

Cordial Relations

by Dreamy_Dragon

Mystery and mayhem or: someone is missing, someone is frantic and everyone has their own agenda. And there is a bit of romance, too.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 6

Mystery and mayhem or: someone is missing, someone is frantic and everyone has their own agenda. And there is a bit of romance, too.

4 May 1998

The Prime Minister rubbed his burning eyes and tried to concentrate again on the report on his desk. It had been a dismal month. No, make that dismal months. The numbers and words on the sheet of paper in front of him confirmed what he already knew. The country was in a dire state. The number of tramps—no, homeless people—on the streets of London had increased to an extent that even those who usually did their best to ignore these things had noticed. According to what the report said, most of the ragged people aimlessly wandering the streets seemed to be mad as hatters on top of everything else. They kept mumbling something about wonts and registrations when the police had tried to suggest to them gently that they might be better off in one of the overcrowded shelters away from the city centre. Nobody seemed to have any idea where they had come from in the first place.

His eyes scanned the next lines. The rate of unsolved murders had increased by twenty percent in a year, most of which were gruesome and under circumstances nobody was able to explain. The police were suspecting a serial killer. The Prime Minister's yawn turned into a bitter laugh. 'Must be some killer, what with the bodies strewn all over the place.'

The laugh quickly died as he saw the next page, handwritten and obviously attached to the report in haste. There had been an earthquake in the Scottish Highlands, near the site of the ruins of an old castle, accompanied by unexplained tornadoes that had caused damage to several villages and towns—even Aberdeen had been affected. The geologists and weather experts were at a complete loss to explain the cause. Lives had been lost; the cost for rebuilding was estimated to be at least three million pounds. Not for the first time, he wished that they would get on with establishing the Scottish Parliament. Then he could have passed on the problem to the MPs up North. As it was, the Scottish earthquake was another item on *his* list.

The Prime Minister's hand strayed to the desk drawer that contained his emergency whisky ration. Scottish, single malt, twenty-one years old. A soft noise could be heard. The Prime Minister's hand stopped. To come under suspicion of drinking at a time of national crisis could turn out to be just the proverbial straw to break his back. Or maybe, he had just imagined the noise? One could hope.

There it was again. So much for that particular hope. The Prime Minister slowly turned his eyes towards a small painting in the far back corner of his office, just in time to hear the small froglike man in the portrait cough softly again.

'To the Prime Minister of Muggles. Urgent we meet. Kindly respond immediately. Sincerely, the Minister for Magic.'

The speaker's voice sounded as though he was reading a pre-prepared statement—just as it had when the Minister for Magic had requested a meeting before.

'Erm... I've had a long week...' The Prime Minister tried to think quickly of a reason why now was not a good time to meet. After all, the ability to think quickly was one of

the reasons why he'd become Prime Minister. 'Oh, very well, then.'

He sat up straight in his chair, staring into the empty grate beneath his marble fireplace, trying to look as if people arrived in a whirl of green flames in his office every day.

He nearly succeeded until he recognised the man stepping out of his fireplace. 'Kingsley,' he exclaimed.

'It's a pleasure to see you again, Prime Minister.'

The Prime Minister simply waved to the empty chair in front of his desk. 'Please, have a seat.'

He looked for a moment at his secretary—presumably his former secretary, now. He'd never seen him in anything other than a perfectly fitting, elegant suit. In theory, he'd known that the other man was a wizard. The reality of it, and with it the possible implications of this visit, struck him only now when he saw Kingsley in whatever his kind called what they were wearing.

'I presume this is not a visit to hand in your notice.'

'No, I'm the interim Minister for Magic.' Kingsley remained standing.

'I see,' said the Prime Minister, though he had no idea what he claimed to be seeing. 'Congratulations.'

'Thank you. I've come to inform you that the war is over. The Dark wizard known to you as He Who Must Not Be Named is dead.'

The Prime Minister nodded. 'I'm glad. I hope there weren't too many casualties on your side.'

'Too many good people died. As for the rest, we're still assessing the damages,' Kingsley answered.

'My condolences for your losses.' As he said this, the Prime Minister noticed how very tired the other Minister looked. There were deep lines beneath his eyes, his skin had taken on a greyish tinge, and he appeared to be a lot thinner than the last time he had seen him.

'Thank you. There'll be no more disturbances to the Muggle world,' Kingsley added.

The dots started to connect. 'The murders all over the place... they were part of your war, weren't they?'

'Most of them.'

'The train accident? The collapsing school building? The tanker we lost in the Channel?'

'Not the tanker, but the rest unfortunately, yes,' Kingsley confirmed.

'The sudden increase in homeless people?'

Kingsley nodded.

'The Scottish incident?'

Kingsley nodded again, looking even more tired than before.

'What do you plan to do about it?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Given that your lot is responsible for throwing the whole country into a state of chaos, I expect reparations. Not to mention a guarantee for our future safety.'

Kingsley stood even straighter than before. 'As to the latter, I assure you we're doing everything in our power to prevent events like these from happening in the future. As to the former, of course we'd be happy to contribute in some way. However, wizarding Britain is currently in a state of disarray. So, I'm certain you'll agree that our priority should lie in rebuilding on our side. Especially in view of keeping our world secret and separate from yours.'

The Prime Minister considered this. 'You're a good politician, Kingsley,' he conceded. 'Still, I insist on some form of reparation.'

'I'll see what I can do,' Kingsley hedged. He took a step back into the fireplace. 'Goodnight, Prime Minister.'

After Kingsley had vanished in another whirl of green flames, the Prime Minister sat for a long time, staring at nothing in particular. Then, checking that the painting in the corner was empty, he pulled a sheet of paper towards him, uncapped his fountain pen—courtesy of Her Majesty—and quickly filled two pages in his tiny, nearly illegible handwriting.

After he had folded them carefully into his breast pocket, he decided that it was time to go home where Cherie and a brandy would hopefully be waiting for him.

A/N: "To the Prime Minister of Muggles. Urgent we meet. Kindly respond immediately." quoted from Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, p. 9, UK paperback edition.

The Potterverse belongs to JKR.

Originally written for Duniazade in the 2010 sshg exchange on Live Journal. Full prompt will be given at the end of the story.

Many thanks to my betas Melusin and Pyjama Pants.

One

Chapter 2 of 6

Mystery and mayhem or: someone is missing, someone is frantic and everyone has their own agenda. And there is a bit of romance, too.

JKR's, not mine.

Many thanks to Melusin and Pyjama Pants for the beta.

31 March 2007

'We're missing something.' With a frown, Hermione pulled the thick volume towards her, leafing through it for the fifth time in as many minutes.

'No, we aren't. Even your inquisitive mind won't find any more defensive spells that should be included in the pre-O.W.L. curriculum, Miss Granger,' Snape said, reviewing the list of spells they'd drawn up over the last weeks again.

'Ha! I knew it.' Hermione shoved the book towards him, her index finger tapping the line in question.

Snape glanced at the page. 'It's merely a variant of the simple shield spell we've noted down for the third years.'

'But wouldn't it be important to teach the variations of spells as well?'

'It's evident you haven't been teaching for long. We'll be lucky if the majority of dunderheads can even remember one of the basic spells by the time they get to O.W.L. level...let alone varieties of any kind.'

Hermione narrowed her eyes. 'This may only be my second year teaching, but the majority of *my* students passed this year's exams with at least an acceptable.'

Snape opened his mouth, then closed it again, obviously reconsidering.

'Yes?'

'Sheer dumb luck.'

'We'll see.'

'I suppose we will. Now, can we get on with the list before not only Easter but Christmas will have passed as well?' Snape indicated the piece of parchment that lay between them.

Hermione nodded, then glanced at her watch and jumped up. 'Bugger. I'm supposed to meet Ron at my place in ten minutes. Can we finish this tomorrow?'

She noticed Snape's scowling expression with interest and continued quickly, 'He said he wanted to talk about something, but I suppose he'll just try to drag me down the Leaky.'

Snape was still scowling. Recently, she had started to wonder if he had a life beyond the school. He definitely deserved it after the war and everything. From what she could tell though, he seemed to have only his work and the occasional meeting with one of the staff. Maybe she should invite him along to the pub?

'I wasn't aware you were planning to grace these meagre halls with your presence tomorrow,' Snape said archly.

Maybe not. 'I thought we should get this done quickly, so that we can pass it on to Minerva and the board.' That didn't sound right, either. Now he probably thought that she wanted to get rid of him as quickly as possible.

'Hasn't Minerva given you leave to spend your holiday buried in the wizarding branch of the British library?'

Was there a note of envy in his voice? 'Yes. Which is good, as the deadline for the manuscript is in four weeks, and there's still so much I need to cross-reference. Grenier and Thompson constantly contradict each other, and then there's Belkins to consider, not to mention that I really need to reread the latest edition of Viridian, and I haven't even managed to locate Wenlock's scrolls, yet. The thing is, I disagree with all of them. I think there's more to magic than just counting and dissecting spells, charms and curses, but for some reason, neither of them takes the nature of magic itself into account.'

'Back to the foundations of magical theory?' he asked. 'Rather an ambitious project. Have you thought about consulting Agrippa?'

'Agrippa?' Hermione very nearly wrinkled her nose. 'I'm interested in facts, not wild speculations.'

'More projects fail because of the researcher's arrogance than their actual ignorance. In case you hadn't noticed, magic, in most cases, doesn't exactly deal with precise facts.' Snape looked down his long nose at her.

'I'm perfectly aware of that, thank you very much,' Hermione replied. 'However, there is a difference between being merely obscure and esoteric babble.'

'And you'd draw the line precisely where?'

Hermione thought for a moment. 'I'd draw a line if there doesn't seem to be any hint that what is described in the text could have any reference to actual magic in whichever form,' she clarified.

'In which case, the Agrippa would be an important source for you,' Snape pointed out. 'As you know, the Muggles of his time were on to him, thinking him evil, so he had to try and hide what he was truly saying from them. Write in code.'

'If you're right that would open up a whole new avenue of research. If his obscurity is deliberate that would mean to look first at which sort of "code" he was using, and then to sort out what he was actually saying about the connections between magic, alchemy, astrology...' Hermione had drawn the parchment towards her and was busy scribbling down notes and drawing up charts. 'Hm, there could also be connections to early theories of numerology and the Kabbalah, all of which did influence the development of Arithmancy, and if one would draw a line here and assume that there might be a connection there...'

Hermione stopped, suddenly becoming aware that Snape was still sitting opposite her. To her surprise, he was looking at her with an expression of keen interest. She hesitated, then ploughed ahead. 'Would you be interested in discussing this further? I mean, I'd really value your opinion.'

'That would be acceptable.'

'Really?' Snape wasn't exactly the polite type, which left the conclusion that he really was interested in her research. 'That would be brilliant. Tomorrow?'

'Tomorrow is fine.'

'We could go for lunch at the *Hog's Head*,' Hermione suggested before she had time to reconsider. 'I hear the new landlord has completely revamped the place.'

Snape didn't say anything, his eyes fixed on her face.

'And Minerva says their food is really good.' Hermione locked eyes with him.

More silence until, finally, Snape seemed to come to a conclusion. 'Fine. *TheHog's Head*. Lunch. Tomorrow. After we finish the list.'

'Right. Good. Tomorrow, then.' Hermione nodded before she practically ran from the room.

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Back in her quarters, she hesitated before she quickly sorted through the stacks of books and parchments on her table. Much better to stay at home overnight and come back tomorrow morning. She hadn't seen Harry and Ron in months. She added a vial of Hangover Potion to her bag.

She quickly brushed her hair, applied fresh lipstick, and, on the spur of a moment, decided to secure her hair with two silver-coloured clips. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she paused. So, Snape and she would be having lunch together tomorrow. What had started as an impulse because he seemed so...well, lonely wasn't quite the word for it, but it seemed that he could do with some company...now caused a feeling of bubbly happiness to spread through her. She ignored the nagging little voice that suggested she was rather enjoying *his* company.

'Very nice, dear,' her mirror said.

She shrunk and packed the most important books, only a dozen plus one or two into her bag. At the last minute, she decided to pick up crisps and some booze, so she quickly discarded her robes and pulled on a pair of jeans and a jumper over her t-shirt before she Apparated to Diagon Alley and then took the tube to Holloway Road. Two plastic bags with drinks and nibbles from Holloway supermarket in hand, she flagged down a cab and let it take her to Barnsbury.

Hermione pretended to rummage through her bag for her keys while she waited for the cab to drive away. It seemed to take forever before she heard the sound of the exhaust disappearing in the distance.

She turned around when she heard footsteps coming down the road and spotted Ron's distinctive hair approaching quickly. Ron ran to her, Harry in tow, and pulled her into a bear hug. 'Hermione! Where've you been? Good to see you.'

'Hermione. Oh, good. We were starting to get worried about you,' Harry hugged her, too.

'Sorry. Severus and I were working on next year's curriculum. We'

'What's in the bags? Beer?' Ron asked.

'Yes, but...'

'Excellent.' Ron pulled out a bottle, opened it, and took a long swig.

'As I was saying, we were researching defensive spells for next year's curriculum. We think it would be a good idea to teach some things in Defence as well as Charms,' Hermione said pointedly while she opened the door and let the boys into the kitchen.

Harry was right on her heels. 'That makes sense, especially as the same spell can be used in different ways.'

'Exactly, and there are a number of almost forgotten spells that could be really useful. So we're going through the old spellbooks in the library to make a list of them and suggest for which year they'd be appropriate,' Hermione continued. 'And it all still has to be approved by the board of governors, so we really have to get on with it if we want to teach the new curriculum next year.' Hermione put two bottles on the kitchen counter before storing the remaining beers in the fridge and fetching glasses.

'I still can't believe Lucius Malfoy managed to get re-elected as a school governor,' Harry said, taking the glasses from her and setting them on the table while Hermione took two bowls for the crisps out of a cupboard.

'Barking, the lot of them.' Ron plonked himself onto a kitchen chair and took another swig from his bottle before he pulled one of the crisp packets towards him and tore it open.

Harry pushed a glass in Ron's direction. 'Threats and bribery is more like it.'

'Actually, Minerva and Severus asked him to be on it,' Hermione said, tipping the crisps from the open bag into one of the bowls.

'What?' Ron asked around a mouthful of crisps while Harry stared, open-mouthed, at Hermione.

'They both thought it would be good to have a member of one of the old pure-blood families on the board again. And there aren't many left that aren't either dead or in Azkaban.' Hermione had put more crisps into the second bowl and gone to dump the empty packets in the bin.

'They could've asked dad.' Ignoring the glass and Harry's pointed looks, Ron kept drinking from his bottle.

'Yeah, but as Minister, he's got other things to do.' Harry was inspecting the now empty crisp bowl.

'Or Percy.'

'I think the idea was to help build bridges to the... more traditional families,' Hermione said, taking the glass of beer Harry had poured for her. 'And I actually agree with that. I don't think we can afford to alienate any group within our society. Not if we want to prevent another Dark Lord.'

'Fair enough. But why Malfoy of all people?' Ron shook the remaining crumbs out of the second bowl.

'If you think about it, he's the obvious choice. He's a member of one of the oldest pure-blood families and, despite his past, he's done his best to redeem himself after the war.'

'Yeah, bet it's all an act until the next Dark Lord comes along.' Giving up on finding the non-existent crumbs, Ron drank down the rest of his beer in one gulp.

'I don't think so. I mean, he sort of did change sides right at the end and, judging from his trial, the last year with Voldemort must have been hell for him and his family. And don't forget that he lost his wife shortly afterwards,' Hermione pointed out.

'Honestly, Hermione. We're talking about Lucius Malfoy here. He should be rotting where the sun don't shine, not be on any board. You almost seem to like him.'

Hermione shrugged. 'He's definitely one of the more co-operative board members. Another?'

Ron and Harry nodded, and she went to the fridge.

Inspecting its contents, her thoughts wandered off to the conversation she'd just had with the boys. She could see Ron's point. She'd wondered for a while if the new Lucius Malfoy was just an act, as well. He'd been pleasant to her at all the board meetings she'd attended in the last year, even flirting with her a bit, and he was one of the few who actually listened to what she had to say. This didn't have to mean anything, but Severus had not only suggested him as a board member, he had practically vouched for him. That if nothing else proved that Lucius's Death Eater days were long over.

Severus. His face when she'd asked him to have lunch with her had been priceless. Hermione smiled at the memory. He was definitely the most interesting of all her colleagues. There was the nagging little voice again, whispering in her ear that he had the potential to be a lot more than just a colleague

'Oi, Hermione!' Ron's voice brought her back to the kitchen.

'Sorry. Be right with you.' She stood up with the beers and retrieved two more bags of crisps, ready-salted and salt'n vinegar, from the goodies cupboard.

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'She's a right tart, that one.' Ron was saying as Hermione came back to the table.

'Who is?' She put the drinks and nibbles down.

Ron flinched slightly when he heard Hermione's voice.

Despite Harry's frantic hand waving, he said, 'The new shop girl. Has a new bloke every week.'

Hermione's eyes narrowed. 'And how exactly does that make her a tart? As opposed to someone, say, who's gone out with most of his sister's teammates by now?'

'It's different for a bloke,' he mumbled. 'Those are really pretty slides, Hermione.'

Hermione couldn't help but grin at his obvious attempt to avoid the familiar discussion. 'Thank you. Luna gave them to me. She brought them back when she and Draco went to Greece.'

Harry shook his head. 'I still don't know what I find more bizarre. That you and Luna are sharing a house or that Luna is going out with Draco.'

'Luna's all right. And she and Draco seem to be perfectly happy together,' Hermione said with a stern look at Harry.

'The ferret.' Having finally taken Harry's hint and poured his beer into a glass, Ron took a long draught. 'Erm, Hermione? There's something I need to tell you. And you're not going to like it.'

What had he done now? And why did he still need to tell her these things? An all too familiar mixture of anticipation, amusement, and annoyance spread through her. 'What is it?'

'Erm, you know how I like cars?' Ron was toying with his now empty glass.

'Uh-huh.'

'And you know, I really like to take some of the cars that end up in dad's shed out for a spin? And usually that's fine and nobody's the wiser?' Ron's eyes didn't quite meet hers.

'Uh-huh.'

'Yes, well... you see... There was this really cool Bentley that dad had...' Ron looked at Harry, but there was no assistance coming from that direction. 'It didn't go all right this time. I dunno. At some point, the car wouldn't respond to my spells any more.'

'And?' This couldn't be good.

'And there were these roadworks; they came out of nowhere, really. I mean, I'd been on the same street the day before, and there was nothing, and a day later, there was suddenly this massive construction thingy, right in the middle of the road, and I couldn't get the car to brake, and I sort of ran into it.'

'You sort of ran into it?'

'Yes, well, I ended up right in it.' Obviously, Ron had mustered the courage to look at her by now as he was staring at her, eyes all round and apologetic.

'Oh, Merlin. Are you all right?'

'Yes, I'm fine.'

'And the car?'

'The car's a total write-off. But that's not all,' he mumbled.

The relief that he was unhurt quickly evaporated, leaving her with irritation. 'What else?'

Ron had gone back to staring at the table top. Apparently, he was finding it more forgiving than Hermione. 'Erm, the police were there real quick and... well, you know that I sort of never got around to getting a proper driving licence, so I Confunded them and showed them a flyer for the next Harpies match, but I couldn't get them not to notice the wrecked car. And I couldn't very well say that the car was dad's. With him being Minister, and all. I mean, the police wouldn't know that, but it would be very awkward.' He took a deep breath. 'So I said the car was yours. And the police might wanna talk to you.'

'You. Did. What?' Hermione had to fight down the urge to use some of the more creative hexes she knew on Ron.

'I told the police the car was yours. I mean, you're Muggle-born. Nobody would find it strange if you had a car, see?'

'And it never occurred to you that it might get me into trouble if anything happened to the car you were driving? Without a driving licence? I'm a Hogwarts teacher, for Merlin's sake. Did you even consider for a second what it would do to *my* reputation? Honestly, Ron.'

'I'm sorry.' Ron looked like a chastised puppy.

'Bit late for that, don't you think?'

'Erm, Hermione?' Harry tugged at her sleeve.

'What?' she snapped.

Wordlessly, he pointed at the glasses on the table that were spinning wildly, one of them dangerously close to the table's edge. Hermione took a couple of deep breaths and concentrated on quelling her fury and getting her magic back under control. Within seconds, the glasses stopped spinning.

'Right. I think it's time for you to go home,' she said.

'Hermione, can we talk about it?'

'Not now. I'm having trouble keeping from hexing your bits off as it is.'

Ron visibly paled. 'I'm really sorry.'

'Harry, I'll be here doing research from Tuesday. I'll Floo you. Sorry, but I really need some time to cool off, now. Say "hi" to Ginny.'

Harry nodded, his face showing a mixture of relief and discomfort as he stood up. 'Will do. See you, Hermione.'

'Come on, mate.' He firmly grabbed Ron's arm and steered him outside.

Hermione managed not to explode anything in the kitchen, but she definitely needed some fresh air. Outside, she paused briefly, but Harry and Ron had disappeared, probably to go and get pissed at the Leaky. She hoped Ron would have the hangover from hell tomorrow and no Hangover Potion. She marched off at a brisk pace, not stopping until she had walked for a while and was back at her doorstep. She paused. A glance at her watch confirmed that it was still early. She'd thought she'd be up late, drinking and chatting with the boys. Which, thanks to that blithering idiot, that complete fuckwit, hadn't happened. What on earth had he been thinking? Probably, he hadn't been thinking, which was precisely the problem. The air around her started to fizz with uncontrolled magic again. Brilliant. Just brilliant. She hadn't had any uncontrolled outbursts of magic since she and Ron had split up seven years ago. Once again, she fought to get both her anger and her magic back under control. 'Hexing would have been too good,' she mumbled. Kicking his sorry little arse would have been much more satisfying.

She could still Apparate back to Scotland tonight. Quieten down with a hot bath and snuggle down on the cosy sofa in her rooms with a good book and hot chocolate. Have a lie-in tomorrow before meeting Severus. It sounded very tempting. Or she could stay home and hope that Luna would be in later. A little bit of girly solidarity would be nice, especially the Luna-specific brand of solidarity. She was still fuming as she entered the smallish terraced house...only to nearly bump into her housemate, who was standing right behind the door.

'As you didn't come in, I thought I'd meet you outside instead,' Luna greeted her in her usual dreamy voice.

Hermione smiled. 'It's good to see you, Luna.'

'You look ghastly. Tea?'

'Yes, please. I'll just put my stuff upstairs. I'll be right down,' Hermione said, grabbing the bag she'd dumped in the corridor earlier and trotting up the staircase.

Upstairs, she threw her bag onto her bed and changed into a pair of joggers, a well-worn cardigan that had once been blue, and fluffy, purple socks. When she arrived in the living room, a steaming mug of tea...splash of milk, no sugar...was already waiting for her. A plate with Honeyduke's Fruit and Nut Chunkies on it sat in the middle of the coffee table. Luna sat cross-legged on the sofa, her head barely visible behind the latest edition of the *Quibbler*.

Hermione sank into an armchair and took a sip of her tea. As the warm liquid ran down her throat, she felt her anger evaporate slowly and calm spread through her.

The effect lasted until Luna asked from behind her newspaper. 'What happened?'

'Ron's what happened,' Hermione said, setting down her mug with a thud. A bit of tea sloshed over the rim and onto the tabletop.

Luna carefully folded her *Quibbler* and put it down next to her. Then, she leant back and just looked at Hermione with round eyes.

'Sorry,' Hermione mumbled, pulled her wand from her sleeve and vanished the puddle of tea. 'It's just Ron's a blithering idiot. Can you believe that he's still nicking the cars his dad stashes away in that shed of his? And he still can't be bothered to get a proper driving licence.' Her finger had started to draw little circles on the table top. 'I mean, if he loves Muggle culture so much, why can't he do things properly?'

'It's another form of contempt, but they're not aware of it. I've seen it with other wizards when I was travelling. Even if they like Muggles, they think there's no need to learn their ways because magic can fix everything.' With a flick of her finger, Luna levitated a biscuit towards her.

'That's a good point. I should mention this to Penelope; she's lobbying to have Muggle studies made into a compulsory subject.' Hermione snatched a biscuit as well.

'Ron can be a bit inconsiderate sometimes,' Luna said.

Hermione snorted. 'Daft git is more like it. Not only is he thick enough to crash a car, he has to pretend it's mine.' She felt another wave of anger surge through her. 'And guess who the Muggle authorities will want to talk to? Me, of course. About a car I've never seen and about an accident I didn't know anything about until a few hours ago. Never mind that I don't have a driving licence, either. You'd think by now he'd know to leave me well out of his stupid affairs.'

'I can see why you're angry. What are you going to do?'

'Tell the police the truth. I've never seen that car. I've had it with sorting out Ron's messes. Not this time.' The biscuit had become a heap of tiny crumbs while she was talking.

Luna nodded. 'Maybe he'll learn.'

'Or he'll find another daft bint to help him out.' Hermione said. She glanced at the newspaper that lay next to Luna and remembered something. 'Aren't you supposed to be in Iceland?'

'I came back a day early. Draco's going to Paris on Tuesday, and I wanted to see him before that.'

'So, it's still going well.'

'Oh, yes. You know he's really adorable when he wakes up in the morning and his hair is all soft like a Puffskein's. He likes it when I make him hum.' A dreamy smile spread over Luna's face.

That was more than Hermione really wanted to know about Draco, but Luna's obvious happiness still made her smile, too. 'I'm so glad for you two.'

'What about you and Snape?' Luna asked.

'Me and Severus???' Hermione said, sitting upright and ignoring the little skip of her heart.

'Oh, I just thought you might like him.' As usual, Luna offered no further explanation.

'Yes. I mean... No. Maybe. I don't know.' Hermione's heart insisted on continuing to beat a bit faster.

'You'd be well suited, like two swoopers.'

'I'm having lunch with him in Hogsmeade tomorrow.' Suddenly that didn't sound as innocent as it had a few hours ago.

'See.'

'It's just lunch.'

'You have to start somewhere. Maybe you should take a good-luck charm with you.'

'I'll remember that.' Hermione yawned. 'I'm off. See you tomorrow morning?'

'Draco has promised to bring white wine for tonight.'

'Maybe not, then. Have a good time. Night, hon.' Hermione stood up and picked up her mug.

'Sweet dreams, Hermione.'

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Hermione stretched and snuggled back into her pillow. Just as she was drifting off to sleep again, her alarm clock started to beep.

She fumbled to switch it off, but it wasn't where it was supposed to be. Hermione sat up, blinking, and realised that she was at home, not in her rooms at Hogwarts. This time, she found the "off" button and the noise ceased. A glance out of the window showed a clear, sunny sky. Excellent.

A bit of digging through her wardrobe got her fresh underwear, a clean t-shirt, a light jacket and a pair of joggers that looked decidedly less worn than those from last night. The house was quiet, and a knock at Luna's door confirmed that she was at Draco's.

Downstairs, Hermione chugged down a glass of orange juice, skipped into her trainers, and set off for a run.

Familiar streets and houses greeted her as she ran down Ripplevale Grove, enjoying the sunshine, even though it was a bit more chilly than expected. As she was crossing Thornhill Square, two men approached her. 'Ms Granger?'

They were of average height and build, clean shaven, short hair, nothing remarkable about the way they were dressed. In fact, they were so inconspicuous that several bells at once went off in Hermione's head, and she checked for the familiar feel of her wand tucked into her sleeve before she answered. 'Yes?'

The shorter of the two flashed a badge at her. 'CID. We'd like to ask you a few questions about a car accident that happened last Thursday on the B3212 near Bakers Hill.'

Two

Chapter 3 of 6

Mystery and mayhem or: someone is missing, someone is frantic and everyone has their own agenda. And there is a bit of romance, too.

The Potterverse belongs to JKR. I only take the characters out to play.

Many thanks to Melusin and Pyjamapants for beta reading.

Severus Snape was pacing the length of the empty Defence classroom. Reaching his desk, he pulled out his pocket watch and glanced at it. Then, he turned and stalked in the direction of the door. He walked back again to his desk, turned, and resumed his circuit, staring at the time-piece over the door and scowling at it. After his next turn, he flung open the door and stomped down the stairs to the ground floor.

He marched into the administration office without knocking. 'Were there any owls for me today?' he barked.

'No. No owls today for Professor Snape,' the elf on duty informed him.

'Check again.'

The house-elf obediently got up to look through a shelf on which various parchments lay in different heaps.

'No, Professor. Sir.'

Snape took care to bang the door behind him as he left without a word.

He stormed into the staffroom next door and switched on the Wizarding Wireless Network. After he'd been glued to it for nearly half an hour, he knew all about the latest Ministry decrees, the current charts, Patil's newest line of hair care products for the discerning witch or wizard, and Slughorn & Jiggers' recent breakthrough in Headache Potion: "Vanishes your pain instantly, no side effects".

'Hmph,' said Snape. But there was no news about any accidents or traffic disturbances other than a blocked Floo connection somewhere in the West Country.

Back to the administration office it was. 'Get me Professor Granger's home address.'

'Professors' home addresses is confidential,' the same house-elf squeaked.

'Confidential, my arse. I'm the Deputy Headmaster. Get me that address.' Snape's glare would have intimidated lesser beings.

The house-elf threw him a look Snape chose not to interpret, but went up and waved his hands over a stretch of blank wall. A hole appeared; in it lay a stack of parchments. The house-elf retrieved one of them, duplicated it with another wave of his hand, and gave it to Snape.

'Thank you,' he managed to grind out before he swept out of the room and practically ran upstairs to his office.

With a quick flick of his wand, his fireplace flared to life. Snape knelt in front of it and threw a handful of Floo powder into the flames. When they turned green, he stuck his head in and shouted Hermione's London address.

After a quick succession of unidentified rooms flew by, he found himself staring into the living room of his colleague. He hardly noticed what it looked like as he shouted, 'Miss Granger.'

No answer.

'Miss Granger, time to wake up.'

Silence.

'Miss Granger, get your arse down here. Now.'

Nothing.

He was about to step through when he felt a firm poke at his backside. Withdrawing from the fireplace and whipping around, he found himself face to face with a very stern looking McGonagall. 'What?' he snapped.

'What do you think you're doing?' Minerva asked.

'Trying to reach Miss Granger. Not that it's any of your business.' He glared at her.

'Actually, it is. There is a reason why access to the staff's home addresses has been restricted to the Headmistress since the war, as you well know.' Minerva continued to look at him.

'Did that damned elf have nothing better to do than go blabbing to you?' Much as he usually liked Minerva, he wished she'd just leave.

'*That damned elf* adores you. Binky came to me because he was worried. He wasn't very explicit, but I take it you behaved rather oddly in the admin office when you ordered him to retrieve Miss Granger's address.' Minerva's expression had softened slightly. 'Severus, I know there must be a very good reason why you needed that information, but I still have to follow this up.'

Severus sighed. 'We'd scheduled a meeting for nine this morning, and she didn't turn up.' Said aloud, it sounded a tad ridiculous. No need to mention the lunch on top of it.

Minerva looked at him oddly. 'Hm. Maybe she forgot. You know Hermione tends to get caught up in her research.'

'Minerva, in all the time you've known her, how many meetings has Miss Granger forgotten?'

'None that I remember,' Minerva conceded.

'Exactly.'

'Perhaps she's late. But no, she'd send an owl. Hm, you're right. It's a wee bit odd.'

'Took you long enough.'

'Don't start with me. And no, you're not going to barge into her home.'

Severus scowled, but didn't object.

'Come up to my office, Severus. Let's have a cuppa and see what we can do.' With that, Minerva took a handful of Floo powder and threw it into the fireplace before she said, 'Headmistress' Office.'

Severus stepped in after her, knowing better than to argue with Minerva when she was in taking-charge mode.

He soon found himself settled into an armchair, a steaming mug in front of him. At the wall, the portraits of the former Headmasters and -mistresses appeared to be sleeping. Minerva pushed a tartan-patterned biscuit tin towards him. 'Try one. They're really nice.'

'Minerva...'

'I know.' Minerva snapped her fingers once. 'Binky.'

The elf appeared instantly. 'Yes, Headmistress?'

'Bring me Professor Granger's file, please.'

Within a moment, the elf was back, handing a folder to Minerva.

'Thank you.'

Binky turned to Severus. 'Binky is sorry, Headmas...Professor. Binky will punish himself. He will clean the Owlery, even though Professor Hagrid says we elves is not having to because it's too dangerous.'

'You will do no such thing, Binky. It's perfectly all right.' Severus made sure to accompany his sentence with a firm glare to keep Binky from punishing himself.

'Yes, sir. Thank you, Professor.' The elf vanished.

Minerva flicked through the file. 'Let's see who Hermione has named as emergency contact. If she's had an accident, they'd know.'

'Wouldn't that be her parents?'

'No. Don't you remember the fuss when they stayed in Australia? Oh, yes, you weren't...' Minerva looked embarrassed for a moment before she continued to look through the information in the folder. 'Ah. Here it is: Mr Potter and Miss Lovegood.'

Severus was already on his way to the Floo by the time Minerva closed the file. 'The Ministry.'

He stepped out into the Ministry's atrium. Brushing a few specks of soot off his robes, he strode quickly to the Visitors' Desk. Several people started whispering and turning their heads as he passed. *It's been nine years. Get fucking used to it*, he thought.

The Visitors' Desk was staffed by a young man, who looked vaguely familiar. Hufflepuff, Snape's brain helpfully supplied. Two surly-looking security trolls were guarding the entrance to the Ministry area proper.

'Please provide your wand for inspection.' The welcome wizard barely looked up from his paper.

'I'm here to see Auror Potter,' Snape said and put his wand on the dish of the wand-testing device that sat on the desk.

Did this always take so long? Finally, after what seemed like an inordinate amount of time, a thin strip of parchment slid out from a slot at the instrument's base.

Still not looking at Snape, the young man picked up the strip of parchment. 'Ebony, thirteen inches, dragon heart-string,' he read out and put it onto a small brass spike.

'Please state the purpose of your visit and put your hand right here.' He indicated a triangular space on his desk.

Severus slapped his hand down. 'I'm here to see Auror Potter. Now can we get on with it?'

He felt a slight tingling at his palm, and then a visitor's badge slid out while a disembodied voice announced, 'Severus Snape to see Auror Potter. Approved.'

The young man's head snapped up, and he stared at Snape.

Ah, Jenkins. His face had frequently worn the same expression during his Defence lessons. Snape saw no reason to linger at the desk any longer, and he stalked off towards the lifts at the far end of the atrium.

More stares and whispers as he rode up to Level Two while paper aeroplanes were busy circling over their heads. He resisted the impulse to pull out his wand to see if they could be hexed into smithereens.

Potter was already waiting for him when the lift stopped on the floor that housed the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Snape briefly nodded in greeting. 'Potter.'

'It's good to see you.' Harry gestured for Snape to follow him.

Severus followed Harry through the Auror office into a kitchen area. Had the office always been this big? The kitchen area consisted of a small set of cupboards, a rickety table, and several mismatched chairs in vastly different colours. Two kettles were standing next to each other on the work surface.

'Tea? Coffee?' Potter asked.

'No.' Severus was circling around the chairs like a panther ready to attack.

Potter leant against the kitchen counter. 'I take it this is not a social call?'

Severus quickly cast a Muffliato around them. 'I see your Auror training wasn't entirely wasted. Miss Granger's missing.'

Potter's casual pose vanished immediately as he stood up straight, all his attention focused on Severus now. 'What do you mean, missing?'

'Missing as in she didn't turn up for a meeting we were supposed to be having this morning,' Severus explained, coming to a stop right in front of Potter.

'Why would you meet during the Easter holidays?' Potter asked.

'That's none of your business. Fact is, she wasn't there.' Snape restrained himself from looming over Potter...barely.

'Maybe she overslept?'

'She. Did. Not. Oversleep. Potter, you're listed as her emergency contact, and you're supposed to be a sodding Auror. Get on with it and find out what happened.'

To his credit, Potter snapped into action immediately. 'Right, let me check with St Mungo's first, and I'll get someone to contact the Muggle hospitals. We'll find her.'

Severus nodded. Finally, something was being done. 'What can I do?'

'At the moment, nothing really. This shouldn't take long.' Potter disappeared into the office.

By the time Potter came back into the kitchen, Severus had not only memorised the colours and patterns of every chair, the table, and the cupboards, he also knew how many paces he needed to get from one end of the room to the other.

'She isn't in St Mungo's. Nor in any Muggle Hospital. MLE has no record of any accidents involving a witch.' Potter's hair looked even messier now than when he had left the kitchen, Severus noticed.

'Damn. What now?' Nausea was starting to spread through Severus' stomach. Something was wrong here. Very wrong.

'We need to talk to Luna. Maybe she knows something we don't. Come on. Let's see if she's at home.'

Potter led the way to the Floo at the back of the Aurors' office. As they passed through the row of cubicles, one or two younger Aurors raised their heads, their eyes going wide when they recognised who was with Harry. To his astonishment, Severus saw Potter level a glare in their direction that had them quickly busying themselves with whatever was on their desks.

Severus watched Potter's head disappear into the Floo only to reappear again fairly quickly. 'According to her secretary at *The Quibbler*, Luna's taken the day off. Maybe she's at home.'

His head disappeared again. It reappeared as quickly as the last time. 'No, not at home either, neither is Hermione.'

Severus scowled. 'I've already told you that she's not at home.' Then the rest of the sentence registered. 'She's living with Luna Lovegood?' It seemed he had completely misread their agreement to have lunch together, then.

'Sorry, professional habit. Always confirm information given.' Potter's hair was getting messier with every Floo call, soon it would look like the end of a broomstick. 'And no, she isn't "seeing" Luna. They're sharing a house.' He looked as if he wanted to say something else but didn't. 'Come.'

Severus was about to ask where they were going, but Potter was already halfway across the room, so he just stalked after him. They went down a corridor, and after Harry briefly knocked at a door, they were standing in front of Kingsley's desk.

'Kingsley, I need Draco Malfoy's address and access to his Floo.'

Kingsley didn't bat an eye at Potter's entrance. 'Sorry, Harry. You'd need to have a very good reason for that. Hello, Severus.'

'Kingsley.' Snape nodded curtly. 'What do we need Malfoy for? What the hell are you on about, Potter?'

'Frankly, I'd like to know what's going on, too,' Kingsley added.

Potter looked at them both with an expression of utter surprise on his face. 'Didn't you know? Luna's going out with Draco Malfoy. Has been for a while, actually. So he'd probably know where she is.'

Snape now remembered Lucius mentioning something about Draco having a new girlfriend. Kingsley, though, was still staring at Potter as if he were speaking in Gobbledegook.

'Oh, right. It seems Hermione is missing, and we thought maybe Luna knew something,' Potter explained.

'Have you checked with St...' Kingsley began.

'Yes, we have. And before you ask, she isn't in a Muggle hospital, either. She hasn't overslept, she's not at home, and she hasn't forgotten that she had a meeting with me.' Severus' voice had grown louder with every word.

Silence.

'Yes, well. Now that we've established that, maybe we should try to see if Miss Lovegood knows anything,' Kingsley said and pointed his wand at a filing cabinet next to the window. A file floated out and landed with a soft thud on his desk. He quickly flipped through it before he stood up and went over to the fireplace.

Severus couldn't help the feeling that precious time was ticking by as he waited for Kingsley to finish his call.

'The bad news is, Draco isn't at home, either. The good news is, according to his house-elf they've gone to Malfoy Manor for lunch. I've advised the elf to let them know that you'll be there momentarily to talk to Miss Lovegood.'

Harry said, 'Right, let's go over to the Auror's Apparition point. That way, we don't have to go down to the atrium.'

Severus nodded. 'Thank you, Kingsley.'

'You're welcome. Go and find Hermione.'

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Severus and Harry materialised in front of Malfoy Manor, the door opening instantly for them. Without waiting for Potter, Severus strode up the steps and into the entrance hall. If Draco and Luna had come for lunch, they'd be in the dining room. He set off immediately in its direction, accompanied by a house-elf that was running to keep up with him. The elf reached the door just in time to open it for Severus and announced breathlessly, 'Mr Snape.' And after he noticed Potter, who came jogging after them, 'And Mr Potter.'

'Thank you.' Lucius rose to greet him. 'Severus. Mr Potter. What can I do for you?'

'I need to speak with Miss Lovegood. I'm sorry to disturb your lunch, but it is rather urgent,' Severus said.

'We are here to talk to Luna,' Potter piped up.

'Yes, Potter. I think we got that,' Draco said.

Potter threw a glare in his direction.

'Why do you need to speak to me?' Luna asked from her place at the table.

'Let's all sit down. Severus, Mr Potter, can I offer you anything?' Lucius asked.

The fear and worry that had held Severus in their grip subsided as they so often did in Lucius' presence. He chose the chair opposite Luna and sat. Seeing that Potter had found a chair as well and was about to open his mouth, he quickly intercepted, 'Miss Lovegood, have you heard anything from Miss Granger?'

'I saw her last night. Why?'

'She's missing. She didn't turn up for a meeting this morning, and nobody seems to have seen her.'

'Hermione is very reliable.' Luna looked as if this was a rather fascinating academic problem.

'Yes. I know that. Do you have any idea where she could be?' Severus wanted to shout at the witch opposite him in order to get the information faster, but seven years in his classroom had proven that any intimidation tactics were entirely wasted on Miss Lovegood.

'No. She did seem rather excited about her lunch with you, though.'

All eyes in the room turned to Severus.

Lucius said nothing, a speculative expression on his face. Draco stared at Severus.

'You didn't mention anything about lunch,' Potter said.

'Yes, well. You haven't informed me about your plans for lunch either, Potter.' Snape scowled.

'It's Harry. And my lunch date isn't missing.'

'Which is exactly the point. Miss Granger is missing. Vanished...without a trace as it seems. So if you've finished with this pointless discussion could we get back to that?' Snape said.

'I want to find her, too. Luna, you said you saw her last night. Was that before or after Ron and I saw her?' Harry asked.

Of course, the other third of the Golden Trio had to be involved in this mess somehow, as well. Not exactly a surprise. 'What's Mr Weasley got to do with all of this? And how come you never mentioned that you saw her, too?' Severus resisted the urge to shake, hex, and then throttle Potter.

'Ron's got nothing to do with this. We went to Hermione's place to ask her if she wanted to come down the pub with us. But she wasn't in the mood. Luna, did you see her after we left?' Harry asked.

'Ron can be a bit unkind sometimes,' Luna said, twisting a strand of her hair round her finger.

Before Potter had time to rush to the defence of his friend, Severus said quickly, 'And?'

'They had a quarrel. Apparently, Ron crashed a car and said it was Hermione's and...'

'What?' Severus asked.

'Yes, it was a stupid thing to do. Hermione told him that, too. And I think she wasn't in the mood for drinkies after that. I think she was still a bit upset when she went to bed.'

'Imagine that,' Severus murmured and leant back in his chair. It seemed they weren't getting anywhere. As far as they knew, Hermione had been snug in her bed last night and then never been seen again. Damn.

'Did you see her this morning?' Harry asked.

'I was at Draco's.' Luna looked at them as if they were supposed to already know this.

'Which means, nobody has seen Hermione since she went to bed last night,' Harry said, summing up what they already knew.

'Maybe someone has a grudge against her and made her disappear,' Draco suggested.

Lucius and Severus locked eyes. Lucius' suddenly rigid expression indicated that he was thinking the same thing as Severus. Harry had gone pale. 'Do you think anyone would risk their probation?'

'If they thought they could get away with it,' Lucius said.

'Right, time to check the whereabouts of Nott, Parkinson and Goyle,' Harry said grimly.

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Hermione opened her eyes and quickly closed them again, deciding that the light was entirely too bright. She tried again more slowly. Her head felt woolly, and something furry seemed to have taken up residence in her mouth and died there. She saw a ceiling that looked completely unfamiliar with a light-bulb that shone directly into her face. She tested her arms and legs. All there.

She sat up in slow-motion and surveyed her surroundings. She was sitting on a narrow bed, which was standing in what appeared to be a bedsit. There was a bedside table next to her. A table with two chairs was standing beneath a window. Two doors were visible on the wall opposite the window. The wall next to it was dominated by a gigantic mirror and a sideboard beneath it. She squinted at the mirror and the frame surrounding it. Definitely the ugliest frame she'd ever seen, she decided. A closer look revealed that it was made up of little figures that were strangely reminiscent of the house-elf heads mounted on plaques that used to adorn the walls of Grimmauld Place. Hermione shivered before she directed her thoughts back to more pressing matters.

What had happened? How long had she been unconscious? How had she ended up here? Where was here? And why was she feeling so lousy. Fuzzy scraps were materialising in her brain. She'd gone running this morning... The two blokes...

They had asked her to report to the police... And they had had badges... What sort of badges? They'd been passing a large dark van. And then... Nothing. What had happened? Hermione's hand went to extract her wand from its usual place on her arm and found an empty space.

Hermione froze. Ice-cold terror spread through her, threatening to overwhelm and paralyse her. She, like Ron, Harry, Luna, and she was sure many other survivors of the war, never went anywhere without her wand. Not even downstairs to the kitchen to fetch a biscuit. And now her wand wasn't there. Her hand started shaking, and something dark and nameless threatened to consume her until a tiny shred of sanity raised its voice. Hermione took several deep breaths and forced herself to concentrate on the fact that she was alive and relatively unharmed.

She reminded herself firmly that she was a witch, that her magic did not depend on a piece of wood, and that her abilities in wandless magic had improved considerably in the last nine years. The darkness that had threatened to engulf her, and with it the feeling of utter terror and panic, receded. Her hands stopped trembling, and she slowly started to feel warm again.

She took another deep breath. She needed to get out of here. Hermione swung her legs over the side of the bed. She stood up carefully, still a bit wobbly, but her legs seemed willing to carry her weight. She closed her eyes, forced herself to take more calming breaths, and then concentrated on the image of her bedroom. An odd feeling crept up her spine, and her eyes snapped open. Someone had seen her leaving this morning, which meant someone had been watching the house. Closing her eyes again, she focused on the Apparition point just outside Hogwarts gates instead. Nothing.

Destination, determination, deliberation, she reminded herself and focused again.

Still nothing. Whoever had set this up had obviously heard of Anti-Apparition wards. 'Oh, brilliant, fucking brilliant,' Hermione murmured.

She went to inspect the room next. As she had suspected, one of the doors was locked. Hermione inspected it thoroughly. There was no lock visible on the inside and no hinges, either. It was made of a firm material: steel, she estimated, definitely not wood. A wandless "Alohomora" yielded no result. 'Fuck.'

The other door led to a tiny and fairly grubby bathroom. Neither the miniscule shower cubicle nor the loo looked particularly inviting. At least the washbasin seemed to be more or less clean. Hermione walked over to the flat's windows next. She quickly took a step back after she'd peered outside. She was very high up. Forcing herself to look out, but not down, she approached the window again. It was already getting dark outside, but from what she could see, she was in a high-rise building. Maybe on the top floor, but definitely on one of the uppermost floors. She could look down on several other tall buildings in their immediate vicinity, though none of them as high as the one in which she was currently stuck. Predictably, the window didn't open. No handles, no hinges. She wrapped her cardigan around her hand and tried to smash the glass. Nothing. 'Wouldn't have been much use this high up, anyway,' she muttered.

Hermione sat down on the bed again and stared at the floor. Carpet: mustard, yellowish, she noticed before a tear escaped one of her eyes. If she'd been the type, now would have been the time for a good cry. As it was, she sniffled once or twice and used the back of her hand to rub away the trail of wetness on her cheek.

'Ugh.' Hermione went to the bathroom and washed her face and hands with cold water. The towel was scratchy but clean, so she used it to dry herself off before peering at her reflection in the mirror.

'What a mess.'

The fact that the mirror didn't comment nearly caused another tear to run down her cheek. She usually grumbled at her chatty mirror at Hogwarts, and the one at home wasn't much better. Now, she'd have been happy to hear one of their quips. Quickly pushing the futile wish away, Hermione went back to the bed. Time to get a grip and find out whatever was going on here. Somehow, it was all connected to the CID blokes. If they were CID. And since when did CID investigate a simple car accident? She could have kicked herself for not realising this sooner. They'd set a trap, and she'd walked right into it. And she still didn't know what was going on.

'Fuck,' she said again. Time to see how good her wandless magic really was. Hermione concentrated on happy memories. She thought about the moment she'd received her Charms diploma and Davies's beaming face as she called her "the most talented apprentice she'd ever had" and then said, '*Expecto Patronum*.'

A very faint wisp of silvery smoke materialised before her, only to instantly disappear again.

Hermione thought about the day she had been accepted into the scholarship programme in Ancient Charms and Magical Theory at the University of Montpellier *Expecto Patronum*.'

This time, the silvery wisp was a bit bigger, but it didn't take shape.

She thought about the day she had started teaching at Hogwarts. *Expecto Patronum*.'

Still no discernible shape.

Hermione sighed in frustration. She needed a different memory. What had made her happy, really happy recently? Two heads bent over a stack of ancient books, a heated discussion about the nature of magic, intense, dark eyes shining with intelligence...

'*Expecto Patronum*.'

A silvery otter appeared out of thin air and started happily gambolling around her. She instructed it to find Snape and tell him about her predicament. The otter did another

somersault before it disappeared through the crack beneath the locked door.

After it had gone, Hermione started to wonder why she'd sent her Patronus to Snape of all people.

Three

Chapter 4 of 6

Mystery and mayhem or: someone is missing, someone is frantic and everyone has their own agenda. And there is a bit of romance, too.

It took Potter less than an hour to get back from the Ministry. When the same elf as before showed Harry into the dining room, Snape gave up pretending to eat. Everyone else's food had been cleared away, only he still had a plate with a sandwich in front of him. And that only because Lucius had insisted.

'Nott, Parkinson, and Goyle are all accounted for, and they have alibis. Your other former friends, too.'

'Now look here, Potter...' Draco said.

'It's all right, Draco. As Mr Potter correctly stated, they are my *former* friends.'

Draco muttered something under his breath until Luna leant over and whispered into his ear.

'Which means we still have to find information about Miss Granger's disappearance,' Lucius pointed out.

Harry had been pacing in front of the fireplace; now, he stopped. 'What's your interest in all this?'

'You mean, apart from the fact that you came barging into my home and,' Lucius looked briefly at Severus before he continued, 'that I hate to see one of my friends in distress?'

'I'm not distressed. I want to find out what the fuck happened to Hermione,' Severus bellowed.

Lucius continued smoothly, 'As I was saying...'

'Why would the police want to talk to Hermione?' Luna asked.

Tiny wheels started to whirr in Severus' head. 'The police? Why didn't anybody mention this before? Potter, what exactly was the argument with that red-haired dunderhead about?'

'I don't see how...'

'Potter! And stop prancing about.'

Harry sat down, looking mutinous. 'Right. As you know, Ron borrowed one of the cars his dad keeps in his old shed, and he had an accident with it. He said the car was Hermione's.'

Severus stared at Harry, eyes narrowing. 'Since when do the police talk to the car's owner and not the driver after the accident? Something's off here.'

Harry was silent for a moment, then he nodded. 'Definitely dodgy. There's something else. Ron said the roadworks he crashed into looked really extensive, but they hadn't been there the day before.'

'I think it's time someone found out about this police investigation,' Severus said.

'The Auror department has contacts with the Muggle police. Let me see if they know anything. Maybe Arthur can help, too. He's been working really hard on improving relations with Muggles since he's become Minister.'

Lucius rolled his eyes, but didn't say anything when Severus shot a warning look in his direction.

Severus stood up and said to Harry, 'I'm coming with you.'

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'What's she doing?'

Liz Mulligan peered at the woman in the other room. 'Not much. Walking around, sitting on the bed. Muttering something to herself for a bit. Nothing fancy.'

'Do you think it's true that they can't do anything without that?' James Wolverton pointed at the long, thin piece of wood on their worktable.

Mulligan shrugged. 'The others couldn't.'

'But isn't she supposed to be special? More powerful than the others or something?'

'I suppose.' Mulligan glanced through the two-way mirror again. 'Doesn't look like much, though.'

'Tell me again. Why do we have to use this bloody thing instead of proper surveillance techniques?' Wolverton asked.

'Because "proper surveillance techniques" don't work with that lot, as you well know,' a voice stated from behind him.

Wolverton and Mulligan whipped around to face their superior. As usual, the nameless man had entered without any sound. As usual, he was dressed in a brown, inconspicuous suit that perfectly matched his short, brown, inconspicuous hair and the brown, inconspicuous frame of his glasses.

Mulligan nodded. Yes, she did remember the nasty hiss when their fancy, new equipment had short-circuited. Not to mention the smell of burnt plastic.

'Excellent. Now, this time it's different. We've got enough data. This time, I want you to interact with our "guest".' Even his voice was inconspicuous. No trace of an accent but not posh, either.

'Interact? What for?'

Mr Noname put his brown, inconspicuous briefcase on their worktable. They heard several soft clicks as he bent to open it, then he extracted a small, wooden box from it. He put it on the table. 'Open it.' He passed a bunch of tiny keys to Wolverton.

It took him several minutes to figure out which key went into which lock. Finally, he turned the last one in its lock and opened the lid. Or rather, tried to open the lid. When he attempted to lift it, there was a flash of light, and he was blasted backwards. He managed to grab the edge of the table to keep from falling. After carefully inspecting the burns on his hand, he threw an accusing glare in Mr Noname's direction.

'Ah, yes. I thought it might be booby-trapped. You should have been more careful.' He turned to Mulligan. 'Here's what I want you to do. Establish contact with the subject. We want her to open the box and tell us how to use the object inside it. Use any means necessary.' He left the room as quietly as he had entered it.

Mulligan and Wolverton looked at each other. 'Shit.'

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Severus leant back and stretched his legs, only to pull them back under the chair again a moment later. He bent forward to thumb through some of the security leaflets on Harry's desk, not really seeing what was printed on them. What the hell was taking Potter so long?

At that very moment, Potter entered the cubicle looking haggard, his hair even more untidy than the other times Severus had seen him. 'And?'

Potter shook his head. 'Nothing. I've talked to our contacts in the Muggle police. Nobody knows anything about an investigation into an accident. I talked to Ron to get more details. I even managed to talk to someone at the Highways Agency. According to them, there were no roadworks on the B3212 the day of Ron's accident. Fishy, if you ask me.'

'Extremely,' Severus confirmed.

'What do we do now?'

Severus said, 'I suggest, we...'

Susan Bones peered over the rim of Harry's cubicle. 'The Minister wants to see you, Harry. And you too, Professor.'

'Right, let's see what Arthur wants.' Harry stood up.

When they entered the Minister's office, they found Arthur Weasley busy studying what appeared to be the manual for the bits and pieces that were spread over his desk. Severus noticed that an entire shelf was devoted to all sorts of Muggle appliances in various states of assembly. He recognised a telephone and a toaster; most other things looked unfamiliar or consisted mostly of individual components that didn't add up to a whole. Another shelf was filled with Muggle books, mostly on inventions and technology. A glance at the stacks of magazines in front of it revealed titles like *Elektor*, *TopGear*, and *What Car?*.

'Isn't it marvellous?' Arthur beamed at them. 'Only got it this morning, directly from the other Minister's office. Once it's assembled, it's supposed to play music. Just like the wireless, but you can carry it around. Ingenious what these Muggles come up with.'

Severus came to a halt right in front of Arthur's desk and resisted the urge to sweep all the junk off it. Barely.

'Now, Harry, Severus, what's this I hear? You've been poking around in Muggle affairs. What for?'

Severus decided to see how Harry would manage to explain that one without implicating his idiot friend.

Harry shuffled his feet. 'You see, Hermione is missing, and there's evidence the Muggle police might have wanted to talk to her. And that's really the only clue we've got.'

Arthur had suddenly become serious. 'Our Hermione is missing? Are you certain?'

'Yes, positive,' Harry said quickly as Severus was drawing breath to inform Arthur what exactly he thought about being asked this question for the umpteenth time.

'Hm. Muggles couldn't be involved. We've made tremendous progress and enjoy cordial relations, now. The other Minister said as much when we had tea, yesterday. I don't want you to risk that with false accusations. Check the activities of former Death Eaters and their sympathisers.'

'We already have,' Severus ground out. Would it help their case if he tried to shake some sense into Arthur? Probably not.

'Check again. It's the only possible explanation. And keep me informed.' Arthur turned his attention back to the bits and pieces on his desk.

Severus led the way out of Arthur's office, feeling that any further attempt to talk to the Minister would be a complete waste of time.

Without a word, they walked down the corridor and didn't stop until the door to the staircase had closed behind them.

Severus banged his fist against the wall in frustration. 'Arthur has gone bonkers.'

'What now?' Harry asked, not making any attempt to defend his father-in-law.

'We continue our investigation from elsewhere. How about your place?'

All of sudden, Harry looked uncomfortable. 'Erm, I'd rather not.' He offered no further explanation.

'Hm, Hogwarts is not very practical.' Severus considered their options. 'Let's go back to Malfoy Manor.'

'If there is Death Eater involvement, I don't want any of the Malfoys in this.'

Severus had to try very hard to resist the temptation to cast a Petrificus Totalus on Harry and just carry him off to the manor. 'Look, even if any of the Death Eater lot are involved in this, Lucius isn't. In case you hadn't noticed, he isn't exactly keen on Voldemort's followers himself. Plus, we can use all the help we can get.'

'What makes you think he will help us?'

'Call it a hunch.'

'Hmph,' said Harry, but he followed Severus, nevertheless.

Satisfied, Severus marched downstairs to get to the Apparition point in the Atrium.

Draco and Luna were still there when Harry and Severus arrived back at Malfoy Manor. They briefly explained what had transpired at the Ministry. Once again, they all took seats around the dining room table to think about what to do next. Severus hadn't noticed the tea cups appearing before them, nor the plates with biscuits and small cakes that were now sitting in the middle of the table. Lucius poured the tea with a drop of milk and two sugars and, without a word, pushed the cup towards Severus. The warm, sweet liquid running down his throat felt very soothing.

'What if there were others?' Luna asked suddenly.

'Others?' Harry looked clueless.

'Who've disappeared,' Luna clarified.

'Oh, right. Good point, but I don't think I can poke around, anymore.'

Severus set down his cup with unnecessary force. 'You can't. But Miss Lovegood can.' He turned to Luna. 'You could pretend you're researching something for that magazine of yours.'

'Excellent. Nobody will mind because they all think...' Harry didn't finish his sentence when he saw the looks Draco and Severus were directing at him.

'...because they all think I'm a bit strange,' Luna said calmly.

A moment of awkward silence ensued while they were all busy staring at their tea cups until Draco said, 'I'll help. I can postpone my trip to Paris.'

'No, go to Paris. Something tells me that we should attract as little attention as possible,' Lucius said.

'But, father...'

'I agree with Lucius. I can't quite put a finger on it, but there's something very odd here.' A very familiar sense of intrigue had taken up residence in Snape's spine. 'Miss Lovegood, how soon can you start?'

'I'll just get my lucky quill.' With that Luna left, Draco on her heels.

Lucius looked around. 'Severus, Mr Potter, I'd like to invite you to stay for dinner.'

Harry shook his head. 'No, thank you. I really can't. I should go home.'

'Thank you, Lucius.' Severus was glad not to go back to his empty rooms at Hogwarts.

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Hermione had no idea how long she'd been sitting on the bed, thinking about her situation when she heard the door open. A woman came in, carrying a tray with a pot, two mugs and a plate on it.

'Hi, I'm Liz. I've brought you something to eat.' She set the tray on the table at the window and sat down on one of the chairs.

Ignoring the rumbling of her stomach at the sight of food, Hermione remained where she was. 'Where am I? And what do you want from me?'

'Aren't you hungry?' Liz pointed at the sandwich.

'No. I want to know what's going on.' Hermione avoided even looking at the food.

'We mean you no harm.'

Hermione snorted. 'Explain how abducting me and holding me here goes together with "meaning me no harm".'

'You really should eat something.' Liz held the plate out to her.

'What, so that you can drug me again?'

Liz shook her head. 'It's not poisoned.' She broke off a bit of the sandwich and ate it, then she poured tea into one of the mugs and drank from it. 'See.'

The voice of reason suggested that eating might be a good idea, indeed. Besides, Hermione really was hungry. She slowly walked over to the table and accepted the offered tea. The egg salad sandwich was surprisingly tasty, but then she was so hungry that even Hagrid's rock cakes would have tasted good at this point.

Hermione swallowed the last bite of her sandwich and, for the first time, took a closer look at the woman opposite her. She looked to be in her early thirties with short, strawberry blond hair and a couple of freckles on her nose. Her eyes were blue, and Hermione suspected that she'd have a friendly smile if she weren't looking as if something was haunting her. And, unless her radar was completely off, the woman was a Muggle. Still, for a fleeting moment the woman looked like a member of the Weasley family, and Hermione felt a pang of longing that was quickly replaced by white-hot anger. 'What do you want from me?'

'Your co-operation.' The woman's smile looked forced and didn't quite reach her eyes.

'Why would I want to co-operate with you? I repeat, you drugged me, abducted me and you're holding me here against my will.'

Liz didn't answer; instead, she shoved a picture towards Hermione. 'Ever seen this?'

The picture showed a square wooden box with several keyholes of various sizes, its lid intricately carved.

Hermione crossed her arms in front of her and didn't say a word.

Liz nodded as if Hermione's reaction confirmed something. 'We thought you might need a little persuasion.' She shoved another picture towards Hermione. Hermione looked at the photo and spotted one of her exes. Terry. Terry-can't-keep-it-my-pants-Boot. Who had spent two weeks in St Mungo's Spell Damage Ward after she'd found out about his little trysts on the side, not to mention his attempt to access her Gringotts vault without her knowledge. He was chained to a wall in some sort of cellar, gagged and looking fairly miserable.

'If you co-operate, we'll let him go,' Liz said gently.

'No.' Hermione glared at her.

'No? You might want to reconsider that.'

Hermione barely heard the door close as she kept staring at Terry's photo, fury still racing through her. With a loud bang, the mug next to her exploded, shards and splashes of tea raining over the table. One of the shards grazed the back of her hand, and red drops of blood were trickling onto the table top, mixing with a puddle of soggy

tea. Suddenly Hermione's stomach decided that it didn't like the egg salad after all, and she ran into the bathroom to be violently sick in the loo.

~*~*~*~*~

'I think either your elves are bored or you need to have guests more often.' Severus eyed the amount of food that had just appeared on the table.

As there were only the two of them, he and Lucius had repaired to the conservatory for dinner. They'd just eaten their way through a herb salad and goat cheese with Severus keeping his opinion on fancy food to himself. Actually, the salad had tasted really nice, but the smells that wafted into his nose now were much more to his liking. A roasting tin with Toad in the Hole stood in the middle of the table, accompanied by steaming bowls filled with mashed potatoes, thick onion gravy and peas while their glasses kept refilling themselves with the smooth beer both he and Lucius liked.

They ate in silence with Lucius casting an enquiring glance at him every now and then. Severus felt very full after his third helping, but found that there was still room for some Bread and Butter pudding. The two wizards topped off their silent meal with a glass of Lucius' excellent brandy in front of the fire in his study.

'You know it's highly unlikely that any Dark wizard is involved in this. Not that there aren't any die-hard followers of the Dark Lord out there, but if any of them had a hand in Miss Granger's disappearance, we'd know by now.' Lucius twisted his glass around in his long fingers.

'Yes, we'd have received a note. Or a body part.' A shiver ran through Severus, and he saw that even Lucius had gone paler than usual. He quickly took a sip of his drink, relishing the soothing effect of the alcohol running down his throat.

'She means a lot to you, doesn't she?' Lucius asked softly.

'She is... a friend,' Severus answered.

Lucius nodded. 'She's a remarkable witch. I think you should stay here, tonight. I'll have Keppy prepare a room.'

'Thank you.' One of the guest rooms at the manor sounded like a much better place to spend the night than at Hogwarts where everything would remind him of Hermione.

Lucius stood up to give directions to the house-elf. As he walked past Severus, he briefly rested a hand on his shoulder. 'We'll find her.'

At that moment, the silvery shape of an otter swam into the room and stopped in front of Severus.

'I've been kidnapped. I don't know by whom or why. I'm in a high-rise tower block, but I don't know where it is. Help me, please,' the otter said in Hermione's voice before it disappeared.

A momentary surge of relief that Hermione was alive washed through Severus before he grabbed the edge of the table very hard. 'Shit.'

'Why didn't I think of this earlier?' He fumbled for his wand. *Expec...*

'Master Malfoy and Miss Lovegood,' Keppy announced, interrupting Severus' spell.

Draco and Luna rushed in, both looking very tired, but Luna beamed, announcing, 'We've found her. She's alive.'

Lucius said, 'Yes, we've actually just received a Patronus from her that confirmed as much.'

Severus sprang to his feet. 'Where is she?'

'And we have a pretty good idea what's going on now,' Draco said.

'Out with it.' Severus had started to pace in front of the fireplace.

'It seems a number of witches and wizards have disappeared over the last few months only to turn up again a few days later unharmed. When interviewed by Aurors, all they could remember was waking up in a strange flat, somewhere in a high-rise building where they were kept for a day or two without their wands. They didn't see anyone, and the next thing they knew, they woke up at the Stirring Rod...you know, that seedy drinking hole in Knockturn Alley.'

'But the really interesting bit is that it's all been kept very quiet. Allegedly because no one was harmed. And, the Aurors who interviewed them were always the same two people,' Draco said.

'Weird, but not surprising, given the level of competence at the Ministry,' Lucius commented.

'It gets weirder. Apparently, the order to keep it all hush-hush came directly from the Minister.'

'Arthur?' Severus couldn't quite believe what he was hearing.

'Arthur Weasley,' Draco confirmed.

'Arthur is blind, not guilty. I suspect Wrackspurts,' Luna said.

'Too bad,' Lucius muttered under his breath.

'As Luna said,' Draco resumed his tale, 'Arthur Weasley isn't directly involved in this, but someone at the Ministry is.'

'Who?' Severus asked, coming to a stop in front of Draco.

'Demelza Robins, and she was happy to supply us with the information we needed.'

'Just like that?'

'A few drops of Veritaserum and an Oblivate might have been involved,' Draco conceded.

Lucius gave his son a proud, fatherly smile.

'Where did you get Veritaserum? Never mind. What did you find out?' Severus asked.

'I do have access to your stores, remember?' Draco sounded almost offended.

'Yes, yes. Demelza Robins?'

'We didn't have time to get all the details, but apparently she has a contact, get this, at the Muggle Ministry to whom she passes on the relevant information. It seems there's a group of Muggles who study wizards and witches, and Demelza's been passing on names of people they might be interested in. She admitted that she gave them Hermione's name.'

Severus suddenly had the urge to go and hex Miss Robins to a place from where she wouldn't return, like right in front of a Quintaped.

'Does she know where these people keep their captives?' Lucius asked.

'Yes, because she helped them make the place "wizard-safe",' Draco said with a sneer.

'Wizard-safe?'

Severus didn't need to look at Lucius to see and feel the cold fury radiating in waves from the man standing across the room.

'Severus, I think it is time for you to use your talents and go undercover again.'

Four

Chapter 5 of 6

Mystery and mayhem or: someone is missing, someone is frantic and everyone has their own agenda. And there is a bit of romance, too.

JKR's, not mine.

Many thanks to Melusin and Pyjama Pants for the beta.

Hermione watched the dark sky outside change slowly. It went from black to grey, and then a faint tinge of rose began to colour the sky until the sun was up over the tops of the surrounding buildings. Another morning.

Last night, she had inspected the flat thoroughly again. She had gone over every wall, the windows, the front door. She had tried wandless spells once more. The result confirmed what she already knew. She was effectively trapped, and while she could use magic inside the flat, there was no way to open the door, the windows, or to Apparate. Whoever had chosen her prison knew about magic. The only new thing she had found out was that the mirror masked a window...unfortunately, it, too, turned out to be unbreakable. She was being watched. But why? Her thoughts kept revolving around that question when she wasn't thinking about the possibilities of getting out of the flat.

She got up from her seat on the bed and went to the bathroom to drink some water. At least the taps provided plenty of that. The rumbling in her stomach reminded her that she hadn't eaten anything since the day before yesterday. Her clearly stated lack of co-operation had resulted in a lack of food.

'If you're trying to starve me out, you're doing rather well,' she muttered, walking back to the bed. The last time she'd gone without food, she'd been on the run with the boys. Images of digging mushrooms out of humid earth, of stretching a soup with yet more water, of rationing a valuable piece of bread to last as long as possible flooded her brain. When they hadn't been planning, comparing notes or trying to work out the location of the next Horcrux, she and the boys had made up games to forget about the lack of food. Ron had proven especially difficult to distract. Hermione smiled as she remembered the Ludo board she had conjured from a leaf...and then she remembered again that this time she was all alone in her predicament. Another tear threatened to make its way down her cheek. Just like its predecessors, it was quickly wiped away, and Hermione began to mentally recite the spells necessary to pass the O.W.L.s.

O.W.L.s. Snape. Had her Patronus reached him? Could she have given him more clues?

She'd never thought that she'd miss him so much. Had she started to see him as something more than just a colleague? Hermione turned the thought over in her head, examined it from various angles, and found that she rather liked it. And for a pleasant moment, she was distracted from her current situation.

To which she was brought back abruptly when she noticed something misty drifting into the room through the crack beneath the door. Within seconds, the silvery wisp took on the form of a crane. 'Hermione, we don't know yet what exactly is going on there, but we know where you are, and I'll be with you shortly. Make sure no one notices that you know me. Pretend that you've changed your mind and want to co-operate. It is the only possibility for us to find out what this is all about and to get you out of there. Oh, and try to keep your usual boldness under control and opt for a bit of subterfuge,' it said in the unmistakeable voice of Snape before it disappeared through the crack again.

A warm wave of relief flooded through Hermione, making her almost laugh. Snape knew where she was. That meant other people would know, too. And he'd be here soon. Together, they'd find a way out of this mess. 'You've no idea how happy I'll be to see you... Severus,' she whispered.

She opened her eyes to a soft clicking noise. *I must have fallen asleep*, she thought as she peered at the front door.

A familiar voice said, 'Good morning. I'm Stephen. Stephen Prince. And you are,' he glanced briefly at the folder he was holding, 'Hermione Granger.'

Hermione's heart skipped a beat, and then another wave of relief swept through her. Snape was here, standing in the doorway and looking for all accounts and purposes like a Muggle scientist. He was wearing a lab coat over black trousers, the Muggle clothes emphasising his body much more than his usual robes. His hair was tied back, bringing out his dark eyes, his cheekbones and his prominent nose. Hermione's breath caught. He looked gorgeous.

He peered at her as if he'd never seen her before, and Hermione remembered just in time that they were probably being watched from behind the mirror. Forcing an expression of guarded suspicion on her face, she said, 'How is this a good morning? I'm still your prisoner.'

Snape, no, "Stephen", walked into the room and over to the table. Putting down the folder, he looked at her. 'Hermione, I can call you Hermione, right? I'd like to show you something.'

She made sure it looked like she was shuffling reluctantly over to the table. 'Why would I want to look at anything you want to show me?'

'Yes, Liz mentioned that you were a bit hesitant to co-operate with us. If I were you, I'd reconsider.'

On the table lay the familiar-looking picture of the wooden box. Hermione peered at it, trying to think of a way to communicate with Snape. Which wasn't easy as she was feeling rather faint, and the gnawing hunger in her stomach seemed to dominate everything. 'I'm not going to consider anything before I get something to eat.'

'Very well. We're not unreasonable. If you promise to look at the picture, I'll see what I can do about some food.' He indicated the chair that was facing away from the mirror.

Hermione nodded. She felt a pang of disappointment when she heard the door close behind Snape. She sat down at the table and pretended to pull the picture reluctantly

towards her. Remembering his advice, she pretended to look at it. Soon, the image did capture her interest, so much so that she forgot how hungry she was until she heard the door open again, and the delicious smell of fried eggs and bacon wafted under her nose.

She looked up to see Snape enter the flat again, carrying a tray. He stopped so that she could see the plate with eggs, bacon, and baked beans on it; next to it sat another plate with stacks of golden, buttered toast. A mug and a pot, presumably containing tea, completed the tempting display. Her stomach rumbled audibly.

'Well, Hermione, have you made up your mind if you're going to help us or not?'

She swallowed, her eyes remaining glued to the food. 'I might if you give me that breakfast.'

'Ah, that's not the way it works. You agree to help us, and you'll have breakfast. If not, I'm taking this away with me.' He held the tray just out of her reach.

Hermione pretended to think about this for a while, then she said, 'All right.'

Snape set the tray down in front of her. 'We knew you'd come to your senses. I'll be back in an hour. Make sure you have a few ideas by then.'

Hermione polished off the food quickly. Usually, she didn't like cooked breakfasts, but today it seemed like the most wonderful thing in the world. With a contented little sigh, she mopped up the last bit of tomato sauce with a piece of toast. Mug in hand, she pulled the picture towards her again. Some of the carvings on the wooden box looked vaguely familiar.

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When Snape came back, he brought the box from the picture with him. Setting it down on the table, he said, 'Does this look familiar to you?'

Hermione shook her head. 'No, I've never seen it before, but some...'

Snape's eyebrow went up.

'...of the carvings seem to be familiar, but they looked different in the picture. I don't think I've ever seen anything like it before.'

The eyebrow relaxed.

'What we'd like you to do is to open the box.' He placed a set of tiny keys next to the box.

'Why would I do that?' Hermione tried to suss out if opening the box was a good idea.

Trying to read his expression, she noticed a barely perceptible nod before he said, 'It's in your own best interest.'

That would be a yes. She ran her hands over and around the box without touching it. There was magic there, powerful magic, and it wasn't benevolent, but it didn't seem to be coming from the box itself. She peered at the set of keys and the keyholes. She put the first key in the matching keyhole and turned it carefully. The lock clicked open. Hermione proceeded to unlock the box until only one key was left.

Her concentration was interrupted by a knock on the door. Liz stuck her head in. 'Everything under control, Stephen?'

Snape nodded. 'Everything's fine.'

'I'll be off then. See ya.'

'See ya.'

Snape and Hermione waited until the footsteps had disappeared. When Hermione opened her mouth to speak, Snape put a finger on his mouth and shook his head. He pulled out his wand and cast a series of spells. Apparently satisfied with the results, he said, 'It's safe to speak now. Are you all right?'

'I'm fine. I'm so glad to see you. And what is this?' Hermione pointed at the box.

'Never mind that now. Let's get you out of here first.'

'Do you have my wand?'

'It's right here.' Snape pulled her wand out of his folder and handed it to her.

Warmth spread through Hermione as her fingers closed around the familiar shape of the handle. She felt complete. Hermione stood up and started towards the door. 'What are we waiting for?'

'Hermione, stop. I'd rather we're not seen walking out that door together. There's a camera outside, and beyond this room, Muggle technology does work.'

Hermione stopped in her tracks. 'Bugger. It would have been too easy. We could always blast the damn thing apart,' she suggested.

'We could. We could also leave a note on the table saying you've escaped and telling them where to find us.'

'You're right,' she conceded. 'I just want to get out of here.'

'So do I. And preferably without having to dismantle the Anti-Apparition wards. But I'd rather throw that bunch of imbeciles off our tracks.' Snape looked pensively at Hermione.

'Have you ever mastered the Animagus Transfiguration?' he asked.

'Why does everyone think that because I'm bright and powerful I'd have tried every spell known to wizardkind?'

Severus didn't say anything, just narrowed his eyes and waited.

'All right, I have.'

'What's your Animagus form?'

Hermione muttered something unintelligible.

'Sorry? Is it something small enough to carry?'

'Yes, it's just...'

'What?' Apparently Severus was waiting for her to perform the spell.

'I wasn't particularly happy with the result,' Hermione mumbled.

'Merlin's Balls. Stop being vain and transform.' Snape's eyes narrowed.

'Couldn't we dismantle the wards? I mean, there's two of us, and it couldn't take that long,' Hermione hedged.

'Hermione, get on with it,' Severus snapped.

Hermione threw him a dirty look and transformed.

Severus looked at the floor, a corner of his mouth curling upwards. 'Nice. Would you like me to get you a bowl of milk?'

Hermione the hedgehog glared at him, her nose twitching.

Still grinning, Severus Transfigured the empty mug into a rucksack and threw his folder, the wooden box, the keyring, and Hermione's wand into it. He disappeared into the bathroom and came back with the towel. Crouching down, he placed it in front of Hermione. 'I'm sorry, this won't be very comfortable.'

Hermione padded onto the towel. It felt a lot less scratchy to her hedgehog belly than it had on her human skin. She felt Snape fold it into a little nest around her, then he lifted her up and put her into the rucksack. As the zip started to close, she felt a surge of panic, but then she saw Snape's hands fumbling with it, making sure she had air to breathe. When she felt him lifting up the rucksack, she tried to sit in her towel nest as comfortably as possible.

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After what felt like a long time and a lot of bouncing and jiggling, her temporary lodgings were set down on something solid. She saw the zip open, and Snape's hands appeared, lifting her together with the towel. He looked at her for a moment before he set her gently down on the floor.

Hermione felt her body assume its human form again as the leaves of grass around her shrunk. She stretched her neck and her shoulders, then she looked at Severus. 'Are we really out of there?'

He nodded.

Without thinking, Hermione hugged him. 'Thank you.'

Severus stiffened for a moment, but then his arms wrapped around her. 'You're welcome,' he murmured into her hair.

Hermione was content to let him hold her until she remembered that Snape wasn't exactly the hugging type. She quickly stepped back. 'Yes, erm...'

'Erm, right...' Snape said, looking as embarrassed as she felt.

'Where are we?' Hermione asked quickly.

'On the grounds of Malfoy Manor.'

'What? Why did you bring me here?' Hermione grabbed the rucksack and started to dig through it until she found her wand.

'Hermione, relax. We've no idea yet what exactly is going on. At the moment, this seems to be the safest place.'

Hermione let out a shaky laugh, barely keeping the memories of the last time she had been here at bay. 'You do realise how ironic this is, don't you?'

'I know. And yet, at the moment, this is the one place where you'll be safe.'

'Why?'

'You know the "scientists" were Muggles, but you also noticed that the flat had been warded against certain spells,' Severus replied.

'Yes... That means that both wizards and Muggles are involved in this.'

'Exactly, and at the moment, we neither know who they are nor what they want.'

'How can you be sure that Lucius Malfoy isn't involved in this?' Hermione asked.

'He isn't.' Severus didn't elaborate, but something in his voice made Hermione believe him.

They had made their way slowly towards the manor while they were talking. As the elegant, impressive building came into sight, Hermione stiffened. She felt Severus' fingers link with hers, and together they mounted the steps to the front door.

Lucius came to meet them in the entrance hall. 'Miss Granger, welcome to my home. I'm glad to see you well. Rest assured that you'll be safe here.'

Despite Severus' reassurances, she had dreaded entering the manor again, but she understood both the apology and the promise in Lucius Malfoy's words. She started to relax, helped by the fact that she had become used to his presence from various board meetings, where she'd usually found his company pleasant and inspiring. She smiled at him. 'Thank you.'

'Keppy will show you to your room.' A house-elf bowed to her. Hermione noticed that he was clad in a clean tea-towel that managed to look almost like a proper apron, and that the elf seemed to be neither fearful nor cowering. For some reason, this helped to reassure her further.

'Thank you, Keppy,' she said, becoming increasingly aware that she'd been in her running clothes for over two days now, and that all she'd been able to use was cold water and a few cleaning charms.

'Do you think you'll be up for lunch in an hour?' Severus asked.

Hermione nodded and followed the elf upstairs. She didn't notice much about the room, only that someone had brought some of her clothes from home, and that there was a bathroom across the corridor. She contemplated a bath, but then decided on a shower. That should be enough to scrub the smell of the bedsit off. The warm water running over her body and the rose foam of the rose-scented soap felt wonderful.

Hermione yawned as she, squeaky clean now, went back to her room. The bed looked very inviting. *Only a few minutes*, she thought as she stretched out on it.

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Hermione snuggled back into the soft, fluffy pillow with a contented sigh. Her eyes opened to an unfamiliar room. She sat up quickly. It was already dark outside, but her room was slowly lit up by a soft light from two sconces on the wall. Realising where she was, she lay back. She wasn't a prisoner anymore. She was safe...as odd as that sounded to her own ears, given the fact that she was at Malfoy Manor. Severus had come to her rescue. A smile spread over her face, which turned into a grin as she pictured Severus' expression if she ever told him that he was her knight in shining armour.

'And I'm not exactly the typical damsel in distress, either. Which is a good thing,' she murmured as she stretched before getting up. She grinned again, noticing that she was feeling like Hermione Granger once more. She dressed in jeans and a jumper and went downstairs.

Keppy seemed to appear out of nowhere when she reached the stairs. 'The gentlemen are in the drawing room,' he said.

As Hermione followed him down the corridor, she braced herself to see *that* room again. Keppy opened the door for her, and she found herself in a warm, well-lit room. It was dominated by a large sofa and two armchairs grouped around a coffee table. A fire was crackling merrily in the fireplace; the velvet curtains before the large French windows were drawn. Bookshelves lined the walls, interspersed with a few paintings of landscapes, and a side table held an assortment of bottles and glasses. Nothing in the room reminded Hermione of the worst hours of the war. She felt the tension in her recede and greeted Severus and Malfoy with a smile.

Both had risen at her entrance. 'Sleep well?' Severus asked.

'Yes, thanks. I think I was a little more tired than I realised.'

'No wonder after your ordeal,' Lucius said. 'What would you like to eat, Herm...Miss Granger.'

'Hermione is fine. And whatever you're having is fine, too.' Her sentence was accompanied by her stomach growling.

'Ah, you've just pinpointed the problem. Some of us think the height of variety is having broccoli instead of peas,' Lucius said with a pointed look at Severus.

In response, Severus muttered something about fancy food.

Hermione looked from one to the other. It seemed they had this conversation frequently. In return, both were now expectantly looking at her. 'Chips?' she ventured, earning her a nod and a tentative smile from Severus. 'Yes, I'd love some chips.'

'And a salad or some veggies would be nice, too.' This time Lucius smiled at her.

In the end, they decided on pork chops with apple sauce, chips and a salad, and everyone seemed to be happy with their dinner.

After they'd eaten, they went back to have a glass of Burgundy in front of the fire. Hermione's thoughts returned to the events of the last two days.

'Did you find out what's in the box?' she asked.

'Yes. Come, I'll show you.' Severus stood up and led the way through several corridors and down a flight of stairs to what seemed to be a small workroom, Lucius trailing behind. Hermione noticed that both men disabled several layers of wards before the door opened.

The open box sat on a table. Its edges seemed to be slightly blurred. 'We've placed it under a Stasis Charm. The box was heavily warded and booby-trapped so that it could only be opened by a witch or wizard, and whatever that thing inside it is, it's dangerous,' Severus explained.

'Yes, I noticed that there was some powerful magical object inside when I started to open it this morning. And it seems to be Dark,' Hermione said as she went to the table to take a closer look. Inside the box, she could see a golden, round object. It was shaped like a sun, its rays thin and spiky. The disc itself was blank, apart from a small ribbon of symbols engraved around its rim. Hermione peered at the symbols. 'I don't think I've ever seen anything like that before,' she said.

'Neither have I,' Severus said.

'I haven't, either. But it's definitely Dark,' Lucius agreed. 'We thought we would have a look at some of my books tomorrow and see if we can find anything.'

Despite the gravity of the situation, Hermione's heart leapt happily at the prospect of research, and at the chance of seeing the library at Lucius' home. Rumour had it that it was the best and most extensive private library in Britain.

Five

Chapter 6 of 6

Mystery and mayhem or: someone is missing, someone is frantic and everyone has their own agenda. And there is a bit of romance, too.

Four days later, they weren't any closer to finding a clue about the device. Despite her growing frustration with the unsolved mystery, Hermione was having a wonderful time. She, Severus, and Lucius had spent their days in the library, which did indeed live up to its reputation, going through book after book that catalogued ancient and obscure magical devices, through volumes of magical theory, ancient and modern, and through tomes containing the history and facts about the Dark Arts.

Hermione had no idea how Lucius had kept his books out of the Ministry's clutches, and she didn't want to know, but she was glad that he had. She selected another volume from the pile on the table. This one was about artefacts originating in ancient China. She started to look through it. Nothing in it looked even remotely like their item. She had read a few paragraphs on the properties of jade figurines when Severus walked past her on his way to the shelves to get yet more books. He stopped and bent over her shoulder to see what she was reading, the tips of his hair brushing the skin on the side of her neck. A pleasant little shiver ran through her. He whispered, 'Imagine if they could tell us about their properties; that would save a lot of time.'

Next to her, Lucius looked up from the book he'd been reading. He pointed to the picture in Hermione's book. 'And just imagine the amount of chatter, if they all talked at once.' As he withdrew his hand, he ran it along her arm as if by accident.

Hermione's grin turned into a smile as Severus' hair grazed along the side of her neck again, leaving goosepimples in its wake. Her arm was still tingling where Lucius' fingers had touched her. To her, it felt like research had never been so much fun as with Lucius and Severus.

Come to think of it, she had generally enjoyed their company. Every time they'd tried to plan a meal, she'd had a hard time to keep from giggling. Severus was a very traditional eater with a pronounced distaste for too many greens and "fancy grub". She wondered how he managed to stay so slim and fit. At least he looked fit, and she admitted to herself she wouldn't mind investigating his body a bit further.

Lucius' food preferences were closer to her own, though her tastes weren't as extravagant as his. From what she could tell after these few days, he preferred French or Italian cuisine with loads of fresh vegetables and herbs. He, too, looked remarkably fit, and every now and then, Hermione found herself speculating about *his* body.

They usually managed to find some common ground food-wise. It made for interesting combinations...and for very happy house-elves in the kitchen.

She'd noticed both men displaying a mildly protective streak towards her. Hermione would never have admitted it, but she thought it rather endearing, especially as they were unobtrusive about it. She had gone running on the manor grounds twice; the first time, Severus decided that he hadn't practised flying in far too long. The second time, Lucius had announced that he needed to check the whereabouts of some of his peacocks.

Hermione snapped out of her musings as Severus put a large volume down on the table with a thud.

'There must be something in here somewhere,' he said, gesturing to the rows and rows of books around them.

'Yes, if only we could find it,' she agreed. 'The odd thing is, the symbols on the device look almost like hieroglyphs, which is why I thought they were familiar at first, but then they aren't.'

Severus nodded. 'It's like someone has appropriated familiar shapes for their own purposes...assuming one has a familiarity with hieroglyphs.'

Keppy came in, a scroll of parchment on his small, silver tray. 'Post for Miss Hermione,' he announced.

'Thank you.' Hermione unrolled the scroll and read through it quickly. 'It's from Harry. He says he's almost certain that Kingsley isn't involved, and there seem to be no further disappearances.' Which meant Terry was also safe and sound, she realised with what almost felt like a pang of disappointment.

'Still, I think it's for the best that only Harry and Luna know you're here,' Severus said, lightly touching her upper arm. More goosepimples.

'Yes. That way, Harry can try to find out what exactly Demelza is up to and who else is involved,' Hermione agreed.

Both bent over their respective books again.

Lucius appeared from the depths of the stacks, a small book floating before him. He levitated it carefully onto the table and then cast several wordless spells in quick succession. By the time he'd finished, both Severus and Hermione were staring at him with fascination.

'It should be safe to handle, now,' he explained. 'I found this in a chest at the very back of the library. I had completely forgotten I had this. It belonged to the Black family, and they were rather specific about who was allowed to touch their books.'

Hermione had a very good idea what "specific" meant, so letting Lucius thumb through the book first seemed like a good idea.

He stopped, staring at the page. 'Don't you think this looks familiar?' he asked, pointing at the illustration and handing the book over to her. His fingertips grazed hers, lingering just a tad too long, as she took the book.

There it was, an exact image of the device they had currently secured under a Stasis Charm. Hermione looked at the lines under the illustration: "'Amun-Ra's sun" also known as "Purifying Fire" a device created by Gellert Grindelwald,' she read. 'It doesn't say anything more,' she added, feeling slightly nauseous. 'That also explains the symbols. From what I know, Grindelwald and his followers used hieroglyphs that they'd modified slightly to create spells and enchant objects for their purposes.'

'Well, at least that confirms our suspicion that it's a Dark object,' Lucius said, 'but we still don't know how exactly it works or what it's for.'

'I know someone who should,' Severus said. 'I think it's time to visit Dumbledore's portrait.' He stood up. 'The sooner the better.'

'Do you want me to come with you?' Hermione asked, walking with him to the door.

'No, I can handle him. But thanks.'

They paused outside the door, looking at each other. Hermione tentatively put her arms around him and pulled him closer. His head dipped slightly, and she felt his lips on hers, smooth and warm. She slowly ran her tongue over his bottom lip and felt his mouth opening to her while his hand stroked her hair and then sneaked around the nape of her neck. When they broke apart, they both smiled. Hermione felt her body tingle all over.

'I'll see you later,' Snape said, hurrying up the staircase. He returned a few minutes later, his cloak over his arm and swept out the door.

Hermione looked after him, her heart still beating a little faster. When she turned around, she found Lucius standing back in the corridor, looking thoughtful.

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From the Apparition point just outside the gates, Severus strode up to the castle. Despite the chilly air, there were signs of Spring everywhere. He could have sworn he saw a hedgehog scurry away under a bush, and he grinned. He'd never thought of hedgehogs as dinky before, but really, they were adorable little creatures, not that he would have ever admitted such thoughts to anyone. From there his thoughts wandered to Hermione, and warmth spread through him.

As he neared the castle, he put his mind back on bracing himself for the conversation with Dumbledore. He was not looking forward to it. He'd talked to the portrait only twice after the war. Both conversations had been unpleasant and tedious...with Dumbledore first expressing his surprise that Severus had survived at all and then reminding him of all his shortcomings. Both times, Severus had felt miserable and guilty afterwards.

Severus reached the entrance to the castle, decided to make a little detour to his rooms, and then went to Minerva's office, hoping to find her there. After giving the password, "fâilte", to the statue of the gargoyle, he was swept upwards on the moving stairs; the door at the top was already open.

'Severus,' Minerva greeted him. 'Come in. What can I do for you?'

'Minerva. Actually I haven't come to see you. I was wondering if I could have a word with Dumbledore?'

'Of course.' Minerva sent him a questioning look, but when he didn't offer an explanation, she didn't ask. 'I had planned to take a look at the new greenhouse, anyway.' After another look at Severus, she left the office.

Severus noticed that Dumbledore, for once, wasn't pretending to be asleep. 'Dumbledore,' he said.

'Good afternoon, Severus. It's good to see you. It's been too long, my boy.'

'Don't call me that,' Severus said through clenched teeth.

'So, has Miss Granger turned up again?' Dumbledore asked.

'I fail to see how that concerns you,' Severus answered.

Dumbledore gave him a patronising smile. 'Severus, Severus. Another hopeless infatuation? Maybe this time your love won't get anyone killed.'

Severus took a deep breath. Yes, there it was again, the reason why he usually avoided talking to Dumbledore's portrait. 'That concerns you even less,' he said.

'Saving innocent lives always concerns me, my boy,' Dumbledore answered.

But only if it coincided with Dumbledore's ideas about the greater good was more like it. This conversation was going nowhere. Time to change the pace. 'What do you know about Amun-Ra's Sun?' he asked.

'I've never heard of it,' Dumbledore answered too quickly.

Severus narrowed his eyes. "'Purifying Fire", perhaps?'

'Doesn't ring a bell.' Again, the answer came too quickly.

'I don't believe you. I think you know perfectly well what I'm talking about. I suggest you dig through that magnificent memory of yours and see if you can remember. It might interest you to know that "innocent lives" may be at stake. Oh, right. I forgot; they don't matter if they're not part of your great plan,' Severus shouted.

None of the other portraits pretended to be sleeping anymore.

'There's no need to get so worked up, my boy. Come to think of it, I may have heard of the "Purifying Fire". It is merely a legend. If that device ever existed, it was lost a long time ago.'

'It might interest you to know that the device is neither lost nor a legend,' Severus said, his voice a little calmer.

'If such a device did indeed exist, it would be highly dangerous, and I don't think you're the right person to have more information about it. Need I remind you that your track record in this respect is rather bad? You'll always be weak, and you'll never lose your fascination with the Dark,' Dumbledore said calmly.

So far, the conversation had gone as Severus had feared it might. Time to turn things in his favour. He pulled a small vial from the pocket of his robes. 'Do you know what this is?' He made sure Dumbledore had a clear view of the dark purple liquid. 'No? I thought not. You might not be aware of my research in experimental potions. It's amazing what one can find the time for if one isn't at the beck and call of two megalomaniacs,' he added conversationally.

'Severus, don't let me keep you,' Dumbledore said.

Severus ignored Dumbledore's interjection. 'I brewed this little potion here a while ago; it has amazing qualities, depending on the number of drops one uses. Two drops trap a portrait in its frame. Three drops paralyse the portrait. Any dosage higher than that serves as the wizarding equivalent of turpentine. Now, would you like me to demonstrate, or do you think you might remember more about the "Purifying Fire" after all?'

'Severus, don't be ridiculous. Extortion won't get you anywhere.' Despite his statement, Dumbledore sounded worried.

Severus waited, the vial in his hand.

'This conversation is over. Good day, Severus.' Dumbledore stood up from his chair and turned to leave his portrait.

Severus chose this moment to direct two drops of the potion onto the painting with his wand. There was a slight hiss, and then Dumbledore could be seen running his hands along the wall that had appeared in the background of his portrait. The other portraits were murmuring among themselves, and there was much scrambling as they all hurried out of their frames in the Headmistress' office.

Dumbledore turned around, his expression one of utter fury.

'Now, what is it going to be? Another drop, and you'll spend eternity paralysed, or would you rather part with the information I need?' Severus asked.

'You sneaking, conniving snake spawn. All you Slytherins are alike, disgusting, slimy, lowlife...'

A long streak of colourful invectives followed with a number of interesting, and entirely impossible, suggestions about Severus, his parents, his house, and a number of other things.

Severus calmly held up the vial and waited until Dumbledore had run out of steam. Which took a surprisingly long time.

Finally, Dumbledore stopped and said reluctantly, 'There are two scrolls among my assets that will tell you what you want to know. They're in a glass case in the Restricted Section of the library now. Minerva has the keys; the password you'll need to read them is "Fizzing Whizbees".'

'Thank you.' Severus turned to leave.

'What about the antidote?'

'There isn't one.'

As he shut the door behind him, the shouting began again.

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Hermione looked up as Snape walked into the library, two scrolls in hand. Her heart started to beat faster again at seeing him.

'Dumbledore was co-operative, then?' Lucius asked.

'With a little persuasion,' Snape answered as he spread out the scrolls on the table. Each of them was filled with rows upon rows of text.

Hermione inspected one of them. 'Odd, they aren't even coded.'

'They were protected. Just blank pieces of old parchment if you didn't know how to activate them. I made sure Dumbledore gave me the correct password back at Hogwarts,' Severus explained.

Hermione had started to read the scroll that seemed to explain how the "Purifying Fire" worked. Bile rose in her throat, almost threatening to suffocate her the further she read.

She pushed the scroll away from her. 'That's horrible.'

Severus and Lucius bent their heads over the same scroll.

After a while, Snape said, 'It's gruesome.'

Lucius didn't say anything, but he looked a little green around the gills.

All three were silent, then Hermione said, 'So basically, this device drains a witch or wizard of his or her magic.'

Snape nodded. 'And then the person dies because magic is an intrinsic part of a wizard's being.'

Hermione avoided looking again at the passage that described the slow and torturous death in excruciating detail. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Severus and Lucius

do the same. 'I think we can all imagine that Grindelwald planned to get rid of all the Muggle-borns before turning the Muggles into slaves. The question is, what did the Muggles want with it?'

Lucius said, 'Can't you see? It'll work on all wizards. Imagine you wanted to get rid of the wizarding population. Wouldn't that be a handy way of doing it? One by one, without attracting too much attention? It would take time, but eventually you'd get there...or at least decimate us enough to be practically non-existent. It would be our worst fears come true.'

'But that would be genocide,' Hermione said, shivering.

'Wouldn't be the first attempt in history,' Snape said.

'We have to let someone know about this. Kingsley, Harry. And we have to find out who's behind it.'

'Let's see if there's something in these scrolls about how the device can be disabled first,' Snape suggested.

'I agree. I want this thing destroyed.' Lucius pulled the other scroll towards him. It looked newer than the other one and was handwritten.

'That's Dumbledore's handwriting,' Snape pointed out.

After all three had read through it, they were silent again.

'Well, the good news is that it seems it can be destroyed,' Hermione said.

To extinguish the fire, three is key.

Variation in three, different parts of one.

Three alike, three in harmony.

Three is key,

Power, trust and unity.

'Yes, but what the hell does it mean?' Lucius asked, pointing at the parchment in front of him.

'It sounds almost like a nursery rhyme,' said Hermione with a frown.

'Lucius, do you have a book on Numerology?' Severus asked.

'Yes.' Lucius went through the rows of books, and soon a number of volumes were floating towards the table.

Several pages later, Lucius said, 'It seems clear that three refers to wizards.'

'Or magical beings. It says "variation". That would indicate that there needs to be a difference between them.' Hermione pointed at the line in question.

'I concur. It seems to be clear that all three participants have to share the ability to do magic...and if I read this correctly, they would all have to be fairly powerful. And they'd all have to bring a different aspect to it. I wonder which would qualify?' Snape pulled a new piece of parchment towards him and started to make a list.

'Nationality, houses,' Hermione suggested.

'Humans and non humans,' Snape added.

'Bloodlines,' said Lucius.

'But that means, that we could try to do it.' Hermione looked at the scroll again. 'We all have magic; we're skilled and powerful. That's what we have in common. And we're one pure-blood, one half-blood, and one Muggle-born, so we could perform the spell together.'

'Yes, but it also says there has to be absolute trust between all of them,' Snape pointed out.

'I suppose what you're saying is that it comes down to whether Lucius and I are able and willing to trust one another.' Hermione looked at Lucius.

'Yes. This is ancient magic, blood magic. It can't be tricked,' Snape said.

Hermione continued to look at Lucius. Could she trust him? Did she want to? After the last days, the answer was definitely "yes" to the second question. And the first? She contemplated all she knew about him, and then she made a decision. 'Yes.'

'If you can, so can I,' Lucius answered.

'Tomorrow, then?' Snape asked

'Tomorrow,' Lucius and Hermione answered.

'Then we'd better start to figure out how the ritual works.'

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Hermione tossed around in her bed. She was too hot. She threw off the duvet, only to pull it back over herself five minutes later when she was freezing. She tried to go back to sleep again, but she was thirsty. She got up and conjured a glass of water. After she'd drunk it, she snuggled back under her duvet. Closing her eyes, she tried to sleep. Instead, she remembered the descriptions of how one died if one's magic was taken away. She shivered and tried to concentrate on something else. She thought about Snape's kisses and was just dozing off when she realised that she needed the loo.

Back in her room, she climbed back into bed and closed her eyes. This time, she started to worry if they had done all they could in preparation for the next day. Did they have all the equipment? And had they all memorised the spell? And was the trust between her and Lucius genuine? What if it wasn't?

It was no good. Hermione got up again, wrapped her dressing gown around her and walked along the corridor until she stood in front of Severus' door. She hesitated, then she knocked.

The door opened almost immediately.

'Hermione?'

'I can't sleep. Can I come in?'

Severus stared at her for a moment, then he said, 'Of course.'

His room looked very similar to hers, apart from his personal belongings that were strewn all over it.

'Why can't you sleep?'

'I don't know. Too much on my mind. I can't stop thinking about tomorrow and about what the device could do if we don't destroy it.' Only now did she notice that he was clad in nothing but striped pyjama bottoms. His torso looked very nice: slim, not too muscular with a few sparse, black hairs. Fascinated, her eyes followed the trail of hairs down to the waistband of his trousers.

'We will succeed. But you need your strength for it.'

Her eyes snapped back to Severus' face.

'Can I stay?'

Severus' eyes fixed on hers. 'I'm not sure this is the best time...'

'I just don't want to be alone.' Hermione walked over to his bed and sat down.

'It seems you've already decided.' He didn't sound angry as he sat down next to her.

Hermione leant against him, and Severus put his arm around her. 'Let's try to get some sleep,' he whispered.

They settled down with Severus spooned behind her. His arms felt good holding her, and he smelled really nice. Hermione snuggled into his arms and contemplated turning around, trailing kisses up his chest and his neck...

Another knock at the door.

'Now, what?' Severus clambered out of bed to open the door to a dishevelled Lucius.

'Yes?'

'Can I...Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt.' Lucius had obviously spotted Hermione.

'You're not interrupting,' she said after a look at Severus.

'Yes, we might as well have a party.' Severus snarled as he opened the door to let Lucius in.

Lucius was wearing a dark, silky looking dressing gown over his pyjamas. His long hair was plaited down his back. Hermione had never seen him looking so tired.

'It's just that I can't really sleep because...'

'...you can't stop thinking about tomorrow,' Severus and Hermione chorused.

Lucius looked puzzled.

'It seems we're all having the same problem,' Hermione explained.

'Not all of us.' Severus yawned. 'You two can discuss this all night, but me, I'm going to bed.'

Without a word, Lucius followed him to his bed. Severus looked from him to Hermione and shook his head, but he held up the duvet for Lucius to climb in. After a Replication Charm on the pillow and the disentangling of a few limbs, they were all settled in with Severus in the middle, Hermione in his arms, and Lucius spooned behind him.

'You know, I... ' Lucius began.

'Some of us would like to sleep. Now. Lucius,' Severus said.

As Hermione drifted off to sleep, she thought that Lucius smelled nice, too.

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Lucius put down his cup. 'Shall we get on with it, then?'

Severus and Hermione nodded, though Hermione didn't really fancy getting up from the breakfast table. Something had changed between the three of them after last night. She couldn't really put her finger on it, but she felt... comfortable wasn't really the word for it... at ease was more like it. At some point, she would have to think about what this meant. For her, and for her and Severus, maybe even for her, Severus and Lucius. But not now. Now, they needed to concentrate on the spell.

'Do you think we need to conjure something like, I don't know, ceremonial robes?' she asked, wondering why they hadn't thought about this yesterday.

Severus shook his head. 'No, but I think we should definitely all wear robes. Which we already are.'

'Right. Let's go, then. And remember, whatever happens, don't break the circle.'

They had decided to use one of the dungeons for the ritual. Lucius went first, carrying the "Purifying Fire", still under the Stasis Charm. Hermione followed him, a silver chalice in her hands. Severus brought up the rear, holding a silver athame.

Hermione used a variation of the Flagrante Charm to draw a pentagram on the floor. When the purple flames flickered out, the shape remained. She set the chalice in the middle.

Lucius disabled the Stasis Charm on the "Purifying Fire" and went to put it into the chalice. He had trouble crossing the line into the pentagram as he seemed to be drawn away from it, but eventually, he managed to place the golden, sun-shaped device into the chalice. He stepped away from it, and then all three stepped back into the pentagram at the same time.

Lucius began. He took the athame, made a cut on his left middle finger, and squeezed a drop of blood into the chalice. Severus and Hermione followed, doing exactly the same; then Hermione placed the athame on the upper point of the pentagram, the tip of the knife pointing towards the chalice.

The three linked hands, then they spoke the incantations together and waited.

Hermione could feel the magic flow between them, around them, through her body.

When the first drop of blood had hit it, the "Purifying Fire" had begun to take on a red colour. Now it was a pulsating, bright red. Around Severus, Lucius, and Hermione, a

storm started to rage through the room, threatening to throw them off balance and out of the circle, but they remained standing, their hands firmly linked, their magic flowing freely between them.

Dark flames erupted from the carved rim of the sun-shaped device; the storm in the room gained even more force. Hermione could feel it testing their magic, their strength, their trust in each other. She could feel that neither of the three was wavering while the storm increased further until the "Purifying Fire" erupted in one dark, darting flame with a howl that sounded more terrible than anything Hermione had ever heard before.

And then all was silent, and all that remained in the chalice was a lump of molten metal.

Lucius, Severus, and Hermione kept holding hands until Severus said, 'I think it's safe to let go now.'

Hermione felt oddly bereft when she let go of the others' hands.

They all started running diagnostic spells on the remains of the "Purifying Fire" until they were satisfied that there was no magic left in it, but put it back under a Stasis Charm for good measure.

Hermione's legs shook as she trudged up the stairs to the groundfloor again, and a glance at Severus and Lucius' faces confirmed that they looked as tired as she felt.

'I think I need a nap,' she announced and shuffled upstairs, too tired to think about why she was going to Snape's room. Still in her robes, she collapsed onto the bed. She'd stretched out on her side and closed her eyes when she felt the bed sag behind her, and then it dipped down at the front, as well.

Two arms pulled her close. She snuggled into the nice male chest with a contented sigh. Slowly, a hand crept beneath her robes, stroking her back, fingers tracing the line of her bra straps, and then working its way to around to her breasts.

Hermione opened her eyes, seeing that she was in Severus' arms. This time, she gave in to her desire and trailed kisses up the side of his neck, over his chin until she reached his lips. He responded eagerly to her kiss, opening his mouth, and their tongues found each other again.

Meanwhile, Lucius had managed to open her bra, and his hand was now stroking her breast, rolling her nipple around in his fingers, causing her to moan into Severus' mouth. She tried to turn around, but got tangled up in all the cloth around them, binding both men firmly to her. 'Too tired,' she mumbled.

'Too tired for what?' Severus asked.

'To undress properly.'

'Let me assist you,' Lucius suggested and used a Divesto to get rid of their clothes.

'Much better.' Hermione placed a kiss on Lucius' chest while Severus spread the duvet over all of them.

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When Hermione woke up again, she was alone in the bed. She showered and dressed quickly. Downstairs, she found that Harry had just arrived. 'Have you found out anything?'

'Yes. I had to confide in Kingsley eventually, but he said to go ahead with the investigation. So we have a fairly good idea what's been going on, now,' Harry said.

'Tell me.'

'Did you know that Demelza Robins was Colin Creevey's girlfriend? Apparently, she's kept in contact with his parents all these years. Colin's mum works as a cleaning lady in, get this, the Muggle Ministry. She hates wizards because she thinks her son would still be alive if he hadn't been magical. So, when she was approached by someone from MI5, she was only too happy to give them Demelza's name, who in turn, helped in setting up the flat and pointing out possible victims.'

'That explains the who, but not the why,' Severus said.

'I'm getting there. Kingsley knows the Muggle Ministry fairly well, so he did a bit of investigating of his own. You know, called in a few favours and the like. Turns out the link goes right to the very top.'

'You mean...?' Hermione asked.

'Yes,' Harry confirmed. 'It seems the Prime Minister is involved in this.'

'Talk about a conspiracy,' Hermione said before she filled Harry in on the "Purifying Fire" device, how it worked, and that they had destroyed it.

When she'd finished, Harry was silent.

'That's really scary,' he said after a while.

'It is, and we still need to find out how that device found its way into Muggle hands,' Hermione pointed out.

'Demelza was part of the Auror team that investigated the estate of the Lestranges a few years ago. They had loads of Grindelwald's stuff and most of his diaries. She could easily have found out what it was and kept it,' Harry said.

'How does Arthur Weasley fit into all this?' Lucius asked.

'He's just a pawn in the game,' Harry looked apologetic.

'And an easy one at that, given his love for all things Muggle,' Severus added.

Lucius looked thoughtful. 'I think it is time I visited the Ministry.'

'Actually, Kingsley's already suggested that you might want to go with him to visit the Muggle Prime Minister. He thinks it's time the Minister learnt a few things about wizards and not to mess with them. And that he might want to think about a job change. And Kingsley came up with this even before we knew about the device.'

Lucius looked as if Christmas had come early. 'Tell Kingsley, I'm at his service.'

'Will do. Severus, Hermione, I need the details about the tower block and the captors. We need to track them down to Obliviate them. We can't risk having them running around with knowledge about our world.'

'We'll write them down for you,' Hermione said.

'Thanks, I must be off. You know what?' Harry said to Hermione. 'Luna will be forever sorry that she missed this.'

Hermione grinned. 'Yes, but she couldn't publish it, anyway.'

'Oh, and I nearly forgot, Ron asked after you,' Harry added.

'Tell him to stay away from me, or I'll turn him into a steering wheel.'

When Harry had vanished through the Floo, Severus, Lucius, and Hermione looked at each other.

'So it's all over,' Hermione said.

'So it would seem,' Severus answered.

'And I can go home.' Something that almost felt like disappointment spread through her.

'Not quite,' Lucius said. 'I think we should celebrate. Have a special dinner tonight.'

'Now, Lucius, when you say "special", are we talking about all those extravagant dishes you love, or are we talking about good solid food?'

'Severus, don't start again. I'll find something even you'll like.'

Hermione grinned at the usual bickering between the two.

The same afternoon, the wizarding wireless announced that Arthur Weasley would be resigning as Minister for Magic due to health problems and the wish to spend more time with his family.

~*~*~*~*~

As Lucius had called it a celebration, Hermione had quickly gone home and fetched a suitable dress. It had only taken about a dozen transfigurations until she was satisfied with the result. Now, back at the manor, dressed in a strapless, dark blue dress, the hem coming down to the middle of her calves, her hair tamed by generous applications of Patil's Conditioner, she thought she looked rather nice.

Her breath caught in her throat when she saw Severus and Lucius downstairs; they had arranged to meet in the conservatory. Severus was dressed in his usual black, but it had never looked as good on him as it did tonight. Lucius had chosen dark grey robes that went perfectly with his hair and his eyes. They were both gorgeous. When Lucius handed her a glass of champagne, his fingers lingered a little longer than necessary on hers, sending little sparks all through her, right down to the tips of her toes. He raised his glass, 'To saving the wizarding world and to us.'

Severus and Hermione echoed him, 'To us.'

Severus' eyes remained fixed on Hermione while they drank, sending little shivers of anticipation through her.

The table in the dining room had been set with white porcelain, silver candlesticks, and arrangements of white daffodils and tulips; Keppy had donned a fresh tea-towel in honour of the occasion. Lucius broke off little pieces of the tomato, olive, and basil bruschetta they had for a first course and fed them to Hermione.

'This is delicious,' she said, offering a piece of bruschetta to Severus. 'Try it.'

As he bent forward to take the piece of bread from her, his mouth closed around her fingers and Hermione felt his tongue quickly sweep over her fingertips. 'Tasty,' he said.

Hermione nearly dropped her glass while Lucius was watching them. She was glad that the next course consisted of roast leg of lamb, gravy, roast potatoes, broccoli and carrots. Not only was it extremely delicious, it also didn't lend itself very well to be fed as nibbles.

'So it seems we'll need a new Minister,' Lucius said, taking a sip from his Bordeaux.

'So it would seem.' Severus speared another roast potato. 'My bet would be on Kingsley.'

'He'd make a good Minister.' Hermione contemplated another glass of wine.

Not even Severus found anything to complain about with the food, especially as they had apple crumble with custard for pudding, which, according to Lucius was one of Severus' favourites. Severus didn't object.

Hermione felt pleasantly full and mellow as they retired to the drawing room where another bottle of the excellent Bordeaux from the Malfoy cellars was waiting for them. She leant back against the backrest of the sofa, watching Severus and Lucius, who in turn were watching her. 'So, any plans for Easter?' she asked.

'Right, it's Good Friday today. I'd completely forgotten,' Severus said. 'Nothing in particular, read, sleep. And you?'

'Pretty much the same. I can do with a bit of peace and quiet after the last few days,' Hermione said.

'I don't blame you.'

Lucius was watching them both, a thoughtful expression on his face. 'The manor is a good place to spend Easter,' he said.

'It sounds tempting.' Severus turned to Hermione. 'What do you think?'

She set down her glass. 'What exactly does "spending Easter" mean?'

Severus sidled up to her on the sofa, taking one of her hands while Lucius perched on the armrest on her other side, his hand on her shoulder.

'Whatever you wish it to be,' Severus said.

Lucius added, 'We're all yours.'

Hermione looked from one to the other, then she began to smile. 'We'll really have to find a bigger bed, then.'

~fin~

This story was originally written as a present for duniazade during the sshg exchange 2010 on lj. This was duniazade's prompt: "After the Second Voldemort War, the Muggle Prime Minister has decided to do something about the wizards' interference. He has put together a special task force and a team of (mad) scientists who are charged with capturing a witch/wizard in order to study them and find a way of neutralising magical power. It so happens that Hermione is captured (the reason is up to you, but maybe Ron's idiocy is involved). It's Snape's job to rescue her and sort things out."

Many thanks to duniazade for her fabulous prompt, and to my wonderful betas melusin and pyjamapants.

The Potterverse belongs to JKR; I only take the characters out to play. Will return them unharmed but much happier.