Two paragraphs later, she found herself grinning.

And by the fifth paragraph, with its gentle reminders not to let Snape get under her skin and colourful examples of how to translate Snape's invective, she was laughing out loud.

Harry's letter had pierced through the dark cloud that had settled over her when she left Snape's office. Yawning, she penned a quick reply and spelled off the lights.

## The Conference Room

*Chapter 3 of 8*

When Rose and Hugo Weasley are involved in a prank that sends Scorpius Malfoy to the Hospital Wing, Hermione is summoned to Hogwarts. What she finds there calls for investigation.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings in this story are lovingly borrowed from J.K. Rowling.

Special thanks to DreamyDragon\_73 and AnnieTalbot for their incredible beta work. This story originally posted at the sshg\_exchange. I'll be posting new chapters every three days or so.

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Harry,

*Yes, Saturday would work perfectly. I'll meet you at the Three Broomsticks for lunch at 11:30, and then we'll head back to the castle.*

*Thank you for the remedial course in Snapish. I'd forgotten that 'get the hell out of my office' translates to 'I want you to have my babies.' Rose and Hugo will be overjoyed to hear their Headmaster wishes to provide them with a half-sibling.*

Love,

Hermione

*P.S. Stop laughing! The poor boy's unconscious!*

~\*~

After another trip to the chamber to sketch the patterns on the walls, Hermione made the trek back to the conference room in Snape's office to find a note on the table from him. She was free to store her books on shelves he'd cleared, and Mosey would be popping in at eleven to inquire about lunch.

Setting up camp at the far end of the conference table, she unloaded the box of books from her handbag and began sorting the volumes. Bless Snape for clearing the bookshelves. One shelf for texts of last resort. Another for tomes she likely wouldn't need for several days. She stacked the remainder on the table in front of her, resolving to spend a few minutes prioritising which of the remaining texts would yield the most information. Another five books on the shelf, and she was finally ready to begin digging through the volumes.

Pulling out her sketches from the chamber, she noted several questions for investigation and opened *Runes Through the Ages*. Her quill scribbled the occasional note, but the search was, not surprisingly, slow going. However, one thing was increasingly clear. It was uncommon, indeed, for someone to invoke this level of power. One had to be desperate or obsessed to go to these lengths.

She heard Snape coming and going several times during the morning and was frankly surprised that he left her alone. Every time she heard footsteps, she half expected him to loom over whatever source she was reading, pointing out something or other that she'd missed. She tried to tell herself she wasn't disappointed.

She was noting a promising resource regarding runic spell layering in Aztec burial crypts when Mosey interrupted, asking what Hermione would like for lunch. Lunch ordered, she returned to the text with a smile. She could get used to this. All the joy of research without having to stop for pesky things like leaving the office for lunch with

colleagues or enduring the chatter of the tea cart witch.

Mosey delivered her salad, and Hermione munched while flipping back through the morning's notes, fishing a highlighting quill from her bag. There were several leads to track down. Hopefully the intern would arrive in the next day or so. There was a good bit more than she could cover on her own. As appealing as the idea of non-stop research was, she just didn't have the stamina any longer. Scorpius's condition notwithstanding, there wasn't any immediate threat. The chamber was warded. Theoretically, the students were safe. So there really wasn't cause for marathon research sessions.

After lunch, she settled into reading again. She finished *Runes Through the Ages*. She read the entirety of Baker's unbelievably dry and boring *Ancient Runes for Death and Destruction*. She skimmed over another three texts and then settled into Burlingson's *Rites with Runes*.

She looked up again when the scones flared to life, the sun beginning to sink behind the canopy of the Forbidden Forest. At some point, Mosey must have cleared her lunch plate and left tea. Thank Merlin for Warming Charms. It was a bit late for tea, but she really wanted to finish the text before she stopped for the day. The tea and scones would keep her until she stopped for a late dinner.

She'd skimmed through the relevant chapters in two more texts when Snape entered the room. She looked up to find him smirking at her.

Taking in the line of books and parchment that arced around her, he said, "Somehow, I suspect you'd have neglected meals entirely if I hadn't scheduled Mosey to stop by."

She made to protest, but Snape waved away her objection. "Mosey is accustomed to serving me for precisely the same reason. Are you ready to stop for dinner? I promised Draco an update on your progress tomorrow morning. If there is anything you require, he has offered to provide any texts contained in the Malfoy library, or failing that, the funds to procure any necessary volume."

"Dinner sounds good. I think I'm at a stopping point for the day." Besides, if she didn't stop now, she'd still be sitting here at midnight, wondering how the time had gone by so quickly.

"Any dinner requests?" Snape asked.

She shook her head. "Whatever the students are having is fine. I'm not picky at the moment."

Snape summoned Mosey, and Hermione watched the interaction between them. Now that she was paying attention, Hermione could see Mosey's affection towards Snape. It wasn't anything obvious. Snape certainly wouldn't tolerate the obsequious devotion shown by most house-elves. But the warmth in Mosey's eyes was unmistakable, and Snape responded to each of her questions with courteousness, making Hermione wonder how many many humans had experienced the same from him. It seemed Mosey knew how to interpret Snape's gruff dismissal and left the room, beaming, to retrieve their meal.

With Mosey gone, Hermione realised she had no reason to be staring at Snape and shifted her gaze to the conference table. It could do with a bit of tidying, and she set about sorting her parchments and moving the books she'd already reviewed to the bookshelves. Snape had left the room when she next glanced up, and once she returned her research materials to a state one might be able to call orderly, she left the conference room to join him in his office.

He sat at the same table that had been set up the night before. This time, two matching plates of lamb roast, green beans, and roasted potatoes sat at each place. Hermione took her spot, smiling. Nothing could quite compare to a house-elf prepared roast. Even her Mum's wasn't as good.

Tonight Snape was far more talkative during their meal, and he seemed to have entirely recovered from his snit the night before. Either his day had put him in high spirits or he was challenging himself to ask her something every time she put a forkful of food into her mouth. Right. Time to take up the offensive and send questions his direction if she wanted to eat without zapping her food with Warming Charms.

"So, Severus, what keeps you busy aside from your Headmaster's duties and your teaching?" she asked as Severus took a bite of roast. She innocently followed suit as Severus chewed.

"What makes you think that doesn't keep me busy enough?" he replied, reaching for his water glass.

"Severus, for years you brewed Potions, published research, taught all seven years, and spied for the Order. Simply running a school can hardly be enough to keep you occupied."

She watched as he cut his green beans into identical slices while answering, "I review submissions for Potions Quarterly, and I'm serving on the Council for Development of Higher Wizarding Education."

Snape as editor. Did any research succeed in making it to publication? Lucky for her there was little, if any, crossover between runes and potions. Publishing academic papers was difficult enough without someone as picky as Snape involved. Although, now that she thought of it, Dedalus Stewart, editor-in-chief of *Symbology Subsidia* might be even worse.

There'd been a time in her fourth year when she'd been rather enamoured with semicolons. Snape had seemingly made it his mission to break her habit of overusing them. After catching her sniffing over Snape's margin comment that only pretentious swots used semicolons when a period would suffice, Ron had teased her mercilessly for being upset about punctuation, asking if she was going to start the Society for the Protection of Utterly Ridiculous Things.

Dedalus Stewart was on a similar crusade against the em dash. Her colleagues had a theory that using an em dash was a guaranteed rejection.

Perhaps the Council was a safer topic.

"And how many decades will it be until we have an institution of higher learning on British soil?" Whoops. Perhaps her question had been a bit too sarcastic given that Snape worked on the Council.

"Actually, I have hope that we'll break ground on a facility in my lifetime. We'll be accepting our first year of students next autumn, utilising the former Middleton estates as our temporary facilities," Snape replied, his smug grin swallowed by his next bite of lamb.

She nearly dropped her utensils. "You're joking. And everyone has agreed to recognise the program?"

"There are still some individual masters who refuse to participate. The pure-bloods' resistance to change is nothing compared to the apprenticeship system."

"So, what has finally pushed the issue?"

"They can no longer keep up with the demands of the population increase," Severus said, pausing to cast a Refilling Charm on his water glass. "Also, I believe the Minister was unhappy with the seven-year waiting list for a Charms apprenticeship for his granddaughter."

Hermione shook her head, concealing her grin. "And that was pure coincidence, of course."

"Why would you suspect otherwise?" Severus asked, his innocent smile looking anything but.

"A seven-year waiting list? How did you even manage that?"

"I'm quite sure I don't know what you're talking about. It's perfectly natural for Potions candidates to seek co-mastery in charms," Severus said as he turned his knife

towards dissecting his roast.

Hermione laughed. "Won't it be rather obvious when enrolment numbers in the Charms program don't support your little ruse?"

"Actually, it seems the long wait for apprenticeship programs has discouraged applications across the board. The university was at capacity within three weeks of announcing our autumn schedule."

Hermione wondered what other, world-changing news she'd missed in the past year. It was hard to believe something this significant had escaped her notice. She took a drink of water to dislodge the lump in her throat. "Congratulations, Severus, that's an amazing accomplishment for the council."

"Thank you," he replied with a nod.

They lapsed into silence for several minutes, Hermione thinking wistfully about how much easier it might have been to attend university. An apprenticeship had been hard to sell to her parents. It had taken ages to convince her father that apprenticeship didn't mean she was going into a trade of some sort. He'd accepted that as her choice, of course, but she could see his relief three years later when she'd shown him her certificate of mastery and the immediate job offer from the Department of Mysteries. Not that working for the government had gone over much better than the thought of his daughter working in magical construction. Comparisons to Scully and Mulder had finally managed to stop him grousing about it.

Hermione finished the last of her dinner and broke the silence. "Thank you again for the use of the conference room and the shelves."

"It was no trouble. Besides, it's to everyone's benefit that you work as efficiently as possible."

She stifled a grin as she recalled Harry's translation guide. It was entirely possible Snape had just proposed marriage. Or perhaps that was Snapish for 'I'm horribly lonely and require your company to rescue me from a pit of doom.' She couldn't quite recall.

"And how is your research progressing?" Snape inquired.

"Well, I covered a good bit of ground today, but I don't have all that much to report yet. I believe I've narrowed it down to three alphabets in use between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Since the runes were still evolving at that time, it can be a challenge to pinpoint the precise alphabet used. While it's too early to say for certain, I think this evidence points towards involvement by one of the Founders or their immediate successors."

"The Founders? Interesting, though I suppose not altogether surprising. And have you heard back from Mr Potter yet?"

Hermione wondered if she'd ever heard Snape say Harry's name with less vitriol. It almost sounded... pleasant. "Harry's meeting me for lunch on Saturday, and we'll explore the Chamber of Secrets after that."

A question seemed to hover on the tip of Snape's tongue.

"Yes?" she asked.

Snape seemed to be considering his words carefully. Hermione wondered if she ought to be afraid. "I'm surprised you haven't taken a meal with Rose or Hugo yet."

"I'm trying not to interfere with their lives here. Having your mum around at school isn't the height of cool. And I overheard murmurings about Rose having something to do with Scorpius being in the Hospital Wing. I suppose they have enough to worry about without having to keep their mum company. Or making people wonder why I'm around."

Snape smirked. "Ah. So their cold shoulder when you confronted them was effective."

Hermione glared at him. "It's not that. It's.... I wasn't sure it was allowed," she finished weakly.

"Nonsense. Invite them to tea, if you don't wish to distract them from their schedules. I believe the Gryffindor team holds practices on Saturday, so they should both be free on Sunday."

"I'll do that..." she trailed off, wondering why Snape was intervening. "Well, I really need to begin tackling the mountain of paperwork I brought with me from the office."

Snape stared at her in disbelief. "You have research to do, and you're wasting time on administrative drivel?"

"Busy work, Snape. It's very freeing to the mind. Did you abandon brewing during the war?" she asked, her eyebrow arching.

"I concede your point. Well, let yourself out when you're finished."

Hermione returned to the conference room, setting her parchment and books to the side and withdrawing her box of paperwork and inbox. The rhythm of reviewing patent applications, spell mishaps, and the other miscellaneous reports that meandered into her office was a familiar balm. Mr Klandestin had tried to delegate this task to the interns, but Hermione fought to keep it. It hardly made sense to most, but some of her best ideas over the years had come to her during the routine task. Sometimes, just the freedom to let her mind wander without constraints was the key. Other times, text leapt off a form and sparked a line of thinking she'd never have considered otherwise.

Tonight, however, the mundane task saw her mind wandering to Snape. He was... different than she'd expected. Not that she'd walked into the situation with specific expectations. Oh, he still maintained walls about him, but it seemed as if he'd scaled back the defensiveness considerably. A wall and a moat remained rather than trip wards, anti-Apparition wards, and a ring of Devil's Snare.

Two hours of chipping away at the stack of yellow and maroon forms made a smallish dent in the pile of parchments. And her mind was sufficiently muddled. Time to call it a night. She tidied the paperwork, setting it to the side of the room, and scrawled some notes to pursue in the morning. She doused the sconces and left the room.

Snape was sitting at his desk when she left the room, his feet propped up and a book in hand. He didn't look up as she left, and she ignored the tiny sting of disappointment that they'd spent the evening a room apart. As she descended the staircase, she tried to shake off the frown that settled onto her features.

"Goodnight," she muttered under her breath as she stepped off the last stair, nearly crashing into someone. "Minerva!"

"Hermione, Severus mentioned you were here during this morning's staff meeting. I'd hoped I might run into you. Will you walk with me? It's my night for curfew patrol."

Hermione nodded and together they began walking the corridors. "It's been ages since I've seen you. How is Hogwarts treating you these days?"

Minerva gestured for them to take a right at the next corridor before replying, "As well as it always has. Though I'm starting to slow down a bit, I'm afraid. It's my first year without Head of House duties."

"I can't believe you maintained that post for as long as you did, especially with your Deputy Headmistress duties."

Minerva laughed. "Well, my duties as a deputy have lightened considerably with Severus at the helm of the school. As much as I loved Albus, he wasn't exactly well organised."

"I'm certain that's an understatement," Hermione said, wondering what the man's office must have looked like when he couldn't coordinate his wardrobe. "And how is it, working for Headmaster Snape? Weren't you rivals when you were both teachers?"

"Severus and I get along rather well. And he tolerates me being an insubordinate subordinate at times, especially when he tries to get my hackles up with empty threats to relocate Gryffindor dormitories to the Forbidden Forest or similar rot."

Hermione smiled, thinking that such teasing sounded quite familiar.

"Severus has been wonderful for the school. I simply wouldn't have the skill or patience to navigate the politics like he does."

Hermione laughed. "I don't believe I would have ever used the word 'patient' to describe him."

Minerva directed them down the corridor that led in the direction of the Ravenclaw dormitories. "Oh, he still gets a bit touchy in most situations. Thank Merlin he's not teaching the younger students any longer. But he really is in his element when managing the demands of the Board of Governors or the Ministry. All that Slytherin cunning and ambition, you know."

"I don't believe I've ever had the pleasure of seeing him employ that skill of managing demands. I've only seen its ugly second cousin 'refusing helpful suggestions'," Hermione said, trying to keep the bitterness out of her words.

Minerva pursed her lips then frowned at Hermione in that unmistakable manner that left any Gryffindor ducking their head in chagrin. "Never allow him to make you think that, Hermione. He'd never admit it, but he's valued your input a great deal. There have been significant changes to both the History of Magic and Muggle Studies curricula since you've become involved."

Hermione had just swallowed her disbelief and begun to reply when Minerva cut her off.

"One moment, Hermione." Minerva cleared her throat. "Mister McLaggen. I believe the Headmaster told you that if you were caught out past curfew again, there would be serious consequences."

The boy mumbled something unintelligible.

"One hundred points from Gryffindor and a month's detention with Professor Longbottom. If you're out past curfew again, you'll lose your spot on the Quidditch team and Hogsmeade privileges for the rest of the year. Now back to your dormitory."

"Yes, Professor McGonagall," he muttered before departing.

Minerva's expression remained stern until the boy was out of sight when she broke into a grin. "That never grows old."

Hermione laughed. "And here I thought Snape was the only one who made sport of finding students out of bounds."

"That was before he became Headmaster and made an annual contest out of which staff could nab the most students. McLaggen just put me ahead of Professor Longbottom."

"Minerva! I'm shocked that you would rub your victory in Neville's face like that."

"Oh, you quite misunderstand, Hermione. Neville's got a crop of corpse flowers in greenhouse three that are due to bloom next week. He'll appreciate having a student to tend them. Sometimes even a Bubblehead Charm isn't enough."

Hermione chuckled. Her aunt had once taken her to the botanical gardens in Kew Gardens when its corpse flower was in bloom. The smell was so foul, she wouldn't have been surprised if you could see Thestrals afterwards. Neville was lucky Minerva had netted him a minion for the task.

They continued walking the corridors, discussing the shortcomings of the current Ministry administration, the latest in Transfiguration research, and Minerva's continued campaign to increase the number of students pursuing Animagus training. Eventually, their route took them past the Room of Requirement.

Hermione stopped Minerva, asking, "Could we stop here for a moment?"

"Certainly, Hermione. You know, it hasn't worked since the war. You can still gain access if you concentrate on seeing the room, but the magic is gone. It's rather heartbreaking. This was always such a special part of the castle."

Hermione searched the wall across from the door, finding the runes she knew would be there. She sketched the runes and tucked her parchment into her bag. "This is fascinating, Minerva. I believe the power behind the room lies in a series of runic inscriptions."

"Is that what you have discovered in the dungeons?"

She nodded. "It is. It's strange. There's nothing published on these rooms at Hogwarts. The Room of Requirement gets a passing mention in *Hogwarts: a History*, but it seems no one has researched them in depth."

"The school has always guarded its secrets, Hermione."

Despite herself, Hermione shivered. "Do you mind if we go inside, Minerva? Will I be keeping you from your rounds?"

"Not at all. I've finished most of my patrol already."

Hermione paced in the corridor, thinking about the room. At length the door opened.

The room was barren. Nothing Minerva could have said would have adequately prepared her. There had always been *something* here. To see the room empty... it cut in ways she couldn't express in words. A swath of new stonework cut through the southern wall like a fresh gash.

Hermione sighed. She needed to put her nostalgia aside and observe the room for what it was today and examine the evidence that had been preserved.

Except where the middle section of the southern wall had collapsed, runes were carved into the bottom two stones around the perimeter of the room. Hermione raised her wand to visually trace the path they took. Unless the pattern changed significantly in the chunk that was missing, the two strands of runes formed a Möbius strip. The power behind that unending chain perhaps explained why the room was able to accomplish so much with so little rune carving.

Hermione pulled some parchment from her ubiquitous handbag and sketched a sample of the runes. At least upon initial examination, the alphabet looked similar. But the simplicity of the runes was striking compared to the complexity of the chamber in the dungeons. She shook her head. These two strands of runes were able to execute something as complex as the Room of Requirement. That hardly boded well for whatever lurked in the rune-covered chamber in the dungeons.

Minerva stood by the doorway in silence, observing Hermione as she recorded the information. Hermione decided to cut her information gathering short. She could come back later if she needed. There was no reason to keep Minerva waiting.

Hermione stuffed her parchment back into her bag. "Thank you, Minerva. I think I've gathered enough."

They left the room and began walking the remainder of Minerva's patrol. Hermione tried to map out their location in the castle relative to her rooms. She sighed. It had been too long since she'd walked these halls. Thank Merlin Harry was bringing the map tomorrow.

"Why is it that the staff still relies on foot patrols? I'm surprised you haven't duplicated Harry's map."

Minerva smiled. "For that matter, we could simply charm the portraits not to admit or release students after curfew or place Tracking Charms on their wands. However, one of our roles is to teach students responsibility and the consequences of their actions. This requires offering them the freedom to make poor judgements and face the outcome. They wouldn't take the risk if we caught them all the time."

"I suppose that's quite true. Though the threat of capture never seemed to be enough to dissuade Harry. Nor the threat of censure by his house mates." Hermione sighed. "Or mortal peril. Hopefully the students don't give you as much grief as we did."

Minerva's laughter echoed through the corridor. "No one has managed to give us as much grief as the three of you. That lack of consequences for Mr Potter's after-hours escapades used to frustrate Severus immensely. He would berate Albus endlessly about the importance of teaching responsibility to someone with Mr Potter's levels of power and influence. It's rather fortunate that Mr Potter seemed to pick up those lessons elsewhere."

Hermione fumbled for an adequate response, but their route soon deposited them outside Hermione's room.

Minerva embraced Hermione. "It was wonderful to catch up with you, Hermione. Perhaps we can take tea together while you're here."

They said their good nights, and Hermione turned to find a stack of parchment at the foot of her bed. She sighed. Things at the castle were easier in many respects, but she was beginning to miss the routine of home.

She'd have to tell Mosey to deliver the post to the conference room. She flipped through the letters, checking to see if there was anything personal. Reading work correspondence immediately before bed required Heartburn and Headache Potions she'd not thought to pack with her. Especially if the correspondence involved Hendrickson. Idiot intra-office politics from the Slytherin contingent.

She pulled a note from her mother from the stack, shoving the rest into her bag for the morning. She grinned at her mother's excitement as Spring took a firmer hold. Ah, and there it was, the invitation to bring the kids to Australia for the Christmas hols. Before dousing the lights, she scribbled notes to Rose and Hugo, inviting them to Sunday tea.

## The Chamber of Secrets

*Chapter 4 of 8*

When Rose and Hugo Weasley are involved in a prank that sends Scorpius Malfoy to the Hospital Wing, Hermione is summoned to Hogwarts. What she finds there calls for investigation.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings in this story are lovingly borrowed from J.K. Rowling.

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*Mrs Malfoy,*

*Sending countless owls will not expedite my progress. I have and will continue to pass on relevant information to Headmaster Snape. I encourage you to contact him if you require further information. Additional inquiries will only delay my progress in determining a solution to your son's ailment.*

*Hermione Weasley*

*Unspeakable, Department of Mysteries*

~\*~

Hermione rubbed the ink spot that covered the side of her hand. She remembered the days when such a stain was permanent. It was almost nice to have the stain back. Almost.

She twisted in the chair to unkink her back, the cracks and pops rattling through the conference room. Groaning, she looked at the stack of notes she'd taken. She didn't want to contemplate how many pages or words. Too many. Far too many, given that she still didn't have a clear understanding of what exactly she was searching for.

She'd visited the room three more times, scribbling down different sentences from portions of the room. Fortunately many of the phrases repeated, so it would save her a bit of translation work, but it was nauseating to think about how many individual runes the room's creator had etched into the walls. Carving into stone, even with the aid of spellwork, was no small feat. And there was no simple way of editing a mark once it was written, so precision was a necessity. The tedious attention required to plan and carve the room bordered on obsession.

Yesterday, she'd had roughly six hours of optimism when one of the texts she'd reviewed had indicated that translation of the text should lead to a more refined classification of the room's purpose. So she'd begun transliterating the northern wall. She'd nearly wept with joy after transliterating the first sentence to reveal Latin. If she'd had to translate Old or Middle English she might have gone spare.

In the end, her hand had ached from hours of frantic scribbling, and she'd rejected only two possibilities. The room was not designed to hide fugitives from a foreign invasion or facilitate connection with the astral plane. Not precisely helpful information.

Her eyes crossed as she looked at the list of additional sources she'd pulled from Burlingson's text. She desperately needed to narrow the field of her research soon. Otherwise she'd never finish. Especially if Mr Klandestin kept dragging his feet on those interns.

She cast a Tempus Charm. Thank Merlin, it was nearly eleven. She grabbed her cloak from behind the door. The weather was just beginning to turn, so the cloak might not be necessary, but if the day turned overcast, she would need it. As she left the castle, she inhaled the autumn air. This was her favourite time of year. The days were crisp but filled with enough sunshine to warm you if you found a spot in the sun. The nights were chilly, but lacked the bite of the cold winter air.

The path to Hogsmeade crunched underneath her. Thank Circe, Harry had agreed to meet her for lunch. Much as she enjoyed, surprisingly, Snape's company, the castle

was isolated. Even for her. And she suspected that the change of scenery would do her research good.

She walked into the Three Broomsticks and spied Harry seated at a table in the back. She grinned as he looked up and their eyes met.

Harry grabbed her in a tight hug before she could remove her cloak. "Hermione! I was beginning to think that I'd have to storm the castle to find you."

She grinned at him. "What can I say? There were books and research involved. I had to pry myself off the chair with an Unsticking Charm." She hugged him again. "Oh, Harry it's so good to see you."

Harry signalled to Alfred Cattermole, the Three Broomsticks' new proprietor, and grinned as they settled into their chairs. "So how is the castle? I haven't been there since James was a second year."

"Some days I expect to see myself walking through the hall, Harry. Like some Time-Turner accident gone horribly wrong. In some ways, it seems like the castle hasn't changed at all, even if I'm researching areas that weren't accessible when we were there."

"I can't believe we missed exploring a part of the castle. I thought we'd covered every inch by the time we left." He took a drink of the ale sitting in front of him, smiling again when he finished. Merlin, it was still a shock to see Harry Potter with the beginning of crow's feet nipping at his eyes.

"It's really fascinating. This new wing of the castle... Severus said it was completely walled off from the rest of the Hogwarts. They still aren't sure why the original wards fell," Hermione said.

Harry leaned forward, elbows on the table. "So have you explored the rest of that part of the castle? Are there any other hidden rooms?"

"None that I've found. Please tell me you remembered to bring the Marauder's Map."

Harry stood and withdrew the folded parchment from his back pocket. He handed it over and began to ask another question, stopping when Alfred approached.

They ordered their lunch, and Harry glanced around. "Muffled." The noise of the dining room dulled to a fuzzy din. "So, is Scorpius still unconscious?"

"He is. Nothing's changed at all. He seems perfectly safe and healthy, except for the horns."

The serious look on Harry's face evaporated as a smile fought to emerge. Despite herself, Hermione found herself doing the same. "Stop it, Harry. It's not funny."

Harry picked up his ale. "Oh, you're wrong there, Hermione. It's hilarious. I just wish I'd managed to do the same to Malfoy when we were at school."

"Harry!"

"What? The git deserved it."

"Oh, and the Sectumsempra wasn't enough?"

Suitably chastened, Harry mumbled something under his breath.

"You're just lucky that Lucius Malfoy wasn't free to take you to task for casting that spell. And, yes, I know Draco was about to cast the Cruciatus. It wouldn't have stopped Lucius Malfoy, though. If Draco's behaviour after Scorpius was cursed is anything to go by, Lucius Malfoy would have taken your head to Voldemort on a platter, regardless that Voldemort wanted you for himself."

Harry looked shocked. "You must be joking."

"Harry, don't act so amazed. It's pretty obvious that Draco is very protective of Scorpius. You should have seen him the day it happened."

"Did he threaten you?" Harry looked as if he were about to leap from his chair and hunt Draco down.

"Harry, calm down. He didn't threaten me. But he made it quite clear that he was more concerned about his son's well-being than..." She paused, a frown passing over her.

"What?"

"Well, I probably shouldn't say this, but there's a reason why you haven't seen anything about the story in the *Prophet*... Draco asked Snape if they could keep the story quiet."

"That makes no sense at all. This? From the boy who cried for his mum after a scratch from a Hippogriff? You must be joking."

"He said he didn't want to stir up all the old trouble between pure-bloods and Slytherins and Muggle"

"Now I know you're joking."

"Harry, he's on the Board of Governors."

"Just like his father."

She glared at him. "And he truly seems to have the best interests of the school in mind."

"He's a Slytherin. I guarantee you he doesn't have anyone's best interests in mind but his own."

"Harry! How can you be so prejudiced!"

"Oh, come off it, Hermione. The only time Malfoy ever did what was right was when it saved his own hide. The same with all of them. The only reason why they've behaved after the war is because they know they don't have the upper hand. Malfoy's probably just waiting to see if you'll muck something up so that he can reveal some Gryffindor plot to discredit and ruin all the remaining Slytherin families."

"How can you say that? You know, Harry, *you know* the pressures that he was under during the war. Hell, you testified on his behalf. Or have you forgotten?"

"Of course I haven't forgotten that I testified for him." Harry stopped mid-tirade to finish the rest of his ale. "Hermione, you just... you don't see it. Time and again, the Auror office has to investigate these people. And it's the same thing over and over. They're all power hungry, conniving..."

"Harry, they can't all be bad. And I think you're rather forgetting that you have to track criminals who hailed from the other houses too."

Harry stared at her. "If I'm not watching my back in the field, then I'm trying to stay two steps ahead of the ones in the office."

"Well, what about Snape?"

"What do you mean, 'What about Snape?'"

She stared at him blankly. "Where do I start? The number of times he saved your life, risking his own. The way *you* fought to redeem his opinion in the public's eye... even though Snape told you to bugger off."

Harry snorted. "Bugger off is putting it politely. Though now I know what that translates to," he said with a lopsided grin. "And Snape is the glittering exception. He learned about Voldemort's brand of betrayal early enough that he was smart enough not to trust the scaly bastard. But it's disgusting how everyone, even the Slytherins, point to him as some sort of patron saint."

The exchange was making Hermione increasingly uncomfortable. She didn't particularly trust the Slytherins in her department, and Merlin knew that despite the respect she'd gained for Malfoy in the past week she still didn't trust him. But she had to work with them, and carrying that sort of hate and suspicion around didn't exactly make for a pleasant working environment.

Hermione bit back the comment that Harry had nearly ended up in Slytherin and that he still exhibited the qualities that would have earned him a spot there. He just hadn't needed ambition during his life post-war. Whether he liked it or not, he didn't need it to get what he wanted. But she'd seen enough of his family to know that he could be as manipulative as any of the Slytherins he was accusing. What was worse, if pressed he usually had some perfectly righteous rationale.

She saw Alfred approaching out of the corner of her eye and cast a discreet *Finite Incantatem* to cancel the muffling spell, thankful that the food would curtail any additional uncomfortable discussion.

The smell of fish and chips tickled her nostrils. For all the wonderful food that the elves cooked, nothing compared to the Three Broomsticks' fish and chips. She dumped a generous amount of vinegar on her fish.

"I'm surprised to hear you defending Snape, Hermione. Hasn't he resisted every educational reform you've tried to push through?"

For the love of Merlin, she always managed to forget that Harry Potter had a one track mind. She chewed, thinking of how to phrase her response. "He has, but here's the funny thing, Harry. I've noticed that several have been implemented."

At Harry's sceptical expression, she continued, "The changes might not have been as sweeping as the ones I recommended, but... he obviously understands the dynamics of running a school, and it looks like he selected the changes that could be introduced without ripping apart everything that binds the school together..." She stabbed at her fish with her fork. "...which my plans, in retrospect, probably would have done."

Harry was a bit quieter after that. Perhaps he'd finally learned to respect the twitching eyebrow that signalled she was about to lose her temper and begin threatening assorted body parts with physical harm. Hermione asked after Ginny and the kids, who occupied the conversation for the remainder of lunch.

Lunch finished, Harry pushed back his chair and asked, "Well, are you ready to get this nasty bit of business over with?"

She nodded, gathering up her cloak and handbag.

"You know I wouldn't go back there for anyone else, don't you? I opened it once for your co-worker, and that was enough. I didn't even have to go down there then."

She shrugged on her cloak. "I really appreciate it, Harry. I need to see if there are similarities with the chamber I'm researching."

"Effing Salazar Slytherin. You know there will be."

"I'm a researcher, Harry. I can't be biased like that." She slumped when she realized she had stiffened her spine, again, at the accusation.

"Right, Hermione."

Harry waved to Alfred, and they began the trek back to the castle.

"So how's mini-Hermione?"

She considered shoving Harry off the path into the lake. "Hugo is fine."

"Started studying for his O.W.L.s already?" Harry snickered.

"Well, at least he has the good fortune to be in Ravenclaw where it's the normal thing to begin studying fourth year. I'm sure he doesn't miss *the idicule* of his peers."

Harry grinned. "All part of the Gryffindor charm, Hermione."

"He gets enough from his sister, thanks."

"And how is Rosie?"

"I don't know. She's said four words to me since I arrived at Hogwarts." Hermione sighed. "But I'm having tea with both of them tomorrow."

"Give them my love, will you? Rosie's had a hard time of it since Ron died."

Hermione grit her teeth. "I know, Harry. I'm her mum."

"I'm not an idiot. I know you're her mum. She's just... really missing her dad. More than Hugo, I think."

Hermione stopped in her tracks. "Harry, how do you know this?"

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. "She owls me."

"Rose owls you." Hermione blinked back tears.

"She's owed me for a few years..."

Hermione stared at him, blinking.

"I am her godfather."

Hermione began walking towards the school.

"Hermione, come off it."

She stopped again. "Harry, it's fine. I'm... glad she has someone to talk to, but can we please stop talking about this right now? We need to go open the chamber while Snape has the wards down."

She could hear Harry's sigh as he walked past her, and she watched as he climbed the hill, his jaw set. They walked the rest of the path in silence, and it wasn't until the castle was in sight that he said, "Do I need to cast a Notice-Me-Not Charm? Or will the kids still be at lunch?"

"Lunch was served ten minutes ago, so you should be clear."

They entered the castle and were soon standing in a familiar corridor on the second floor. "Ready to greet your biggest fan, Harry?"

Harry groaned. "You're lucky I didn't remember before now. I might not have come."

She laughed as she opened the door, jumping back when she came face to face with Moaning Myrtle.

"Oh, it's you," Myrtle said, pouting. The ghost's expression brightened when she saw Harry. "Oh, Harry! You promised you'd come to see me every year. It's been aaaaaages." Myrtle did a somersault mid-air and floated in front of them with her chin propped on her hands.

"Sorry about that, Myrtle... See, they've closed off the bathroom. I, uh, wasn't sure how to find you."

Myrtle sniffled audibly. "The Saviour of the Wizarding World can't be bothered visiting old friends."

"Myrtle, I'm not at school any longer. I've got a job and a family and a wife and a dog. It's not as if it's exactly convenient for me to come up here."

Myrtle sobbed. "You're married?" She plunged into a toilet. "I'll just go and play with the squid."

Harry groaned.

Hermione chuckled. "See what I mean? Time-Turner accident. Things do not change." With Myrtle out of the way, Hermione opened the first cubicle door.

"Need a bit of privacy there?"

"No, I just want to have a look at the walls and see if there are any carvings in here. Did you know there were runes on the wall across from the Room of Requirement?" Her voice echoed off the cubicle walls.

"Really?" Harry replied, sounding about as interested as if she'd told him the price of bread in Surrey.

"Yes, I think that's how the room worked. The runes outside must have interacted with the runes inside."

"Hunh. Is that why they weren't able to fix things after the war?"

"I think so. One of the walls partially collapsed, and they replaced the stones with fresh ones, afraid that the previous ones were compromised. Of course, if they'd replaced the stones, they surely wouldn't have put them back in the proper placement."

"Now that's a jigsaw puzzle I wouldn't want to do."

She shut the door to the last cubicle and walked to the sinks. Nothing. Not so much as a scratch marred the walls. "Very odd. Well, shall we go to the chamber?"

Harry nodded. "Merlin, it's been ages since I've spoken Parseltongue. I wonder if I still can."

"You might have mentioned this before now."

"Hermione, I'm teasing. I can't speak to snakes at will any more, but I don't think I'll ever be able to forget these words." He shivered.

Harry stared at the snake carved above the tap. He hissed, sending goosebumps up Hermione's arms. The wall yawned open, revealing a passageway she'd hoped to never see again.

"You might want to cast an Impervious Charm on yourself," Harry said before disappearing in the mouth of the entrance.

Hermione cast the charm and tried to quiet the nervousness that nipped at her. She stepped onto the slide and shoved off. The twisting, turning slide shook her lunch, threatening to dislodge it entirely.

Fortunately, the ride ended before her stomach could protest too vigorously. She clutched her stomach as she stood at the bottom of the slide. "It's moments like that which remind me that I'm certainly not seventeen any longer."

Even Harry looked dizzy. "I *do not* remember it being that bad."

"Well, I'd forgotten how utterly creepy this room is." She stared at the enormous statue of Salazar Slytherin, her head cocked to the side. It was a bit incongruous that the other chamber didn't have anything identifying its creator. Slytherin had obviously been rather proud of this particular room. It seemed everywhere she turned in the room there was a snake in sight. She shivered.

She turned her attention to the dark, meandering spot on the floor. "Looks like they've removed the entire Basilisk corpse."

"Hmmm. I wonder what happened to it."

"Potions ingredients. Ministry-regulated of course." She began pacing the perimeter of the chamber. "I thought the runework would be much more obvious. Although... this room was largely constructed to house the Basilisk. Since that was the room's primary purpose, it may not have needed to do much else. Although, I'd expect to see something to at least provide a heat source. You'd think a reptile would need one, and runes could provide that..."

Harry shuffled nervously. "Right, well, this chamber is all but making my scar tingle. What is it you need to do down here?"

"Will you help me look for runes, Harry?"

"Hermione, I wouldn't know a rune if it were inscribed on my forehead."

She stood dumbly for a moment, wondering if Harry's scar was really the rune for sun rather than a lightening bolt. Fascinating. "Just look for markings on the wall, Harry. If you find anything, I'll figure out if it's a rune or not. How about I start to the left of the statue and you start on the right?"

Forty-five minutes later, her shoulder bumped Harry's. "Nothing?"

"Not even half a rune. I didn't see anything."

"The floor?"

Harry nodded. They walked to opposite corners and got to their hands and knees. Twenty minutes later, they met in the centre of the room.

Hermione grumbled, "I supposed I'd better check the ceiling, to be thorough. Will you levitate me? You'll have a better eye for directing my path from the floor."

Harry levitated her, and she hovered six inches from the ceiling as Harry directed her movement.



"Nothing, Harry. You can let me down."

She floated to the floor. Harry mopped sweat from his brow.

"The statue?"

Together they scoured every inch, Harry griping the entire time about Salazar Slytherin and his hubris. Well, not that Harry used the word hubris. His diatribe was a little more... profane than that. Despite her abused eardrums, the search still came up with nothing.

"Thanks for your help, Harry. I'm still rather confused that we didn't find anything." She began walking back towards the passageway, Harry following behind. She stopped. "I wonder if we should move the rocks"

Exasperated, Harry interrupted, "Hermione, if you haven't found anything yet, then you're not going to find anything there, and if I'm going to have the magical strength to get myself back to the top, then I certainly can't levitate boulders."

"Getting a little soft around the middle now that you've entered management?"

"Ha. Bloody. Ha."

Hermione grinned then levitated herself, steering herself up the dark tunnel by feel. She sat panting on the floor as she waited for Harry. She'd just caught her breath when he floated out of the tunnel and flopped next to her.

"Thanks again, Harry. Obviously, I couldn't have investigated the chamber without you."

"I think we might finally be even for the Forest of Dean."

Hermione snorted and stood, offering Harry her hand to help him up. "Nothing could ever make us even for the Forest of Dean." She grinned.

They left the room to find Severus waiting in the corridor. Once the door shut, he began recasting the wards to seal the room.

"Snape, good to see you."

"Potter." His eyes turned to Hermione. "I take it your trip is complete?"

"It is. Other than a dank smell and surprising absence of moss, there were no similarities between the rooms."

Snape's shoulders relaxed ever so slightly. She might have missed it if she hadn't taken tea or meals with him for five days straight. He'd never admit it, but ~~had~~ been worried about a link between the two chambers.

Harry shifted from one foot to the other. "Right. I'm just going to pop by the Gryffindor Common Room." At Snape's raised eyebrow, he continued, "To see my kids, not my fan club. I'm sure the Gryffindors have heard enough stories about how mean a dad I am to tarnish my shine."

Hermione watched Harry's back as he retreated. She wondered what it was that kept her from just waltzing into the Common Room as if she belonged there. Perhaps she needed to intrude more into her daughter's life. Maybe she'd been too optimistic about their progress this past summer.

She was still staring down the corridor when she felt Snape's hand on her shoulder. "Hermione?"

Turning around, she found him eyeing her with a puzzled expression. "Did something happen in the chamber? You seem a bit... off."

Shaking her head, she replied, "No, it's just... it's been a long day, and I'm a bit frustrated to still be lacking a solid direction."

"I see. Well, you've missed tea, and it's nearing dinner time. My office in fifteen minutes?"

"Could we make it thirty? I'd like a few minutes to clean up."

Snape eyed her speculatively.

"I *feel* disgusting."

His eyebrow rose.

She rolled her eyes. "The entrance to the chamber is disgusting and slimy. Despite the Impervious Charm, I feel like I've been swimming in muck. I'll see you in a half hour." She turned on her heel and left for her quarters, ignoring Snape when he called her name.

A half hour and one glorious shower later, she entered Snape's office to find him already seated at the table, plates of food in front of both their places.

"You might have asked what I wanted," she grumbled as she approached the table.

"I might have asked if you hadn't stomped off in a snit," Snape said, his eyes revealing amusement rather than the anger she would have expected.

Hermione begrudgingly shed a bit of the day's frustration. Even more dissipated when she sat down to find a plate of bangers and mash. She looked up to find Snape smirking at her.

"Mosey suggested this might be an adequate dinner."

Not quite trusting herself to speak, she nodded then tucked into dinner, relishing another divine Hogwarts meal.

Severus waited until she'd finished dinner before he pounced. "Care to share what had you stomping off like a fifth year?"

Ah, Snape. Always with a prickly layer wrapped around his concern. She found herself smiling. "It's been a frustrating day."

"Really. I'd have never guessed."

She glared at him and sighed. "I'm at a complete dead end on my research."

"I cannot possibly imagine that research is what has you so upset."

She wanted to scream.

"Did Boy Wonder upset you?" Snape needed further.

Great. It wasn't just that Snape was bullying her into talking about things, but he cut through her flimsy excuse. She could have complained about research for hours, too. "Yes, Harry upset me."

"We're going to be here for quite a while if you continue to stall my questions. Should I call for... tea?"

Hermione saw the corner of his mouth twitch, just the tiniest bit. Her jaw dropped before she burst out laughing. "No, tea will not be necessary, Severus. I think I can manage to speak without tea."

She settled back into her chair, shaking her head and smiling. Her smile faded as she tried to determine what to say. Merlin, the issue with Rose seemed ridiculous now that she tried to put it to words. Right. The Slytherin issue then. "Harry's views towards... Slytherins were unsettling."

Snape rolled his eyes. "So he had the usual to say? We're all evil and conniving? Except Snape?"

"Something like that," she mumbled. Was there some way to signal to Mosey that this conversation would go down much better with coffee and blueberry crumble?

"Potter doesn't know *any* Slytherins well enough to make character judgements on the house as a whole."

She stared pointedly at Snape.

Through clenched jaw he ground out, "I do not count, Hermione. And Potter hardly knows me well. The contents of a vial of memories nearly twenty years ago and his pestering me at every Ministry event since does not a friendship make."

"Well, Harry would have been friends with Slytherins during school if they hadn't been so horrible to him."

Snape was going to strain something if he rolled his eyes more. "Yes, because it's impossible to make new acquaintances once one has left school."

Hermione frowned. "Harry has a rather limited social circle. He's... afraid most people want something from him."

"I suppose that is rather understandable, given his fame. So does his paranoia extend to all houses or only my own?"

"Mostly to Slytherin, verbally anyway, but he suspects everyone. He's... really only friends with people that he knows from school. But, you know, it's not as if any Slytherins were friendly to him while we were at Hogwarts."

"It was not politically possible for anyone in Slytherin House to be seen supporting or befriending Potter when he was in school. There were plenty of students in my house who might have been friends with him if the times hadn't been so politically charged."

"Well, if they really felt that way, they should have stood up for what they believed."

"Yes, because courage and righteousness is so very characteristic of the house," Snape said dryly.

He summoned Mosey, thank Merlin. Coffee *and* dessert.

"And how many Slytherin friends do *you* have, Hermione?"

She fumbled around for an answer. 'Uh, one, maybe, if he doesn't give me the boot when this conversation is over' wouldn't work. She wasn't *bot* friends with Slytherins in her department. If she fudged things a bit, she might be able to claim four people.

He interrupted her thoughts, "For a researcher, you are appallingly closed-minded."

She ought to be offended. But there was more than a bit of truth in what Snape had said. She straightened in her chair. Well, she could change that. Merlin knew she served on enough committees with Slytherins. Really, it wouldn't hurt her to network more with people in all the houses. And perhaps she could start having dinner parties again.

Looking up to find Snape smirking at her, she knew he'd deduced her train of thought. Again. "We don't need you to champion us, Hermione. Just recognise Slytherins for their strengths as well as their faults. All of the houses have both of them, you know."

"Yes, I'm well aware of that. I'm not a complete idiot."

"I never said you were an idiot. But since Voldemort's ascension to power, the word ambition has become a slur. You can see it everywhere. Even the *Daily Prophet* won't use the word. Politicians have 'aspirations' these days," he paused, taking a moment to observe her rigid posture. "Pardon me. It's... rather a sore spot."

"Getting a bit righteous about it, aren't you?" Hermione teased, relieved to see Mosey deliver dessert. She mouthed a silent 'thank you' to the elf upon seeing blueberry crumble.

He glared at her. "I rather dislike being continually exempted from the rest of my house or described as 'Snape, the Good Slytherin'."

"You have to admit, you do stand out a bit. It's not like there were many other shining examples to come out of the war."

His glare intensified. She felt like an ant under a magnifying glass. But even as she watched his posture for any sign that he was angry, she saw none of the usual signs. The tense posture. The twitching eyebrow. The stream of invective.

At length, he sighed wearily and said, "Hermione, you cannot make exceptions for prejudice. People don't get to ignore that I was a Slytherin just because I was deemed a war hero. I am as cunning and ambitious as any other Slytherin you'll ever meet. Probably more so."

Her heart sank and it must have shown in her expression. "Good grief. That's not a bad thing! It doesn't mean I'm evil."

"Severus Snape, have you completely forgotten what it was like for Muggle-borns during the war? There were no Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs, or Gryffindors who called me Mudblood, who captured me, who dragged me to Malfoy Manor, who *Crucioed* me."

His anger deflated. "I'm not going to go so far as to say that was coincidence. But there were plenty of Slytherins who *didn't* do those things. And there were plenty of Snatchers and other servants of Voldemort who hailed from other houses. The sins of the few should not damn the whole."

She sipped her coffee and considered her next words carefully. "I'm not saying you're wrong, Severus. But most of us haven't had cause to examine our prejudices. And most of Voldemort's well-known Death Eaters *were* from Slytherin House. To change public perception, you have to give them suitable reason to change their thinking. Most of us are too busy going about our daily lives to give a second thought to beliefs so widely accepted."

Severus grumbled.

Hermione grinned. "If you want faster and more widespread results, Severus, then you'll have to come up with methods that are a bit more..." She paused, waiting for him to make eye contact. "...obvious, brash, bold."

He snorted. "We'll just hire a Gryffindor to manage our public relations campaign then."

"Exactly."

Snape seemed disinclined to continue the discussion, turning his attention instead to his dessert. Relieved that such a difficult conversation had ended, she put a forkful of the blueberry crumble into her mouth and sighed as it melted. This moment was the absolute highlight of her day.

As she took the last sip of coffee, Hermione yawned; Snape must have had Mosey use Decaffeination Charms. The day had completely drained her. The conversation had exhausted her reserves. She had nothing left. Forms. Paperwork. Runes. Correspondence. It all would have to wait.

She bade Snape good night and trudged to her chambers. After performing only the bare minimum of her nightly routine, she tumbled into bed.

## The Urgent Owl

*Chapter 5 of 8*

When Rose and Hugo Weasley are involved in a prank that sends Scorpius Malfoy to the Hospital Wing, Hermione is summoned to Hogwarts. What she finds there calls for investigation.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings in this story are lovingly borrowed from J.K. Rowling.

Special thanks to DreamyDragon\_73 and AnnieTalbot for their incredible beta work. This story originally posted at the sshg\_exchange. I'll be posting new chapters every three days or so

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*Hermione,*

*I'm sorry to write and tell you this, but I'm afraid the Department of Mysteries will not have any interns available in the next three weeks. Unfortunately, Sanderson and Smith pulled rank on you and demanded they needed the resources for their project. If anyone frees up, I'll send them your direction.*

*Robert Klandestin*

~\*~

Hermione resisted the urge to cast a Cushioning Charm and bang her head against the table. She'd transcribed countless runes. She'd transliterated. She'd translated. She'd read. She'd cross-referenced. And nothing. She had no answers. A thousand theories, but no answers. And the thought of recovering her tracks with another day of probably fruitless research made her want to scream.

She might have figured out how the runes in the hallway revealed the room's door, but nothing else. And now there would be no interns to assist her.

There had to be something. She'd read back through her notes, and all that had yielded was yet another pile of possibilities. She felt as though she had all the information she needed, but the elusive thread that bound everything together was missing.

Bill. She should write to Bill. She was stuck enough that it'd be worth the ten feet of parchment the goblins mandated for emergency communications. Ten gruelling feet that ensured that circumstances were dire enough to need their intervention to expedite communications. If the situation were less dire, she'd wait a week for an owl to travel to Tibet and back. But Malfoy would harass her to no end if he found her research had stalled.

Grabbing her cloak, she breathed a sigh of relief at her decision. Surely, he'd have encountered something similar in all the crypts he'd explored. Besides, the walk to Diagon Alley to pick up the paperwork from Gringotts would help clear her head. She needed a break before she could possibly assimilate the relevant information Bill might need to know. Merlin knew if she went back through her notes now, it would just lead to a bruised forehead and splintered conference table. Cushioning Charm be damned.

If she was very lucky, she'd have an epiphany on the way to Gringotts that would negate the need to write to Bill. The kind of epiphany she'd been hoping for while she slogged through her paperwork. Well, perhaps the fresh air would clear the cobwebs in her brain. She requested a sandwich from Mosey. She'd never hear the end of it if she skipped lunch.

Her footsteps echoed in the hallway. For once, she had managed to time her departure when the students were shuttered away in class. She stopped by her quarters to grab her Department of Mysteries Security Clearance forms; they would cut the paperwork down to nine feet of parchment. More importantly, the forms would remind the goblins that they were bound to deliver her letter, despite the ill feelings they still harboured for her.

She left the castle and was surprised by the brisk breeze. Casting a Warming Charm on her cloak, she looked at the greying sky and decided her trip needed to be quick unless she wanted to risk conjuring an umbrella from a twig.

Her mind still whirled with runes, tumbling them over in her head. She needed to think about something else. Something that wasn't a pointy, angular etching on a wall.

Her mind drifted to Snape. Her bark of laughter startled a flock of birds. Severus, she corrected herself. Talk about pointy and angular. And yet not quite so much as she had expected. She'd stopped marvelling that she enjoyed his company. Once you knew how to read him, how to interpret his particular flavour of sarcasm, it was a joy to converse with him.

With the exception of that second night when he'd read at his desk, they'd spent all of their evenings together. It was rather suspicious, really. It was almost as if he enjoyed her company. A week ago, she wouldn't have given the man a second thought. Well, not in a romantic way. She'd never thought of him in that context and certainly wouldn't have called him attractive. But he'd grown on her since she'd arrived at the castle.

Perhaps it wasn't Diuretic Charms on the tea service but Befuddlement Draught in the tea. And yet, that thought was ridiculous. It wasn't as if she was writing sonnets about him. She'd simply come to admire the way he argued a point. And learned how to sift through his words and actions to see where his heart lay. And caught herself staring at the silver streaking through his hair. Bugger. She might as well be writing sonnets.

She left the Apparition point in Diagon Alley and walked up the steps to Gringotts, taking a deep breath before she pulled open the massive doors of the bank. Dealing with the goblins was an ordeal even on a good day. They'd never forgiven her for the break-in to Bellatrix Lestrange's vault. Oh, they still took her money, but they always watched her like a hawk, as if expecting her to set the entire building aflame on a whim. Today they'd probably pick up on her desperation to get the correspondence to Bill

and be on edge for the entire exchange.

Stepping up to the counter, Hermione ignored the three security goblins now lingering several feet away. She glanced at the service goblin's name placard. Clarence stared at her.

"Clarence, I need a copy of the Gringotts' field agent communication forms," she said, plunking her Ministry security clearance papers onto the counter.

"Is that all you'll require today, Mrs Weasley?" Clarence asked.

"It is," she answered, knowing it was best to keep things as terse as possible.

Clarence raised his arm, and a scroll zoomed through the air to land in his palm. He shoved a roll of parchment at her and said, "Return the completed form by six o'clock today for delivery before tomorrow morning. Include your correspondence inside the scroll. We will forward the reply once we receive it."

"Thank you," she said, tucking the thick scroll into her handbag. There was no sense keeping it out for the trip back. The goblins forbade form completion using a Dictoquill.

She Apparated back to the school and trudged up the hill. Again. If she never saw the hill to Hogwarts again, it would be too soon.

Once inside the castle, she climbed the stairs to the Headmaster's office and cleared the conference table. She spread the parchment onto the table, dug her quill out, and prepared to tell the goblins her life story.

Two hours later, Hermione stretched in her chair. It was nearly three, time for Rose and Hugo to arrive for tea. She stared at the parchment. Another hour of effort and it would be finally done. She just had to replicate the relevant notes and write the cover letter to Bill.

She hoped she wasn't making a mistake in inviting Rose and Hugo here to the conference room. It wasn't the most inviting of environments, especially given the uncomfortable conversation they'd had the other night. But she was at a loss for anywhere more appropriate in the castle. If her guest quarters weren't big enough to contain her research, they certainly weren't up to the task of entertaining.

She called for Mosey, who quivered with excitement. "Oh, yes. We is preparing tea for you and Miss Rose and Mister Hugo. We has made everyone's favourites."

Hermione grinned at the elf. Mosey wasn't quite as fawning as the other house-elves Hermione had encountered over the course of her life. Clearly, Mosey got joy from a job well done, and Hermione could certainly appreciate that. Her scones alone were worthy of a lot of pride.

She heard the trudge of trainers up the stairs, and the elf Disapparated. Rose and Hugo shuffled into the conference room, looking as if they were headed for detention rather than tea with their mum.

Hermione finished stacking the parchments she was sending to Bill and moved them to the bookshelf. She turned around to find Hugo rifling through her papers. "Hugo! You learned not to look through my research when you were seven."

Hugo grinned and shoved his hands in his pockets. "So, you're researching something with runes, yeah, Mum?"

Rose rolled her eyes and slumped into one of the chairs, crossing her arms and settling into her usual, sullen, 'my Mum and brother are so abnormal' posture.

"Yes, Hugo."

Mosey, bless her, picked that moment to deliver tea, scones, and biscuits. The kids were silent as Hermione served. She hoped that Hugo would drop the subject in favour of stuffing his face as usual. But, of course, she wasn't so lucky.

After polishing off two biscuits in under a minute, Hugo asked, "You didn't say so in the hallway, but your research has to do with Malfoy, doesn't it?"

Any response would be damning. Hugo could read her too well. "Yes, it does. There are runes carved in the area where the encounter happened."

Fortunately, Hugo took the theoretical route. "How does that even work, Mum? All we've covered so far is four different alphabets and proper sentence construction in Latin."

"There are several different theories on how the runes propagate magic, but no one theory has really been able to adequately explain things. Some scholars believe that because the individuals creating the rune carvings had more raw, primal magic when they carved the runes, some of their raw magic bled into the carving," she explained.

Hugo stared at her with the dreamy expression that meant his brain was working overtime to digest new information. Rose's eyes were glazed over.

"Others hypothesize that even the witches and wizards from hundreds of years ago used spells to imbue magic into the carvings. You don't see as many runes created today because modern magic has often developed other methods that accomplish the tasks more easily. But in seventh year, you'll learn the spell to carve them, and nothing beats a rune carving for longevity." Hermione took a breath as she finished her explanation.

Hugo began to ask a question, but Rose interrupted. "Hugo, shut up. Could you be more boring?"

"Rose! Don't tell your brother to shut up." Yes, tea was such a wonderful idea. Bickering teenagers would be a lovely way to spend the afternoon.

Tense silence filled the room for several minutes. Rose glared at Hugo while she ate a scone. Good grief. They normally got along much better than this.

"So, Rose, how is the Quidditch season going?"

Rose looked at Hermione as if she was, in fact, the dumbest mother on the planet. "Mum, we don't have our first match for a month."

"Oh. Well, how's the team look this year?"

"It's the same as last year. None of our players finished."

This was so not the conversation topic to have selected. "Oh. Does that mean you're playing the same position, then?"

"Mum, no one changes positions."

"Well, your Aunt Ginny did."

"Mum, that's because Uncle Harry got banned from the sport. It's not like that happens on a regular basis." Well, if Hermione hadn't won the prize for dumbest mother, she'd at least sealed the nomination.

"Rose, are you all right?" she asked, grabbing her tea so that the 'you're even crankier than normal' didn't slip out.

"I'm tired, Mum. Lessons are harder this year. I'm supposed to be in the library right now, studying with Veronique."

Hermione wondered if it was possible to ship a child to Azkaban. "Well, I won't keep you too long, then."

She relayed the news about their invitation to Australia. Rose looked physically pained. There was no winning. Absolutely no winning. She hurried through the rest of tea, hoping it would end before *she* ended up in Azkaban. When had Rose turned into such a harpy? Was there something else going on? Things hadn't been remotely close to this bad over the summer. Hermione made a mental note to ask Ginny for dinner once she was back home. Rose was acting as horribly as Lily had a couple years ago, although Lily had at least had the excuse of being twelve at the time. Perhaps, Ginny would have advice. If nothing else, it would be an excuse to lounge around drinking wine.

At last, the kids had finished their tea, and Rose asked to be excused. Hermione nodded, certain that actual words would just result in some scathing retort. One she didn't have the patience or energy to handle. She watched Rose leave and exhaled, rather more loudly than she'd intended. She turned to Hugo, a bit embarrassed, and offered a weak smile.

"Mum, you know you don't need to try so hard with Rose. She doesn't expect you to be Dad."

Hugo hugged her again and left. Hermione was angry enough to strangle a giant. Rose had better grow out of whatever phase she was in, or she could spend the Christmas hols at the castle. No way was she going to Portkey that attitude to the other side of the globe.

Hermione shook off her frustration. A Tempus Charm revealed that tea had taken longer than she'd anticipated. She took small comfort in the fact that it hadn't just ~~seemed~~ like forever. But she needed to hurry if she was going to pull everything together to send to Bill.

After a half hour of casting Replication Charms and writing her cover letter to Bill in between spells, she bound the notes, letter, and forms. She was casting a Warming Charm on her cloak when Severus walked into the room.

"Off somewhere?"

"I've got to run this packet to Gringotts. I've written to Bill Weasley to see if he's run into anything similar."

"Would you like me to have one of the elves deliver them?" he offered.

"No, I've got to deliver it by hand, and I've got only thirty minutes to get there."

Severus held out his hand, gesturing for the cloak. He held it as she slipped into it. "You'll want an Impervious Charm. I believe it's raining over Hogsmeade."

"Thanks," she said, casting a charm on cloak and paperwork alike.

Severus began walking with her as she left the office. "I should take dinner in the Great Hall tonight. While most of the student body is oblivious to my presence, there are some who will notice if I've been absent from too many meals."

"Ah, Slytherin House keeping tabs on you? Always on the look-out for a conspiracy?" Hermione grinned, enjoying that she could tease Severus about such a thing now.

Snape ignored her. "I'll see you afterwards, then? Perhaps I can join you while you're on your Great Ministry Unnecessary Paper Caper?"

Merlin, Snape had gone punny and was looking smug about it, too. He really needed to get out of the castle more often. She followed his strategy and ignored his rhyming rhyming! barb. Their paths diverged outside the Great Hall. "That would be excellent. I'll see you then."

She made it to Gringotts in time and before the rain. Clarence was none too happy to see her again, but he accepted and stamped the paperwork, assuring her again that the goblins would forward the response as soon as Bill answered.

She Disapparated into a thunderstorm at the Hogwarts Apparition point. She slogged through the downpour back up the hill *again* to the castle. Stupid. Rain. Stupid. Bloody. Runes. Stupid. Bloody. Castle. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Hill.

Entering the castle, she stomped back to the conference room, stomach growling. Thank Merlin she'd made it back while dinner was still underway. Severus might have complaints if she hexed first years out of her way.

Mosey popped into the room. Words could not fully describe Hermione's joy. "What is you wanting for dinner, Hermione?"

She flopped into her chair and responded wearily, "I'm too hungry to care, Mosey. Whatever's for dinner in the Great Hall."

Mosey's ears dipped. "You is okay, Hermione?"

Hermione smiled. She adored this elf. If Harry wouldn't tease her until the end of time, she'd try to smuggle Mosey home with her. "It's been a rather trying day, and I'm stuck for research until Bill writes me back."

Mosey's ears began wiggling. "Oh! I can be delivering the letter to you right away once it arrives! I will be watching for it special!" she declared before disappearing from the room.

Hermione wondered if Orders of Merlin could be awarded to house-elves. Still smiling, she pulled out her paperwork and inbox. She was exhausted, yes, but if she didn't keep herself busy, she'd go spare waiting for Bill's response.

She'd just got everything arranged when Mosey returned with a steaming plate of roast turkey, gravy, buttered peas, and boiled potatoes. She was sincerely going to miss this when she returned home. Her stomach and taste buds might go on hunger strike.

The meal and the familiar routine of reviewing and sorting paperwork put her in much higher spirits by the time Severus entered the room. "Mind if I join you? I've got a stack of essays that will be much improved with company and a glass of brandy."

She looked up from a patent application and grinned. "So long as your red ink doesn't spatter all over my papers."

"Quiet, you, or I'll forget to bring an extra glass."

Severus return a moment later with a stack of essays two feet high, levitating behind him and two brandy snifters in his hands. He settled into a chair a few feet away and began sorting through his own papers.

She raised an eyebrow.

"It's imperative to insert a halfway decent essay every now and then. Saves on brandy."

Hermione giggled and returned to her paperwork, gratefully accepting the snifter of brandy.

"I trust you made it to Gringotts in time?"

Nodding, she said, "I did. I hope Bill's able to point out the missing link."

"I'm surprised you never consulted with Bathsheba."

Hermione grit her teeth, trying not to blurt out the rude comments circling in her mind about her former teacher and occasional colleague. "I hav~~e~~*tried* to see Bathsheba at least six times, but I keep finding myself at the castle entrance, panicking that I've left the iron back at the house."

The corner of Severus's mouth twitched.

She glared at him. "Not funny! I need to know if she has a copy of Michelson's book. She won't return my owls either."

A grin threatened to bloom on his face.

"Severus, one would almost think you don't want me to figure out what's wrong with your godson."

"Hardly. As it happens, Bathsheba spoke with me after dinner."

The big tease. "Really?"

"Yes, she asked me to give you this." Severus withdrew a book from his cloak and presented it to her. "She also asked me to tell you that if you're headed down the path of Michelson, then you're well beyond her area of expertise in pre-eleventh century runes."

Oh, well that explained why Bathsheba hadn't explored these rooms in the castle. Though Hermione hoped she was never so pigeon-holed in her research. She opened the Michelson text and flipped to the chapter she needed to reference, giving it a quick skim. Still nothing. Thank Merlin she'd sent that letter to Bill.

"And lastly, she said that if you keep setting off her wards while she's trying to finish her book, she'll walk down to the chamber and ward you inside."

Hermione laughed. "Does she always get this prickly around publication time?"

"It's usually worse. Last time Dumbledore threatened to spell her office door open if she didn't restore her office hours to normal."

"She's rather lucky that you allow her such freedom."

Severus went quiet, and she glanced over to see that he'd started on his essays. She winced on his behalf as she watched him. It was only the first one, and she'd already heard no fewer than a dozen strings of colourful commentary. She wasn't sure who to pity more, the essay writers or their reader.

Shaking her head, she returned to her own, far less aggravating, papers. Severus fell silent. She smiled. He must have reached one of the better essays. She stifled a giggle as she heard him thank the Founders for creating the house of Ravenclaw.

Looking up when he completed that particular essay, he said, "These are worse than I thought. I shall require biscuits. And more brandy. Any requests?"

Hermione shook her head. Biscuits were biscuits. She was certain to find something she liked. She smiled as Severus summoned Mosey and ordered a plate of his favourites.

Mosey returned moments later with coffee and an entire platter of biscuits. Oh, yes! The platter had Jaffa cakes. Severus grabbed one. Here was a man after her heart. She transferred several biscuits to her plate and nipped a bite off one.

"So, Severus, why is it that you're still teaching N.E.W.T.-level potions?"

"This stack of miserable excuses for essays aside, I enjoy teaching the older students. Their essays will be much improved by next month. And teaching keeps me in touch with the students and reminds me of the concerns of the staff."

Well, that made more sense. More sense than her theory that he simply enjoyed torturing himself.

They settled back into their respective tasks. She grinned as she watched Severus's hand fumbling at his empty plate. He scowled at it and loaded up a pile of biscuits. Considering for a moment, she decided she could get away with another biscuit or two, especially with all the hill climbing she'd done lately. She went back to her papers.

Hermione paused in her review of an accidental magic use report. Fascinating, really, that an eight-year-old could succeed in inverting his house. But apparently that couldn't compare with the top of Severus's head. Or the rims of his glasses. Or his hands. She forced herself to glance at the paperwork again. He'd already caught her looking at him twice.

Halfway through his stack really, he was making considerably more progress than she was. Severus stood and stretched.

"It might be a toss-up as to which pile of chicken-scratching is worse," Severus said, glancing at her stack of rune transliterations. He frowned. "That marking looks familiar. Is it common?" he asked, pointing to one of the runes she'd yet to identify.



"No, I haven't encountered it in any of my sources. I can't determine its meaning. It only crops up once, however."

"It's carved inside the Slytherin Common Room." Snape's gaze flickered up at her, daring her to make the obvious remark about any link between Salazar Slytherin and the room's creation.

Hermione managed to restrain her response, but only for lack of a rejoinder witty enough to silence Snape. But she rejoiced just a bit that a small shred of evidence pointed in that direction. Not out of prejudice their discussion had been on her mind all day. No, it was a matter of personal pride.

"Heavens! It's nearly eleven." No wonder he was stretching and looked ready to be calling it a night.

Grabbing her stacks of processed paperwork, she began the process of sending them through the inbox. The first stack to the Ministry Archives. The second to her office for follow-up. The third back to the point of origin because they'd bungled the form somehow. And so on.

"Do you think you might be able to take me to the Slytherin Common Room at some point? I'd like to have a look at that rune."

Severus gathered up the last of his essays. "I could meet you there around ten in the morning. I'll be done with my sixth years then."

"That would be wonderful," she said as the last of her papers were transmitted to the Ministry. She packed up what was left and tucked it on the shelf.

They walked out of the conference room together, and Hermione headed towards the stairs.

"Right then, see you in the morning."

She turned on her heel to answer him, but miscalculated her distance from the top step. Her heel slid off the stairs, and her arms windmilled as she tried to maintain her balance.

Severus crossed the distance between them and wrapped an arm around her waist, clutching her against him. She let out the gasp of air that she'd thought to be her last

and clutched the front of his robes. They were close, so very close, and for a moment she thought she saw Severus's head begin to lower. Her breath hitched again, but Severus simply righted her and stepped away.

"Th-thank you, Severus," she stammered.

"You're quite welcome. I'll see you tomorrow then."

She nodded and walked down the stairs, her heart racing. For a moment, she tried to tell herself it was due to nearly breaking her neck on the Headmaster's stairs, but that was a lie.

She was still a little dazed when she reached the bottom of the stairs. She meandered towards her room and was about to unlock her door when she changed her mind.

A walk. She needed a walk. And with Harry's map she was free to prowl the castle. She pulled it from her bag, lifting corners of the parchment until she found the set of footsteps with her name. She noticed that Severus was pacing his office, and she stifled the instinct to return to see if everything was okay. She crammed the map back into her handbag. She didn't need the stupid thing unless she got lost.

She trolled the halls, trying to process everything that had happened. And the things that, rather pointedly, hadn't happened.

This was the height of stupidity. Walking through the halls of Hogwarts, wondering whether Severus Snape was interested in her when there were more important things to think about. She looked up and found herself near the Hospital Wing. Yes, this would work well. Seeing Scorpius would refocus her energies.

She pushed open the door and was shocked to hear Draco Malfoy speaking angrily.

"Snape, you led me to believe that Weasley was here to figure out whatever caused Scorpius's condition. Instead I find that you're off having cosy little dinners and teas."

"Draco, you are needlessly making an issue of this."

"Oh, am I? How exactly is Weasley supposed to make any progress when you're busy trying to get your hands up her skirt?"

Her eyes widened. The empty beds before her blurred.

The hiss of a spell sizzled through the air, and Malfoy yelped.

"Oh, don't give me that petulant stare, Draco. You deserved that. I am not distracting Mrs Weasley from her efforts. You needn't worry that..."

Hermione fumbled for the door handle before she could hear the rest of Severus's retort. She scurried down the hall, eager to put distance between her and the Hospital Wing.

She stopped at a window overlooking the Quidditch Pitch. Oh, Severus was wrong, very, very wrong. She was most definitely distracted. Not that it really was affecting her research. Well, not at this point anyway.

Grumbling to herself, she turned to make her way back to her quarters. It was ridiculous that she was standing here, wishing Severus would just act upon the feelings that he felt for her rather than mask them in some ill-guided attempt not to distract her. It wasn't as if she were a student whose springtime romance threatened to derail her N.E.W.T. study schedule.

She sighed. She supposed she could see some of Malfoy's reasoning frightening as that realisation was. Honestly, she didn't think it had impeded her progress or contributed to her lack of progress. But she couldn't exactly say that she was looking forward to figuring out the room. That would mean leaving, and she was enjoying her time with Severus too much to wish for that.

Although, assuming her interpretation of the hospital scene was correct and the attraction was mutual, there would be plenty of time to pursue something after she'd figured out what was going on with that stupid chamber in the dungeons. Perhaps, she could even convince him to be the one to make the trek up and down the bloody hill.

## The Hospital Wing

*Chapter 6 of 8*

When Rose and Hugo Weasley are involved in a prank that sends Scorpius Malfoy to the Hospital Wing, Hermione is summoned to Hogwarts. What she finds there calls for investigation.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings in this story are lovingly borrowed from J.K. Rowling.

Special thanks to DreamyDragon\_73 and AnnieTalbot for their incredible beta work. This story originally posted at the sshg\_exchange. I'll be posting new chapters every three days or so.

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*Bill,*

*I hope Tibet is treating you as well as possible. Please give my love to Fleur. It's wonderful that you've finally managed to be assigned to the same expedition. Being at opposite corners of the globe is so draining on a marriage.*

*I've run into a situation at Hogwarts that I'm hoping you can help me with. I'm investigating a room that is covered floor to ceiling with runes, bears some resemblance to the Room of Requirement, and may have been designed by the same witch or wizard. Something in the room has attacked one of the Slytherin students who was in the corridor immediately outside the room. All of the rune sentences I've translated to date indicate that the room was built to protect something, but I've hit a dead end trying to fit the information together. I've a bit of experience with runic artefacts, but I've never encountered a room like this.*

*I've attached a synopsis of my notes as well as a list of resources consulted to date.*

*Thanks so much for your help,*

Hermione

~\*~

Hermione awoke with a clearer head and brighter outlook than she'd had in days. She liked to think it was the letter to Bill that put the spring in her step rather than the conversation she'd overheard between Severus and Draco.

She had realised after writing Bill's letter that she really ought to propose studying the Room of Requirement for her next project. After all the time she'd invested studying this chamber, it was only logical that she apply her research to the room's cousin. Never mind that the project would keep her close to the castle and Severus. Perhaps the room could be reconstructed. Such an undertaking, of course, would be a rather long-term project that would certainly require her oversight.

She walked down to the chamber with a ridiculous grin plastered on her face. It had been such a long time since she'd experienced the thrill of a new romance. She'd forgotten how nerve-wracking, exhilarating, and really bloody distracting it could be.

She entered the chamber and forced herself to concentrate. On what, she had no clue. What else could be done while she waited for Bill's reply?

She was close, so close, to figuring out the room. Hopefully Bill's reply would make the last pieces of this puzzle slide into place.

Hermione groaned as her mind returned, for the thousandth time, to Severus. She was worse than Rose had been the summer she'd developed a crush on Teddy Lupin. All longing sighs and 'Mum, do you think Teddy will be at the Burrow for Sunday lunch?' Hermione had been searching for common ground with her teenage daughter, but mutual boy craziness was not at all what she had in mind.

She made a circuit around the room. Nothing stuck out as something she'd missed. She was about to make another round when she heard footsteps in the corridor.

"Hermione," Severus called out, stepping into the room.

"Severus, excellent! There's a bit over here I'd like you to look at," Hermione said, the echoes of a smile teasing the corners of her mouth. "Severus?"

His face paled.

"Severus, what is it?"

He opened his mouth to reply but slumped to the floor.

She flew across the room, grabbing him just in time to keep his head from crashing onto the floor. "Severus!" A sob strangled her.

She staggered under his weight and guided his body to the floor, cradling his head in her lap. Nausea threatened to strangle her as she saw now-familiar horns emerging from his head.

Dammit. Dammit. Dammit. She needed to marshal a happy thought. It was cruel that one needed to conjure a happy moment when it was least likely to appear. Closing her eyes, she scrambled for a memory. Any memory but the sight of Severus crumpling to the floor. She ran through her mind, finally grabbing the moment that she'd read Hugo's owl about his Ravenclaw sorting.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" she cast at last, sending her otter skittering off to Minerva.

That bit of business complete, she opened her eyes. The colour was beginning to return to Severus's ashen face. She smoothed his hair.

How? How was it that this had happened to him? If there was doubt before, it was erased. The room had done this. The room had attacked. Spells flew from her wand. Was there an invisible enemy? Had something triggered the wards? Her heart raced.

She wanted to move Severus, but the din of students rampaging through the corridors told her they were in between classes. She couldn't move him to the Hospital Wing until the break was over. The sight of their Headmaster floating unconscious through the halls... no. It couldn't happen. She didn't trust that any Disillusionment Charm would hold. Not with her emotions blundering about like a troll.

"Severus, can you hear me?"

This was stupid. Of course he couldn't hear her. He was unconscious. She continued anyway. It wasn't as if there were anything else to do. "Severus, I've sent for Minerva and Poppy. Once we get you settled in the Hospital Wing, I'll alert Draco."

She cast another set of nervous detection spells.

Still nothing.

"I'll figure out what's going on... I'm so sorry this happened. If I'd had any idea..."

Poppy came scurrying in. She stared at Severus, flicking her wand with a series of Diagnostic Charms. "Same as Scorpius, then? Well, let's get him up to a bed. The students should be behind closed doors now. You take the front. I'll take the rear."

Hermione took her appointed spot, barely containing her nausea as Poppy levitated Severus so that he hovered mid-air, placing his arms over his chest and charming them to stay put.

Their journey seemed to take ages. Minerva was pacing in between the beds when they arrived.

"Does he have any indications that differ from Mr Malfoy?"

"No, Minerva. There's nothing different at all. Just the wizard. Here, Hermione, let's put him in one of the more private beds over here." Poppy walked towards a section of the wing with tall curtains surrounding the beds. Scorpius's bed sat across the aisle.

"Come, Hermione. We need to call Mr Malfoy. I'll spare you the task of telling the tale twice. He'll want to know precisely what happened in the dungeons. I owed him earlier, and I expect him in the Headmaster's office shortly."

She followed Minerva, her throat tight as she climbed the familiar staircase. She walked woodenly to the conference room, absently flicking her wand to shelve the books she'd left spread across the table the night before.

Her shaking hand poured a glass of water. She sat the glass on the table, grasping at the edges of control, trying to keep things together. She sank into the chair, forcing herself to take deep breaths.

"Weasley. What the hell happened?"

She jumped as Draco entered the room.

After taking another deep breath, she explained, "I was working on translating the northern wall of the room. I was stuck on a particular section, and Severus offered to



come take a look."

"Because he's an expert in runes..."

She blushed. "Of course he isn't, but he recognized one from the Slytherin common room."

"Fine, Weasley. So *Severus* was coming to take a look at your runes. What happened?"

"He walked into the room and collapsed. The horns began sprouting once he hit the ground."

"That's it?"

She nodded, realising how very weak the explanation sounded. No wonder *Severus* hadn't quite believed Rose and Hugo.

Minerva coughed. "I believe we need to address the issue of student safety."

"The wards *Severus* sat are keeping students out of the area. They should be perfectly safe."

"Have you ruled out the ghost of your husband?"

"Mr Malfoy, that is quite uncalled for," Minerva scolded.

"I'm just making sure all the possibilities have been covered. There have been incidents of protective ghosts. And it's rather a coincidence that the only people attacked were Slytherin males in the presence of a Weasley."

She grit her teeth and reminded herself that Malfoy's son and godfather were both unconscious. He had every right to be mad at someone, and she was the most convenient target. "None of the spells indicated recent spectral activity. The evidence points towards the runes."

"And how close are you to figuring out what's happened? When will you be able to reverse it? My son's been in the hospital for a week, Granger."

Hermione flinched at Malfoy's slip.

"I'm expecting an owl from Bill Weasley with some resources about the road block I've encountered. I expect his sources will lead to a breakthrough."

Minerva interjected, "Hermione, we can only keep *Severus*'s absence quiet for a day, maybe two at most. We've already been skirting the edges of proper procedure by not alerting all of the Governors about the incident with Scorpius. If you haven't figured something out by Wednesday, we'll need to take more drastic measures."

Hermione nodded and watched as Minerva left the room. Draco stopped at the doorway. "Do keep an eye on *Severus*, will you, Weasley?"

When the last of Draco's footsteps faded away, she cradled her face in her hands. Please, please let Bill's resources provide the key. The image of *Severus*'s pale form slipping to the ground sprang to mind.

"Mosey?"

The house-elf appeared, wringing her hands.

"Have any letters arrived?"

"No, Hermione. I is to be finding you when they do. I is knowing they is important." She choked back a sniffle.

"Thank you, Mosey. They're even more important now."

"Headmaster Snape, he is going to be okay?"

"Yes." He had to be. She would figure out that stupid room no matter how long it took.

"I is bringing you tea and biscuits and a flannel so you is refreshing."

Hermione's answering smile was watery.

Mosey Disappeared, leaving Hermione to stare at the table. She wondered if Dumbledore had left his Pensieve. Replaying the memory could... no, she was grasping at straws. There *were* no details she'd missed. No flashes of spells. No triggering of wards. No ghosts. Nothing.

She picked up the copy of Michelson and began pacing the room, flipping through the pages. No, nothing. Still nothing. She closed the book, resisting the unfamiliar urge to hurl it across the room. The books were failing her. Fickle things.

There was simply nothing to do until Bill's owl arrived. She grabbed her notes and continued transliterating to pass the time. And when she'd finished that she began translating. Absolutely nothing jumped out. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. And still no word from Bill.

She looked up, surprised to see that the windows were completely dark. A covered dish sat several feet away. When had Mosey left that? She lifted the cover, nearly tempted by the sight of bangers and mash. She forced a couple of bites, smiling that Mosey had thought to bring her comfort food.

She pushed back from the table, knowing where her feet would take her.

The moonlight filtered into the Hospital Wing. She could see the light in Poppy's room. It flickered out as she made her way down the aisle. The curtains were drawn around *Severus*'s bed. She swallowed the rising lump in her throat and pushed the curtains aside. She conjured a chair and sat next to the bed, pulling his hand into hers. For all his pallor, his hand was still warm.

She watched the rise and fall of his chest, keeping time, marching on as if nothing was awry. "*Severus*... Bill's owl should arrive at any moment. I promise I'll figure something out."

Her thumb ran across the top of his knuckles. "I think we have some unfinished business to attend to when you recover."

Her eyes flickered to his horns. Unlike Scorpius's fawn-like nubs, *Severus*'s horns were black. Sleek. They glistened in the moonlight. After glancing behind her to make sure Poppy hadn't decided to check on her patient, she reached out her hand, running her fingers across the ebony. She bit her lower lip and smoothed his hair back.

She jumped as she heard a sob, not realising for a moment that the sound was not hers. She jerked her hand away from *Severus*, her head whipping around. There was still no one behind her.

Her eyes darted to Scorpius's curtains. Was there someone with him? Surely Malfoy wasn't sobbing over his son. Astoria perhaps?

Without a noise, she rose from her chair and crossed the aisle. She drew back Scorpius's curtain and bit back a gasp. "Rose! What are you doing here!" she whispered.

Rose jumped, rubbing her sleeve across her eyes. "Mum, I'm... Scorpius... I..." Rose crossed the room and hurled herself into Hermione's arms.

Hermione clutched her daughter, allowing herself a moment to relish the first genuine embrace she'd got from Rose in months. Rose's sobs got louder, and Hermione pulled her closer.

As the sobs began to die down, she stroked Rose's hair before softly asking, "Rose, why are you up here? Surely it's after curfew."

She sniffled again. "I just had to see him, Mum."

Hermione couldn't quite understand why Rose had been sneaking up to the Hospital Wing to see a boy she barely knew. She ignored the pit in her stomach which suggested that perhaps she knew him a little better than Hermione was aware. "This is why you've been so tired, isn't it? Have you been up here every night?"

Rose sniffled and nodded into her shoulder. Every night. Hermione winced.

"Wait, why are you here?" Rose pushed back and looked at Hermione.

While Hermione fumbled for an answer, Rose craned her neck. "Headmaster Snape!"

Hermione shushed her.

"Mum, what's going on? Why is this happening?" she asked, sitting on the chair next to Scorpius's bed.

"I don't know yet, Rose. Your Uncle Bill is sending me some recommendations that I hope will point me in the right direction again. But you still haven't answered my question. Why did you just have to see Scorpius?"

"We've been going out," Rose mumbled.

"You have?" Hermione stared for a moment. Well, there was no way that Rose had told Harry about *this* in her letters. Hermione made every effort to keep her voice even as she asked, "And how long have you been seeing him?"

"He asked me out while we were studying for O.W.L.s."

Hermione fought to keep her jaw from dropping. Everything slid into place. The crankiness since she'd arrived at the castle. The temper tantrum about Christmas holidays. Some of Rose's reticence this summer. "When were you going to tell me, Rose? And why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't tell you because you and dad have always had *something* to say about Scorpius. And it was never good. You don't even know him! I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to freak out."

Hermione spluttered.

"And now you're freaking out."

"Rose, I'm not freaking out. Well, perhaps a bit, but more about you hiding this from me for six months than about it being Scorpius. I wish you'd told me sooner."

Rose eyed her with scepticism. "So you're okay with me dating Scorpius?"

"I haven't met Scorpius." Rose's posture stiffened. "But I trust your judgement, so it's quite likely I will. I'd like to meet him when all this is over. *And see his father's reaction when he finds out*, she added mentally.

"Mum, is Scorpius going to be okay? Is that what you've been researching?"

"He'll be fine, Rose. And yes, that's why I've been here."

"Did... did the same thing happen to Headmaster Snape?"

Hermione nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat.

She put her arm around Rose. "Come on. Let's walk back to your dormitory. I'll talk with Poppy about letting you come sit with Scorpius. You must promise not to tell anyone about Professor Snape."

Rose nodded and stood. "I won't tell anyone, Mum. I haven't said a word about Scorpius. How long... until you figure out what's wrong?" Rose said, her voice wobbly again.

She sighed. "I've got two days to figure things out. Let's hope that Bill's texts are helpful."

Hermione stood next to her daughter and wrapped her arm around her. "It'll be fine," she said, guiding Rose into the Hospital Wing corridor. Rose cast a glance at Scorpius as she left.

They spent several minutes in silence as they walked. It wasn't until they reached the first staircase that Rose spoke. "I'm sorry if I was rude to you the other day, Mum. This week has been really hard."

Hermione grabbed Rose's hand. "It's fine, Rose. And I promise to never ask you painfully obvious Quidditch questions again."

Rose laughed. "I suppose that means you'll stop asking Quidditch questions completely, then."

"Right in one."

They jumped as Mosey appeared in front of them. "I is having your letter, Missus Weasley. It is being heavy."

"Rose, I trust you can make it back to your dormitory?"

"Yes, Mum, will you let me know when you've got it all figured out?"

"Absolutely, Rose." She hugged her daughter one last time. "Now good night. I've got some research to do."

She watched Rose disappear down the corridor. "Mosey, could you deliver a pot of really strong coffee to the conference room?"

Mosey nodded and disappeared.

Hermione unfolded the letter, reading as she walked. She exhaled. Bill laid out two possible scenarios based on what she'd reported to him. One would require tracking down seven additional texts. The other just one book. She blinked back tears of relief. The answer rested in her hand. She just needed to dig back through a few sources Bill had mentioned to determine which scenario was lurking in the dungeon and track down the answer. Bless Bill, he'd even listed individuals who likely owned copies copy of the resources she would need. The majority were in private collections.

She arrived in the conference room to find Mosey, a pot of coffee, and a plate of sandwiches. "You is eating, Hermione. You will be needing energy to save the Headmaster."

There was no point in resisting. "Thank you, Mosey." She grabbed a sandwich and headed to her bookshelf to grab her books.

Bill had sent two tables of runes and three examples of rooms with rune carvings. She spread them out on the table, finishing her first sandwich and grabbing another. She settled in for a long night of reviewing notes.

## The Statue

*Chapter 7 of 8*

When Rose and Hugo Weasley are involved in a prank that sends Scorpius Malfoy to the Hospital Wing, Hermione is summoned to Hogwarts. What she finds there calls for investigation.

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*Mr Malfoy,*

*I got the information I needed from Bill Weasley. It turns out there's a book you might have in the library at Malfoy Manor that will be instrumental in destroying the power behind the dungeon chamber. Could you please check and see if you have a copy of Magick Moste Malevolent, and if so, bring it to Hogwarts as soon as possible?*

*Thanks,*

*Hermione Weasley*

~\*~

Hermione stumbled into the shower. What little sleep she'd grabbed had been full of runes. Images were continuously assaulting her. Her suspicions had been correct. The chamber was hiding something. Something dangerous that desperately needed to be neutralised. Bill's suggestions had connected some of the dots within her research. Reading back through her notes with his information in mind had done the rest.

Her body breathed a sigh of relief. The built-up stress of a suppressed fight or flight instinct dissipated under the warm spray. Finally, she could make significant inroads into solving this mystery.

She stepped out of the bathroom, grabbing for her wand to cast Drying Charms.

Bless Mosey. A steaming cup of coffee sat on Hermione's bedside table. She gulped the brew as she shrugged into a set of robes.

She was fastening the last buttons on her robe as she hurried through the halls, eager to compare her revised notes against the room. She arrived to find her daughter pacing the corridor outside the perimeter of Severus's wards.

"Rose, what on earth are you doing here?"

"Mum, I've come to help."

"No. Absolutely not."

"Mum, you've always said a set of fresh eyes sometimes helped things. Between Uncle Bill's notes and me, you'll get that breakthrough." Rose bounced expectantly on the balls of her feet.

"Rose, you aren't even taking runes."

"Well, perhaps that's clouding your perception. Maybe that's all you're seeing."

Hermione made to protest again, but Rose cut her off. "Mum, I'm four years older than you, dad, and Uncle Harry were when you stormed off to protect the Philosopher's Stone. I'm old enough to help you."

Dammit. Sometimes being a war hero was *really* inconvenient.

She sighed with resignation. She knew her daughter. Saying no would just make her all the more defiant. And a defiant Rose could do anything she put her mind to. Hermione wouldn't be surprised if she wriggled through a hole in Severus's wards. "Rose, you can stay with me. But do. Not. Touch. Anything. Understood?"

"Yes, Mum," Rose said automatically.

"I mean it, Rose. Nothing without my permission."

"All right, Mum. I get it!"

"I can still leave you out here, Rose. I cannot stress the severity of this situation enough."

Suitably chastened, Rose's posture stiffened and she nodded. Not her entire person this time. Just her head.

Together they crossed the barrier of Severus's wards. This time, Hermione found reassurance in the prickle of the wards across her skin. If Severus's magic was still functioning, then he was fine. Would be fine.

Rose stood at the room's threshold, staring at the markings in amazement. "So what are you looking for, Mum?"

"Bill says there should be a rune that binds the room together. It's the nexus of all the other rune sentences. Mr Malfoy is bringing a book that should help me figure out how to destroy it."

Rose stiffened. "Mr Malfoy is coming here?" Her voice wavered.

Hermione sighed. "Yes, Rose. Though I just sent the note an hour ago. With luck, we'll be done here this morning before the arrival of *youboyfriend's father*." She hoped her tone conveyed teasing rather than the urge to vomit.

Even in the dim light in the chamber, she could see Rose's blush. "So what am I looking for?"

Hermione fished through her notes. "This page shows all the runes in the alphabet used in this room as well as the combinations I've encountered where the rune sentences intersect. See here. This marking is made when these two runes overlap. I've circled the likely candidates, but we can't be sure that one of them will have been used. The runes are constructed in sentences, in Latin, just using different letters."

Rose stared at the parchment, eyes starting to glaze over.

"This page shows the pattern of how these sentences are carved into the room. You can see that they cover all the walls and ceiling. Now, I suspect we'll find the convergence point on either end of the chamber. Bill said it should be somewhere significant. In the absence of any drawings or statues, the two most powerful points in the room should be next to and opposite the entrance."

She cast a charm to reproduce both parchments and handed them over. "I suggest marking on the rune pattern mapping so that you know which lines you've already checked."

"So, I'm just looking for the intersection of these sentences?"

Hermione nodded. "It will likely be where more than four of the sentences cross. Sometimes it's not as obvious as it seems because of the symmetry of some runes. Oh, and if that weren't enough, some of the sentences bind the magic further by reading both left to right and right to left."

"Like a palindrome?"

"Almost. But the meaning is different depending on the direction. That's what the pink highlighting is."

Rose stared at her, jaw dropped.

"What?"

"I knew you had patience, Mum. But, this is insane."

"Rose, if you're not up for this, you can leave."

"No, I didn't mean it that way. I'm just... impressed. You're wicked clever, Mum."

"Well... thanks," Hermione replied, suspicious of the sudden shift from stupid parent to wicked clever. "Just... let me know if you have any questions. Once you get used to the alphabet, it shouldn't be that difficult."

Rose asked a handful of questions as she began. Primarily, they were false starts when she encountered a rune she didn't recognise from the parchment because the rune was turned on its side, the sentence running perpendicular to the one she had been reading. After half an hour or so, Rose's questions tapered off, and they began making significant inroads into the cluttered network of sentences woven on their parchments.

Hermione had finished one quadrant of her wall and was deciding which one to start next when Rose asked, "Mum, what's this rune mean?"

She paused to mark the portion of her parchment that she'd completed then walked to the southern wall. "I have no idea."

Rose traced her finger across the stone. "This part sort of looks weird, don't you think?"

Before Hermione could answer, the wall in front of them shifted.

Rose bounced with excitement. "See? I told you I could help. You should have asked me down here ages ago."

Merlin save her from a teenager's hubris. Never mind that she'd told Rose not to touch anything.

The stone stopped shifting, and Rose began to take a step.

"Wait!" Hermione's wand was drawn before she finished speaking. Rose froze mid-step.

Spell after spell flew from Hermione's wand until finally she breathed a sigh of relief. "All right, we can go in... with caution, Rose."

Her wand still raised in the doorway, Hermione cast, *Lumos*.

The stones from the doorway had reconfigured into a short staircase, and Hermione crept cautiously down them.

"Mum... what is that?"

Hermione stopped. Her heart and stomach plummeted.

Red light flickered from the end of the long, narrow room. She pulled Rose behind her and cast Protection Spells, Shielding Charms, and a half dozen other charms that not even the Auror department used for protection.

"I'm guessing I can't talk you into going back to your common room, can I?" Hermione asked, the pleading tone in her voice threatening to break glass.

"Fat chance, mum. You need me here."

"Right then. Stay BEHIND me, Rose. BEHIND. Or I will bind you and send you floating to the Hospital Wing myself."

She felt Rose nod against her back.

Another round of detection spells. There was something here. It wasn't man or beast.

She scrambled to think of a spell, any spell that would reveal the danger facing them.

"Rose, turn around "

"Mum, I'm NOT leaving."

"Honey, I wasn't going to tell you to. Now, I want you to turn around and put your back against mine. I want you to cast Lumos and... have you covered Shielding Charms in Defence Against the Dark Arts?"

"Last month."

"Good. I want you to cast a standard Shielding Charm as well as a Protection Spell."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief as she heard the incantations.

"Do you see anything behind us?"

"Just the stairs, Mum."

"All right. We're going to walk forward very, very slowly. Reach back and put your hand on my hips. You watch the side of the room to your left. I'll watch the side to your right."

Rose's voice shook as she responded, "Yes, Mum."

Step by step, they crossed the room. The red still glittered in the wand light.

It seemed like it had been hours when the end of the room came into view. Hermione swore under her breath.

"Go, Mum!" Rose said, awed by the string of profanities.

Hermione sighed. "Rose, hush."

If she'd been disgusted by Salazar Slytherin's statue, she took it back. At least he hadn't adorned it with rubies. And gold gilt. And if the colour scheme hadn't already tipped her off, the two griffins perched on either side of the statue removed any last shreds of doubt.

Hermione's head swirled as this information about the room's creator shifted facts and theories, elbowing her unvoiced suspicions about Salazar Slytherin's involvement out of the way to make room for Godric Gryffindor.

Still behind her, Rose whispered, "Mum, something's coming! I can hear it in the room we just left."

"All right. We're going to switch positions, okay, sweetie? Keep your wand out. And don't try to fight it, no matter what. I want you to turn to your right."

They had just finished switching their positions when they heard a voice call, "Weasley, are you blundering around down here?"

Hermione sagged in relief. "Yes, Malfoy. We've found another chamber."

"Look, I found that book that you wrote to me about. Nasty thing. It lunged at Astoria." Draco walked down the stairs. "Oh, gods, that's tacky. That ~~was~~ is to be Godric Gryffindor. Ugh. That makes your common room look positively tasteful."

"Yes, Malfoy. Look, we could do without the interior design critique. Why on earth did you feel like you needed to hand deliver the book to this room? You know that whatever force is at work here has attacked Slytherins. I can't believe you're taking this risk."

Malfoy's jaw clenched. A retort died on his lips as his jaw dropped. "Weasley, who is that behind you? Good Gods, you brought your daughter with you?"

Rose stepped out from behind her, hands on her hips.

He bit back a laugh. "I think you might have forfeited the right to tell me I'm taking an unnecessary risk. Besides, at least I have a vested interest in being here, unlike your sidekick."

Hermione's stomach plummeted as she braced for her daughter's inevitable response.

Rose did not disappoint. "Mr Malfoy, I have as much reason to be here as either you or my Mum."

For a moment, just a moment, Malfoy was utterly confused. Hermione's heart swelled with pride that her daughter was able to render him speechless. She couldn't help grinning as she watched comprehension etch itself onto Malfoy's features.

"You... and Scorpius..."

Rose crossed her arms defiantly. "Yes, me and Scorpius," she confirmed, her tone daring him to challenge her.

Malfoy's eyes widened, and he raised his wand. Hermione shoved Rose behind her. "How dare you!" she hissed.

"Look behind you... very slowly," Malfoy said through gritted teeth.

Malfoy's tone and rigid posture set Hermione's skin crawling. She heard Rose's strangled gasp before she'd finished turning her head.

The two griffins were crouched low on the floor, tails swishing. Their beaks were open, heads cocked to the side with gazes riveted on Malfoy.

Instinct raised her wand without conscious thought. Her mind raced. They couldn't escape. There was no guarantee that Snape's wards would contain them. And much as she wanted to scream for Rose to flee, truth was, she wasn't sure she could afford to have the odds lowered to two against two, assuming Malfoy didn't turn tail and run.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Malfoy step up beside her.

"Any ideas, Weasley?"

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Dammit. That hadn't worked. "Well, other than avoiding the talons and beak? No. No ideas."

The griffins crept closer. "Stupefy?" Draco suggested, his voice wavering.

"It's worth a try." She willed herself to stand her ground. "I'll take the one on the left?"

"Yeah."

Together they cast.

For a moment, it seemed as if that had worked. Then the griffins shook their heads and took a slow step forwards.

"Mum, what should I do?"

Merlin, this was *not* the army she'd have chosen to go to battle with.

"I need to see if the rune's nexus is located in this room. Malfoy, you still have that book on you?"

Draco fumbled in his cloak, his wand never dropping. He passed the book to her.

"I need you both to keep stunning them. I'm going to start my search for the nexus behind the statue. I suspect that's where it will be."

"On three?" Draco asked Rose.

"Sure."

Hermione readied herself to sprint and bolted forward the instant she saw the spells strike, dashing in between the two creatures. She reached the far wall of the chamber just as she heard them cast again.

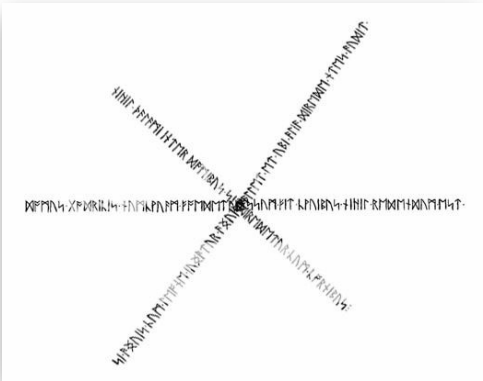
There was a three-foot gap behind the statue of Gryffindor. *Lumos* She scooted behind it, her eyes racing over the wall, trying to make quick sense of the patterns.

"*Stupefy!*"

She took a deep breath, hoping that would keep the runes from swirling before her eyes. Dammit, why couldn't Godric Bloody Gryffindor have been as obvious with his runework as he was with his statues? If there had been hundreds of runes in the previous room, there were thousands here. She swore she could feel the magic radiating from the wall.

"*Stupefy!*"

Her eyes passed over the wall again, flickering back and forth as her gaze travelled from top to bottom. Wait a moment. She stepped closer and squinted. There. Six sentences converged at one epicentre into a tangled knot of runes.



She fished a piece of parchment out of her handbag. She copied the runes, phrase by phrase, squinting as she got to the centre.



She transliterated them.

*fallet et ubi alia direntes audit,  
fossum fit quibus nihil redendum est,  
diredetur cum cornibus.  
nihil thalami inter domibus sit,  
domus Godricis numquam foedetur.  
si anguis cum leone iungatur, anguis*

This was it. She fumbled for the text. Now she just had to figure out how to destroy it.

"*Stupefy!*"

Hermione gripped her wand in her teeth as she held the book open. Chapter Seven. Just as Bill had said. She began skimming.

"*Stupefy!*"

Three pages in.

"*Stupefy!*"

Five pages in.

"*Stupefy!*"

Six pages in she found the spell to remove the rune.

"*Stupefy!*"

"In your own time, Weasley."

"I've found the nexus and the spell in the book to erase runes from stone work."

"Well, get on with it," Draco shouted.

"*Stupefy!*"

She panicked as she scrutinised the text. "Dammit, Malfoy. I've got to figure out which character was inscribed last. It's going to take me a moment."

Merlin, how did Bill live with this pressure all the time?

"*Stupefy!*"

She quickly translated each of the six phrases onto the page.

"*Stupefy!*"

*and when he hears all mocking him, let him be mocked*

*A canyon shall be made from whence there is no return,*

*with horns.*

*let there be no marriage between the two houses,*

*The house of Godric should never be tainted.*

*if a snake should be joined with a lion, let the snake fall*

Well that didn't make any sense. Bugger.

"*Stupefy!*"

She skimmed the passage again. Oh, thank God. It was just a matter of figuring out the logical order.

"*Stupefy!*"

She blinked at the passage. Then she sketched the starburst pattern in which the phrases were placed and numbered both sketch and translation.

"*Stupefy!*"

There. Two and four went together. And so did six.

"*Stupefy!*"

So... yes, two looked like it would work as the passage's beginning. Presumably one, three, five, would follow.

"Weasley, step it up!"

"Almost ready."

"Mum, we can't hold them off much longer!"

"*Stupefy!*"

That was it. She had it.

*A canyon shall be made from whence there is no return,*

*let there be no marriage between the two houses,*

*if a snake should be joined with a lion, let the snake fall*

*and when he hears all mocking him, let him be mocked*

*with horns.*

*The house of Godric should never be tainted.*

The fifth phrase in her drawing was carved last. Which meant 'dæg' was the first to go.

"*Stupefy!*"

She drew the six runes that, laid over one another, comprised the nexus.

"*Stupefy!*"

Placing the tip of her wand on the nexus, she cast, *Litterae amittendae!*

Hermione squinted at the wall. Part of the tangle of runes had disappeared.

Rose shrieked. "Mum! They're coming for you! Hurry!"

"*Stupefy!*"

"*Litterae amittendae!*"

"*Stupefy!*"

"*Litterae amittendae!*"

"*Stupefy!*"

Her wand trembled. She could hear the griffins now.

"*Litterae amittendae!*"

"*Litterae amittendae!*"

"*Stupefy!*"

The wall in front of her glowed. "*Litterae amittendae!*" She obliterated the last stroke of the rune. The wall flickered for a moment, red light glowing from each remaining rune. And then it blinked out.

Hermione whirled around the edge of the statue to find the dusty remains of the griffins not two feet away.

"Mum!" Rose shouted, hurtling herself into Hermione's embrace. Hermione staggered to keep her footing. She clutched her daughter, scrambling to catch her breath.

"Mum, you were brilliant."

Hermione closed her eyes and hugged Rose even tighter. "You were too. You did a spectacular job holding off the griffins with Mr Malfoy."

At the name Malfoy, Rose stiffened, squirming out of Hermione's embrace. Rose brushed away tears before asking, "Can we go see if all the room's magic was destroyed? If Scorpius is awake?"

Hermione's pulse thudded in her ears. Voice strangled, she replied, "Yes, Rose."

Rose ran to up the stairs to the room's entrance.

Hermione approached Malfoy her daughter's boyfriend's father, her mind added handing over the text. "Draco, thanks for that. For the book and the spell work. We couldn't have done it without you."

Draco snorted and began walking up the stairs that led to the outer chamber. "Except that I'm betting I'm the one that triggered those statues. Do I even want to know what your house's founder scribbled on the wall?"

Hermione followed him from the room, grimacing. "I'm sure Severus and Minerva will want an account as well. I'm not sure I have the energy for two debriefings."

"Ah, did that little bit of casting wear you out?"

Hermione noticed that the bite of his usual torments had entirely disappeared. Nothing like fighting a common enemy to obliterate decades of animosity. "The spell work... combined with the two hours of sleep I got last night."

"Presumably Severus will say this more... *eloquently* than I will, but thanks, Hermione."

"You're welcome, Draco." The words sounded rusty when strung together.

They climbed the stairs and walked down the corridor to the Hospital Wing. Hermione could hear Rose talking excitedly the moment they opened the doors. She didn't stop as they made their way to the end of the room.

The curtains were drawn back from both beds. Both Severus and Scorpius sat propped up against the headboards, Severus staring at his hands and Scorpius watching with a smile as Rose chattered on endlessly.

The horns had disappeared from both wizards, and they appeared to be in good health. Well, except for the fact that Severus still hadn't looked up.

Scorpius straightened when he saw his father approach. He squeezed Rose's hand, and her voice tapered off. "Dad, Rose and I are together."

"Yes, Scorpius. I'm... aware."

Hermione was unable to contain her smile. She thoroughly enjoyed watching Draco squirm.

Draco was saved from further immediate discomfort when Minerva hurried into the room.

"Oh, thank Merlin!" she exclaimed. "You're both back to normal. Hermione, I trust your communiqué from Mr Weasley came through?"

"Yes, it did." Hermione kept her expression as neutral as possible. Severus *still* had not so much as looked at her.

She felt a tugging at her robe and looked down to find Mosey, jumping impatiently and waving parchment. "Hermione, I is having post for you."

"Thank you, Mosey."

Hermione unfolded the parchment, her eyes flicking down the page. Her jaw clenched, and she felt as if steam from Pepper-Up Potion was shooting from her ears.

She crumpled the letter, shoving it into her handbag. "Excuse me. I need a moment. I'll meet you in the conference room shortly to discuss what resolved this situation?"

Once Minerva and Draco agreed, she stalked out of the room.



# The Fireplace

Chapter 8 of 8

When Rose and Hugo Weasley are involved in a prank that sends Scorpius Malfoy to the Hospital Wing, Hermione is summoned to Hogwarts. What she finds there calls for investigation.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings in this story are lovingly borrowed from J.K. Rowling.

Special thanks to DreamyDragon\_73 and AnnieTalbot for their incredible beta work. This story originally posted at the sshg\_exchange as a gift for nejna. Thanks for reading!

Original Prompt: Rose and Hugo pulled a prank with almost disastrous consequences for Hogwarts points system. Headmaster Snape calls widow Hermione for a little chat. What was the real reason behind children's prank?

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*Hermione,*

*Great news! Sanderson reported in that he's ahead of schedule and can spare one of his interns. She'll arrive this afternoon.*

*Mr Klandestin*

~\*~

Hermione cast a quick Silencing Charm on the conference room and screamed.

Hermione scrawled a quick note to Mr Klandestin to say that the project had been finished this morning, so Sanderson could keep his intern. She carefully omitted the numerous adjectives that threatened to sneak into the letter. She grabbed the assorted books and stacks of notes from the table and returned them to the bookshelves before collapsing into her usual chair in the conference room. It wasn't noon yet, and she was ready for the day to be over. Exhausted didn't even begin to cover how she felt. She groaned. Severus, Minerva, and Draco would be there shortly.

She flung her arm across the table and grabbed a bit of parchment. She needed some notes if she was going to sound remotely coherent when she explained what had happened in the chamber. Shortly after she finished an outline, which would double as her project resolution report to Mr Klandestin, the trio came in for the debriefing.

Her eyes tracked Severus as he entered the room. He sat on the other side of Minerva, looking out the window. Her jaw clenched in frustration.

Right then. Once they were settled, she launched into her explanation.

"The chambers in the dungeons were created by Godric Gryffindor." She paused for Minerva's gasp and Draco's sniggers.

"There were two chambers. One provided the power source and spell mechanism. The other chamber amplified and directed that power."

Her stomach lurched as she made the next point. "The antechamber was powerful enough to attack Scorpius in the hallway. I suspect this was why someone in Hogwart's past warded off that section of the castle. The inner chamber... The chamber was designed to attack the Slytherin half of a Slytherin and Gryffindor couple."

Hermione braced herself. Draco's shoulders shook with laughter, Severus continued staring out the window, and Minerva looked confused.

Minerva interjected, "Well, we could see that Rose and Scorpius were a couple, but it doesn't make sense that Severus would have been attacked. After all, he wasn't attacked the first time you two went down there."

Comprehension dawned, and Minerva looked positively scandalised. Draco laughed harder. And Severus Snape continued staring out of the window. Either Poppy needed to check him for brain damage from the spell or she would need to reverse several hexes once this meeting was adjourned.

She grit her teeth and responded, "Minerva, Severus and I are not together, but it would seem that the room was able to detect the feelings that were developing between us." She watched Severus flinch at her use of past tense. Oh, good. He'd caught that.

"The chambers were constructed using a large number of rune sentences in both the inner and outer chambers. These were all linked, converging on a spot in the inner chamber where eight rune sentences formed a poem that described the room's purpose. Using the information Bill Weasley provided and the book that Draco was able to supply, I destroyed this nexus, neutralising the room. The wards can be removed from the corridor outside the chamber. The students are, once again, safe."

She glanced at her outline. That covered everything. "Any questions?"

Draco looked as if all major wizarding and Muggle holidays had come at once. "Aren't you leaving out some details, Hermione?"

Severus's attention snapped to Draco at his use of her name.

She sighed. "The inner chamber contained a large, decorated statue of Godric Gryffindor, flanked by two statues of griffins that came to life when Draco entered the room. The statues proceeded to stalk us, and Rose and Draco repeatedly cast Stunners to slow the griffins as I worked to destroy the nexus. Does that cover everything, Draco?"

He grinned widely. "Yes, I believe that covers it. A Founder hated Salazar Slytherin so much that he worked obsessively to create a room that would attack any members of Slytherin's house who dared mingle with his own."

Hermione ignored his gloating and turned her attention to Minerva who looked as if her world had been turned upside down and shaken vigorously. "Did you have any questions, Minerva?"

"The students are safe?"

Hermione nodded. "They are. Although, as a preventive measure, I'd recommend searching the corridors in the rest of the castle to determine if any more chambers have been built."

"Anything else? No? Well, I need to prepare a report on the incident to my supervisor."

Hermione watched as Severus, Draco, and Minerva all left the conference room. She slumped in her chair. Severus had not made one second of eye contact with her since he'd awakened. She blinked away the stinging of angry tears. She was too bloody exhausted for this. Whatever stick had lodged itself up his arse while he was unconscious could just bloody stay there.

Shoving her chair away from the table, Hermione conjured a box and began yanking books off the shelf.

"Leaving so soon?"

Hermione jumped and whirled around to find Severus standing a foot away. "I needed to work off the rest of my adrenalin. I figured the books would have to be packed sooner or later," she said, hoping Severus would accept the excuse. Because she certainly did not care to admit that she had been preparing to leave the castle in a huff.

Severus seemed to ignore the explanation entirely. "Thank you for undoing the curse. Spending an eternity saddled with the horns of Godric Gryffindor would have been unbearable."

"Well, it's not as if you were aware of them," she replied brusquely, not entirely certain where he was headed with the conversation.

He coughed. "Perhaps you're not fully aware of the effects that spell had on young Mr Malfoy and myself."

He took a half-step forward. She looked at him, well, as if he had horns growing from his head. He didn't, of course, not any more.

"We may have appeared to be asleep, but we were fully conscious."

Hermione paled.

"And we could hear every word."

She swore her heart had stopped beating. Her mind scrambled to recover the transcript of everything she might have said. Severus stepped forward.

"I'm fairly certain that I did not hear Poppy grant you the liberty to touch my horns."

Hermione felt her stomach drop to somewhere in the vicinity of her ankles. Her heart kick-started again as she saw Severus's expression narrow, a truly wicked gleam entering his eyes.

Her eyes widened in response. No. No, he would *not* put her off balance like that and get away with it unscathed. "Well, then Scorpius must have caught quite the earful when he heard you and Draco arguing in the Hospital Wing."

Severus's composure only faltered for a second. He stepped forward again and removed the book from her hand, placing it on the table before taking her hand in his.

She snatched her hand away. "I ought to hex you into next week."

Severus had the good sense to look concerned for his safety.

"This is the first time you've even looked at me in the past hour, never mind actually speak to me." She really needed some sleep. She was far more upset than she ought to be. But knowing that it was the fatigue twisting her mind wasn't helping her think straight.

Severus gaped at her.

"Severus, I am completely exhausted. This entire week has turned my life upside down. I want to return home, negotiate peace with my cat, and sleep for roughly three days. Then perhaps I'll be prepared to speak with you again." And if he wasn't careful, she'd simply leave now without her books and beg Mosey to smuggle them out of the castle for her.

She watched as his shoulders slumped, and he began to look as weary as she felt. "Hermione, please come sit with me for a moment. If you want to leave after I've said my bit, then I'll pack up the conference room while you tend to your living quarters."

He walked to the door of the conference room, watching to see if she would follow. She sighed and joined him as he settled onto the sofa.

"I am sorry that I did not look at you or speak to you," Severus said, his voice soft.

Hermione stared at him. There wasn't a trace of condescension in his voice, but when he put it that way, it seemed rather ridiculous.

"When I awoke, because I was asleep, not unconscious, when Rose barrelled into the Hospital Wing," he swiftly clarified, "I had a good bit of information to process. There were some... uncertainties that I had faced the day before that were no longer present. I needed some time, which I took, and some silence, which I certainly did *not* get, to mull things over."

"You expect me to believe that you couldn't look at me because you were thinking about me?" she asked dryly, her half-smile likely ruining the effect entirely.

"Well, when you say it like that it does sound rather stupid."

Hermione grinned. "So... we're done with all that then?"

"Yes, I believe we are."

They looked at each other for a moment. Then Severus reached across the sofa and brushed her hair from her shoulder. Hermione moved closer and took his left hand in hers, her fingers rubbing across his knuckles.

Hermione cleared her throat. "So, I thought I might next propose to study the Room of Requirement. I'd like to determine what runes were carved on the wall that was repaired and return the room to working order."

She felt Severus's hand cup the back of her head, his thumb rubbing her scalp. "That would be awful. You'd have to spend months at the castle."

She shivered and leaned into his touch. "I am not walking that hill any more than necessary, though."

"That's fine," Severus muttered. "I'll have our Floos connected."

Hermione pushed away from him, jerking out of his grasp. "What do you mean, you'll have our Floos connected? You mean I could have been staying at my house all this time instead of that cramped little room?"

Severus chuckled. "Yes, but then you might not have had dinner with me so often."

"You... you," she spluttered.

"Slytherin, remember? I told you that being cunning and ambitious wasn't a bad thing."

He slid towards her on the sofa.

She slid back, glaring at him. "Do you mean to tell me that you engineered this from the beginning?"

"No, I didn't *engineer this*. I simply wanted an opportunity to get to know you a bit better. This one arose and so I..." He paused, taking a moment to select his words with

precision. "...adjusted the circumstances to provide that opportunity."

Hermione shook her head, smiling. "I suppose I should be thankful."

"Yes, you should."

His arm wrapped around her waist, and he pulled her closer. She looked up and met his eyes. Her heart leapt at the warmth dancing in them.

She threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled him down to meet her. Their lips met, brushing gently against one another. She closed her eyes, and the universe narrowed.

Severus pulled her body flush against his, the softness evaporating from his kiss. Lips and arms and legs tangled, and somehow she ended up underneath him on the sofa, the length of his body pressed against her.

Hermione moaned as his lips travelled down to her neck. Her head tilted off the front of the sofa. Her eyes fluttered open, and she found herself staring at the fireplace. Severus found an especially sensitive spot during his explorations, making her groan. Her eyes narrowed. She squinted at the fireplace. "Severus?"

He lifted his head a fraction and groaned, "Hermione" before returning to sucking on her collarbone.

"Severus, stop for a moment."

He propped himself on his elbows. "What?" he asked, exasperation threatening to bleed into his voice.

"Severus, there are runes on your fireplace."

He glared at her. "Hermione, I don't care." He tried to return his attention to her neck, but she pushed him away.

"This could be serious! What if something happens again? What if we activate something else?"

"It will be fine. I'm sure there's nothing to be concerned about."

She looked at him with suspicion. "Seduced a lot of women on this sofa, have you?"

His body tensed above her. "No, I have not. But this office has been in use for centuries. I can't imagine we're the first individuals in this position."

She struggled against him. "Severus, I'm sorry but I just can't concentrate with those runes there."

He looked at her for a moment, an insult dangling on the tip of his tongue if she read his expression correctly. He glanced between her and the fireplace, and for a moment, Hermione fully expected he was going to grab a handful of Floo power and shove her through.

Instead he fumbled for his wand. She shrieked as a chunk of stone disappeared from the fireplace.

"Severus Snape! You just destroyed part of the school!"

"I don't care," he murmured, guiding her back down onto the sofa.

"I could have researched those!"

"I'm sure there's no shortage of runes for you to study in the castle," he said before nipping at her neck. "I'll carve them into abandoned classrooms with a penknife if I have to."

"Ooooh," she cried as he returned to that sensitive spot. "Well, that's rather ambitious of you."

"Indeed." He moved lower on the couch. "Now hush and let me show you how cunning I can be."

~Fin~