

Riddle Me This

by Bambu

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One

Chapter 1 of 7

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Author's Note: Written for leela_cat during the 2011 SS/HG Exchange from her original prompt requesting a story based at an archeological dig in Egypt. With one or two notable exceptions, this story is book-canon compliant. Those exceptions include, of course, the Epilogue Which Should Never Have Been Published, and a clever bit of film-canon. Additionally, as I'm not posting the entire story at once, I shall include each chapter's riddle solutions and attributions as end-notes to the chapter itself.

Much thanks to my beta team of Bambumom, Lifeasanamazon, TalesofSnape, and SnarkyWench. They have been invaluable as sounding boards, Brit-pickers, and to catch those errant bits of punctuation which litter my work, no matter how diligent I think I've been.

As a final note, I shall never again think of a Bakewell Tart without a smile.

Chapter One

What has one voice, and is four-footed, two-footed and three-footed? (1)

She paced, restless. It was dark, but she had been left in the dark before. Long years she had waited, patiently guarding her secrets, and then one came bearing light into her domain. To share her burden, he had said. He remained for many moon cycles, and in an uncharacteristic show of trust, she had given him the keys to her kingdom. Her payment had been betrayal and imprisonment and darkness.

Snarling, her front paw dug into the smooth sandstone floor, and when she resumed her pacing, left behind were small divots where her claws had extracted the retribution she had been denied.

Day and night were indistinguishable in the dark, but she guarded the great treasury and bided her time. Men would come again, bringing light and empty promises.

This time she would be ready.

This thing all things devours;

Birds, trees, beasts, flowers;

Gnaws iron, bites steel;

Grinds hard stones to meal;

Slays king, ruins town,

And beats high mountains down.(2)

It was early summer and the Queen's weather graced London with blue skies and sparkling sunlight. In Diagon Alley, a heavily pregnant Fleur Weasley made her way toward a snowy white building with burnished copper doors. She didn't notice the admiring glances from those she passed on the cobbled street; however, she remembered her placement at Gringotts Bank and nodded politely to the liveried guards flanking the front entrance. She had been to the bank hundreds of times, but this time, she barely glanced at the warning etched in the inner silver doors -- *For those who take, but do not earn, Must pay dearly in their turn*-- before entering the vast public banking hall.

The hundred transaction desks and myriad doors cut into the walls were familiar sights. Crowds of magical folk conducted their daily business, but Fleur hadn't come for a deposit or withdrawal of funds. Her shoes clicked on the highly polished black and white marble floor, one staccato note amongst the background symphony, as she crossed to the gold-plated door in the far wall.

"*Bonjour*," she said to the guard, and was unfazed when he did nothing more than nod curtly. He held out one, long-fingered hand, palm facing up, and Fleur placed her wand on it. A faint, golden glow limned the short length of rosewood accompanied by the hum of magic, and after a fraction of a second, the golden color deepened until it was crimson. The guard grunted in satisfaction, returned her wand, and allowed Fleur to pass.

The startling juxtaposition of ostentatious grandeur to everyday functionality no longer fazed Fleur as she entered the transport hub for the goblin bank's sub-levels. Six sets of rails ran through the hub, and when Fleur raised her wand, a small cart arrived instantly. She crossed between two sets of tracks, and with less grace than usual, settled herself on the cart's padded seat. Unlike those in the public vaults, these carts had a series of knobs to direct its operation. At the tap of Fleur's wand, her cart smoothly accelerated through the nearest tunnel.

Level sixteen was a newer level, carved out of the rock by Gringotts' goblins, and its dimensions accommodated human heights. Golden mage-lights floated near the ceiling at intervals along the corridor as far as the eye could see. Fleur's cart shuddered to a halt at the platform entry, and she laboriously extracted herself while glancing at the floor directory etched into a silver plaque affixed to the smooth stone wall. The Curse-Breaking Department was nestled between Treasure Retrieval and Customer Relations. Fleur walked swiftly to the third offshoot corridor and down the narrowed hallway to a small office before she paused in its doorway.

Seated behind a desk, piles of parchment and numerous scrolls scattered on top of its well-worn surface, was a curly-haired woman using her wand to levitate and rotate a hand-sized fragment of a much-faded and cracked papyrus. She seemed entirely unaware of her visitor's presence.

Fleur's temper flared, and her silver hair began to shine brighter than the surrounding illumination. "What have you done with Bill?" she asked abruptly.

Startled, Hermione Granger flinched, her wand jerked in her hand, and the floating papyrus spun wildly. "Fleur!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

Fleur tilted her head at an oddly bird-like angle. "Where is Bill?"

"Sorry?" The papyrus spun out of its neat orbit and into Hermione's line of sight. She quickly cancelled her spell and the fragment wafted to the desk.

"Bill. My husband. Where is he, 'ermione?" When stressed, Fleur's accent thickened.

"Er..." Hermione blinked myopically. "Isn't he at St Albans?"

Fleur curled her lip disdainfully. "Zis was a waste of my time."

Hermione was on her feet, and coming round the desk. "Wait! Has something happened?"

"I do not know. Only zat Bill has been gone for a week, and I have had no word in two days."

"A week?" Hermione's eyes narrowed. "That's not like Bill."

"Of course not. My Bill Floos every night, if only to say good night to ze girls."

"Maybe..."

"He *nevair* forgets to say good night to ze girls!"

She tossed her mane of silvery hair, and Hermione nearly laughed at her friend's attitude, but Fleur had a point. "I know he doesn't; he adores the girls. But, Fleur, Bill and I haven't worked together for a couple of years. Why would you think I..."

"Because zat is what his note said. *I'll be on assignment for a couple of days. Check with Hermione if you need to reach me.*" Fleur stamped her foot. "Well? I *need* to reach him." Hermione opened her mouth, yet Fleur's wobbly chin prevented her from commenting. "He needs to come home, 'Ermoine. It is near my time."

"Near?" Hermione asked, frantically calling her basic mediwizardry training to mind. She put her arm around Fleur and was shocked when the other witch started to cry. "Fleur! How near? Are you ? Now?"

"Not now, but soon." Fleur sniffled, and Hermione noted uncharitably that the other woman was still beautiful in her extremis. "Bill promised he would be here," Fleur exclaimed, and then she sobbed.

Hermione held her friend until the sobs subsided to hiccups, then Hermione neatly transfigured a comfortable chair from her umbrella stand. As she watched Fleur sit, Hermione was surprised by how awkward the pregnant witch was. Her concern heightened.

"Let me see what I can find out," she said before using her wand to tap three silver-chased runes carved into the narrow edge of her desk. Instantly, the center portion of the desktop, containing the papyrus fragment and other miscellany, dropped into a recess. Immediately, a thin sheet of wood extruded from one inner edge of the desk and slid across the gap to meet the bottom edge of the other three sides, filling the entirety of the space vacated by the previous desktop. The fresh, polished wooden surface, too, was worn with age and use.

Hermione nodded once, then, with a quick jab and swish of her wand, she levitated a glass and small jug from her single bookcase. A flick of her wrist and a silently cast *Aguamenti* filled the jug with water as it floated across the room to land softly in the center of the now empty desk. Her precision was such that the water didn't slosh in the pitcher. "Make yourself comfortable," she said. "I don't know how long it'll take."

Fleur smiled faintly. "I will wait."

"You remember the way to the ladies?"

"I remember, and I will wait. Victoire and Dominique are with Molly."

"If you get hungry, remember it's Wednesday." Fleur's grimace showed that her memory of traditional goblin fare served at the employees' canteen remained unblemished. "There's a packet of crisps behind the kettle," Hermione added as she tucked her wand into its sheath and strode from the room. "I'll be as quick as I can."

Fortunately, Bogrod was in his office. Unfortunately, he was the very same goblin Harry had cast the Imperius Curse on during the last days of the war. As a result of Ron, Harry and Hermione's break-in to the Lestrangle vault and subsequent break-out, Hufflepuff cup in Harry's singed hand, Bogrod had suffered a demotion. After the war, Kingsley Shacklebolt had negotiated adequate restitution on behalf of the trio. Among several non-negotiable clauses in the eventual agreement was one stipulating fifty-two weekends of in-bank service under the direct supervision of Bogrod. Hermione would long remember the malice glittering in the goblin's black eyes that very first Saturday as he'd set the trio to cleaning the muck heap near the empty dragon's lair.

When the year was at an end, Hermione had found herself with a job, the grudging respect of her supervisor, and a return to being single. Ron had resented every moment of his time in the Gringotts' caverns, and he had belittled Hermione's, and even Harry's, interest in the goblins and their culture. Ron frequently derided his friends' willing efforts at recompense, clung to the belief they should be given an amnesty for any of their wartime exploits, and had destroyed any possibility of turning his relationship with Hermione into a more permanent one.

And yet, she counted herself richer in the long run. She might have lost one Weasley, but she had found another. Bill Weasley had returned to Gringotts within weeks of the war's resolution. One Saturday, he had ridden the carts reserved for the bank's clients to the large cavern where his brother and friends were slogging to repair the stone walls of the dragon den. Under Bogrod's suspicious, watchful eyes Bill had shared his lunch, and when the four had been nibbling the last of their crisps, Hermione had pulled out her current book, *The Essential Goblin: Bargains, Agreements, and the Concept of Ownership*. Bill's interest had been piqued and a firm friendship had grown from that moment. Hermione became a frequent visitor at Shell Cottage, cementing her friendship with Bill and forming one with Fleur.

While Bill became Hermione's mentor, Bogrod remained her supervisor at Gringotts. In fact, her accomplishments reflected well on the disgraced goblin. He regained his rank, and then was promoted above his former customer relations colleagues, some of whose noses were left out of joint as a result of his success. Bogrod hadn't minded at all.

In any event, Hermione's initial plans for a career in Law Enforcement had been derailed, and she had embraced the change to curse-breaking with customary zeal. She admired a number of the goblins she worked with, abhorred much of their treatment at wizards' hands, but also acknowledged their warlike, avaricious nature often put them at odds with other magical folk. In general, Hermione held a respectful regard for goblins and a cautious one for Bogrod in specific.

Hermione stood in her supervisor's office doorway, and as protocol dictated, waited for him to acknowledge her.

"What do you want, Granger?"

"I'm not quite sure how to ask, sir."

"Then don't." Bogrod pulled a scroll toward him and picked up his quill.

Hermione forestalled his dismissal by being blunt. "What has happened to Bill Weasley?"

Bogrod's quill hand paused between ink bottle and parchment, black ink forming a globule at the tip of the quill's nib. Neither human nor goblin noticed.

Beetle black eyes focused on her and Hermione shifted her balance. Suddenly, she was very concerned for her friend's safety.

"Why do you ask?" Bogrod's tone was so bland Hermione could practically see a veil of Occlumency settle into place.

"Apparently, he's in the habit of Flooing home at night to speak to his daughters. They haven't heard from him in days."

The moment attenuated. Then it broke. Ink splattered the parchment and Bogrod blinked before his features settled in a wizened frown. "In the past, McLaggen"

"Cormac's working in the private sector now." Hermione kept her opinion from coloring her tone. She never complained about McLaggen's frequent attempts at coaxing her into his bed, one more celebrity notch in his bedpost. She had been quite relieved when he elected to jettison Gringotts for more lucrative possibilities.

"Irrelevant." Bogrod dismissed the former employee with a one-shouldered shrug. "All senior breakers are assigned. It was Weasley's territory."

As Deputy Head of Department, the entire wizarding world was Bill's territory, but Bill knew more about one than any other. "He's in Egypt then," Hermione said. "Despite his impending paternity leave Bill went to Egypt." Black eyes stared into hers, and Hermione knew there was more to the story. "Everyone thinks he's been in St. Albans." She bit her lip momentarily. "The Ministry's involved, isn't it? And the Egyptian Ministry, too."

Bogrod frowned. "Gringotts doesn't pay you to speculate."

Hermione smiled. She couldn't help it; she was right.

"Send the Veela away." Bogrod pointed a long finger at Hermione. "Your Portkey will be ready at three."

Hermione's smile faded. "You haven't heard from him either."

"It is not uncommon with Ministry involvement. Now go. Send Weasley's wife away. Then return to your domicile and pack. Your assignment may be prolonged."

Suspicion blossomed like a particularly bright firework in her mind. "What aren't you telling me?"

Bogrod snarled. "Is my faith in you misplaced?"

"No. Sir."

"Good." He pointed to the door. "Do not say he's been cursed--"

"What!"

Bogrod's sigh forced the tiny pool of ink to trail across the parchment in thin rivulets. "Weasley was cursed two days ago. You may be gratified..." he chuckled, a dark rather evil sound, "...to know McLaggen was the first to fall."

Hermione stared, her mouth dropping open. "Cormac's there, too?"

Bogrod snapped his fingers and the parchment was pristine once more. "You will go to Egypt, Granger. You will protect Gringotts' investment. You will discover the cause of Weasley's curse, determine if he can be fixed, and then you will fix him."

"What about Cormac?"

"What about McLaggen?" Bogrod asked.

"Do I fix him, too?"

Bogrod shrugged. "If he's there. If he is broken beyond repair, leave him. We have no interest in wasting our resources." He waved his long-fingered hand in a shooing motion. "Now go!"

Hermione raced down the corridor, trying to work out how to soothe Fleur, how to tell her something but not forsake professional confidentiality. As she turned the corner to her own hallway, Hermione tried to remember where she'd put her beaded bag. It looked as if she would need it again.

The more you take, the more you leave behind. (3)

Men had come again, bringing light into the once-famed seat of learning. In her time, she had learned caution, had learned to her great cost that treachery might lie behind a pleasing façade. These men, too, were compelling in their need, but they bore the taint of the Betrayer, and as was the nature of her kind, she sought swift retribution. In so doing she had broken the covenant granted her as eternal guardian.

Now, she paced relentlessly, her wing muscles aching to stretch to their full extent, but her prison was too confining. Her claws extended, slashing here and there, searching for an opening to exploit, a way out. None could she find, and thus retreated to her domain, and there, amongst the knowledge of the great age, she waited.

Someone would come.

I can be quick and then I'm deadly,

I am a rock, shell and bone medley.

If I were a man I would make people dream

I gather in millions by ocean, sea and stream. (4)

Perspiration dotted Hermione's brow within the first minute of her arrival. Luxor was significantly hotter than Alexandria where she had met representatives from Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, Wizard Section, and the Ministry of Magic's Department of Cultural Relations. She had presented her credentials, reassured the bureaucrats she had no designs on Egypt's artifacts beyond the scope of her assignment -- yes, copies were on file with the appropriate authority -- and acquired the Portkey to her final destination. Hermione later discovered the small copper and aluminum disc used for her Portkey was a ten piaster piece; a local Muggle coin.

Stepping from the relatively cool building set back from the Nile's east bank, Hermione inhaled the river's rich scent and squinted against the glare. She scanned her surroundings, searching for the dig site's representative who was supposed to meet her. She saw many wizards, but no witches as far as she could tell. In the near distance, sunlight reflected off a head of gleaming white hair; momentarily, Hermione thought Fleur had broken her promise to stay with her in-laws. And then, in an instant as chilling as a bucket of iced water dashed in her face, Hermione recognized the person. It was a man standing aloof from his fellows, impeccably dressed to suit the locale. Furthermore, it was a wizard she knew.

As if her recognition were a beacon in the night, Lucius Malfoy turned his head in her direction. He nodded briefly in acknowledgement and strode toward her. Hermione gritted her teeth and held her ground, but she couldn't halt the reflexive curl of her fingers as they closed over thin air rather than the satisfying hilt of her wand.

Lucius correctly interpreted her reaction to seeing him. "I see Bogrod neglected to inform you of my participation in this venture," he said as he drew near. While still handsome, his face had aged in character rather than beauty.

"A trifling detail which seems to have slipped everyone's mind," she replied tightly, noting signs of strain around his eyes and the way he held his mouth as if against pain. Hermione wanted nothing less than to care about this man's troubles. He had caused her enough anguish for a lifetime.

"Severus was unable to tear himself away from a potion, and he insisted you be met by someone you knew."

"Severus? He's here? I thought he was in St. Albans. Oh." She rolled her eyes. How could she not have seen the connection? She asked, "I take it he's the Dark Arts expert?"

"You don't consider my expertise, Miss Granger?" Lucius asked in a flat interrogative tone.

"I assume you're the financier." When he nodded in reply, Hermione continued, "That fact alone would negate any expertise you might have in the eyes of Gringotts. They would require an independent expert before entering into an agreement with you."

"And so they did," he said negligently. Lucius raised his arm, indicating she should accompany him in the direction of the river. "Shall we?"

"You neglected to mention whether Severus was here or not."

"I thought the answer implied." When Hermione refused to be mollified, Lucius answered tersely, "Have it your way. I assure you I have no malicious designs on your person, Severus is indeed the Dark Arts expert on hand, and he awaits your arrival with bated breath. As do we all."

"No need to lay it on with a trowel, Mr. Malfoy." Hermione settled her wide-brimmed hat on her head. She would burn horribly otherwise. "A simple yes would've sufficed."

"Yes, Miss Granger." The slightly mocking tone trailed off into a sigh, and Lucius asked, "Would you like to contact the local Gringotts branch to validate my status?"

He was far too intelligent for the offer to be a bluff, and Hermione realized he expected her to seize the opportunity to embarrass him. Instead, she said, "That won't be necessary."

His brows rose, but he quickly regained his facial control, and was deliberately civil. "May we go now?"

"I'd like to know about Bill Weasley. He's the reason I'm here." Hermione wondered why his mouth pinched into a bloodless line. With some additional trepidation, she asked, "How is he?"

"As well as anyone could expect given the circumstances." She didn't think he was prevaricating; however, her past experiences had taught her to be wary of him. "Once again," Lucius asked, "shall we?"

"All right."

He led the way along a stone path to an open expanse of greenery, a small park filled with various street vendors hawking their wares from potions ingredients and spices to personal tea services and beautifully woven fabric. One of the vendors was a dark-haired, dark-skinned young man wearing a common white gelabiyya. Hovering behind him was a pile of carpets, some fringed, others frayed, and still others of fine cut, color and weave.

Lucius handed the young man a galleon.

"Mr. Lucius." The young man nodded deferentially and drew a wand from his sleeve. With a muttered incantation a wide, thick carpet bucked and flexed, forcing its neighbors to give way. It shot out from its position in the upper third of the floating pile, and neatly swept in an arc, gliding to a halt in front of Lucius, hovering a foot above the grass.

Hermione's voice reflected her astonishment. "A flying carpet? I've never actually seen one. How do you ride?"

"It's a carpet, Miss Granger." Hermione glared at Lucius, and to her surprise, his impatience seemed to vanish. "You may stand on it if you've the talent to hold your balance. Many prefer to sit in a cross-legged fashion. You're not wearing a skirt under your robes?"

"No. I'm wearing jeans, but how do we er mount?"

Openly amused, Lucius said, "Let me show you." The carpet remained stationary as he stepped onto it, no wobbling or dipping in the middle. "It's quite stable." He then offered her his hand. "Miss Granger?"

Hermione looked from his hand to his face, and back to his hand. The moment attenuated, and then she accepted his assistance. His hand was dry and warm. She passed through a Disillusionment shield, and then it was as if she'd stepped onto a solid floor.

Lucius waved his wand and the carpet rose. Hermione gasped at the swooping sensation in her stomach. "I think I'll sit," she said faintly, and proceeded to fold her legs beneath her as the carpet ascended higher than the nearest buildings.

Lucius looked down at her, the corner of his mouth quirked. "It would be rude of me not to join you." He crossed his legs at the ankles and lowered himself gracefully to the thick rug. "The view is spectacular from here," he said, indicating the wide river, and the green ribbon of lush, cultivated land running along its sides, "if you ignore the eyesore of urban sprawl."

"It's quite a sight." Hermione replied, one hand clutching her bag, the other clutching the carpet's fibers as if they would anchor her in place. "The lack of rails is a trifle disconcerting."

His head swung in her direction. "Do you not like to fly?"

"Not particularly."

"It is one of the joys of being a wizard, I think."

She glanced at him sharply, searching his tone and expression for disdain and finding none. He was, she recalled, an excellent actor. She said, "Probably. I've had several rather unfortunate early experiences, including flying on the back of a Thestral."

"That's quite astonishing," he said, clearly intrigued.

"There are few things more unnerving than flying an invisible creature." When it was clear she had nothing further to say on the topic, he resumed his sight-seeing.

Hermione removed her hat, allowing the rushing air to cool her head, as she continued to dart glances at the scenery. Sailing boats dotted the river with their distinctive tall masts and white sails, and a number of Muggle tourist boats chugged along in stately fashion. Cutting a swathe in the cultivated farmland were clusters of buildings, both whitewashed and the dun color of clay, and in the distance, the sun-baked desert spilled off the hills, encroaching on the fertile land below.

It was, Hermione reflected, a little like being in an airplane, with less comfortable seating and rather more exposure to the elements. The view was spectacular though, and Hermione began to relax. As she released her grip on the carpet she really looked at it for the first time. Its elegant, floral scrollwork and comforting sepia tones was entirely familiar. "Good heavens! Is this an Axminster?"

Lucius glanced at the carpet, and his tone was chilly. "I may have to live in exile, but I see no reason to sacrifice the comforts of home."

"Of course." Hermione replied, and then she giggled. "Sorry. It's just ... just ..."

"What?" His tone chilled further.

"It's exactly the same as the one in my parents' library. I wasn't expecting to find a ... er ... one of them here of all places."

"I see."

They lapsed into awkward silence, but shortly thereafter, Lucius recovered his aplomb and pointed to the left. Hermione automatically turned to look. Two statues rose from the dry dirt, easily fourteen meters in height and in considerable disrepair, but majestic nonetheless. Hermione was struck by the juxtaposition of the statues to the Muggle motorway running alongside. There were no tourists, just modern life speeding past ancient history as if it was part of the landscape, as indeed it was.

"Who are were they?" she asked. "Do you know?"

"Amenhotep the third. They flanked the entry to a temple erected in his name. It has long since been destroyed."

There were no signs of crumbled walls, just a dry and dusty field. She said, "Perhaps there are treasures buried beneath the surface."

"Perhaps."

"Is this our site?"

"No, but it's not far from here." The carpet angled as if to follow his thought. "Our destination is the temple complex at Ipet-isut."

"That's Karnak?"

"Its original name. I believe it means 'the most sacred'."

She nodded. "Isn't it terribly crowded with tourists both Muggle and magical?"

"Indeed. We are fortunate our location isn't open to the public as yet, although Muggle archeological expeditions provide the reasons we've taken a number of precautions."

"If the site is so dangerous, why hasn't the Ministry put it on the proscribed list?"

"Regrettably, it was first discovered and explored by Muggles, and then some years later Nestor L'Hote visited the site on behalf of the ministry. He was little more than a squib and made his life in the Muggle world. But his observations were accurate, beyond anything at the time, and he found no trace of wizards."

"When it was discovered that the Precinct of Mut housed magical artifacts, it was simply too late and knowledge too widespread for the Ministry to take effective measures."

"Unlike Shangri-la," Hermione murmured.

"Exactly." Lucius turned to look at her fully. "Although rumors of its existence persisted for decades."

"And have resolved themselves into myth, legend, and fiction."

"Correct." He glanced at the desert before continuing. "As Karnak is of historical significance to us and the Muggles, the Department of Cultural Heritage and Supreme

Council of Antiquities have come to an understanding."

Hermione noticed his use of the word 'us', and it seemed terribly out of character for him to include her as part of 'us'. Yet, there had been no special emphasis, or lack thereof, on the word. She shelved her thoughts for later contemplation. "In other words," she said, replying to his comment, "we're working along parallel lines, but we are on hand in case of a development which might damage the Statute of Secrecy."

"As well as exploring a potentially important find."

"Is that why you're here? Why Bill was sent?" As an afterthought she said, "And what about Cormac McLaggen? Why --"

"Please, Miss Granger. If you will hold your questions until our arrival, Severus can provide you with full details."

"But..."

He inclined his head, and his white hair gleamed in the sunshine. "Would you believe my account?"

There was no way to answer that question without offending him or lying so she remained silent.

The carpet banked, gently but deliberately, and as it completed its turn, Hermione was facing the sun. She squinted into the glare, and raised her hand to shade her eyes.

"You don't use an Anti-glare Charm?" he asked.

"I considered it, but thought you might misinterpret the gesture if I pulled my wand."

"Perhaps. I wouldn't take it amiss now."

She was more relieved than she would like to admit when she felt the smooth shaft of wood in her hand. Hermione cast the Charm on herself, fully aware that he was watching her while pretending to admire the landscape on her side of the carpet. It seemed he was equally wary of her.

"Better?" he asked.

"Much," she replied.

In another moment, Lucius said, "There we are."

When she could see beyond the sun's glare, Hermione was startled by the reality of Karnak's location. The temple complex was nestled between a main road running parallel to the Nile's bank the east bank, she reminded herself and the urban sprawl Lucius had commented upon earlier. Nonetheless, while Hermione had lived in a thousand-year-old castle for six years, these ruins recaptured that breathtaking moment when she had first seen Hogwarts. These ruins were three times the age of the castle, and time had not been kind. It gladdened Hermione that they had withstood the predations of time and were still appreciated.

As the carpet flew over the double colonnade of the main temple, she was astonished by the numbers of people funneling through the temple ruins, herded by tour guides.

"How in the world did you find something magical here?"

"Not I and not there." Lucius nodded toward the open air exhibits. "Our location is south of the main complex in what is known as the Precinct of Mut."

The carpet flew past the Luxor temple and over the rectangular sacred lake. Hermione said, "I've only read a little about it. Isn't there a second sacred lake shaped in a horseshoe?"

"Isheru. That's where we'll find Severus."

"In the lake?" she asked, half-joking.

"Under it," he replied as the carpet glided to a neat stop, a foot off the ground, hovering above a patch of scraggly, tough camel thorn near Isheru's reed-dotted bank. When Hermione stepped off the carpet, a cluster of black-winged stilts took off from the nearby shore as if they were a sign welcoming her arrival.

Two bodies have I though both joined in one

The longer I stand the quicker I run (5)

Seething with irritation, Hermione threw her beaded bag on the campbed. A tent. By all that was holy, her quarters were a tent. Yes, it might have all the mod cons, but it was a fucking tent! What feeble-minded lack of forethought had led her to believe international field work wouldn't include camping.

When Lucius Malfoy had shown her to her accommodation, neatly disillusioned and nestled amongst a palm grove just to the east of the Mut temple precinct, he had been pleased. The smug smile on his face had told her so.

"Here, Miss Granger," he had said, handing her an oval piece of clay impressed with an unrecognizable cartouche. "It's enchanted to guide you to the entrance of our location. Severus will meet you there when you're refreshed." He had then handed her a badge with the official seal of the Supreme Council of Antiquities.

"It's Muggle identification," she had said, and then flushed with embarrassment for having stated the obvious.

"It has been charmed so you shouldn't be bothered."

"A Muggle Repelling charm? How ironic." She had suddenly remembered the night of the Quidditch World Cup when a group of Death Eaters had tormented the Muggle family running the campsite, and the rumors that Lucius Malfoy had been the instigator. It was no wonder she hated camping.

"Should you draw unwanted attention, this will redirect their thoughts with a subliminal suggestion," he had said, turning on his heel and exiting the tent as if she'd accused him of miscegenation.

Hermione had stalked around the luxurious tent, discovered two bedrooms (one already occupied), a kitchen, a loo (complete with bath and shower), and the main room into which Lucius had escorted her. There was a small dining table in one corner with two chairs; piles of books and parchment, assorted quills and two bottles of ink showed there was work in progress. In the center of the large room were a sofa and two comfy chairs around a coffee table. Most of the comforts of home, she grudgingly admitted.

It was still a tent.

The week she had finally thrown Ron out of her flat, Hermione had returned to the Forest of Dean where she located the tent abandoned when she, Harry, and Ron were captured by Snatchers and taken to Malfoy Manor for interrogation and torture. When she had finally found the tent it had borne the brunt of fifteen weather-beaten, neglected months. Hermione had ruthlessly *Scourgified* the mess, packed the tent and all accoutrements, and returned it to Arthur Weasley. Closure, Hermione had reflected, came in many guises.

And here she was, eleven years after Voldemort's fall, in another bloody tent.

She sighed heavily, chastised herself severely to get on with it, and opened the beaded bag to unpack her things.

After ten minutes, Hermione had transfigured the campbed into something more comfortable and sorted her clothes and other personal items. She retrieved her Dictoquill and narrow scroll of memo-parchment, cast a privacy shield on her 'room' before tucking her wand in its sheath, and left to find Severus.

Outside it was hot. And dry. The palm trees offered little respite in the mid-day sun, and a small aggregation of donkeys jostled for available shade.

The cartouche-inscribed trinket subtly nudged her forward, and Hermione skirted Isheru's east bank, picking her way through detritus which appeared to have been underwater at some point. She surmised the lake had receded or otherwise been drained in the recent past. Ignoring the disc of pottery guiding her hand, Hermione took a detour toward the Muggle dig site. She wanted to get a feel for the physical layout of their location.

One of the first things she had learned about curse-breaking was to look at the big picture. Where an item had been found and in what condition were excellent clues toward unraveling curses or protection spells. Bill Weasley was widely acknowledged to be a stickler when it came to safeguards and recognizing when to request assistance, and he actively discouraged hubris in the department. She remembered his oft-repeated phrase: *Confidence puts bounce in your step, but hubris will kill you faster than a Persian Breath-Stealing Curse.*

Hermione was increasingly uneasy about her assignment. Cormac McLaggen was a competent curse-breaker and Bill exceptional; both had more field experience than she. Active in the profession for a decade, most of Hermione's *in situ* experience was based in Britain where Death Eater homes and hide-outs provided challenging practice. After decontaminating the Lestrange Folly on a solo assignment the previous summer, Hermione had been promoted to her current position. Since then, however, she had been office-bound, heading the Vault Survey Team in compliance with current Wizengamot rulings relating to inheritance laws.

The closest thing to a challenge had been the scrap of papyrus Severus sent her six weeks before. Translation had revealed it to be directions for a healing potion, or salve, but Hermione wasn't sure of the last, faded glyph. However, there was inadequate information to parse the list of ingredients and the quantities involved. Until Lucius Malfoy mentioned Severus Snape's name, Hermione had thought it a purely academic conundrum.

Despite the heat, Hermione shivered.

Severus was waiting to debrief her. He was Bill Weasley's first choice of experts in the Dark Arts, especially in challenging circumstances. And Severus hadn't let her know he was in Egypt.

She climbed a mud embankment to survey the broad expanse of the Mut Precinct. It was rubble-strewn and dotted with reconstructed walls and columns. Here and there work parties clustered, some wearing casual western attire and others in the blue gelabiyas which closely resembled wizarding robes. One team of workers was devoted to removing camel weed and halfa grass, a vigorous plant which could grow through stone. As Hermione wound her way along wide baulks, the walls separating architectural features, she visually connected disparate structures into the outlines of what had once been impressive sites of worship. Passing the Taharqa gate, she paused to trace a hieroglyph carved into the stone. Several splotches of paint, sun-bleached from the original blue and red tints, adorned a leg or a face. Hermione marveled at the fastidious industry which had found and restored these pieces of history. And yet, much had been lost to time, successive conquerors, and the ever-present encroachment of the desert.

A gust of hot wind blew dust and sand into her face, and Hermione coughed. Shaking off her reverie, she continued on her way, passing a row of canvas-covered frames which shaded folding desks, plastic chairs and a series of enormous sandstone blocks on raised mustaba, the cement benches built to keep precious artifacts from further contamination. Above and overlooking Isheru's inner curve was a plywood shed and an electrical pole with power lines linking the dig site to the nearby housing district and the rest of the Karnak temple complex further north. Immediately adjacent to the shed was another canvas covered frame, and it was to that structure Hermione was directed by the cartouche-inscribed disc in her hand.

She paused at the empty shed, glancing around to see if anyone noticed her. To a casual observer it would appear as if she was looking at the lake, seeing the thicker regrowth of reeds on the eastern shores, and the newly excavated eastern quay. She ducked beneath the canvas awning and right through an illusion of a folding table and plastic chair. In reality, it marked the entrance to a staircase as broad as the tent was wide, leading down under the lake.

Lighting wasn't abundant, small metal bowls held flickering magical flames, and Hermione almost tripped as she tucked her hat in her beaded bag. She attempted to calculate the depth from what she'd seen outside but really didn't know. The walls were lined with aging hieroglyphics, evidence of decaying enchantments, but still noticeably blue, red, and yellow a more vibrant version of the paint remnants she'd seen above-ground. She felt a twinge of guilt; Muggle archeologists would never have a chance to see these representations of what they so carefully conserved.

Hermione heard the conversation before she reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Did it never occur to you, Lucius, that Miss Granger wouldn't like being reminded of her lengthy sojourn in the English wilderness, especially by you?"

Hermione grinned at the irritated tone of voice. It had been three months since she had last seen Severus.

"How was I to know where she was living that year? There wasn't time to chat about *housing* while my deranged sister-in-law tortured the girl!"

"I asked you to put her in the..."

Lucius interrupted him. "She cannot stay in our guest room."

"Why?" Severus asked softly, but Hermione shivered at the cold anger in his tone.

"It's Egypt, Severus! She can't live with an unmarried man, or two unmarried men." Hermione listened harder, but wondered when Lucius Malfoy had become single. She had assumed he referred to Narcissa when he'd said 'our'.

"Muggle customs have never concerned you before."

Lucius replied in a hard voice, "We're not in England. The terms of my parole and exile are quite clear. I have given my vow to conform to local customs such that my behavior will not cause any embarrassment to the Ministry."

At that moment, a soft flutter of wings and a cool draught of air distracted Hermione, and she looked up as an owl flew past, bent on its mission to deliver the post. Hermione almost laughed aloud as she recognized the owl as hers. Persephone hovered for a moment as if unsure whether to continue her flight or abort it, but then she swooped down the stairs in pursuit of her goal.

When Persephone reached the bottom of the flight of stairs she flew through a magical barrier, evident by the motes of light spiraling outward from the point at which the owl crossed. With a twist and flick of her wand, Hermione determined the barrier served multiple functions. One of those functions acted as a doorbell, another, she noted, as she passed through the invisible spell-ward and into the cavernous expanse beyond, was to define the parameters of the charm which so rapidly turned the beaded sweat on her brow and upper lip to cool refreshing dots.

The chamber into which she had stepped could best be described as a subterranean forecourt, similar in style to those found at the Luxor Temple. It was a vast, high-ceilinged antechamber with radiating hallways leading south, west and east. The western corridor was barely visible beyond a scintillating, magical barrier. A dark detection shield had been layered into the barrier, telltale bright flashes of spell-fire flared every few seconds, indicating a contaminant. Hermione might have indulged her curiosity had Severus not stepped from a brightly illuminated room a short way down the hall to her left. He waved Persephone off with one hand.

Thoroughly amused, Hermione hurried the rest of the way, heedless of any noise she made. "I see you've got my note," she said, absurdly happy to see him.

He was dressed, as always, in black trousers and a white linen shirt, except his collar was unbuttoned and the cuffs of his shirtsleeves were rolled back. For the first time since she'd visited him in St. Mungo's after the final battle, and during his long convalescence, Hermione could see the visible reminders of Nagini's loving care. The scars from the snake's bite had aged to pale, parallel ridges on his neck. But that wasn't as remarkable to her as the fact she could see his Dark Mark. Like any regretted tattoo, the mark had faded over the years, but Dark magic sustained its presence long after the caster had abandoned this mortal coil.

Severus eyed her warily.

Hermione grinned.

"Did you bring my papyrus?"

"No," she replied, and then forestalled any snide comment he might have made by adding, "If you'll open your missive, it'll be in your hands. I had no idea you were here or I would've saved Persephone the trip."

Severus thanked the owl, telling her she could roost anywhere she was comfortable. Then he returned to the room he had so recently exited, followed closely by Persephone who had always been fond of Severus, probably due to all the treats he had fed her when she was an owlet.

"Well?" Severus' voice came from the inner room. "Come along."

"Lovely to see you, Hermione," she muttered in a false baritone, following it up with a saccharine reply. "Why, thank you, Severus. It's been a while."

Throwing off her irritation, Hermione stepped forward. She entered a spacious chamber built of enormous sandstone blocks with a surprisingly low ceiling. Sconces housing mage-lights were placed in numerous brackets, casting a warm golden tone on everything within. Placed along the opposite wall to where Hermione stood was a long stone bench, reminiscent of the mustaba she had seen above-ground. The bench held potions paraphernalia, including a small gold cauldron set above a very low, bluebell flame. A rack of bottled ingredients, Severus' spiky writing neatly inscribed on labels, floated in the air adjacent to the cauldron, far enough from the flames to protect the preserved ingredients and to prevent the disaster of their falling into the potion.

The other occupant of the room was seated at a worktable in the far right corner. His expression was one of polite disinterest as he toyed with a quill. Persephone flew to the back of a second chair, eying the blond wizard before she landed and tucked her head under her wing.

"Hello again, Mr. Malfoy," Hermione said cordially. "I'm afraid I overheard some of your conversation. Sound really carries down here."

Behind her, Severus halted, and muttered. "Gryffindor."

She whirled. "We're not doing the old school thing. It's rubbish."

When Severus laughed, Hermione ignored him and addressed Lucius. "You have concerns about your behavior embarrassing the Ministry?"

"Not at all, I assure you," Lucius replied, blandly.

Deciding kindness would ruffle his feathers more than stropiness Hermione gave him a bright smile. "I'm relieved you think so. I also want to thank you for arranging my accommodation; I'm sure I'll be quite comfortable."

"A pleasure." His smile was tight. "If you will excuse me, Severus will bring you up-to-date. I hope you are able to join us for dinner this evening, Miss Granger."

"I look forward to it," she replied.

With a brief nod at Severus, Lucius departed, the sound of rapid footsteps dying quickly.

Hermione said nothing, waiting for an explanation.

Severus stared at her for a long moment. "Hermione..."

His tone alerted her, and she really looked at him, at the dark circles under his eyes, the extreme oiliness of his hair always a sign of stress. And was he thinner? Suddenly, her misgivings about this assignment surged in a wave she couldn't duck, swamping any residual amusement from her Malfoy-baiting. "I wish you'd told me," she said.

"I...it has been difficult."

She couldn't rid herself of the impression he expected her to punish him in some way. "I'm not angry with you."

"You aren't?" he asked, and then his posture changed, becoming rigid and remote.

Hermione thought they'd dispensed with that nonsense. "We're friends, aren't we?"

"If that's what you wish to call it."

Hermione laughed. "We certainly aren't enemies."

"Hardly that," he said, his mouth curving in a sly smile. He crossed to his workbench, and broke the seal on the letter Hermione had sent. Tapping the thick envelope with his wand, the papyrus fragment slid from the parchment sleeve before floating to the far end of the workbench where it hovered. "In the past..."

"We're not rehashing the past." Hermione interrupted him while watching the hovering papyrus; a sheet of glass rose from the workbench where it had lain as a protective covering. "We've done that often enough..."

"To take it in jest."

"Yes," she agreed. "Friends do that, Severus. And friends don't always tell friends when they're out of the country on confidential assignments. It's not as if we're a couple."

Severus looked at her sharply, his attention diverted from his spell-work, but not enough to disrupt it altogether. "Indeed."

She stepped closer as he turned back to his task. The well-traveled papyrus fragment floated into a position directly above a larger document, one which had been flattened and held in place by the sheet of glass.

Foolish wand waving to Severus Snape generally meant extraneous fillips and flourishes. It had taken Hermione years to realize that his brilliance was in refinement. Like the marginalia in his sixth-year potions' text, spells of Severus' creation bore a distinctive, elegant minimalism. At present, he demonstrated that refinement in the subtle rotation of his wand, and his softly whispered, "*Integrare*."

The edges of the fragment flared as if lit by a match, and a bright yellow outline of the piece would be burnt into Hermione's retina for several minutes. There was an identical outline on the larger document lying on the table, which Hermione could now determine was also papyrus. Deep scarlet in hue, the magical outline exerted a magnet-like force pulling the fragment to the larger whole. In seconds, the fragment fitted into place and the joined edges flared once again, an amalgam of color, deepening to bright orange, and then subsiding as the pieces melded into a seamless whole, like a completed puzzle.

When he returned to the simmering cauldron, Hermione remained quietly observant. She had learned, over the years, that Severus was more forthcoming when allowed to follow his own timetable.

He picked up a reed stirring rod, and counted as he deftly added a gram of powdered asphodel to the cauldron, stirring the concoction anti-clockwise. Regrettably, Hermione didn't recognize the ingredient, only that it was a brown powder. As ever, his long-fingered hands manipulated the equipment with skill and grace, and she smiled with the simple enjoyment of watching an artist at work.

No matter how much she had grown to like Severus over the years, and despite the assignments on which he had helped, or the rather significant amount of time they had spent together, Hermione had never really considered him as more than a friend. He was an untouchable, like married men or priests, although Severus was possibly more faithful to a memory than many to a live woman or an ideal. His paragon of virtue had been the martyred Lily Potter. Beautiful, intelligent, lively ... heroic. For her own peace of mind, Hermione had never allowed her admiration for him to veer into the category of romantic attachment, simply because his heart could not be touched by a mortal, real, fallible woman. And Hermione feared doing so might be the breaking of hers.

~o0o~

End Note/Riddle Solutions:

(1) The answer is 'man'. This is the classic Theban/Oedipus riddle of the sphinx, and this version was the closest to an original translation I could find. The more modern version is this: "what speaks with one voice, and walks on four legs in the morning, two at mid-day, and in the evening three?"

(2) The answer is 'time', and is one of J.R.R. Tolkien's riddles from *The Hobbit*.

(3) The answer is 'footsteps', and I found this on the Riddle Poem Page on the internet.

(4) I found this riddle at *the dailyriddle.com*, and the answer is 'sand'.

(5) It is an 'hourglass'. I discovered it on *jokelibrary.com*.

Two

Chapter 2 of 7

When a colleague is discovered to be missing in action, Hermione Granger is sent to Egypt to investigate.

Riddle Me This

Author's notes and disclaimers found in Chapter One. Additionally, as I'm not posting the entire story at once, I shall henceforth include each chapter's riddle solutions and attributions as end-notes.

Chapter Two

Rich men want it

Poor men have it

If you eat it you will die(1)

Scant illumination filtered through the magical barricade, yet sufficient after decades in darkness. She had been right. Others had come, and she watched as they trespassed upon her domain.

Aside from the whom she had dispatched, two others bore the taint of the Betrayer. They would not be allowed to pass.

Another had arrived. A woman this time. There was a hint of Darkness about her, and the guardian flicked her tufted tail.

Time would tell whether it was the Betrayer's touch. Meanwhile, the guardian watched and waited.

To share me is a temptation hard to resist,

When you do, I no longer exist.(2)

While Severus finished the trituration of acacia seeds in a malachite mortar Hermione settled in the chair Lucius abandoned when he had left them alone. Aside from the noises Severus made, silence had blanketed the room. Just as Hermione decided it was an exercise in patience something she wasn't known to possess in abundance - Severus asked, "Did you bring Bellatrix's wand?"

"So it's Dark then."

After the war, Hermione had been the recipient of an Ollivander wand made especially for her. She had spent a month with the old wizard, save only her Saturdays at Gringotts. Hermione helped him restore order to his business, and he had shown her some of the details of his profession. One afternoon while they harvested branches from a lightning-felled tree, he had said, "I am sorry to say, Miss Granger, your talents lie elsewhere." She hadn't minded, and when the month was over, her new wand -- willow with a phoenix feather core -- was tucked firmly in its sheath.

Hermione had also kept Bellatrix Lestrange's wand. Aside from scars and horrific memories it was the only memento Hermione had kept from the war. The late Death Eater's wand had an affinity for Dark magic which proved a distinct advantage in Hermione's profession.

"Yes," Severus replied, "and no." He measured four grams of crushed seeds into a copper bowl before summoning his floating rack of ingredients. Plucking a small vial from the top shelf, he uncorked it and poured exactly five drops of its potion onto the crushed seeds.

When he replaced the vial in the portable rack, he asked, "Do you know what this is?" and tapped the newly replaced vial.

She shook her head.

He smiled suddenly. It was a surprisingly winsome smile, one Hermione had seen on too rare an occasion. "You wouldn't have seen it before, but it's what remains of the mandrake juice I used during your second year at school."

"And you kept it all this Medusa's writhing hair! There's a basilisk down that hall?" She pointed toward the magical barrier in the forecourt. Questions crowded her mind: "Why haven't you had the Aurors in? Or the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures? Is it guarding something you need a curse-breaker for?"

Severus held up a hand and she halted mid-thought. "It is not a basilisk."

"Why do you need the Mandrake juice if not to ...?" Her mind raced, furiously trying to sort clues from the scant information she had been given. Hermione reached a conclusion and her eyes widened as they met the inky black gaze of her former professor. "Bill and Cormac are petrified."

Severus smiled, but it was sardonic. "Leaps in logic appear to be your *forte*."

She ignored the dig. "It's not Petrification?"

"No. They're in a voluntary stasis; a healing coma, if you will. The mandrake juice is a component in this elixir. It will keep Weasley and McLaggen relatively healthy until they're revived."

It was an irritatingly oblique answer, and she asked, "When will that be?"

He didn't reply. Instead, he used a thin gold spatula to fold the mandrake juice into the ground acacia seeds until a smooth paste was formed.

Hermione noticed the grim set to his features; the expression made him appear far older than his years. "Severus?" She rose from the chair and crossed to his workbench. He didn't look at her, and she saw his knuckles were white where he gripped the utensil. She asked, "When can you revive Bill and Cormac?"

He practically snarled his answer. "When we learn how to cure the curse that was killing Dumbledore."

She stifled a gasp. "Is that what it is? Dumbledore's curse?"

Severus still wouldn't look at her, but he nodded in a sharp jerking motion. Hermione's throat tightened. If what they faced was Dumbledore's curse, then the situation might be irreparable. No one knew what curse Tom Riddle had placed on Slytherin's ring, but there was no denying its lethality.

After an awkward moment, she said, "Dumbledore wasn't your..."

"Do not say 'fault'," he interrupted, his diction flawless. "We have *never* discussed Dumbledore."

"It's never been necessary. My opinion of you won't change."

"Your loyalty has a price beyond rubies."

Despite the blandness of his reply, Hermione was furious. And she was worried. And he hadn't told her he was in Egypt, working on this assignment. She pulled her wand and sent a hex sizzling past him, striking the padded chair where she'd been seated. It evaporated in a puff of splintered wood, cotton and tainted the air with a noxious whiff of singed material. "Don't mock me!"

To his credit, Severus didn't flinch, but said gently, "You mistake me. Loyalty is an admirable trait."

Her anger dissipated as quickly as it had risen. "Sorry. I thought...clearly I thought wrong." He turned to face her, and Hermione met his eyes; while black, they were anything but cold. She'd always found them expressive, but since they had become friends his eyes reflected things other than rage, disdain, and the cold pit of despair to which he had so often fallen prey. "I'm willing to listen to anything you'd like to say."

He sighed heavily. "If you will wait a moment, we'll deliver the potion, you may see the victims, and I will tell you what you wish to know." He lifted his wand and the flame beneath the cauldron flared brighter, and then Severus picked up the mortar to add the mandrake-acacia mash to the simmering potion.

"It's not just academic curiosity," Hermione said. "I *need* to know." She paced alongside the workbench, pausing at the papyrus-under-glass, her eyes deciphering the hieroglyphs more easily after six weeks spent on translation. She read '*Magic is effective together with medicine. Medicine is effective together with magic*' but passed on. When she heard him put his stirring rod down, she plucked two empty vials from a small basket on the stone worktop. "Here."

He nodded in his abrupt manner and filled the vials with the sludge-like elixir.

"Do you want to bottle the rest now?" she asked.

"I can return later." He slid the vials into the breast pocket of his linen shirt and walked to the door.

"Severus, why are Bill and Cormac in stasis if it's the same as Dumbledore's curse? He wasn't..."

"Come along. I'll explain." As they returned to the main subterranean chamber Severus asked, "What do you remember about Narcissa Malfoy assisting Potter?"

"Pardon?" The question was a complete *non sequitur*, and Hermione almost tripped over her own feet. She barely noticed the brightly painted hieroglyphs depicting ancient witches and wizards in daily activities, from gathering grain to taking inventory in storerooms; on another wall were scenes which could only be of teachers lecturing students. Ahead was the pulsing shield barricading the unknown malevolent entity, to the right was the broad staircase ascending to the Precinct of Mut. Severus led them to the left-hand hallway, but it was a short passage leading to a hypostyle half again as large as the subterranean forecourt. The hypostyle was mostly dark, mage-lights hovering head-height between the seven freestanding columns representing the papyrus plant in bud and bloom.

"Were you aware Narcissa saved Potter's life during the last battle?" Severus asked. He didn't seem to notice their surroundings, and Hermione pushed an errant desire to explore to the back of her mind. There would be time later, she thought.

"Yes, but what does Narcissa Malfoy have to do with..." Hermione dropped the question when he glared at her. She knew what that glare meant. She sighed. Compared to his behavior from the war years, Severus was now quite domesticated, but it would never do to forget he had once been feral. "Fine. She lied to Voldemort about whether Harry was dead. That's why the family escaped Azkaban."

"In part. Exile isn't a reward, Hermione."

"Fine," she said again, grinding her teeth before relenting. "Narcissa Malfoy's lie gave Harry enough time to recover so he could finish his prophesy-damned task."

"Succinctly put. What else do you know about Narcissa?" he asked as they reached the far end of the hypostyle, and stepped into a wide corridor with several illuminated doorways ahead of them. The hall ended abruptly where a cave-in had occurred; it was the site of the present excavation team's focus. It must have been a break time because no one was working at present. Hermione would have liked to look, but at that moment, Severus stepped through the second doorway on the right.

"What else is there to know..." she broke off as she entered the room behind him. A young woman Hermione recognized but couldn't immediately place greeted Severus in

a way that set Hermione's teeth on edge. The woman didn't react to the sight of his Dark Mark, and that bothered Hermione even more, but then she was distracted by catching sight of the other occupants of the room. Bill Weasley and Cormac McLaggen were laid out on hospital-style beds, covered lightly to the neck with white linen sheeting.

While McLaggen appeared much as he had the last time she had seen him, Bill looked significantly different. The scars left by Greyback's attack had subsided over the years, never entirely healing, but they had shrunk to thin red slash marks. Now, however, they were thick and scabrous as Dumbledore's hand had been. Black curse lines spread from the wounds, covering much of Bill's unconscious features.

Hermione blinked against the sudden upwelling of tears. If a cure for Dumbledore's curse couldn't be found, then she was looking at a dead man. Bill would never see his child being born, or say good night to his little daughters. His loss would be enormous, Hermione thought, and then she sniffled and glanced at the occupant of the other bed. She might not like Cormac, but he was equally a victim.

Severus' voice interrupted her reverie. "Miss Granger meet Miss Clearwater. Miss Clearwater is the matron for our endeavors."

"Most ably supported by you, Severus," the healer replied before speaking directly to Hermione. "You might not remember me, but we shared an adventure at Hogwarts."

"Of course I remember you," Hermione replied. Her memory was sufficiently jogged to conjure the image of a younger version of the brunette in the draughty, ancient halls of the school. "You're Penny, aren't you?"

"You do remember." Penny's smile was warm. "It's nice to see you again."

"You, too. You saved our lives by having a mirror when we needed one."

"You were the one who knew we needed a mirror in the first place, and why," Penny said.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Shall we dispense with the love-in?"

"You introduced us," Hermione replied tartly. "It's nice to see another friendly face."

"We have work to do," Severus said repressively as he handed the two vials of elixir to Penny.

"I didn't know you had become a Healer," Hermione commented.

Penny waved her wand, raising the back half of Bill's bed to angle him in a semi-recumbent position. Flick and swish. A silent incantation later and he had swallowed his potion. Penny spoke as she administered to her patient. "I was fascinated by Madam Pomfrey. She was far more capable than any of us realized. I originally planned on a career at the Ministry, but after what happened with the basilisk, I changed my course of study."

The healer turned to her next patient and repeated the procedure with McLaggen. His looks had never appealed to Hermione beyond his sterling ability to needle Ron. However, Penny seemed captivated by his rugged features, and there was something proprietary in her manner as she fondly brushed a wiry curl from his brow. Only then did Hermione see the striation of black lines radiating from some point under his hair. Her stomach turned.

Severus asked the healer, "Did Lucius tell you about dinner?"

Penny blinked and withdrew her hand from McLaggen's hair. "I'll be there," she said, "and I've sent an owl to Ayman. He's in Cairo, but he should return in time." She held her hand out to Severus as if expecting another vial.

He said, "There are twenty-eight vials in the basket on my workbench. You may decant the cauldron." Then he jerked his head for Hermione to follow him and left the room.

"I'll go now, Severus," Penny called out. "See you at dinner, Hermione."

"You, too." Hermione hurried after Severus. She didn't catch up with him until he was on the staircase leading to the surface. "Where are we going now?"

"Out."

"All right." They erupted into the hot afternoon, and it was as if they were in the path of a Norwegian Ridgeback's flaming breath. Instantly, sweat dotted Hermione's brow. She was glad the Anti-glare charm was still in effect against the brightness of the sun.

Severus stalked down the embankment toward Isheru, heedless of whether he drew attention or not, and it was unclear whether he wore his Muggle-repelling identification.

"Why won't you just tell me..." Hermione scrambled down the dusty incline, sliding a little as she descended, "...what's going on?"

His jaw was clenched and his hands were knotted into fists. Again.

Very real fear blossomed in Hermione's mind. "Severus?"

He held up a hand, a stalling measure. He stared intently into the water of the sacred lake as if it might solve all his problems.

With a leap of logic that would provoke Severus' teasing, Hermione said, "I don't think Bill and Cormac are the only ones who've been cursed." Severus didn't reply, but he didn't negate her postulation. "I also think the other victim is someone you know. Narcissa?"

"It is not Narcissa."

"Just tell me! I need to know. It's why I was assigned..."

"Is that why you're here, Hermione? Because you were given an assignment?"

She held her frustration in, but it took effort. "You know me better. If you'd bothered to *read* my letter you would know Fleur came to see me. She hasn't heard from Bill and is worried. What she said worried me, too. I know Bill. He doesn't make mistakes. Please just tell me."

He sighed and unclenched his fists. "There's a lengthy explanation."

She huffed. "When isn't there? Shall we find somewhere more comfortable? My *home away from home* has seating ... and Cooling Charms."

"That would be acceptable. Lead the way." Severus gestured for her to precede him. He was infuriatingly quiet as they skirted the lake and made for the grove of palms where Hermione's tent stood.

Hermione frowned at the unassuming portable residence. "Fucking tent," she muttered and passed through the magical spell-ward guarding the entrance. Proving as uncanny as any owl, Persephone glided into the tent above their heads and into the room Hermione had claimed for her own. Once inside and dust free, Hermione sighed in bliss. Cool, cool bliss. Then she fixed a steely glare on Severus who remained in the doorway.

He smirked. "Minerva does it better."

She pinched her lips before speaking. "Unless you were the one to curse them, I don't understand why you keep putting this off?" Before he could be outraged, she continued, "And I know what you think of Bill, so you didn't." She pointed to the sofa and each word sounded as if it were bitten off before it left her lips. "Now sit there and tell me. Don't leave anything out."

When he obediently followed her command, she watched him suspiciously. Hermione slipped off her shoes and folded herself into the armchairs with floral upholstery.

Severus turned sideways and reclined until his head was pillowed on one arm of the sofa. He closed his eyes and began to speak. "When the Dark Lord learned Narcissa lied about Potter being alive, he cursed her."

"I had no idea."

"There were few who did and fewer who would've cared had they known."

Hermione shrugged; she would have numbered in the majority.

"They didn't discover it until later," he said, "when the family was allowed to see a Healer."

"She didn't notice she was cursed before then?"

He opened an eye and pierced her with his glare. "It was not her only injury, or even the most urgent."

She hesitated, but then said, "I doubt anyone was left unscathed." He closed his eye again, but did not immediately take up the tale. With some foreboding, she asked, "What did Riddle curse her with?"

Severus raised a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose as if warding off a headache. Perhaps he was, Hermione thought.

Then he sighed. "It was the same as Dumbledore's. He called it a Withering Curse."

Hermione shuddered.

"Unlike Dumbledore, Narcissa was struck in the elbow. The curse radiates from the point of impact. Because of Lucius and Narcissa's circumstances, adequate medical attention was difficult to come by, and they consulted every known curse expert willing to work with them. There weren't many. I refined the restorative elixir I had created for Dumbledore, and Narcissa drank it religiously."

Hermione blinked. He'd used the past tense. "She's dead then?"

"She died shortly after Draco was allowed back into England. He found the papyrus I sent you among the Dark Lord's things."

"I'm surprised the MLE didn't confiscate anything that was Riddle's."

When he looked at her, his black eyes held a distant expression. "The manor was sealed until one of the family's return. Potter himself headed the inspection." Severus grimaced. "I'll give him credit; Potter took only what was necessary, and none of his team damaged as much as a teacup."

Hermione smiled. "Harry can be fair-minded like that."

"What a paragon." The words were delivered in a voice as dry as the desert encroaching upon the Nile's verdant boundaries, and then Severus turned his head toward the tent's ceiling. "Nevertheless, Draco found the Dark Lord's cache in the Manor's library."

She leaned forward. "Including the papyrus on your workbench?"

"As I said before. It appears to be the recipe for an antidote to the Withering Curse, but is incomplete. There is a scroll missing. Draco searched everywhere; he even re-enlisted Potter's aid."

"Draco Malfoy asked Harry for help?" She was astonished. "Harry never said anything about this."

He sneered. "The reason Potter does anything escapes me."

"Let's not argue about Harry."

"We have agreed to disagree about Potter in the past."

"And what a memorable evening that was." She smiled at the memory. It had occurred shortly after Severus had been released from St. Mungo's and had been pardoned by the Ministry. Hermione had brought him take-away to celebrate and ended up leaving before she had eaten any of the chicken tikka.

Severus snorted. "It was a week before my hair resumed its normal color."

"And I thought you looked fetching in curls." Then she laughed. "What about me? I had to present my findings on the Avery property in Wales. I'm sure Bogrod thought I was mocking him with the pointy ears you gave me."

"Not to mention the green skin tone. That will teach you to defend the Boy Who Blundered."

She sighed. "Harry means well."

His tone had bite when he said, "A card at Christmas would be sufficient."

Amused in spite of circumstances, Hermione replied, "I'll be sure to tell him when next I see him."

"I won't hold my breath waiting for the results."

"No, that probably wouldn't be a good idea. Harry isn't always predictable."

Severus actually chuckled. "What a gross understatement."

Comfortable silence blanketed the room for a moment before Hermione broke it. "Let's get back to the point, shall we?"

Severus sat up and stretched his long legs to rest on the coffee table, ankles neatly crossed. "Potter searched the catalogues made from Death Eaters' holdings, and reported the lack of acquisition or even mention of a papyrus. Draco sent copies of what he had discovered to his parents, and Lucius and Narcissa came to Egypt. During their search, they heard rumors of a magical collegium. It was further rumored to be a great seat of learning with ties to the library at Al Iskandariyya. They began their investigations there, at Qait Bay."

"Of course," she said, captivated despite her relations with the Malfoys. Having been in Alexandria so recently Hermione could imagine the Malfoys beginning the search there.

"For a short time, they thought they'd discovered the location, only to find the ruins of the Pharos lighthouse instead."

"How disappointing."

"You have no idea. I believe it was then Narcissa lost hope."

His features set into the grim, stoic lines Hermione remembered from her youth. What astonished her was how unnatural the expression looked on his face now. She waved her hand to indicate their surroundings. "When did they know this was the right location?"

"Last year. We all hoped for a reprieve" He shrugged his shoulders, but she knew it had mattered to him.

"You'd kept her alive for nine years."

He glanced at her, his expression indecipherable. "If we had kept her in an indefinite stasis, she might still be alive."

"Why didn't you -- they?"

"She wouldn't allow it. Would you?"

"No," she replied, shifting positions. "I would want to sort it out myself, or help."

"Do you blame Narcissa for doing any less?"

"No. I'm sorry."

He pierced her with his glare. "Don't dissemble, Hermione. You didn't like her."

She met his glare with one of her own, but her tone was gentle when she spoke. "I know Narcissa was your friend, and I'm sorry she died. I also know she saved Harry's life, but it's difficult for me to forget the way she did nothing while her sister cursed me."

"You were cordial enough with Lucius earlier."

"It irritated him."

He snorted. "It did indeed."

"Tell me about the basilisk."

He frowned. "It is not a basilisk."

"Fine. Did whatever it is curse Narcissa again?"

"No. She was bedridden by then. I came to be whatever help I could."

Reminded how often Severus had been unreachable over the past two or three years gave Hermione a peculiar pang. She had always assumed his absences were periodic, anti-social sulks. Now she knew better, and it hurt to know he hadn't confided in her. In all fairness, her antipathy toward the Malfoys, singularly and as a family, was most likely a deciding factor in Severus' decision not to tell her. It hurt nonetheless.

He was unaware of her introspection. "When I arrived," he said, continuing his story, "I knew it was only a matter of weeks, months if we were lucky. Over the years, the Withering Curse damaged Narcissa's internal organs, and complete collapse was imminent."

"There was only so much you could do without the actual antidote or spell reversal."

"I know that, Hermione," he snapped. "I don't need coddling."

Hermione privately disagreed, but refrained from saying so.

He sighed. "In any event, we were in Aswan when Draco arrived, and for several weeks, we attempted to recreate the entire potion from what we had translated. The three of us traced threadbare clues and false leads when we could, when Lucius could tear himself away from Narcissa."

Hermione was touched by this story of familial devotion. It reminded her painfully of her parents. That they lived was her solace; that they knew her not was her ever-present sorrow.

"Out of desperation, perhaps, or serendipity," Severus said, his fingers pressing together as if they were mirror copies of one another, forming a pyramid, "I picked up a copy of Nestor L'Hote's original notes from his Egyptian surveys, and discovered his mapping of the Mut Precinct. As I had been studying a recent layout of Karnak the day before, I noticed several discrepancies between the two. Draco was here the following day. When he reported the presence of a reconstructed healing temple within the precinct itself...."

"I imagine there was rejoicing."

"I have rarely seen Lucius so hopeful," Severus smiled slightly, and there was real affection in the smile. "Draco took steps to blend in with the Muggles, and within days he found the entrance. A week later, Lucius brought Narcissa to see the staircase. It was the last time she left her bed."

"How terribly sad."

"There was worse to come."

"Worse? How could things get Oh! It was Draco who was cursed, wasn't it?"

Severus' shoulders slumped. "Lucius couldn't leave Narcissa, and I was still in Aswan finishing the last version of the antidote. I do not know all the details. Lucius says little on the topic, but if the recent past is any indication, Draco will have attempted to hire an archeological team. Too many in the magical community know who he is and what he has done. No one would work for him." He leaned forward, his hair swinging like curtains to hide his expression. "Out of desperation, Lucius went to Gringotts."

"Was that when he hired Cormac?"

"McLaggen was hired later, after Gringotts turned Lucius down."

Her eyes widened. "They turned him down?"

"Initially." Severus let his head rest against the back of the sofa. His nose looked larger from this angle, she thought irrelevantly. "Neither the Ministry nor the SCE were willing to waive 'ownership' in favor of the goblins," he said. "But we're skipping ahead. When Draco learned of Gringotts' reaction, he took on the task himself."

"That's when he was cursed?"

"Yes."

"The basilisk's in the library, isn't it?"

Severus snorted. "It is most decidedly not a basilisk, Hermione, but you're correct. It is in the library, or better yet, it guards the passage to the collegium's library. Draco confirmed that it was a library before he was confronted."

She was lost in thought for a long, contemplative pause. "What did they tell Narcissa?"

His head jerked up, and she realized he had almost fallen asleep. "They we didn't, at first," he said. "Draco came to Aswan. He referred to himself as my first test subject." Severus' expression was bleak. "When the potion failed, I dosed Draco with the restorative elixir."

"I'm so sorry, Severus."

Their eyes met, and she knew he could read the sincerity on her face. The corner of his mouth quirked upward in acknowledgment. Severus shifted, until he rested one arm on his propped up knee, and let his hand hang. In other circumstances it would have been dead sexy, as it was Hermione was too busy looking at his face to notice.

"Draco was desperate to prevent his father or me from going into the excavation on our own, and yet terrified to see his mother." Severus glanced at her. "I persuaded him to return to Luxor. When Lucius saw Draco he suspected the truth, but Narcissa knew immediately it was too much for her."

Hermione's fingers covered her mouth. "She died?"

"That day."

"Oh, how cruel."

"It was. I will never forget the depth of Lucius' despair. If it hadn't been for the hope offered by having found the library, I believe he would have killed himself."

From his expression, Hermione could imagine how difficult it had been, and despite her dislike, Hermione was saddened by Narcissa Malfoy's death. Diverting Severus, however, she asked, "Is that when Lucius hired McLaggen?"

"Yes. Gringotts wasn't interested, but then Draco remembered McLaggen worked there. McLaggen was very interested." He snorted. "Arrogant snot. He didn't last a day before suffering the guardian's displeasure."

Hermione leaned forward. "I'm a little confused. Didn't Narcissa die last year?"

"November."

"Your restorative supplement kept Dumbledore alive for a year and Narcissa for nine. Why are the others in healing comas now? It's only been a few months."

"It has to do with the location of the curse itself. Draco was cursed in the chest, directly over his heart. After two months, it was clear he couldn't continue without considerable risk. McLaggen lasted barely a month."

"I saw Bill, and the encroachment on McLaggen's jaw. Where was he hit?"

He glanced at her sharply. "McLaggen was hit in the ear and Bill in the face."

"Oh, sweet Merlin!" So many of her curse-breaking assignments had resulted in minimal consequences, but in this case, if she they weren't successful, three men could die. Three men she knew. "Why did Gringotts agree oh, that's right, they'll acquire any goblin-made artifacts." Hermione turned pensive, and stared at Severus. "Bill arrived a week ago."

"The day after Gringotts sealed the bargain. He spent his first three days reading Draco's and McLaggen's notes." He lifted his dangling hand to point toward the dining table with its scattered evidence of research in progress. "As you saw, the curse targeted Grayback's scars, and Bill was in stasis within hours."

"And you didn't think to inform his family?" she asked, indignantly.

"It would have broken the confidentiality clause."

"You could've arranged to tell Fleur."

"Gringotts assured us it was being handled."

Hermione stared at Severus, processing all he had told her. One thing stood out, and when she acknowledged the truth of it, her feelings were hurt beyond measure. "Why, Severus?"

"Why did Lucius wait so long?" He looked at her as if she were a first year and didn't know the answer to a question. "He's persona non grata, Hermione. No one would help him."

"That's not what I'm asking," she said.

"Then what?" he snapped.

"It's been seven months since Draco was cursed, six since McLaggen. You've been helping Lucius all this time. For years."

"Not consistently," he replied, and his incomprehension was completely exasperating to Hermione. She shot to her feet, and Severus' eyes widened. Cautiously, he said, "I have been in England, as you well know."

"If I had my wand I'd hex you." Irritably, she brushed a stray curl from her face.

"You do have your wand."

"Remind me to hex you later." She paced the large room, from dining table to coffee table, her gaze gliding over the piles of parchment, scrolls, and research materials left *in situ*. Her course diverted around the sofa, after which she returned to her original position and stared at him, scowling. "I'm too busy deciding how furious to be."

Abruptly, Severus straightened. "Whatever for?!"

She asked with scant patience, "Why didn't you ask me to help?"

His expression was sheer incredulity. "What would I say to you, Hermione?" His voice then twisted into sarcasm. "Lucius Malfoy, ex-Death Eater, scourge of Muggle-borns everywhere, the man in whose home you were brutally tortured and mutilated, he needs some help. Drop everything and come at once. Of course, you might die as a result, but come anyway."

Hermione's shoulders dropped, and she shrugged off her irritation. "All right. I understand you didn't ask because you thought I wouldn't help the Malfoys. But I would have come for you. If you had asked, I would have been here as fast as I could arrange transportation." Severus just stared at her. He looked Petrified. She wondered if he was even breathing. "Severus?"

He blinked and shut his mouth.

"Severus?"

"I did not ... I do not..." He rose to his feet, his posture stiff, face an expressionless mask. Uncharacteristically, his hands betrayed the turbulence of his thoughts, clenching and unclenching as she had seen him do at the lake earlier. "I do not ask for help."

"It's what friends do, Severus. It's what you do," she said gently, and then she took pity on his discomfort by returning to her seat and changing the subject, or rather, returning to the main topic. "To recap, if I may? Draco discovered a magical collegium which houses a not-basilisk, and the not-basilisk guards the corridor leading to a library which most likely houses the papyri required to brew an antidote to the Withering Curse oh! Were there signs of the collegium being found before the Malfoys arrived?"

Severus finally sat down, staring at her as if he'd never seen her before. Perhaps, she thought, he hadn't. When he didn't answer the question, Hermione surmised he was absorbing her revelation, although why he didn't know she cared for him deeply after eight years of friendship, she couldn't imagine. Well, she could, considering the way he'd been manipulated and abused, but still....

She resumed her summation. "It has to have been Riddle. Sometime during his transformative sojourn, he discovered the collegium, and hence learned the Withering Curse." She paused in case Severus wanted to add something. He appeared to still be mulling over her comment. Finally, she commented, "He was awfully good with snakes. Are you sure the guardian's not a basilisk?"

Severus seemed to have realigned the axes of his universe for his response was perfectly in character. "Only if you consider a creature with the body of a lioness, the wings of a gryphon, and the torso of a woman a basilisk."

"Oh," she practically breathed her answer. "You've found a sphinx."

"Worse."

"Worse?"

"It's also a ghost."

~o0o~

End Notes, Riddle Solutions:

(1) The answer is 'nothing'. My sons learned this riddle in grade school; the original author is some anonymous wit who shall never be properly accredited. My thanks, nonetheless.

(2) It's a 'secret'. And I found this on the Riddle Poem Page on the internet.

Three

Chapter 3 of 7

When a colleague is discovered to be missing in action, Hermione Granger is sent to Egypt to investigate.

Riddle Me This

Author's notes and disclaimers found in Chapter One.

Chapter Three

Voiceless it cries,

Wingless flutters,

Toothless bites,

Mouthless mutters.(1)

Severus had gone and Hermione settled in to do what she did best. Research.

She waded through Draco's and McLaggen's notes and reference materials. The bulk of the parchment and pyramids of scrolls were Draco's handiwork, but McLaggen had done a fair share, although not quite as thoroughly. The most recent parchments, however, bore Bill Weasley's distinctive handwriting. Hermione reasonably decided to see where her colleagues had been before she tackled the problem directly.

A sphinx.

A ghost sphinx.

Just because she had never heard of one didn't mean it didn't exist. After all, she had been forced to recant her skepticism after Luna Lovegood proved the existence of the Crumple-Horned Snorkack. Hermione had been happy for Luna, but less than pleased to lose the hundred galleons to Ginny Potter.

Fortunately, Hermione was familiar with common or garden sphinxes. On occasion, Gringotts used them to guard the higher priority vaults. All curse-breakers knew of their existence, and once past journeyman status, they were introduced to each of the seven sphinxes who resided in the lower levels.

None of them were ghosts, however. Hermione had always understood that only humans could be ghosts. She pursed her lips. This was a puzzle. A riddle, she thought and her lips morphed into a scowl. Not funny at all.

She reached for the parchment Bill had scribbled on, and scanned his notes. Their thoughts had coincided as the very first thing he had written was: *Sphinx ghost? Ghost?*

She shuffled through McLaggen's pages, scanning them, looking for a similar question but found none. He had initially focused on determining whether the ghost sphinx was a magical construct. With a shudder, Hermione remembered being confronted by the construct of Dumbledore creation which haunted Grimmauld Place after the old wizard's death. If only Mad-Eye Moody were still alive, she thought. He had been a canny old wizard.

Summoning a glass from the tent's kitchen, Hermione absently cast *Aguamenti* before settling in to read her cursed colleagues' notes.

Hours later, Hermione was startled by Penny's arrival.

Penny laughed. "Don't you need light to read?" She pulled her wand from the untidy bun on her head and with a non-verbal incantation, several lamps flared into life.

Hermione blinked, and rubbed her eyes. "I hadn't even noticed."

"You were squinting at the page," Penny pointed out.

"I suppose I was." Hermione watched the other woman settle onto the sofa, almost exactly where Severus had been. "Do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

"Not at all," Penny replied. "I want this to be over." She sighed and angled her head back, in a parody of Severus' earlier posture.

Hermione noticed the glitter of tears in the other woman's eyelashes. "Severus told me about Cormac."

Penny's lips curved in a small smile. She said, "I want him back," so softly Hermione almost didn't hear. "I want him whole."

"I will do my best." Hermione promised.

Penny lifted her head and pierced Hermione with her deep blue eyes. "Good. I know your best is nothing less than excellent."

Hermione blushed. "Thank you."

"Do you mind if I get ready while we talk. I want to freshen up before we go to Lucius." Penny eyed Hermione and said, mildly, "You might want to wash your face before we go. You've got ink on your chin."

"Have I?" Hermione swiped at her chin, only to smear the ink further. She couldn't see it, but Penny's reaction was a clear indication. She capped the ink and put the quill on its rest before moving across to her room. "We can both get ready while we talk."

Penny entered her own room, and her reply was slightly muffled. "All right."

Hermione eyed the clothing she'd packed, and called out, "Do we have to dress for the occasion?"

"I wouldn't suggest you go in the nude. They might get entirely the wrong opinion."

"That's not at all what I meant." Hermione laughed. "Is it formal? I didn't bring anything that would be suitable although I suppose I could transfigure something."

"Casual is fine." Penny stepped into the opening of Hermione's room. She had changed into summer robes the color of spring daffodils.

Hermione groaned. "My only robes are formal. I generally wear jeans on location."

"Transfigure something then, or simply change your top. Now, what did you want to ask?"

"How soon after he was cursed did you treat Draco?" Hermione eyed her nightdress. After a quick swish and flick, it was transformed into a long swishy skirt in pale blue. Paired with a three-quarter-length sleeved top, she would be modest, comfortable, and suitably dressed. Hermione turned to see the other witch staring at her skirt. "What?"

"That's pretty. Now I wish I'd done something similar." Penny fingered her more restrictive robes momentarily before dropping the fold of cloth. "To answer your question, though, I didn't treat Draco at all. He was in a healing coma by the time Cormac sent for me."

As Penny talked Hermione unbuttoned her jeans and stepped out of them, slipping the skirt up and over her hips. She enjoyed the swishy feel of the hem around her ankles. Penny was right. It was quite pretty.

"I was so angry he hadn't asked sooner..." the older witch unknotted her hair, its curls twining around fingers making it an onerous task, "...but Cormac hoped they could create the antidote before he had to say anything. He's optimistic that way," she said fondly.

It didn't tie in with what Hermione knew of Cormac McLaggen, but she held her tongue. Love altered people's perspectives. "So you didn't treat Draco at all, and you only saw Cormac after a few weeks?" she asked. "What about Bill?"

"Oh, I treated him immediately. Why do you ask?"

Hermione fluttered her free hand toward the accumulation of research. "I can't find any reference to the riddle."

"Riddle?"

"Traditionally, sphinxes guard treasure or sacred places. They do not allow anyone to pass without payment, and payment to a sphinx is the answer to their riddles. It's how Harry reached the Goblet of Fire. He had to face a sphinx first."

"How horrid." Penny shuddered. "Cormac didn't mention any riddles."

Hermione frowned. "And I found nothing in any of his notes. Or Draco's, or even Bill's."

Penny's frown matched Hermione's. "Now that you're asking, no one recalls much of their encounter with the sphinx at all. I put it down to the pain they were in at the time. Now I wish we'd been more thorough in questioning them. I was so distraught about Cormac's..." A small chime sounded throughout the tent thoroughly derailing her train of thought. "If we don't leave now, we'll be late," Penny said, offering her arm to Hermione. "I'll take you Side-Along."

"Hang on a moment," Hermione said, and called out, "Persephone!" as she crossed to the table filled with research, notes, and conjectures. She hurriedly quilled a note on a piece of parchment as Persephone flew silently from her perch in Hermione's room. The large, snowy owl landed on the table and bobbed her head with pleasure when Hermione brushed her feathers. "Please deliver this as quickly as possible." Persephone accepted the missive, and launched herself toward the entrance, flying through the flap that magically rose for her egress. "That's sorted," Hermione said and turned toward Penny. "I'm ready. Maybe the others will know about the riddle."

Penny took her arm and spun on her heel, squeezing the two witches into the nether guided by Penny's determination and destination.

An hour later, Hermione was impatient to discuss the topic at the forefront of her mind. She had been graciously welcomed to the Malfoy flat, a beautifully decorated and luxurious home, and met the small team of dedicated specialists responsible for cataloging the Mut Temple's collegial legacy. Among them, Edouard Delacour, no relation to Fleur, was the team's photographer. He regaled his fellow diners with his latest escapade in a Cairo Muggle nightclub. As a half-blood, Edouard traveled between communities frequently and was an engaging raconteur. However, Hermione was too preoccupied to really listen.

Dinner was Hermione's first opportunity to taste local cuisine. The meal was served family style, with serving dishes waddling between host and guests.

"I've never had pigeon before," she commented to Severus who was seated to her left. "It's delicious."

"I prefer it to pheasant," Severus replied. There was a lot to be said for a potions master and his dexterity with a knife. He dismembered his pigeon with exacting skill. At one point, he accepted a liberal portion of salad from a side dish which then settled quite happily between his plate and Hermione's. Every so often a piece of cucumber would slip onto her plate. She pretended not to notice.

Severus waved off a platter as it sidled toward Hermione's place setting, and with what could only be described as a sulky air, it turned toward the opposite end of the table.

An accomplished host, Lucius noticed, and asked, "Do you not care for mushrooms, Miss Granger?"

"I'm sure they're as delicious as the rest of the meal," Hermione said, watching Ayman Mubarak, the magical site's recently returned Field Director, accept a generous serving spooned over his fish, "but I've lost my appetite for them."

"A bad reaction?" Penny asked from across the table.

"Over-indulgence, I'm afraid," Hermione replied before glancing at Severus. He was watching her, his expression unexpectedly affectionate.

Lucius cleared his throat, and she shifted her attention to her host. "I confess myself surprised, Miss Granger. I would not have taken you for the type."

"It was a circumstantial thing," she said, shrugging off his curiosity, uninterested in explaining her aversion further. She didn't know the other diners well enough to talk about the time she, Harry and Ron had been on the run. It was then Hermione had traipsed through each and every forest where they camped, searching for edible fungi, and adding them in every possible meal to bolster their scant rations. Along with camping, mushrooms had made it to her never again list.

Edouard took a small portion and speared a bite-sized piece, sauce dripped from the curved cap. "Perhaps it's the texture. I've never been fond of fungi," he said, and Hermione stifled a giggle.

At her side, Severus coughed to cover his laugh at the other man's expense. "I foresee a future coffee table book of the same name," he said snidely, but only for Hermione to hear. She laughed.

In what became a thoroughly entertaining conversation, the others discussed their least favorite foods. Hermione's sole contribution was her dislike of mushrooms, but she was amused to learn Lucius disliked asparagus, Penny wouldn't touch veal, and as Hermione already knew, Severus was not fond of eggplant or cucumber.

When the cheese was served, there was a brief lull in conversation, and Hermione seized the moment to ask of Lucius, "Do you recall Draco mentioning a riddle the sphinx..."

He cut her off by saying, "Speaking business at the dinner table is vulgar, Miss Granger."

A scathing retort danced on the tip of her tongue, but Severus elbowed her. "Not now," he said quietly.

Hermione scowled at Lucius, and shared her disgruntlement with Severus by turning to engage Edouard, her right-hand neighbor, in conversation with an anecdote about her first sight of the Eiffel Tower. He seized the topic with enthusiasm.

Finally, Lucius dabbed his lips with his serviette and announced, "There is coffee in the lounge for those who wish to stay."

Hermione was the first to rise from her chair.

At her side, Severus chuckled. "I've been told that patience is its own reward," he remarked casually as he stood, but his glance was pointed.

Hermione was never able to remain angry with Severus for long. "As you have ample reason to know," she said and then smiled at him.

"I am not a patient man." When she opened her mouth, a contradiction half-formed and ready to escape, he added, "with certain exceptions."

As they left the dining room, Edouard, Ayman and his assistant bade the rest a cheerful good evening and departed. The Field Director's assistant was a dark-haired, swarthy-complexioned man whose eyes were as pale as a Malfoy's. He had made up for his striking looks by being nearly as silent as the grave, and Hermione didn't think she'd heard his name or a word escape his lips the entire evening.

Hermione turned to Severus. "Now can we talk about the riddle?"

"No."

"What!" she exclaimed. "Dinner's over."

Her reaction had drawn the attention of the others. Lucius had been chatting with Penny, the other remaining guest, about an author they both liked, but he politely excused himself and came to Severus' side. Not for the first time, Hermione noticed how at ease Severus was in Lucius' presence. Severus rarely allowed people to come too close to him, and it had taken her years before she had found the temerity to offer him a polite peck on the cheek or a pat on the arm.

Now she remembered Sirius Black calling Severus Malfoy's lapdog, and she also remembered Severus' white-lipped reaction. Hermione had always dismissed the comment as one more of Sirius' vicious taunts, but she wondered.

Shoving the wayward thought to one side, she addressed Lucius, "I want to know what riddle the sphinx asked Draco and Cormac and Bill. I can't find it in any of their notes."

Lucius looked at Severus quizzically. "To the best of my knowledge there was none."

"There must have been."

Lucius shrugged. "Draco never mentioned it. Neither did Mr. McLaggen."

"Or Bill," Severus supplied.

"There has to have been a riddle, or it cannot be a sphinx."

Lucius scoffed. "That's the sum of your expertise on the matter? If it doesn't ask a riddle the creature isn't a sphinx?"

"Conundrums are a fundamental sphinxian characteristic. Asking the riddle determines worthiness in the supplicant." Hermione's pedantic reply curled Lucius' lip further,

and Severus put a hand on his friend's shoulder. Hermione stared, and then dragged her eyes away, looking up at Severus' face instead. His eyes were fixed on her.

He said, "If you will recall, we're dealing with an anomaly. It is a ghost sphinx. Perhaps there are other anomalies as well. Perhaps it isn't a sphinx at all."

She shook her head. "While its being a ghost is anomalous, I've read all the notes and they indicate it's a true sphinx. Draco and Cormac were quite exhaustive in their research, although they did consider the possibility of a construct. Yet, even Bill's notes concur with their conclusion. If they're correct, and I believe they are, then there must be a riddle."

Lucius said, "There was none."

Penny interrupted. "If I may?"

Severus turned toward the healer. "Of course you may."

"I didn't have an opportunity to see Draco or Cormac until long after they were cursed, but I did treat Bill. He mentioned nothing about a riddle, but he was in considerable pain at the time. During the course of my examination, I noticed the tell-tale trace of a Memory Charm."

"What?" Lucius asked, his eyes widening.

"It wasn't directly related to the curse injury itself, and the traces were so faint they could have been weeks or months old."

Severus' eyes narrowed. "Why am I just learning of this now? We need to know everything..."

"It's in my report." Penny's posture stiffened, affronted by the accusation.

"Where?"

"I listed it as either pre-existing or incidental symptomology."

"This is unrelated to the curse," Lucius said. "Narcissa certainly wasn't hit by a Memory Charm. She was checked most carefully."

"As was Dumbledore," Severus added.

Hermione's brain whirled with details and information, thoughts percolating as she toyed with the puzzle.

"I remember that look," Penny exclaimed, laughing suddenly and pointing at Hermione. "It's the exact same look you had that day in the library."

"Is it?" Hermione asked, blushing. "I didn't know I had a 'look', but I remember the moment I confirmed that we faced a basilisk. I could hardly wait to find Harry."

The mantelpiece clock chimed in the drawing room, and Hermione suddenly realized how awkward the moment had become. Victims and perpetrator sharing a meal. Although stranger things had happened after the war. Pansy Parkinson and Dean Thomas becoming a couple was a perfect example of how life after Hogwarts had changed for many.

Penny drifted toward the door and broke the awkward silence. "I'm afraid I must check on my patients. I'll see you later, Hermione. I'll send you the report again, Severus. Thank you for a lovely dinner, Lucius."

She slipped out before Hermione could say anything, and then Lucius turned to look directly at her, his face expressionless. "The war has been over for a decade, Miss Granger."

"I didn't mention the basilisk to upset you." Hermione thought Lucius' discomfort was fairly earned, but pricking his composure had not been her intention. Still, she was intrigued by the fact she had been capable of doing so. "It's how I met Penny," she explained. "We were both victims."

Lucius said, "And Severus brewed the cure."

"With Devil's Club Root grown in the Malfoy greenhouses." Severus detonated the heretofore unknown detail in exactly the right place to dislodge Hermione's paradigm. She didn't particularly thank him for it. Neither did her host, apparently.

"Severus!" Lucius snapped, glaring at the dark-haired wizard.

Hermione stared at the two men, taking in the undercurrents between them. Providing ingredients for the Mandrake potion was inadequate compensation to the many Lucius had injured. Yet, the fact he had attempted to mitigate that damage left her speculating about any other efforts at expiation he might have made. Then she wondered if that had been Severus' purpose in revealing the information in the first place. She said, "I had no idea, obviously."

"You were never intended to know." Lucius strode toward the inner hall. "I will not apologize for my actions, Miss Granger, but I never wanted to kill children. Good evening." He departed quietly, leaving Severus and Hermione alone.

"He is not a monster."

"Despite his intentions and your good opinion, Severus, I distinctly remember being at the other end of his wand and running for my life. Moments like those tend to color one's opinion," she said coolly. "Good night." Abruptly, she wrenched open the front door and slammed it behind her.

She didn't hear him curse nor did she realize the muffled crash from inside the flat was the sound of Severus' fist hitting the wall.

Always wax, yet always wane; I melt, succumbing to the flame.

Lighting darkness with fate unblest, I soon devolve to shapeless mess.(2)

Activity beyond the barrier roused her from unpleasant memories. Despite her incorporeal body, she felt the uneasy ripple of Darkness cascade against her awareness. The tainted Dark One had entered her domain. He came to stand on the other side of the magical barrier, staring into the corridor beyond.

She did not know his thoughts, but she smiled and flexed her claws.

Here was her next victim.

I have a bed, but never sleep;

I run, but do not walk;

I have a mouth, but never talk.(3)

"Hermione."

The voice infiltrated her dream, and she stirred, her curly hair tumbling across her parchment pillow.

"Wake up, Hermione."

She closed her mouth and frowned. In the recesses of her mind, wakefulness stirred. She shifted in the chair and vaguely knew she had fallen asleep at the table, draped across Draco's notes on the history of Mut and her son, Khonsu.

"Granger," the deep voice rumbled through her subconscious thoughts, "I need you."

Hermione's eyes snapped open and stared into Severus' too pale face. "Wha's wrong?" Her voice was thick and blurred. When he said nothing, alarm raced along her nerves, spurring her into full consciousness, and it was then she noticed his stance. "Severus?"

"I..." He broke off and looked beyond her.

She could see the careful way he held himself, as if to stave off excruciating pain, and the despair on his face was more than she could bear. "What's happened?"

"I..." He clamped his jaw shut and she could practically hear him grind his teeth.

Anxiety triggered adrenaline and Hermione shoved away from the table. Her hair flopped into her eyes; irritably she brushed it back. Her tone was shrill. "How are you hurt?"

Black eyes bored into hers and Hermione almost staggered at what she saw in their depths. Her fingers flew to her lips. There was no need to ask what he had done. She knew. "Oh, Severus," she whispered. "How why? Why would you do such a thing?"

He sneered. "What were *your* plans for this morning?"

She flushed. "You're right, but it's my job. I've been trained."

"As were Bill and McLaggen, and even Draco is well-versed in the Dark Arts."

Hermione didn't reply. The truth needed no defense. She blinked back incipient tears. "You you arrogant independent -- daft pillock!" She darted toward the loo, pulling off her top as she crossed the living room, heedless of his awestruck expression. "I need -- I need a shower to clear my head. Wait right here. Don't go anywhere."

"I came to you."

Despite the horrible situation, the dry humor in his tone stopped her in her tracks, and she turned to face him, one hand braced against the loo's door jamb, her shirt clutched in her hand. Severus stood next to the dining table where she'd wasted too many precious moments in sleep.

"You did," Hermione whispered. "You came to me." She stared at him as if memorizing his features. He stared back. While she couldn't read his expression she was fairly certain he could read hers. She cleared her throat. "Where -- where did the curse hit you?"

Without a word, Severus pulled his left arm forward. The long shirtsleeve had been rolled up to his elbow revealing his Dark Mark. It had faded to insignificance over the years, but had now changed overnight. The outline of the skull was vividly black, and the snake was a welt of pulsing Darkness. Hermione cried out as if in pain, and her tears came then. With one despairing glance at his face, she retreated to the shower thinking how utterly stupid she was. How foolish to think she had controlled her feelings for him.

Pressed for time, Hermione skimmed on her normal rituals: lather, rinse and no repeat. She washed away the last of her tears and then stepped out of the shower, grabbing the nearest towel. As the last syllable of a non-verbal *Accio* faded from her mind, her wand squeezed through the gap beneath the door and into her hands. Hurriedly, she summoned clean clothes and cast a charm to dry her hair. Instantly, the sodden, straggly mess snapped and crackled as it dried, puffing around her head before falling into unruly curls framing her face. When the clothes slithered under the door and into her hands, she paid no attention to whether the knickers and bra matched they didn't nor did she care, at that moment, whether the t-shirt was appropriately modest for Egypt.

Voices could be heard from the living room, Severus' deep tones and others' she didn't recognize. Hermione didn't bother to look in the mirror before she opened the door.

In the short span of time she'd been absent the living room had filled with people. Ayman demanded answers about the relocation of the magical barricade. His assistant shifted from foot to foot behind him, nodding in agreement as the Field Director argued with Severus. He believed the change in the barrier's location was less defensible, possibly providing a weakness the sphinx could exploit.

Severus' reply, "It was regrettably unavoidable," didn't daunt Ayman's passionate worry.

Penny, too, was there, her dressing gown held together by a hastily tied belt. She stood at Severus' side her wand moving so fast Hermione was unable to determine any but the most basic diagnostic charms. From one of the kitchen cabinets a wide terra cotta bowl rose from its shelf and flew toward Penny. She flicked her wand and it halted, hovering beneath Severus' forearm and left hand.

From behind Hermione, bottles jostled in the medicine chest until a dark blue bottle separated itself and flew into the living room and straight to the healer's hands. With sure fingers Penny poured its contents over Severus' hand and a yellow liquid dripped into the bowl below.

It was then Hermione noticed his bruised and bloodied knuckles. She frowned and would've spoken, but was distracted by movement at the tent's entrance. Lucius Malfoy had arrived. Beyond the raised tent flap sunlight glittered off the Isheru like a beautifully faceted emerald, and a small flock of birds wheeled into a graceful, swooping arc to land on the lake's banks to search for its breakfast. The scene would have been beautiful if Hermione wasn't distracted by the cataclysmic events of the morning. Lucius' sudden stillness drew her attention, however. His face appeared carved from stone, paler than the statues she'd seen the day before, but just as hard.

Severus snapped his head toward the new arrival. Hermione couldn't read his expression, but for some reason she felt as desolate as the moment Hagrid had carried Harry's limp and apparently lifeless body from the Forbidden Forest during the Battle for Hogwarts.

"You stupid sod," Lucius said, diction as precise as ever. His gaze dropped to Severus' hand soaking in the essence of Murtlap, and then he looked at Hermione. His eyes blazed with cold fire and he curled his lip.

Hermione forced herself to take a deep breath, and asked the question for which she already knew the answer. "Well?"

"It's the Withering Curse," Penny pronounced sadly. Lucius joined them, laying a hand on Severus' shoulder as Penny continued with her debriefing. The gesture was so reminiscent of the evening before, Hermione glanced at Lucius' face. He was staring at her. Hermione blinked and returned her attention to what Penny was saying. "Severus is both lucky and unlucky. The fact that he was struck on the arm should have given him several months before we had to consider a healing coma..."

"Should have?" Lucius interrupted her. "Why is that not an option now?"

"The Dark Mark," Penny replied simply. "It's causing the curse to mutate. If we don't put Severus into stasis soon which will halt the curse's progress entirely I don't know if even the proper antidote will cure him."

Hermione crossed the room to stand in front of Severus, her heart stuttering in her chest. "How long does he have?"

Penny looked at Severus and when he nodded, she said, "The sooner the better. Today, if possible."

Lucius dropped his hand from Severus' shoulder and snarled, "What the *fuck* were you thinking?"

Severus bristled, and spoke. "Do not presume..."

"Row later," Hermione interrupted him. "We have no time for bickering."

Severus glared, and Lucius sneered at her. He said, "Do not..."

Hermione interrupted him as well. "Later."

"If there is a later," Severus said gloomily, then removed his hand from the bowl and stared at it dispassionately. The abrasions on his knuckles were noticeably better, but it was insignificant in the face of the greater threat to his life.

"There will be." She ducked her head and caught his eyes with hers, willing him to see her sincerity and her determination. The grim line of his lips softened momentarily.

Lucius muttered, "Gryffindors are so idealistic."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "Stop it. We haven't time to be petty."

He raised his head to look down his nose at her. "I suppose you think you can solve this puzzle when others..." he waved his hand to indicate Severus and himself, and the unspoken *more clever, better, than you* was as clear as if he'd said the words aloud, "...have been unable to."

"Yes," she replied, and then ignored him and asked Severus, "Do you remember the riddle?"

It was clear he did not. Hermione turned toward the healer. "Penny, did you find evidence of memory tampering?"

"I did, and before you ask, there are similarities to the remnants I found on Bill Weasley. You should also know that I checked Bill last night, and any residual charm trace is entirely absent."

"Is that usual?" Lucius asked, once more a proponent rather than antagonist.

Penny frowned. "Not at all. I should be able to detect its traces for several more weeks."

Hermione bit her lip and Severus raised an eyebrow. Their eyes met. He was the only person in the room who knew about her post-war avocation: Memory Charms and their reversal. After the war had ended and before she'd begun her work at Gringotts, Hermione had traveled to Australia to find her parents. Fortunately, Monica and Wendell Wilkins were easily found, hale and hearty, and opening a dental practice in Brisbane. Unfortunately, Hermione was advised that too much time had passed for an effective charm-reversal. Hermione had refused to believe the healers at Australia's Cooper Hospital for Magical Maladies, but was finally forced to accept the heart-breaking diagnosis after consulting with Healer Cumbra Gilderoy Lockhart's primary healer -- from St. Mungo's. In the end, her only consolation was that her parents were happy.

For two years Hermione had refused to accept the diagnosis. In every spare moment, she scoured wizarding libraries, corresponded with Charms experts, dipped into the fields of Muggle psychology and neurology. She learned a great deal about Memory Charms and how to reverse them, but nothing could alter her parents' fate.

"May I?" she asked Severus, while adjusting her hold on her wand.

He closed his eyes. "You may."

When she raised her wand, Lucius blocked her arm. "May you what?" he asked harshly. "What are you going to do?"

Hermione glared at the blond, and he wrapped his fingers loosely around her wrist, not tightly enough to hurt, but enough to impede. "Release me," she said evenly.

"Lucius!"

The blond ignored Severus, and with an edge to his tone, he repeated his question. "*May you what?*"

"I'm going to sort this out."

He jeered and Hermione wrenched her arm free, casting a Stinging Hex as she did.

"Granger!"

"You little..." Lucius ground the words out, and shook his hand.

"Hermione!"

She ignored Penny's and Severus' outbursts, and noticed but didn't acknowledge Ayman and his assistant's hasty departure. Instead, Hermione stared down the end of her wand and into Lucius' face. He was livid, and she remembered *that* expression all too well. If she weren't aiming her wand at him, he would have already drawn his. Her smile was grim. "Just like old times, isn't it?"

"I seem to remember always having the advantage before."

Suddenly, Hermione's wand flew from her hand, and both she and Lucius toppled face forward, victims of a swift, non-verbal stunner. As expected, she met a furious glare when she was turned right side up, but it wasn't Severus who was doing the glaring. It was Penny.

She held Hermione's wand in her hand and tapped one foot. "Honestly, can't the two of you behave properly? You both owe the other an apology, and as you said, Hermione, we don't have time to waste."

Remorse flooded Hermione, and when she was released she couldn't meet Severus' eyes.

"My apologies for behaving like a boor, Miss Granger," Lucius intoned coldly, formally, and she noticed that he rose to his feet a little stiffly.

She stood up and shook her hair out of her face. "I wasn't going to hurt Severus."

"He is my oldest friend," Lucius replied, an oblique explanation and more realistic apology rolled into one. He had donned wounded dignity like armor, and Hermione wondered whether he was jealous of her and Severus' friendship. She thought fleetingly of Harry and the lengths to which she had gone for his safety, and then glanced at Severus. She flinched. He was livid.

Sighing, she held out her hand toward Penny as she addressed the healer. "I'm not going to hex Lucius..." a sideways look at the blond spurred her additional remark, "...unless he deserves it."

Severus glowered, Lucius huffed, and Penny laughed before handing Hermione's wand to her. "I won't deny he deserved the Stinging Hex. What were you thinking, Lucius, to grab her that way? She could have been mid-cast and then what would have happened to Severus?"

Lucius said not a word, but spun on his heel and stalked toward the tent's exit.

"Please don't go." Everyone, including Lucius, turned toward Hermione, their surprise blatantly obvious. "If the circumstances had been reversed, I might've done the same," she explained. "Our history isn't conducive to giving one another the benefit of the doubt, but I'm willing to try."

Lucius inclined his head, his hair falling forward in a pale curtain. "As am I. We have a common goal."

"Yes," she said. "We do."

"If you are finished with these histrionics..." Severus' icy tone ended their efforts at rapprochement. "There is little time for frivolity."

"All right." Hermione crossed to Severus' side, and said quietly, "I'm sorry."

He pinched his lips, and then nodded. "Get on with it."

"Penny?" Hermione looked at the other witch. "How soon is soon?"

Penny flicked her wand in Severus' direction, and Hermione frowned as a green mist erupted from the healer's wand, settling over Severus and glowing in a range from green to red. The darkest, crimson so dark it appeared black, seemed to adhere to his Dark Mark like cling film. "The sooner the better," Penny said, "but under no circumstances later than midnight."

Hermione sucked in her breath.

"There are things I must see to," Severus said, and would've left had the others not blocked his exit. "Move," he said angrily. "I must start the regenerative elixir, and ..."

"I can brew it," Penny said, and pointed toward the sofa.

"I will assist, if necessary," Lucius volunteered, then he looked at Hermione who had remained silent. "Miss Granger? I recall that you were the top of every class. Are you not going to volunteer?"

Hermione flushed. "I was an excellent student, although my potions making skills aren't more than adequate. I can certainly prepare ingredients, but Penny's a much better choice for brewing."

Lucius cocked his head skeptically, and Hermione was rewarded by a small smile from Severus. "So modest," Severus commented as he moved to where Penny had pointed.

"Not really," she replied. "I just grew up."

"How refreshingly honest," Lucius said in an entirely different tone of voice than his friend's, and then he and Severus engaged in a silent communication. "Yes, yes, I concede." Lucius tossed his hair over his shoulder and crossed to one of the occasional chairs, instinctively choosing the more masculine of the two. "If you will proceed with your whatever it was you were going to do when I interrupted you, Miss Granger, I will then speak with Ayman about acquiring another bed for the infirmary."

Severus gritted his teeth, but said nothing, and he glared at Hermione. "Let's get on with it."

"Fine."

"Wait!" Penny said. "What are you going to do, Hermione? I'd like to know so I can monitor its effects, if any, on the curse and its progression."

"I've spent some time researching Memory Charms and while the attack on Severus is recent, I want to see whether I can reverse what's been done to him. We need to know what riddle has so stymied three er" she blushed and glanced at Severus in apology, "...four intelligent, highly competent wizards."

"All right," Penny agreed, and she sat on the sofa, next to Severus, and summoned a Dictation Quill and scroll of parchment from her room. "I want this recorded properly."

Hermione grinned. "You remind me of Poppy Pomfrey."

Severus practically growled, but settled into his seat.

"Penny, will you cast the diagnostic spell that revealed the Memory Charm?"

"All right." Penny suited action to words, and sparks shot from her wand, circling Severus' head until, one by one the sparks burst, forming runic symbols before they dissipated entirely. "They were never that clear with Bill, and entirely undetectable in Cormac and Draco."

"I've learned an obscure Revealing Spell which should prolong the manifestation of its results." Hermione settled on the small coffee table in front of Severus, facing him. "Ready?"

He nodded; his posture rigid. Hermione swished her wand, and within a minute, runes identical to those which had so recently dissipated hovered several inches above Severus' head. They were clearer and shone more brightly than those resulting from Penny's spell.

"No. That's not right," Hermione said, shaking her head.

"What isn't?" Lucius asked, his pale eyes reading the runes as easily as copperplate script.

"Algiz, Eihwaz, and Perthro are the foundations of Memory Charms." There was a questioning note in Penny's statement.

"True," Hermione replied, "but have you ever seen Gebo used before?"

Penny said, "I've never had the need to examine them closely, so I don't know."

"To my knowledge, this is entirely non-standard." Hermione trailed off, deep in thought. Vaguely, she listened to Lucius and Penny discuss why Algiz was so commonly used for Memory Charms.

The runes hovered above Severus, resembling nothing more than a glowing crown. The standard three represented hidden things and enlightenment, defense and protection. Hermione ignored those, however, and focused on the unusual addition of Gebo. Not that she was an expert, but she had consulted with many before she'd grown resigned to her parents' fate.

In this instance, Gebo's positioning was ambiguous, but Hermione thought it lay in opposition to the rest of the runes. If that were the case, then the gifts of sacrifice and generosity which were the rune's basic meaning had been twisted into something darker, perhaps over-sacrifice or loneliness or privation. Translating runes was a lot like curse-breaking, she thought. Much depended upon the circumstances.

"The presence of an anomalous rune is certainly daunting," Lucius added to the discussion, drawing Hermione's attention.

"Why?" Penny asked. "What does it mean?"

"A challenge," Severus commented wryly.

"This whole bloody thing's a challenge," Penny said, suddenly, her own anxiety and fear rising to the surface and clearly expressed on her face.

"My dear, we will not let it defeat our efforts," Lucius said very gently, and patted her on the shoulder like a benevolent uncle. Penny flashed him a grateful smile.

Bemused by the interaction, Hermione didn't reply to Penny's question, but when Severus cleared his throat it spurred her to answer. "It's unclear whether the rune lies in opposition, and I can't tell whether its presence is deliberately misleading or included as a warning against tampering."

"If it's a warning, then isn't it dangerous to look further?" Penny asked.

"It's more dangerous to abandon our efforts, especially now," Hermione replied, fingering the smooth wood of her wand. "If there are no direct contra-indications, Penny, I need to examine Bill, and it would help if I could see the others as well."

Penny cast several diagnostic spells on Severus, including the clinging mist. There appeared to have been no change from before Hermione's spell.

"Mr. Malfoy?" Hermione asked, looking at the blond. For an instant, she saw beyond his façade, to the fear he held in check. She said very gently, "I don't believe it will injure Draco, or Bill or Cormac further."

"Do you *know* it won't?" he asked.

"Not absolutely, but from what we've just seen, and Penny's supposition that Severus' Withering Curse is worse than the others because of its location, it stands to reason none of the others will be negatively impacted as a result of my revealing spell."

Severus snorted. "Negatively impacted? Good gods, Hermione, it's no wonder you've never gone into the healing arts. You have an atrocious bedside manner. Just tell him Draco won't be hurt as a result of the diagnostic charm."

She scowled at Severus, and Lucius asked, "Is that true? He won't be hurt?"

"If she says she believes not, Lucius, and I am patently unharmed," Severus said, "the risk is negligible."

"It's not your son!"

"No, but this..." Severus raised his left forearm so all could see the raised black tattoo, pulsing with malignance, "...is my life. I've only recently got it back and I'd rather not have given it in vain."

Hermione bounced to her feet, standing between Severus' parted knees. She looked at him, hoping her expression was unreadable. "Let's go. We haven't much time, and I need all the information I can get. Penny?"

"Let me dress. I agree to your examining Cormac. I want him back. And I want him back whole."

Lucius rose to his feet, stiff and unbending. "No more than I want my son restored to me."

Hermione replied to Lucius, but stared at Severus. "I need to know the riddle so we can find its answer before confronting the sphinx, and I don't want anyone else to suffer." Unexpectedly, tears caught in her throat, and her eyes filled.

"No!" Severus exclaimed. "No maudlin displays, Hermione. I beg you!"

She sniffed, and laughed, but it was a sickly sort of laugh, and entirely lacking in mirth. "All right. No maudlin displays, but you will do as you're told."

He rose to his feet as she side-stepped to allow him room. He towered over her. "I must begin that potion."

"But no more confronting sphinxes on your own. Anyone might get the wrong idea."

Lucius asked, "And what idea might that be?"

"That he has a saving people sort of thing."

Lucius's laughter was short and sharp. "Isn't that what people say about Potter?"

Severus sneered and stalked to the entrance to the tent. "I will be in my office." He glared universally at the three and slipped into the morning beyond canvas walls.

~o0o~

End-note/Riddle Solutions:

(1) Another Tolkien riddle from *The Hobbit*; its answer is 'the wind'.

(2) The answer is, of course, 'a candle'. I found this riddle at azkidsnet.com

(3) It's a 'river'. I found multiple versions of this riddle on the internet, including the Riddle Poem Page and jokelibrary.com, but I've adapted it slightly for my own use.

Four

Chapter 4 of 7

When a colleague is discovered to be missing in action, Hermione Granger is sent to Egypt to investigate.

Riddle Me This

By Bambu

Author's notes and disclaimers found in Chapter One.

Chapter Four

I defend without weapons,

Stand without legs,

I wound without force,

And am harder to fight than to kill(1)

She watched from behind the scintillating, magical barrier, gloating at her triumph. He had been so certain of his cleverness, this most recent man. And yet, the other had been equally clever, equally certain of victory. But none had discerned her secret.

With a deep-throated roar the guardian extended her wings to their full width, feathers brushing the sides of the antechamber, blue paint flaking off the sandstone, coating her wingtips.

She didn't care. She had gained ground.

Soon there would be more, and after a time, her domain would return to its former state. Hers alone. None, thus far, had proved worthy.

A cloud is my mother,

The wind my father, my son is the cool stream.

A rainbow is my bed,

The earth my final resting place, and I'm the torment of man.(2)

Draco looked so young, Hermione thought as she stood at his bedside in the infirmary. His blond hair had been swept off his face, feathering the pillow upon which his head rested. His chin wasn't nearly as pointy as it had been when they were children, and he had filled out since she'd last seen him manacled to the witness chair at his own Wizengamot hearing. For all that he'd been in a healing coma for months, he appeared merely asleep, and none of the wasting signs of long-term inactivity were yet apparent.

Despite their history, Hermione was not unmoved by his plight. She glanced at the man standing on the other side of the bed. He didn't seem to remember she was even present. Lucius' gaze was fixed on his son's face, and for once, his expression was naked. Grief etched deep lines around his eyes and mouth, and fear painted a too vivid picture. His hand rested on his son's arm, as if he hoped the connection were somehow helping Draco combat the destructive curse lying dormant in his body.

"I know how you feel." His head jerked up at Hermione's quiet comment, expression smoothing into the polite mask he had perfected over the years, but she was not fooled, not any longer. "The summer that Dumbledore died, I cast Memory Charms on my parents and sent them away from England."

Lucius' eyes widened in shock. "You altered their memories? You were what sixteen? How could you...?"

"I was eighteen and desperate to protect them. Little did I know that after six months the spell would become irreversible. I became an orphan in essence right before Christmas that year. I just didn't know it until after everything was over."

"So that's why Severus..."

"It's how we became friends actually. I was annoyingly persistent while he was in hospital, but afterward, Severus loaned me several books from his personal library. None could..." She trailed off, blinking rapidly against the tears thoughts of her parents always seemed to call.

"I am sorry for your loss."

To Lucius' great credit, Hermione believed him. "Thank you. I won't let Draco be another casualty."

Lucius smiled tightly.

Drawing her wand, Hermione asked, "May I?"

He nodded, and she rotated the willow wand in an arcing loop, non-verbally casting the revealing charm. Nothing happened at first, and Lucius' shoulders sagged in disappointment. However, this had happened in each of Bill's and Cormac's case, so Hermione waited, maintaining the spell, letting its power develop. Perspiration dotted her brow with the effort she exerted.

After an endless minute, wisplike runes began to appear above Draco's head. They were too faint to be seen clearly. Instantly, Lucius snapped his wrist, ebony wand dropping onto his palm. A dark blue spark ignited at the wand's tip, gleaming off silver quillan and pommel at either end of the wand's hilt. The cobalt-colored spark separated from the wand and glowed brighter, backlighting the faint, smoky runes, making them easier to read.

"Thank you," Hermione said, noting the similarities between this casting and her earlier efforts. Algiz, Eihwaz and Perthro were expected. However, as with the others, a fourth rune appeared. "Is that Thurisaz?" she asked, squinting as if that would somehow make the vaguely distinct rune more readable.

Lucius leaned closer to the wispy runic representation. "Yes. I believe so."

Hermione bit her lower lip and cancelled her spell. She turned toward the small bedside table and added to a series of notes she'd compiled. "I have to see Severus."

"Aside from the pleasure of his company, why?"

"I need to tell him what I've seen here." She nodded toward Draco, indicating the rune reading. "And I want to cast the spell on Severus again."

Lucius stepped in front of her, as if questioning her reasoning. "Again, I ask why?"

"We don't have time to wait. Severus doesn't have the time."

"What do you mean?" he asked sharply, turning with her as she stepped past him and into the corridor.

"Haven't you seen him?" She turned her head to look at him, but didn't stop her forward momentum.

"Yes."

"Recently? Have you seen him in the last hour?"

Lucius raised a hand as if to stop her from walking away, but remembered the Stinging Hex incident earlier. Hermione noticed and paused. "The entire Dark Mark has changed since this morning."

"Damnation!"

"Penny wants to induce the healing coma now, but he keeps putting it off. The last time I saw him Severus agreed to complete the first stage of the restorative elixir and leave the rest to her, but he refused to go into stasis until I told him the results of my examination."

"What are the results?"

"Come with me, but don't interfere. I will talk to you once he's safe."

Lucius' long legs allowed him to keep pace, but Hermione's anxiety fueled her speed. When they entered the subterranean forecourt, they paused to stare at the glittering, pulsing barricade holding back the ghost sphinx.

Lucius said softly, "You care for him."

"I told you we were friends." Hermione strode toward Severus' office as if ignoring his comment, but before she stepped into the potions lab and office, she turned to face the blond. "Yes, I care for him. Perhaps even more than you."

Hectic activity greeted her entrance. Penny was thinly slicing lotus root as Severus lectured to her, and at the far end of the workbench, Ayman and his assistant poured over the papyrus under glass, interrupting Severus' lecture with questions as they attempted to correlate the hieroglyphs with Severus' theories.

All activity halted with Hermione and Lucius' entrance, but only for a moment, and then Ayman called out, "Are you certain it requires a cauldron of precious metal?"

Severus frowned, but nodded curtly as he added four dried berries to the gold cauldron he leaned over. Steam rose from the cauldron, swirling about his head, and Hermione noted that his hair was lankier and oilier than ever.

"Only four haws?" Penny asked.

"From this source, yes." Severus frowned suddenly, and Hermione watched his Adam's Apple bob in his throat. "Should it be necessary to find another source of thornapple, I suggest using five haws for the initial batch."

Penny paused, her knife poised above the lotus root on her cutting board. "I hope that won't be necessary."

He nodded curtly, and stirred the potion with a wooden spoon. Hermione suspected it might be hawthorn to enhance the use of the berries. "Severus," she said, "I need to recast the revealing charm."

"Not now, Hermione." He frowned at her while reaching for another ingredient, a powder she didn't recognize.

"If not now, when?"

Something in her tone caught his attention and he looked up. "As soon as I'm done here. Fifteen minutes?"

Penny interrupted. "As soon as you're done here, Severus Snape, you are going straight to the infirmary."

"There's too much to be done."

"Severus." Penny's tone was a clear warning.

He glanced at the magical hourglass on the bench, time-telling sand falling in a steady stream. These sorts of hourglasses were quite common for use in potion-making. They resembled their Muggle counterparts, yet were capable of being set for several hours or even minutes at a time. In this case, it had been set to track Severus' final hours, and now there was far less sand in the top half than piled in the bottom. "I have another hour," he said. "I need all of it."

"I hope you'll give me at least fifteen minutes." Hermione ignored Penny's frown and pinched lips.

Severus removed the stirring rod from the cauldron and set it aside. "Is that all you'll need from me?"

Their eyes met and locked. "Not nearly," she said quietly, "but I'll make do."

Lucius stepped next to Penny and distracted her by asking, "How may I be of service?" She had finished the lotus root, and wiped her hands on a cloth tucked into her belt. Then she and Lucius crossed to the corner table where they sat and began to discuss ingredients and local suppliers.

Severus returned to his self-appointed task which left Hermione to her own devices. She settled at the end of the workbench nearest Severus, and picking up a glass stirring rod, she asked, "Will you need this?"

He flicked his eyes in her direction and shook his head while adding the powdered ingredient a pinch at a time and stirring the elixir with his left hand: twelve deosil stirs, and then three clockwise, before the next pinch of powder was incorporated.

Hermione transfigured the stirring rod into a tall stool, and then spread her parchment across the mustaba, anchoring it in place with another stirring rod in one corner and an empty vial in the other. On the parchment were her notes from the results of the revealing charms she'd performed on Severus, Bill, Cormac, and Draco. She had been able to elicit data from each examination, something which had left Penny frustrated until Severus had explained how Hermione had come by the rare and unusual charm.

That was when Penny had left the infirmary to accompany Severus to his lab. Hermione had remained behind to finish her examination. And now her notes puzzled her. There were constants in each case, but there were also distinct differences.

She created a small table, Algiz, Eihwaz and Perthro in one column, Isa, Gebo, Thurisaz and Jera in another. Next to Isa she wrote Cormac's name, and next to Gebo she wrote Severus'. She then added Draco to Thurisaz, and Bill's name was added last, next to Jera. Reversing the Memory Charm which was fairly straight-forward, if archaic -- when she didn't yet understand the inclusion of the fourth rune could prove ill-advised.

"Why aren't these consistent?" Lucius asked, coming to stand at her shoulder and indicating the second column of runes.

Hermione had been working so intently she hadn't noticed him draw near, but for the first time, she didn't flinch at his approach. She replied, "I don't know yet."

"From our earlier discussion, Eihwaz, Perthro, and Algiz are standard. They clearly represent a shield and protection and hidden things..."

"And I suspect they're also an indication of warding off evil."

He firmed his mouth as he grew lost in thought, and Hermione sketched the four anomalous runes in their normal positions, then in merkstave and opposition, hoping for a clear read on the inclusion of Gebo. It was always difficult to tell whether it was a straightforward or an opposition casting.

"How do these..." Lucius pointed to the four oddities, "...affect your reversal of the Memory Charm?"

"Without understanding their relation to the charm, reversing it could be dangerous."

"In what way?"

She looked up at him and met his gray-eyed curiosity bluntly. "Permanent memory loss, or even worse, a complete mind-wipe."

"Fuck!"

"I won't take the chance with Severus, or anyone else. And we need to know what that riddle is."

"If there's a riddle."

"If it's a sphinx, there's a riddle."

"You're so certain?"

"Aren't you? Draco's research is impressively extensive, and he concluded it was a sphinx. There are anomalies, of course, but both Cormac and Bill seem to concur with Draco's initial conclusion. I've already sent an owl for some information about the anomalies, but from what we already know ... and demonstrably ... the sphinx is protecting something. It's proved an effective guardian of the library. It doesn't need to hide anything else " she broke off, her eyes rising to the corner of the room as she chased a niggling thought. Beside her, Lucius turned his head as if to see what had drawn her attention, but she was lost in thought. The nebulous connection between theory and anomaly faded as she tried to pinpoint it. She shook her head in frustration and said, "There's a reason for the memory charm, and the most likely reason is to protect the riddle. I don't know why. I need to know what happened."

"Can you not use Legilimency? Severus is an expert."

"If the charm hadn't blocked-- No! Wait! What a brilliant idea!" She beamed at Lucius, and he seemed taken aback by her genuine enthusiasm. "Severus!" she called out. "I need more than fifteen minutes."

"I don't have them to spare."

"Penny?" Hermione asked.

"No, Hermione. If he waits longer than the next hour, we're taking an awful risk with his life."

"Severus," Hermione pleaded. "Lucius said something and it gave me an idea I think it'll work."

He clenched his jaw, his nimble fingers wielding knife in fluid artistry. "What is your idea?"

"If I use a revealing spell on you while you Legilimize me, I might be able to see through the Memory Charm as if it were a window. It might not work..."

"Hermione, you're brilliant!" Penny exclaimed from the other end of the mustaba.

Hermione flushed. "Thanks, Penny. I've never particularly thought so. I used to tell Har...er my friends it was all books and cleverness, but that's not it. I'm just highly motivated."

Severus sniggered, Lucius looked highly amused, and Penny asked, "Really?"

Hermione ignored the two men and talked to Penny. "From practically the moment I entered the wizarding world, I wanted to prove my right to be here. That desire changed fairly quickly, once I needed to help Harry, and my later efforts were all about keeping him alive."

Lucius's mirth had evaporated, and when he spoke he was entirely sincere. "Very few friendships inspire that sort of loyalty, Miss Granger."

"Harry's the brother I never had."

"And now?" he asked, curious and thoughtful at the same time.

"I beg your pardon?"

Lucius asked, "What motivates you now?"

Hermione looked away from his piercing, too-knowing eyes, but then she tilted her chin, and led from the heart. "Didn't you ever hear Dumbledore talk about the power of love?"

Severus' hand arrested mid-stir, but then continued as if he were focused only on his present task. Lucius sneered, and his words were etched in acid. "Dumbledore was a fool."

Hermione shook her head. "He wasn't a fool. Manipulative and ruthless, but not a fool."

Both eyebrows rose in surprise. "You weren't beguiled by his dotty charm?" Lucius asked.

"I was once..." Her glance flicked in Severus' direction. He was leaning over the cauldron, steam obscuring his expression.

It was Penny who asked, "What changed your mind?"

"He used me to delay our quest for the Horcruxes, did nothing to mitigate Ron's insecurities, and he manipulated Harry into believing there was no other solution than for him to die at Voldemort's hands." Severus and Lucius both flinched at her use of Tom Riddle's self-created name, but she continued, "We had agreed to do what was necessary, and while my respect for Dumbledore suffered an irrevocable blow for being used as a pawn, I didn't despise him until later. Until the war was over."

Severus had stopped stirring, and Penny had given up all pretext of measuring dried goldenseal. At the far end of the work-bench, Ayman and his assistant said nothing, but it was clear they were listening.

Penny opened her mouth to speak, but Lucius spoke first. "I confess to being more curious than ever. What turned your approbation into enmity?"

Hermione looked at Severus as she said, "Albus Dumbledore remorselessly condemned one of the bravest men I've ever known to death with his reputation in tatters..." and turned her attention to the blond wizard standing at her elbow, "...and sentenced a young man to suffer the agony of believing he had to commit murder to save his family when there were other options." Seeing Lucius' shocked expression, Hermione added, "Dumbledore also fostered an atmosphere of divisiveness at Hogwarts

because of his blatant favoritism. No one is immutably defined by who they are at the age of eleven."

There was silence save for the liquid burbling in the cauldron. Hermione briefly regretted her outburst; she wondered whether Lucius would exploit what he might perceive as a weakness. However, Severus put down the hawthorn stirring rod, lowered the flame on the cauldron over which he had been toiling, and said, "So that is why you dislike House bias."

She almost laughed. "In part, yes."

"We aren't here to reorganize Hogwarts, although I'll grant it is time." Lucius pointed to Hermione's parchment. "What are we going to do about this?"

Hermione glanced at the small clock, and then up at Severus. He was staring at her, his expression carefully masked. "Will you try?" she asked.

He nodded curtly, and turned toward Penny. "The goldenseal isn't necessary at this stage. There is nothing to be done on the elixir until the haws steep for forty-eight hours. You've only to follow my exact instructions..."

"Of course I will," the healer replied. "I'll review my notes and compare them with the memory in Lucius' Pensieve. I've already compiled the list of your usual suppliers, and discussed the alternates with Lucius. I won't let the supplies run too low."

He smiled at her briefly before turning toward Hermione. "It appears I've freed up some time. How much do you need?"

"As much as you can spare," she replied. "What else do you have to do before ... er ... before?"

"A few personal details." He picked up a sealed scroll and handed it to her. "These are my instructions to Gringotts relating to my vault and any eventual disbursements."

Hermione dropped the scroll. "Severus!"

His jaw clenched. "Be realistic, Hermione. How long are you going to keep me all of us in stasis before "

She was furious. "Don't you even think it, Severus Snape! We *will* sort this out. Won't we, Lucius?"

"If at all possible."

And it was Lucius' turn to suffer her glare. "It is possible. I - we will make it possible." Hermione's chest heaved and she exhaled suddenly, an explosion of air from her lungs. She picked up the scroll. "I will accept this as a representative of Gringotts, but I'm keeping it in my possession. Now, let's go."

She turned and stalked out of the room. Her steps faltered in the corridor and her voice filtered back as she called, "Well? Where are we going?"

A smile tugged at the corner of Severus' mouth, and Lucius smirked. The blond said blandly, "She really is a Gryffindor."

Severus chuckled. "I wouldn't say that in her presence; you heard what she thinks of the house system." He nodded at the others before exiting the room.

Lucius murmured, "Among other things," and he, too, followed his friend.

I am a wingless bird, flying even to the clouds of heaven

I give birth to tears of mourning in pupils that meet me,

And at one on my birth I am dissolved into air (3)

Hermione turned sideways on the sofa and faced Severus. "We could've done this in the infirmary."

He sneered. "Because it would be so much more comfortable there."

"No need to be sarcastic. I just don't know how long it will take and I wanted you to be at ease."

He closed his eyes slowly and sighed. "Nothing about this is easy."

"I know, but if this works and it should then it will have been worth it, don't you think?" He smiled tightly at her, and she blushed. "Merlin, that was insensitive. I'm sorry, Severus. I don't damn it! You're right. Nothing about this is easy, and I'm wasting time. I just... Being a curse-breaker has its exciting and dangerous moments, but this just might put me off..."

Severus reached out and touched her shaking hand. "Stop stalling, Hermione."

"All right." She reached to the coffee table, nudged the plate of biscuits and fruit aside, and grabbed a tall glass. She quickly drank the iced hibiscus and ginseng tea. It was a favorite at the Muggle dig site, and was both refreshing and energizing. She replaced the empty glass and plucked her wand from the messy topknot she'd made of her hair. "I'm ready."

"What do you know about Legilimency?" he asked.

She smiled. "Beyond the textbook definition?"

His mouth curved in answering amusement. "How fortunate you've grown out of your childish mannerisms."

"I'll have you know..." she started to say in mock-outrage, but then huffed and desisted. "I know more about Occluding. We practiced a lot that year we were on the run, and even now, I often clear my mind at night before I go to sleep."

He pursed his lips before commenting. "It isn't an exact discipline, yet masters can discern truth from lies as a result of extracting the feelings and memories of their subject."

"Feelings?" she asked. "I hadn't realized."

"Afraid I'll learn what you really think of me?" he asked lightly.

Her answer was anything but frivolous. "I think you already know."

They stared at one another for several long seconds, and then he swallowed hard and raised his wand. "We cast simultaneously," he reminded her.

"All right." Hermione pointed her wand at him and counted down. "Three ... two ... one."

Legilimens!

Hermione's surroundings blurred to an invisible background as image after image, memory after memory, flickered across her mind. Fitting emotions battered at her psyche

until the cascading images slowed, finally stopping on a memory familiar to both Hermione and Severus, whose presence she felt but could not see.

They were in the Dark Arts classroom during the only year he had taught her. The curtains were drawn and candlelight was the only illumination. Hermione's attention was avidly fixed on Severus as he paced along the edge of the room, speaking in a low, mesmerizing voice.

"The Dark Arts are many, varied, ever-changing, and eternal. Fighting them is like fighting a many-headed monster..." Admiration and interest were Hermione's foremost emotions mixed with excitement that here was a man who could teach them what they needed to know. *"You are fighting that which is unfixed, mutating, indestructible. Your defenses must therefore be as flexible and inventive as the arts you seek to undo."*

That memory faded into the next, to the moment Hermione watched Severus' body being levitated past her and into the Hogwarts infirmary where she was carrying a pile of clean bandages hours after Harry had defeated Voldemort. Her own injuries forgotten, she stood at the open doors -- shame, guilt, and relief vying for prominence within her as she stared past the rows of occupied beds, to the back of Hogwarts' infirmary where Poppy Pomfrey cried out and immediately began to work on her most recent patient. At the door, Hermione sobbed, crying for everything she had lost, and for the bittersweet victory they had won.

The next memory was a happier one. The New Forest, where Hermione and Mr. Ollivander harvested deadwood to replenish the raw materials required for his wand-making. A protective magical dome shimmered above a blanket dotted with the remains of a picnic. At the edge of the clearing, Hermione held a long branch for Mr. Ollivander to assess. The frail but stalwart wizard leaned forward to inspect the wood when an official owl swooped below the forest canopy to deliver a letter to Hermione. Her heart raced and her mouth was dry. She knew the letter bore her NEWT results.

"Go on, girl," Mr. Ollivander urged, "open it."

She gave him a shaky smile and with trembling fingers, Hermione broke the official seal, and pulled the results from the envelope.

"Well?" Mr. Ollivander asked after several moments.

Hermione's smile lit her face. "I passed all of them, and I raised my DADA score from an E!"

"Not an unexpected outcome after your lengthy sojourn in the forest," the elderly wand-maker commented dryly. "But you don't mention how many, my dear. How many NEWTs did you take?"

"Not as many as my OWLs but ..."

"And how many are not as many as your OWLs?"

"Nine," she replied, flushing, thrilled at her success.

"Bless my stars! Nine NEWTs. That's ... very good, my dear. Very good. And all Outstanding?"

"Except Magical Theory. I got an E..."

The memory whirled away, replaced by one of the tempestuous last day of her and Ron's relationship, but Hermione wasn't going to allow herself to wallow in that debacle any longer than necessary. She watched a furious Ron grab his broomstick from the dining table, his face the color of beetroot. He turned on her, yelling, "If that's how you feel, we're finished, Hermione."

She stared at the redhead and wondered if she had only ever admired the qualities he most downplayed, and then, why she had ever thought that would be enough. Sad, yet determined, she answered him, "Yes, Ron, we are."

The pictures hanging in her hall stressed their sticking charms to the very limits as Ron slammed the front door on his way out of her flat. Hermione flicked her wand and the front door swung open, and then slammed shut. "Good riddance!" she shouted before it had closed the second time.

And then, suddenly, the memory's image wavered, morphing to one more recent: to the day before when Severus had brewed the restorative elixir. Her heart raced as her attendant emotions soared, were defined, and Hermione mentally cringed at how easily Severus could read her feelings about him.

It took considerable determination for her to counter-cast her spell, but she finally seized control. "*Clairvoyance!*" she cried out.

She was sucked into Severus' memory as if it was her own and she was he. Briefly, Hermione wondered if it was how Legilimency felt to him. Rather than bounce from memory to memory dating throughout the course of his life, Severus' mind was more orderly than hers, or more practiced in guiding others through it. He had been able to focus on more recent times; in fact, his first shared memory was of the night before, and their disagreement.

It was odd to watch a moment she had lived from a different perspective. It reminded her of videos of her childhood. This, however, was different. Not only did she see the images, but she felt Severus' emotions. At the time, he was angry with Lucius and disappointed in her.

"He is not a monster."

"Despite his intentions and your good opinion, Severus, I distinctly remember being at the other end of his wand and running for my life. Moments like those tend to color one's opinion," she said, and remembered saying, coolly. "Good night." Abruptly, she wrenched open the front door and slammed it behind her.

That much Hermione remembered, but then, watching the door close behind her, she felt an overwhelming sense of loss before Severus cursed viciously and slammed his fist into the wall, knocking a hole in the plasterboard.

Suddenly, Hermione was wrenched from that memory and vertigo twisted her senses, but then she was planted in the midst of the subterranean forecourt and a newer, fresher moment. But this memory was different from the others, as if she were looking through a foggy plate glass window on a rainy day.

A surge of exultation spiked through Hermione, and from her to Severus. Her spell had worked!

In the memory, Severus deftly dismantled the final spells maintaining the magical barricade at the head of the west hallway leading to the purported library. She felt his emotions, just as she had when he punched the wall. He was nervous, yet bolstered by a conviction that it was better him than her tackling this monster.

Severus took a deep breath and terminated the final spell-ward. The second the last layer of the barricade dissolved, a nine-foot-tall ghost sphinx bounded into the forecourt, confronting her jailor.

Hermione's heart raced in time with memory Severus'.

The sphinx was translucent, silvery and female. She wore a layered hairpiece comprising thick braids hanging to her shoulders with elaborate beads woven in a band, forming a sort of crown at her brow. Her face, neck and chest were nude and human in form, but the rest of her body was leonine, from the aggressively raised front paw to the tufted tail flicking in irritation. Unlike many classic sphinxes, however, this was not a cross between woman and lioness, but appeared closer to a cross between woman and gryphon, and like all gryphons, she bore a set of wings. With a snarl, revealing sharp incisors, the sphinx spread her wings to their full extension, covering half the width of the vast antechamber.

Severus stared at this awe-inspiring and rather terrifying specter as she arched her head back to roar her challenge and fury. Hermione could see Severus' wand in his hand, held in a defensive position, and she could feel the adrenaline coursing through him, dampening his palm where he gripped the hilt of his wand. It didn't matter that

this creature was a ghost; she was imposing and he knew she was lethal.

When the sphinx lowered her head, she shouted at Severus. To his great consternation, he didn't understand a single word. Neither did Hermione.

The sphinx's face screwed up in frustration, and then she folded her wings and settled onto her haunches, effectively blocking the hallway leading to the library. Her cold smile let him know it was deliberate. She said something then, in a language Severus had never heard before. When it was obvious he didn't understand, the sphinx closed her eyes.

At that moment, a woman's voice broke into Severus' mind; it was heavily accented, but comprehensible. Hermione wasn't sure whether the language was English or pure thought, but it was remarkable ... magical.

The sphinx's voice held overtones of judgment. "You are trespassing, Tainted One."

"It is unavoidable," Severus replied, mentally forming the words with great care. "I seek a cure for the Withering Curse you have placed upon my friends and family."

The sphinx's expression changed to something unbearably smug. "They did not win the right to pass. If you wish to acquire the knowledge you seek, you must first win the right."

"Does this mean you have the knowledge I seek?"

"I do not." Hermione felt an agonizing shaft of disappointment spear through her, but then the sphinx spoke again, and Severus' hopes re-ignited. "I *protect* the knowledge you seek."

Severus stepped closer to the sphinx. "Then it seems I must pass, Winged One."

"You must answer my riddle correctly before you may pass."

"Will you tell me how many have been successful?" he asked.

The sphinx's answer was chilling. "Should you succeed, Tainted One, you will be first."

"Why do you call me Tainted One?" he asked.

She roared, teeth flashing like white smoke in the mage-light, and Severus' heart hammered in his chest.

"You test my patience." The sphinx practically snarled the telepathic words. "I have been tolerant enough. Answer my riddle correctly if you wish to know more."

"And if my answer is incorrect?"

"You suffer the same fate as those who came before." Her expectation of his failure was clearly evident in her bearing.

Severus bowed his head in acquiescence, and clenched his wand tighter. "I am ready," he thought a perfectly distinct mental declaration.

"Womanly features, yet my claws gouge mine enemy

Leonine in form, yet my wings carry me to safety."

Severus stared at her, and his reaction had been the same as Hermione's present thought, *It can't be this easy.*

"Will you tell me the other answers?" he asked.

The sphinx laughed, and it was entirely at his expense. "Answer the riddle. What am I?"

Severus paced, his mind whirling. After several minutes, he sat, cross-legged on the floor, his wand balanced on one knee and a finger tracing his lips as he considered his answer. He could think of three or four obvious choices, but which would it be. Was it a bluff or a counter-bluff?

"Time grows short, Tainted One. Have you an answer?"

He narrowed his eyes. "There's a time limit?"

"No answer is still an answer. You try my patience."

Severus rose to his feet, fluidly, as if he hadn't been sitting in one place for an hour. "There are a number of possibilities."

"Such is the beauty of a riddle, but there is only one correct answer. Which is yours?"

Hermione felt his trepidation as he considered. Then he spoke softly. "You are a ghost."

The sphinx's smile was feral. "You are as clever as the last, but alas, you have not answered correctly." She stood and padded toward him.

"The answer is true. You are a ghost."

"And I am Egyptian, as your predecessor guessed, and a sphinx as the simpleton before him tried. Nonetheless, you have failed and you will suffer the cost." She stretched her wings, settled back on her haunches and raked the air with her front paws. Glowing red slash marks tinted the air where her claws had been, coalescing to form a magical lightning-shaped bolt. A final jet of gold wrapped around the bolt, limning it in iridescent flame.

Severus back-pedaled toward the stairs, his wand already snapping into action. He set the magical barrier in place with an economy of movement that had Hermione mentally gasping in admiration. The sphinx screamed in fury, and charged the barrier, but she rebounded as the first scintillating motes of light began to flicker and the initial shield engaged.

Regrettably, the malevolent bolt of magic hurtled through the barricade before Severus's final flick of the wrist. Instinctively, he raised his left arm to ward off impact. In the next second, agonizing pain speared through him, beginning and ending at the Dark Mark burned into his forearm.

The memory went black, and Hermione was ejected from Severus' mind.

She gasped, and looked around at the daylight reality of the tent, at the dun colored cloth walls and the golden brown rug, and then coming to rest on Severus's harsh features. Abruptly, Hermione grabbed his left arm, pushing the sleeve to his elbow, revealing the pulsing, mutating Dark Mark. The skin was raised and hardened, like charred chicken left too long on a grill; the surrounding skin was reddened where blackened curse tendrils already encroached on the unblemished skin.

Hermione bent over his arm, and she couldn't stop her tears.

Severus' right hand touched her hair, and then gently, he cupped her face and raised her head. "Why are you crying? Didn't it work?"

"You you didn't see it?"

"I felt you in the memory of last night. Beyond that, I knew we were linked, but "

"Yes. Yes, it worked," she said, stuttering through her tears. "I saw the encounter, and heard the riddle, but I could strangle you for taking such a risk."

"It is the same one that you will take, although you now have more information."

His answer engaged her brain, and she sat up, drying her tears. When she smiled, it was as evil as the ghost sphinx's had been when she had thought Severus was at her mercy. "That's quite true. Severus, not only do I know what the riddle is, but I also know the answers Bill and Cormac used."

"She told me their responses?" Severus was gobsmacked. When Hermione nodded, he said, "No wonder she used a Memory Charm."

A chime rang throughout the tent, and while Hermione flinched, Severus grimaced. "It's time," he said irrelevantly. "Will you walk with me?"

"You needn't ask."

They rose from the sofa, ignoring the uneaten nibbles and pot of tea on the coffee table. As they left the tent, the flap magically pulling back to accommodate Severus' height, then falling into place once they'd passed, Hermione asked, "If you weren't watching the memory, what were you doing all that time?"

He gave her an intense, penetrating look. "Why were you crying over my arm?"

Heat rose in her cheeks, and she glanced at the green water of the sacred lake. "I hate that you're suffering. That you have to be put into a coma. I remember what being Petrified is like. Life passes by while you lie there like a statue. And when you come back, you don't know if your friends will still be friends; you don't know if the monsters who are killing people have"

"Hermione, shhh. I know you. If there's a way to defeat this creature, you will find it." Severus halted on the bank of the Isheru where reeds grew almost as tall as his waist. It was an image burned into her memory.

"But..."

"Why were you really crying?"

Her chin trembled, but the bravery which was so intrinsically a part of her nature asserted itself. "I don't want to lose you!" Then she stammered, "I I I mean your -- our our friendship. It's"

She broke off when Severus cupped her cheek and placed his thumb over her mouth. "I do not particularly wish to be lost. And that is what I was thinking while you watched my encounter with the sphinx."

"That you don't want to be lost?"

He murmured, "That I, who have only just learned how much you care, might lose you, too." Slowly, carefully, in case she reacted negatively, he leaned toward her, and when she understood what he was about, she tipped forward onto the balls of her feet to meet his lips in a desperate, awakening kiss.

It was sheer heaven, until Lucius' drawl interrupted them. "When you've finished your last hurrah, Severus, Penny is pacing the infirmary counting the seconds until you submit to her tender mercies. I wonder if it's a mediwitch peculiarity."

The moment he'd spoken, Hermione had broken the kiss, but she and Severus stood resting their brows against one another's, panting as if they'd run a race. When Severus drew back and turned to look at Lucius, the blond had already retreated from sight. "If memory serves me correctly, Hermione, your last relationship began with an equally ill-advised kiss," he said, still staring at the place Lucius has been seconds before.

"Oh, please," Hermione scoffed. "I was a teenager driven by fear, friendship and hormones. I may have loved Ron, but I wasn't in love with him."

Severus's eyes met hers. "Do you mean that?"

"You're the Legilimens." She searched his expression for the emotion she hoped to find there. Then, greatly daring, she said, "You should know how I feel about you."

"Don't play with me, Hermione. I have never had anyone believe they were in love with me before."

Hermione drew him down toward her again. "I don't believe, Severus. I know."

She had a brief moment to see how delight altered his expression, but then he pulled her into his arms, and, regardless of whether they could be seen by Muggles, or any of the magical crew, or how inappropriate public displays of affection might be in Egypt, Severus kissed Hermione as if it was for the last time.

They were both breathing raggedly when they ended the kiss, and they linked their hands together as they strode up the hill. Before they took the stairs, Hermione said, "I'll try to wake you that way."

"Something to look forward to," he said as they disappeared from sight.

~o0o~

End-Notes:

Severus' speech about the Dark Arts, is quoted directly from *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, pages 177-178, of the American printing.

I shan't be giving you the solution to my ghost sphinx's riddle, as it is all mine. However, solutions to the other riddles found in the chapter are:

(1) This was among several clever riddles submitted to jokelibrary.com by a user named Gal'desh. The answer is 'a wall.'

(2) It is 'rain', and I found it on riddle.com.

(3) The answer to this riddle is 'smoke' and I found it on jokelibrary.com.

Five

Chapter 5 of 7

When a colleague is discovered to be missing in action, Hermione Granger is sent to Egypt to investigate.

Riddle Me This

Author's notes and disclaimers found in Chapter One.

Chapter Five

It cannot be seen, cannot be felt

Cannot be heard, cannot be smelt

It lies behind stars and under hills,

And empty holes it fills.

It comes first and follows after

Ends life, kills laughter(1)

She paced restlessly.

Since she'd cursed the dark-haired Tainted One, there were many comings and goings beyond the barricade, an underlying current of anxiety and haste. All was a violation of her domain.

When two women entered the antechamber, she curled her lip, revealing sharp, white, transparent fangs. How she wanted to rend these defilers limb-from-limb, afflict them curse by curse until there was nothing left but charred remains.

Muscles bunched, claws unsheathed and she hurled herself at the barricade, only to be forcibly repelled. Again.

She snarled and resumed her pacing.

A harvest sown and reaped on the same day in an unplowed field;

Which increases without growing,

Remains whole though it is eaten within and without,

Is useless and yet the staple of nations.(2)

Considering the number of harrowing events in Hermione's nearly thirty years, the forty-eight hours Severus had been in stasis shouldn't have seemed as onerous as they did. Rarely had she shouldered such a heavy burden of responsibility. Fortunately, she was able to share the burden in this instance. Penny was as competent as ever, and Lucius Malfoy hadn't absented himself from the process in any way. In fact, Lucius had proved more supportive than Hermione expected. Aside from financial backing, he lent a hand with procuring potions supplies, putting any volume or all of the books in his personal library at Hermione's disposal, and generally being the man on the spot.

Hermione sat at the table in the tent, flipping through the pages of *The Sands of Time: Wizarding Artifacts in Ancient Egypt* while toying with the remains of her breakfast. She had ventured into the wizarding section of Luxor early, hoping to shake off the seemingly omnipresent negativity battering at her self-confidence. At one corner of the park where she'd met Lucius, there had been a food cart crowded with customers, wizards and boys mostly, but the few women who were present emboldened Hermione to try the local cuisine, a traditional breakfast of fuul, served with chopped hard-boiled egg and a garlicky sauce, with a side of freshly pickled vegetables. No spoons were used, just torn pieces of flatbread to scoop up the savory fava beans.

She closed the book, and retrieved her notes. Munching on a crisp pickle, she doodled on her parchment, *sphinx, Egyptian, ghost*. Those were the answers she knew had been given to the sphinx. Draco's answer was unknown, but she scribbled several possibilities, each consistent with his notes and theories, *woman, librarian, Theban, temple guardian*. She then drew a question mark next to one and an exclamation mark after another.

In truth, she was waiting for Harry's reply to her letter. While there were other avenues she could pursue for the information, he was reliable and discreet. Persephone hadn't returned, and Hermione was so irked by the delay, she decided to make a Floo call to Godric's Hollow. Fortunately, she was able to use the pot-bellied stove in the tent's kitchen.

She had forgotten the time difference, and Ginny was just setting baby James into his high-chair for breakfast in the cheery yellow kitchen. "Good morning, Ginny. Hello, James." Hermione waved at her black-haired godson, and watched his grubby little fist wave back, but then his interest was diverted by the wind blowing in the tree outside the window.

"Hullo, Hermione. Persephone's here..." Ginny looked up before sitting across from James and spooning the first bite into his gaping little maw, something like a mother bird feeding her young, "...but Harry's in Brussels 'til tonight."

Hermione muttered something unprintable, and Ginny looked a trifle shocked. "If it's an emergency, you could send your Patronus."

"It's not an emergency, but it is urgent. How's Fleur?"

Ginny put the spoon down and turned fully toward the fire, her eyes narrowed. "Phlegm's excitable as always, and has brought the girls to stay with Mum and Dad. What do you know that you aren't telling me? And where are you?"

"In Egypt, actually," Hermione replied. "I'm on assignment."

"What does it have to do with-- Oh! Is Bill with you? Is that why Phlegm is so upset? She's practically irrational these days. I assumed it was hormones and that Bill was working like a fiend so he could take time off after the baby." The redhead narrowed her eyes, and asked, "What aren't you telling me, Hermione?"

"You know I can't discuss my work. Ask Harry to reply as soon as he gets home. I need that information."

"Has something happened? Is Bill all right?"

"What part of confidentiality clause don't you understand, Gin?"

"Hermione Jean Granger!"

"Fine." Hermione rolled her eyes and regretted having made the call. She should have tried the Aurory instead of Harry's home. "I'm pushing the envelope to answer you. But yes, and yes to the best of our abilities."

"Bloody hell!" Ginny whispered in an eerie resemblance of Ron when using his favorite expletive. "Is Bill is he ... will he live?" She sniffed. Bill was her favorite brother; he always had been.

Hermione gritted her teeth. "He will if I have anything to do with it. His life is not in immediate danger, Ginny. That's all I can say, but please, if possible, keep Fleur calm. She needs to go full term on this pregnancy, and she won't if she's hysterical."

"Do you need us to come? Harry and I can be there tomorrow."

Hermione smiled; she really did have the best friends. "Thank you, but no. It's work, and I'm abstracting the salient points, and if I can't sort it out, I'll leave a copy for Harry."

Ginny's distress visibly heightened. "What do you mean? Where will you be if you can't sort it out?"

"I'll be with Bill. I've got to go, Gin. My love to James and Harry, and please get him to read my note as soon as he can."

"Hermione, wait!"

"No, Gin. I've come too close to breaking my oath, and you know what could happen to me if I do."

"All right. I'll do my best to support Fleur, although " she grimaced at the thought. "Why couldn't Bill have chosen someone else?"

"You mean someone we liked back then?"

"Well, yeah."

"I don't think that's the way it works. I think we have to consider our own needs and desires before the interests of our friends. If they really love us, then they'll understand."

Suddenly James pounded his hands on the tray of his chair, and he leaned forward for another bite. He was as constantly hungry as any of his uncles, and Ginny offered him more porridge. When she turned to look at Hermione again, her expression was shrewd. "Which is why you've become Fleur's friend?"

"At first, perhaps," Hermione agreed. "There's more to her than you realize. And now, I really must go. Bye, Gin!"

"Bye, 'Mione, and don't think I didn't notice what you were doing!"

Hermione had been pulling out of the green flames, but Ginny's comment pulled her back in. "What? What was I doing?"

Ginny mimicked her. "*Consider our own needs and desires before those of our friends.*Who is it?"

"Who is what?" She feigned incomprehension.

Ginny had always been brighter than people gave her credit. "Who is the bloke you're interested in that you think we won't like? Is he there? Are you working with him?"

"Great Circe! How do you do that?"

Ginny smirked. "I know you, and stop stalling. Who is it? A handsome curse-breaker? Someone you've met locally?"

"No, he's not a curse-breaker, and I'm not telling."

"Hermione!"

"No. Honestly. Not telling. Anyway, nothing's really happened between us."

Ginny's smile widened to an unholy grin. "No, but you want it to, don't you?"

"It's unlikely for the foreseeable future, which is why, Ginny Potter, I need that information from Harry. I really have to go now. Bye." She broke the connection and settled back on her knees. She hadn't needed to end the conversation for anything pressing other than Ginny's ability to elicit all her secrets. Aside from that horrible year at school when they had both been driven by jealousy and hormones, and the year she and Ron had split when Ginny couldn't decide whose side to take, the two had been close friends since childhood. Hermione found it very difficult to keep anything from her.

While she was on her knees, Hermione decided to get the next, unpleasant Floo call out of the way.

"Gringotts London, Bogrod." She threw another handful of gritty Floo powder into the burning fire and stuck her head back into the flames. Bogrod appeared to be in exactly the same position as the last time she'd seen him. Head bent above a parchment, quill clutched in absurdly large hands.

"Well, Granger," he commented when she finally gained his attention. "Have you fixed Weasley?"

"Not yet, but I've made progress. I have a query out to a colleague, and I'm hopeful that information will move things along."

"And Weasley?"

"There's no change. Bill remains in a healing coma along with the others."

Bogrod nodded curtly.

"This seems like a fairly promising site," Hermione said. "Do you want me to assist..."

"No." Bogrod frowned. "Gringotts has already expended more on this project than necessary. You will confine your efforts to your assignment."

"All right."

"And Granger, I expect better progress in your next report." He ended the connection as abruptly as was his nature. Hermione gritted her teeth in irritation. She'd only been on site for three, not four days.

She returned to the table and scanned the parchment on which she'd been working before taking a break for breakfast. It held a précis of the present situation, including a number of conjectures about the site and its history, as well as speculation about the origin and *raison d'être* of the ghost sphinx. Hermione underlined the words *ghost* and *sphinx* a final time.

Hermione sighed and decided to see if Penny needed any assistance in the lab.

The day was already scorching and it wasn't even noon. Hermione looked forward to the permanent cooling charms regulating the temperature of the underground collegium, but when she crossed into the wizarding domain, several people were scurrying toward the south corridor and shouts for help assailed her ears.

Sudden terror that something had happened to Severus or Bill spurred her to action, and she sprinted toward the danger, pulling her wand out of its sheath as she passed through the hypostyle and toward the blocked end of the hallway beyond.

The crisis she hurtled toward wasn't facing those in the infirmary.

If the collegium's layout was consistent with others built in the same time period, and with easy access to Muggle temples in various states of reconstruction throughout Egypt, Ayman Mubarak speculated that another large chamber would be found beyond the cave-in. While Hermione had savored her fuul, the archeological team had discovered the entrance to an inner chamber, and things had gone horribly wrong shortly thereafter.

Hermione dashed past the infirmary without a glance at the brightly hued hieroglyphs depicting students reading or researching or being tutored. In the Muggle version of the collegium, rooms beyond the hypostyle were often sandwiched between it and an inner temple sanctum, and that was where Hermione ran.

The light of multiple illumination spells caused the darkened end of the corridor to glow as brightly as day, and Hermione could see Lucius and Ayman. Beyond them, two members of the team were plying their wands at a frantic pace, uncovering something in the floor. As Hermione drew near, gasping from her frantic dash, her view was unimpeded.

It wasn't an artifact they were attempting to uncover; it was a human.

In fact, it was Edouard Delacour, the team's photographer whom she had met at dinner. He was buried in solid stone to the middle of his chest, and the more the team attempted to release him, the deeper he became embedded in the rock. He wasn't speaking, and his expression was a rictus of fear and pain. His eyes were closed tightly, and the tendons on his neck were attenuated; she could see the muscles of his arms bulging as he attempted to pull his hands and arms from the stone.

"What's happened?" Hermione asked as she skidded to a stop, her heart racing.

No one noticed her. Ayman shouted directions at his workers, his assistant was busy removing the rapidly excavated sandstone, and Lucius frowned as he whipped his wand in spell after spell to release the young photographer.

Apart from the few moments in the Department of Mysteries when Death Eaters had done their best to kill Hermione and her friends, she had never seen Lucius Malfoy in action. She had dismissed his abilities then; after all, he and his brethren were defeated by a handful of teenagers. But now she revised her opinion. He was quite astonishingly skilled. With that thought, Hermione realized his actions, and those of the archeological team, weren't reversing the effects of the curse they had tripped. Quite the reverse.

"Stop, stop!" she cried, and was again ignored. "Lucius!" she yelled rather shrilly, but it had the effect she intended.

He paused, mid-cast, turned her way, and the tone of his voice was as harsh as she had ever heard. "There is little time to waste, Granger."

"I know, but you're not helping! Everyone stop! You're burying him rather than releasing him."

Suddenly, the ground beneath and around Edouard liquefied, shining wetly in the bright light, and the workman nearest him dropped into the slurry granular mess as the photographer sank to his neck. The second wizard screamed in terror.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Hermione shouted. Her stunning spell froze both victims.

Ayman spun on her, literally spitting with anger. "By the setting sun of Amun-Ra! What do you think you are doing, you stupid woman?"

Hermione's eyes widened and she backed up a step, but raised her wand defensively. "You can't fight it or you accelerate the effects of the spell."

As Ayman opened his mouth to shout at her, Lucius flicked his wand in a classic motion, causing the Field Director's diatribe to shut off in mid-syllable. Lucius had silenced him.

Ayman's eyes bulged; furiously, he grappled for his own wand, but even as his mouth moved, no words were forthcoming.

"Miss Granger is correct." The comment came from an unexpected source; Ayman's assistant.

Hermione turned toward him, and couldn't remember his name. She had considered him the silent amanuensis to Ayman's more gregarious personality. "Thank you " she said, pausing in embarrassment.

He smiled suddenly, perfect white teeth a brilliant contrast to his dark skin. "Alex," he replied. "Alex Rosier."

Her eyes widened, and she was met with a knowing expression on the man's face. "My mother was Egyptian and of mixed parentage; a fact my father hid. When he was sentenced to Azkaban, she escaped and brought my sister and me home to live with her family. "

"I had no idea," Hermione said. "I'm sorry if I offended you."

"You didn't at all." He gestured toward the two imprisoned men. "You're quite right about the curse. Until you said something I hadn't realized how poorly our efforts were rewarded, and then I recalled reading about it at school." Alex's smile broadened to a grin, and Hermione decided he was having entirely too much fun at her expense. "I studied archeology at Oxford after my NEWTs," he explained. "I wanted to follow in my grandfather's footsteps." He turned an affectionate look in Ayman's direction, but his question was entirely serious. "Do you know how to counter the curse, Miss Granger?"

"Once I confirm which hindering jinx we're facing." She stepped forward, smiling gratefully at Alex as he calmly directing the other, rather terrified, team member to wait in the hypostyle and then took his place beside his resentful grandfather.

"I'll tell Severus he has competition," Lucius commented as he stepped to her side.

She frowned at him, but pointed her wand at the sandstone blocks lining the corridor. Non-verbally she cast an entirely useless *Finite Incantatem*. "Of course it wouldn't be that easy, would it?" she murmured to herself.

Beside her Lucius sniggered.

In quick succession, Hermione cast three more spells, the last of which incorporated a jerky hooked motion which caused blue sparks to erupt from the tip of her wand, and further, to fall on the sandstone, lighting an elliptical shape around the two captured men. She bit her lip and tapped the palm of her left hand with her wand.

Lucius hadn't moved from her side, but Ayman and Alex had retreated several yards. Hermione could hear Alex's voice speaking softly in Arabic. At least they weren't interfering.

"Do you know what it is?" Lucius asked.

"Yes." Hermione looked up at him. "Don't you?" His lips pressed together until his mouth was a thin line, and she relented by saying, "Now probably isn't the time to tease you about your Dark Arts expertise. It's a Quicksand Jinx; a rather nasty spell as you can see. It was used extensively to protect burial sites around the time of the Hogwarts founders."

"Can you deactivate it?" he asked.

"Yes, but that takes time Edouard doesn't have."

Alex Rosier stepped up behind her asking anxiously, "Can't you help him?"

"Certainly. I just have to manage a work-around." She bit her lip thoughtfully while Alex fidgeted. He settled when Lucius glared at him. "It's possible," Hermione finally said, "to transfer the spell to another block of stone. That stone can then be removed to a protected location for later handling. Once that initial step is complete, it will be possible to safely extricate those who remain entombed."

Lucius muttered something about bedside manners, but he directed Alex to procure an appropriate stone. The younger man sprinted toward the forecourt.

"Where would you like it?" Hermione asked as she carefully circumnavigated her diagnostic spell's parameters, breathing a sigh of relief when she realized the jinx's entire circumference had been revealed by the excavation.

"Pardon?"

She turned to face Lucius. "Where do you want me to put the stone?"

"Directly beneath our sphinx would be my choice." Lucius smiled, and it wasn't a nice smile at all.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Hermione laughed. "The sphinx is a ghost. Besides, it's probably the one who cast..." she broke off as a large slab of sandstone floated down the hallway, followed by an anxious Penny. Later, Hermione would learn the healer had cast Muffliato on the lab and hadn't heard any of the commotion until she had completed the next stage in brewing Severus' restorative elixir.

It wasn't the arrival of the slab or Penny which had arrested her comment. Just behind Penny was a steaming red envelope clutched in the claws of an express owl navigating between the hypostyle's columns, heading in their direction. It soared above the sandstone block and flew directly to Hermione.

She groaned.

"What?" Lucius asked, turning to look at what had drawn her attention.

With grim foreknowledge Hermione opened the lurid envelope no sense in putting off the unpleasant and possibly embarrassing task. Howlers became incendiary if ignored.

'Ermione Granger, where is my husband?' Fleur Weasley's voice filled the narrow corridor, bouncing off the enclosing walls in an echo effect. Everyone within its range flinched. *"If you do not have him home within three days I will find you and you will know what it means zat mgrandmere was a Veela! Comprend-tu?"* The sound of a woman sobbing filled the space, and Fleur's voice shook. *"Please, 'Ermione, please send him home. I need him."*

The Howler burst into disintegrating bits of smoking confetti.

Hermione wrapped her arms around herself, and leaned her head forward so her hair hid her face. She didn't want anyone to see her tears. For all that she was enjoying the novelty of time in the field and having a challenging puzzle to solve, the very real consequences of failure were more than she wanted to contemplate. She had kept her own fears at bay by focusing on the immediate task at hand.

Hermione was so immersed in her distress, she paid no attention as the dense block of stone floated past, settling into position next to the demarcated jinx line, nor did she notice Lucius waving the others back. "Miss Granger," he said, and then when she didn't reply, "Hermione. I know you're "

"No!" she exclaimed vehemently.

"No?"

"Don't offer platitudes. I just just... I am not going to let an incorporeal mythical creature keep Bill from seeing his son born," she said heatedly, hastily wiping her tears with the back of her hand. "And I'm not letting Severus' ridiculously heroic gesture be in vain, and I'm not going to let Penny's hopes for a happy marriage die, and ... and..." She looked away from him, staring without seeing the brightly painted images of daily life in the once-famed magical collegium.

"And?" Lucius prompted.

"And I'm going to get your son back for you!"

He smiled. It was a genuine smile, and it was astonishingly endearing. "That would be most gratifying."

She took a deep breath and settled her nerves. "Let's get this done. I'm not waiting for Harry to get back to me."

"Why were you waiting for Potter?"

"After we sort this out I'll tell you." She spread her feet into a wide stance, balancing her wand neatly in her hand. Hermione closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. When she opened them, her eyes were darker than ever. And then she cast her spell, plying her wand like an expert, swirl, twist, jab and flick. *"Transfero!"*

The stone embedding the victims cracked and buckled. The entire hallway, indeed the entire collegium, shook; dust and sand fell from the ceiling. Hermione ignored the shouts of alarm from her companions, all except Lucius who stood like a colossus with his wand at the ready. She held her footing and controlled the spell. Her wand felt as if it were bucking and twisting in her hand, but slowly she sucked the vicious trap spell from the imprisoning rock at her feet.

Ethereal particles of light, in all the colors of the rainbow, separated themselves from the jinxed sandstone, and Hermione aimed the burgeoning stream at its new, temporary home. The colorful manifestation of the transferring spell appeared no more harmful than a glittering rainbow arcing across the sky. After several, tense minutes, the last colored spark of light sank into the replacement block, and she whispered, *"Terminer!"*

She breathed a deep satisfied sigh and rotated her head, releasing the tension in her neck and shoulders.

"Impressive," Lucius said from behind her.

She glanced at him, surprised by his entirely sincere expression. "Thank you," she said. "It's a bit tricky, and it had been left to mature for a long time. The stone should be safe to move as long as no one tries to climb on it."

Alex responded to Lucius' imperious summons, and the young wizard pointed his wand at the jinxed stone. Hermione was sure she heard him intone the first charm she'd ever learned, and she watched as he followed the enormous block down the hallway and into the Hypostyle beyond. The others, including Penny, giving the stone as wide a berth as possible.

She noticed the smirk on Lucius' face. "What?"

"Severus' competition doesn't seem to have mastered First Year Charms. Surely any adult wizard can cast *Wingardium Leviosa* non-verbally."

Hermione was both amused and touched by Lucius' defense of his friend, and said simply, "Severus has no competition." Then she nodded toward the jinxed victims. "A standard Extraction Spell should do the trick now."

"Allow me." Lucius aimed his wand

"With pleasure."

From the end of the corridor, Penny called out, "Will you bring them to me?"

Hermione answered, "We'll come to you," and Penny disappeared into the infirmary to prepare for their arrival.

Deftly, Lucius cast the Extraction Spells, and together he and Hermione carefully levitated Edouard and the other wizard from their imprisonment. Once they reached the infirmary and placed the two wizards on adjacent examinations tables, Hermione released them from her stunning spell. While Penny cast initial diagnostic charms on both men, Hermione joined Lucius in the corridor. Ayman and Alex had returned after placing the trapped sandstone in a dark corner of the hypostyle for later de-cursing.

While they waited for Penny's verdict, Ayman Mubarak addressed Hermione. "My apologies, Miss Granger. I'm afraid my concern overrode my manners. Please forgive my rudeness."

"It's all right. I know you were worried."

"Nonetheless..." he began, but Penny stepped into the corridor to assure the waiting group that her newest patients would recover completely from their adventure. Edouard had three broken ribs not to mention that his left wrist was also broken, but a dose of Skele-Gro and a night of Dreamless Sleep should see him released the following morning.

Relief washed over the group, and Alex Rosier said, "That was a nice bit of spell-work, Miss Granger. I've never seen a jinx transferred in such a way before."

"Bill Weasley taught me."

"Mr. Weasley is a most respected curse-breaker," Ayman said, and somehow Hermione realized he was complimenting her as well, in a rather oblique and chauvinistic manner.

"Yes," she said quietly. "He is. I've been fortunate to have him as a mentor." Lucius cleared his throat, a reminder of her earlier comment offering further explanations. "If you'll excuse me?" she said to Ayman.

"Of course."

Hermione followed Lucius through the hypostyle, glancing briefly into the far corner where the newly jinxed sandstone was situated, and into the forecourt. They stood before the scintillating barricade for a moment, unable to see the ghostly creature on the other side, but they knew the ghost sphinx lurked there. Waiting for its next victim.

It was Hermione's job to see that there were no more victims. And it had become personal.

It was personal for Lucius as well. "Why are you waiting for Mr. Potter?"

Hermione waved her hand toward the magical barrier. "Not here, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," he replied.

"One moment," she said, glancing the direction they had come and then at the barrier, pursing her lips thoughtfully. She pointed her wand at the barrier, surprised to see that Lucius had apparently considered the same possibility. Simultaneously, they cast an additional layer of shielding, in case the upheaval from the Quicksand Jinx had any repercussions on the existing barrier.

Then they crossed the vast room to the staircase. "We could have lunch," he suggested.

"Only if you're hungry. I don't think I could eat. We could go to my tent."

"An offer to good to refuse," he replied, one eyebrow arched.

"Prat," she said, and he laughed. Then she answered his question as they exited the magical illusion concealing the collegium from Muggle eyes. "Actually, I hope Harry's returned by now. Ginny knows it's urgent, and to some extent that it involves her brother. She'll make sure Harry responds as soon as he arrives home. But I don't know that I want to wait. I think I'll Floo Minerva."

Lucius practically recoiled. "Minerva McGonagall?"

"Yes."

"I fail to see what a ghost sphinx has to do with the Headmistress of Hogwarts. I understand she no longer teaches."

"You're quite right. She doesn't teach..." Hermione suddenly stumbled on the mud and would've fallen had Lucius not caught her elbow, "...any more."

"All right there?"

"Yes," she replied absently, but she turned toward him and her eyes glittered with excitement. "I think I've solved it."

"Just then?"

"As incredible as it might seem, yes. And I have you to thank for it. That's twice now you've been a catalyst." She smiled broadly, turned, quickened her pace, and practically jogged to the tent, despite the dry, parching heat. "Come on, Lucius, catch up!"

Lucius, never one to look less than his best despite a bad two years which he was determined to forget sauntered after her. By the time he entered the tent, Hermione was rifling through the parchment on the dining table. Where were those notes of Bill's, she wondered. Or her scribbles from breakfast.

"Miss Granger?" Lucius asked. She barely heard him so intent was she on locating the misplaced notes. "Miss Granger," he asked again, louder. When he called, "Hermione!" however, she noticed.

"What?" she asked.

"What is it? What is the clue?"

"Have you ever heard of a ghost sphinx before?" she asked.

"That's it? That's the clue?"

"Answer the question, please."

He rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Of course I haven't heard of a ghost sphinx. We had this very conversation your first day here. You cannot have forgotten."

"I didn't forget. Aha!" She pulled out the missing parchment, covered with Cormac's rambling commentary, and Bill's initial marginalia: *Sphinx ghost? Ghost?* "Bill had never heard of a ghost sphinx either."

"I fail to see how that relates to our present circumstances." Lucius stood in the middle of the room, eyeing the accumulated notes compiled by her predecessors, starting with Draco's own journal entries of the day he had been cursed and his initial forays into self-healing. There were other reference materials Hermione had consulted, and in addition to Draco's resources, there were at least a dozen books neither Malfoy had ever seen with scraps of parchment sticking out as bookmarks. Hermione paid no attention to Lucius as she quickly read the page on which Bill had written, but looked up when he said, "You insisted it was a sphinx because of the riddle. Rather you insisted that if it was a sphinx there would be a riddle. You were correct; there was a riddle. Ergo...."

"I think ... I've got a theory I want to test. Have you read any of this?" Hermione waved her hand at the table.

Lucius' expression was pained. "No. Draco worked on it while I met with Gringotts' representatives, hired Mr. McLaggen, and located Ayman Mubarak and his team. Afterwards..."

She spoke very softly. "It was too painful?"

"Yes." He hissed the affirmative.

"And you had Severus."

"Severus is..."

"Remarkable. But his attentions were divided. He was driven to keep Draco and Cormac, and more recently, Bill, from losing ground to the Withering Curse." She held up a hand when it appeared Lucius would vociferously defend Severus. "I am not demeaning Severus in any way. He's utterly brilliant. But he's not here, and I can't properly discuss my theory with you until you've caught up."

"You want me to read all this? Great Hypatia, we'll be here a month!" His expression was incredulous, and anger flushed his cheeks. "Are you dissembling?"

Hermione laughed. "It's not *that* much material. Besides, I've prepared an abstract." She plucked her précis from the top of the nearest pile of parchment. "Here. It's only a few pages." When he accepted it, she said, "I'm going to see if Harry's returned yet, and then if not, I'm going to Floo Minerva to confirm my theory."

He raised a brow. "Are you so confident?"

"In my supposition? Reasonably. I'd like to erase any doubts, which is why I'd like your opinion." She pointed to the parchment he held. "Read it please while I make my calls."

He inclined his head in a patrician acceptance. On anyone else it would've appeared patronizing; on Lucius, the gesture was second nature. He crossed to one of the side chairs. She found it amusing that he eschewed the florid cabbage roses and chose the leather chair he had used before. "Have you any tea?" he asked.

Hermione looked at the table, at the plate of leftover pickles, and then at the dishes in the kitchen sink waiting to be done. "Er, I could make some, I suppose."

Lucius smirked. "It's fine. Would you care for tea?"

"Er..."

"Not the local version, but real English tea."

"Nimue, yes!" she exclaimed, and then stammered, "It's not that I don't like the local tea. It's nice for a change, but..."

"Nothing is as good as a properly infused Darjeeling with a splash of milk."

"Yes, exactly." Hermione crossed to the pot-bellied stove in the kitchen. "Although I also like Earl Grey."

Lucius curled his lip.

"It's was my mum's favorite," Hermione said as she knelt next to the stove, "and it reminds me of her."

Lucius' sneer dropped as if it had been hexed from his face. "Narcissa liked it as well," he admitted. "I've never understood the preference. Perhaps it's a gender bias."

Hermione laughed. "Perhaps it is." She scooped a handful of Floo powder from the ceramic jar kept on the small shelf next to the stovepipe.

"Chaucer!" Lucius called, summoning a wizened house-elf who appeared in the middle of the living area.

"Master Malfoy?" the elf asked as he took in his surroundings with a wounded dignity that suggested he'd just been asked to step into a festering puddle of primordial ooze. Hermione wondered why she hadn't seen him at the dinner party, but then remembered how shy house-elves could be.

"Tea for two," declared the lord of the manor. "The lady will have Earl Grey, and I will have the usual."

"Would Master Malfoy like biscuits?"

Hermione's head popped up, and Lucius chuckled. "I believe biscuits would be most welcome. An excellent suggestion."

Chaucer bowed deeply and with a resounding *POP* promptly disappeared.

Hermione opened the stove, stirred up the coals and threw in a handful of Floo powder. "Harry Potter, Ministry of Magic," she called out before sticking her head into the oven amidst the blazing green flames. "Harry? Harry, are you back?"

Harry's office was dark, and the desk entirely too neat for him to be in residence. Hermione's hopes deflated like a reversed Cheering Charm, and she moved on to the second bullet point on her mental agenda, shunting Harry down the list of priorities.

She took a breath, coughed soot, and then, once her throat was clear, said, "Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress' office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"

The green flames whirled, cinders and soot flew in a twist of wind, and her hair streamed across her face. By the time Hermione contained her hair, she was looking into an office she hadn't seen in several years. It had changed significantly since Albus Dumbledore used it, or even that horrible year Severus had held the position. Looking at the

changes elicited a smile from Hermione; the office now bore the unmistakable stamp of tartan, and a familiar tin of Minerva's favorite Ginger Newt biscuits sat on the corner of the impressive desk.

The witch seated behind the desk was Hermione's earliest magical role model. At first, Minerva McGonagall looked the same upright figure from Hermione's childhood. Her hair was wrapped in the same tight bun as always, but there was grey in it now, and there were deeper lines on the older witch's face. The signs of aging tore at Hermione's heart in bittersweet counterpoint to her happiness at seeing her former head of house.

"Minerva?" She spoke quietly so as not to disturb the woman reading so diligently.

Minerva jerked, and swung her head in the direction of the fireplace. "Miss Granger? Hermione?"

"Yes. Have you a minute?"

"For you, always." She placed her quill in the crystal dish that had long been hers. "It's been quite some time since I've seen you."

"I know. I always seem to be busy these days. I'll try to come and see you during the holidays."

"You would be most welcome." Minerva's expression changed. "Is something amiss?"

"You always did have a nose for trouble, Minerva. I have a small favor to ask. I need to speak to one of the ghosts."

Minerva was astonished. "The ghosts? Whatever for?"

"It's related to my current assignment. I've run across an ... er ... anomaly, and it would help if I could speak to one of the ghosts."

"I could get Professor Binns..."

"No! Please, not him."

Minerva laughed. "All right. Poor Cuthbert does tend to rattle on."

"If it isn't too much trouble the Bloody Baron, please?"

Minerva's eyebrows rose. "Not Sir Nicholas?"

"I don't really have a lot of time..."

"And Sir Nicholas is almost as long-winded as Cuthbert. He is, however, far more entertaining." Minerva turned her head toward the array of portraits lining the circular room and raised her voice. "Ah, there you are Dexter. Would you be so kind as to find the Baron and ask him to come to my office?"

Hermione couldn't hear the response, but when Minerva said, "Thank you," she smiled. She appreciated the help and said so.

Minerva leaned back and removed the glasses from her nose. She set them on top of the desk and reached for the biscuit tin. It seemed Hermione wasn't the only one in need of some sugar. "I take it that you aren't in London where your regular sources are available to you?"

Hermione nodded, green tinged soot falling from her hair into the Hogwarts fireplace. "I'm in Egypt actually, and there's been an unexpected pitfall."

"Pitfalls generally are unexpected." Minerva snorted. "I'm certain you'll sort it out quickly."

"With a little luck."

"And skill, Hermione. Never underestimate your skill. You were a most diligent student." Hermione flushed with the praise. Minerva wasn't generally effusive, so her compliment was all the more welcome. "Tell me," the headmistress asked, "are you still enjoying your profession?"

Hermione answered in the affirmative and they passed the next few minutes in idle chitchat. Hermione shifted her position from kneeling to sitting cross-legged, and fumbled for more Floo powder to refresh the connection.

"Ah," Minerva said, breaking off a description of her latest holiday to the island of Corfu. "Here's the Baron now. I'll leave you in peace."

"Thank you again, Minerva."

"You're quite welcome. Come and see me when you get back."

"I will."

Hermione heard the heavy oak door swing shut behind Minerva just before the Bloody Baron floated into her field of vision. He was as imposing and remote as ever. In the brightly lit room, Hermione had to concentrate to see him rather than the vivid image of large mahogany desk she could see through his transparent form, although his copious bloodstains glimmered like hammered silver on his medieval robes. "Thank you for agreeing to speak to me, Baron."

The ghost bowed his silvery, transparent head. "The headmistress asked me to assist you in your inquiries."

"I won't take much of your time."

"Then get on with it, girl." he said, and she almost laughed because he reminded her of a sulky Severus.

"All right. Sorry. I...er -- is it true only humans can become ghosts? I ask because I've come across a ghost sphinx..."

"Impossible."

"No, really, it's a sphinx. I've seen it."

"It is not possible, girl. You are wasting my time." He rose as if preparing to fly through the wall, but Hermione forestalled him. "No!" she cried. "Wait. Please. I have another question."

She had to crane her head to see him, floating unsupported in mid-air. It had unnerved Hermione when she was a first year, but after the war and working at Gringotts, she was no longer awed by commonplace apparitions. "My other question, then, if you don't mind, is if a ghost curses a live-one "

"Is this a jest?"

"Of course it isn't!"

"Ghosts are prohibited from cursing live-ones."

"Prohibited? Like an Unforgivable."

The Baron bent forward in a half-bow of confirmation. "Verily. It undermines the peacefulness of our existence."

Hermione had never before considered a ghostly existence peaceful, but she could see his point. A society without some form of policing was chaos. "What happens, Baron, if a ghost curses a live-one?"

He roared a protest, rising toward the ceiling. "Ghosts do not break the covenant."

"But if they did?" She persisted.

"Then the ghost council addresses the matter."

"There's a ghost council? How does that work?"

"It does not concern live-ones." Apparently, the Baron considered the audience at an end. He sailed up and through the ceiling, leaving Hermione's head the only animated thing in the headmistress' office. She sighed deeply before severing the Floo connection.

"Did you get the answers you were looking for?" Lucius asked from his chair.

"Yes and no." Hermione rose to her feet and dusted herself off, wrinkling her nose at the smell of singed hair. She walked toward the sofa, but settled instead for the floral armchair facing him.

"Well?" he asked.

Kicking off her shoes, Hermione tucked her feet beneath her as she got comfortable in the chair. "Did you finish reading the précis?"

He pinched his mouth. "It's rude to answer a question with a question."

She huffed. "Honestly, Mr. Malfoy..."

"What happened to calling me Lucius? I distinctly remember your screeching my name at the top of your lungs not an hour ago."

"That was an emergency!"

"And what about after ... when we were outside? Was that an emergency, too?"

She glared at him. "That was a slip of the tongue. Now answer the question. Have you finished reading?"

He smirked, clearly pleased to have nettled her. "Yes, I have read the précis. It was as concise and complete as I had been led to expect from you, and please call me Lucius on occasions other than dire emergencies or inadvertent slips of the tongue."

"Thank you, *Lucius*." She teased, but then more seriously said, "I'm fairly certain I now know what we're dealing with and we may have to wait for Harry." Seeing Lucius' impatience she answered his unarticulated question. "The Bloody Baron affirmed that only humans can become ghosts, therefor..."

"Our sphinx is not a sphinx."

"Exactly." She muttered, "I knew it was a basilisk," for Severus' benefit, even if he wasn't there to hear it.

"Pardon?" Lucius asked, but didn't pursue it when she shook her head. "If it is not a sphinx and what about the riddle -- is it an illusion? A curse-trap? Something similar to the Quicksand Jinx?"

Hermione smirked. "I'm willing to bet that I know the answer."

He frowned and leaned forward, his voice arctic. "Are you prepared to gamble with my son's life? With Severus'?"

"Not even Cormac's," she declared, "which is why I've been waiting for Harry."

"I have some passing knowledge of the Dark Arts," he said stiffly. "Why can you not ask me?"

"This isn't a Dark Art really."

"What else do you call a not-sphinx that curses people? Is the bloody thing even a ghost? Maybe it is a construct."

"That's what Cormac thought," Penny commented as she entered the tent, pushing her hair off her brow. She was more disheveled than Hermione had ever seen her.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked, slightly alarmed.

"Yes, thanks." Penny crossed the room, sinking onto the sofa. "I helped Ayman clean out another of the small rooms; it never occurred to me we would need more than one room for patients." She sighed. "I've just finished working on Edouard and Ali that's the name of the other man caught in the trap. I'll apply Bruise Healing Paste to both in the morning, and then they can be released."

Lucius said, "I'm sure they're grateful, Penelope."

Penny smiled at him, but spoke to her newest tent-mate. "I don't know how you do this for a living, Hermione. Really, I don't."

"It's rarely like this. In fact, this is unique as far as my experience is concerned."

"What comes next?" Penny asked.

"I'm still waiting on Harry." Hermione stared at the unassuming black stove as if her glare could conjure her friend. "After that, I think I'll have a little chat with our NotSphinx."

"You don't even know what it is yet," Lucius said heatedly.

"Oh, I'm fairly certain I know what it is, I just need to know what steps to take after."

"After what?" Penny asked curiously.

"After I get the rest of the cure for the Withering Curse."

Penny sat straight. "You're that close to sorting this out? We've been here for months."

Seeing Lucius' irritated expression, Hermione chose a diplomatic answer. "Without the tremendous amount of research Draco and Cormac have done, and even what Bill added, I couldn't have found the solution this quickly."

Lucius said, "Don't forget Severus."

"I never forget Severus," she shot back.

Penny simply smirked, and then looked rather wistfully at the teapot and two cups. Lucius, having been trained from infancy as a host, called out, "Chaucer!"

POP. "Master Malfoy?"

"Tea for Miss Clearwater, and I think a spot of lunch." He glanced at his companions, before saying, "Nothing local, I beg you."

Chaucer's crooked smile altered his green-tinted face into something rather gamine. Hermione thought she could become quite fond of the little fellow.

If someone had asked Hermione what she ate for lunch that last, seemingly endless day while waiting for Harry to contact her, she couldn't have given them an answer. It was quintessentially English, and thereafter, whenever she ate Bakewell Tart, she thought fondly of Chaucer, Lucius and her time in Egypt.

~o0o~

End-Notes/Riddle Solutions:

(1) Another of Tolkien's offerings. The answer is 'darkness.'

(2) This is one more by Gal'desh. The answer is 'war.'

Six

Chapter 6 of 7

When a colleague is discovered to be missing in action, Hermione Granger is sent to Egypt to investigate.

Riddle Me This

Author's notes and disclaimers found in Chapter One.

Chapter Six

First think of the person who lives in disguise,

Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.

Next, tell me what's always the last thing to mend,

The middle of middle and end of the end?

And finally give me the sound often heard

During the search for a hard-to-find word.

Now string them together, and answer me this,

Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?(1)

By early evening, however, Hermione's patience had worn thin, and she considered asking Penny for a Dreamless Sleep potion. Instead, she politely excused herself from her company, and resorted to stalking around Mut's Precinct, weaving in and out of the marked squares where Muggle archeology students were uncovering sherds and other fragments of a shared history. Hermione carefully avoided the cordoned off areas, and entered the recently erected drunken porch of Mut's temple, where annual bacchanalia were thought to have been performed in honor of the goddess during Pharaoh Hatshepsut's reign.

After an hour, Lucius joined her, and together they strolled along the avenue of the sphinxes toward Luxor. The temple complex was closed to the public, but their official badges concealed them from Muggle security. For some time, they wandered in amicable solitude through the ruins. The layout of the Luxor temple was astonishingly similar to that of the subterranean wizarding collegium. Hermione subconsciously correlated the two structures, and considered how much had yet to be unearthed below the Mut Precinct's sacred lake.

As the sun set, she and Lucius watched birds rising in flight from Isheru's shore to find roost for the night. Shortly thereafter, Lucius and Hermione found their way to the shack concealing the wizarding collegium. In perfect accord, they descended the staircase, mage-lights lighting their way. When they reached the subterranean antechamber, Lucius unsheathed his wand and cast a non-verbal *Lumos*. In a clockwise wave, mage-lights flared to life, illuminating the vast space. He then gestured for Hermione to precede him, and their steps were loud on the stone floor.

When they reached the magical barrier blocking the NotSphinx, Lucius asked, "How sure are you of your conclusion?"

Hermione stared at the barricade, and then glanced up at him. "Sure enough to risk my life."

"Then why are you waiting for Potter?"

"There are precautions to take for what happens after the confrontation."

"Such as?"

"Controlling the sphinx."

"It's not a sphinx."

"Oh, but Lucius, it is, and it isn't."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but was interrupted as a white wisp flew down the staircase, surging and leaping toward Hermione. It resolved itself into a large stag whose antlers rendered it majestic. Lucius' eyes widened as the Patronus came to a halt in front of Hermione and bowed its head.

As always, Harry's Patronus spoke only to his intended recipient, and Hermione's smile as the stag dissipated into swirling mist made it clear the news was both expected and gratifying. After a contemplative moment, she pulled her wand and conjured her own Patronus for a reply. Her otter gamboled about the antechamber enthusiastically; it appeared to sniff at the magical barrier before it surged up the stairs and disappeared from sight.

"All right." She tossed her hair and took a deep breath and glanced at Lucius. "Ready?" she asked.

"Pardon?"

"Are you ready?"

Lucius blinked; his blue eyes curiously intent as he looked at her. "What did Potter say? I assume that was his Patronus."

"It was. He confirmed my conjecture and will send along reinforcements as needed. My reply will let him know they would be most appreciated."

"Reinforcements? Does that not exceed the scope of Gringotts' agreement to get Magical Law Enforcement involved?"

"Not at all, Lucius. These won't be human reinforcements."

"Goblin?"

She grinned. "I should've said they will be non-living reinforcements."

"Granger..."

"Hermione. If I have to call you Lucius, you have to call me Hermione."

"Don't hare off at a tangent, *Hermione*," Lucius said repressively. "What sort of reinforcements are you talking of, and is it wise to do this now rather than in the morning after you've slept and settled down a bit."

His reasonable objections tempered her elevated mood. "Do you honestly think I could sleep? Could you?"

He conceded the point, but then asked again, "What sort of reinforcements are you expecting?"

"A local representative of the ghost council. Perhaps more than one."

"You're so certain it's a ghost, then?"

"Oh, yes. It's a ghost."

"But not a sphinx?"

She smiled. "I told you before. It is and it isn't." Then, in an apparent tangent, Hermione asked, "You are a Legilimens, are you not?"

"I am modestly competent. Why do you ask?"

"The sphinx doesn't speak English, and she communicated with Severus telepathically. I thought you might be able to link with me when I confront her, and that way, if it all goes tits up..." Lucius choked at her use of the colloquialism, "...you'll already know what happened when she casts that Memory Charm on me." Hermione was so buoyed by excitement she couldn't keep still, and she grinned mischievously at Lucius, especially after his prudish reaction.

He narrowed his eyes and began to pace. "There is so much wrong with your statement I cannot begin to make head nor tail of it. First, I am not, with any degree of confidence, certain it is possible to side-along in your mind. Secondly, if it does all go *tits up* -- quaint phrase, by the way," he said the expression scornfully, but it didn't alter the impact of his concerns, "what is to say I won't be affected as a result of the mental link?" He stopped pacing and turned toward her.

"I hadn't considered that. I'm not a Legilimens, and my Occlumency is barely passable. If you think it too great a risk, we can abandon the idea and fall back on what Severus and I did. I wouldn't want to endanger you." Lucius glanced at her sharply, as if expecting her to be mocking him, but she was entirely serious. "I'd like to ask Penny to be on stand-by, and I need to retrieve my wand. You could stay with Penny until it's over..."

"Absolutely not!"

"Lucius, you don't have to..."

He rounded on her. "Hermione, I do not want you confronting this menace alone, no matter how many reservations I might have."

Unexpectedly, she liked him for his protectiveness, and was shocked by his having offered it to her. How polarized her opinion was now from what it had been when she first arrived. While Severus' good opinion might have been influential, it was also Lucius himself. "Chivalry is not, then, a thing of the past," she said lightly.

"I would like to think I have superior manners."

"I definitely appreciate your manners when they don't abandon me to a basilisk."

"Basilisk!" he exclaimed with some degree of alarm.

"No! Sorry. It's a figure of speech; a joke between Severus and me."

He resumed his pacing as Hermione drew her willow wand. He gestured. "With that in hand, Hermione, why, may I ask, do you need to retrieve your wand?"

"Oh, dear," she said, "I forgot you don't know. My wand..."

"Of course," he said as his posture stiffened; they both remembered the events that occurred at Malfoy Manor. "Your wand..."

She interrupted him, "...was left behind during our escape. Mr. Ollivander made this one the following summer."

"How many more pitfalls are we likely to stumble into if we choose to continue our affiliation?" he asked, discomfort expressed on a discordant tone.

"I imagine they'll all be unexpected. Minerva reminded me of that." With a flick of her willow wand, Hermione silently cast the summoning charm she had taught Harry for the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament. "Before we continue, you need to know about my other wand."

Lucius' brow furrowed, but when an eerily familiar length of walnut sailed into Hermione's hands, all good manners were forgotten and his mouth hung open in astonishment.

"I use it professionally," she said.

He choked. "I beg your pardon?"

"It has an affinity for Dark things, objects, curses, locations."

"How long have you?" He stiffened and grew silent; his question unfinished.

For the first time since she had hexed him in the tent, Hermione grew wary. "Unexpected pitfalls, remember? You and I don't have the easiest history to overcome, do we? Perhaps the idea of a collaboration between us was ... er ... too idealistic?"

His expression was thoughtful. "I suspect we have seen one another at the lowest points of our lives."

"I still have nightmares," she said.

"As do I."

"Perhaps we could use that as common ground?"

"You are most generous." He inclined his head.

She fingered the curved shaft of Bellatrix's former wand, repressing a shudder at its feel. Even after a decade it resisted her use. "Severus was the one who suggested I use it for this."

"He knows about Bellatrix?"

Hermione knew Lucius wasn't referring to the wand itself, but the entirety of the circumstances under which it had come into her possession. "Yes."

Lucius' eyes flicked to her left arm. "Draco was violently ill after your rescue."

She smiled grimly. "As was I."

"He had nothing like your reason."

"As I recall, he only ever wanted your good opinion."

Fleeting, the windows to his soul revealed his agony, and Hermione was not unmoved. She stepped next to him, her face set into determined lines. It made her appear older. "I want you to have your son back. I want Bill to see his son being born. I want Penny..."

He interrupted her. "And you want Severus back."

"I do. And so do you."

"He is my closest friend." Lucius stared at her hard. "That won't be a problem, will it?"

"Not if you don't make it one."

"If you cure my son, Miss Granger..."

"Hermione." She smiled at him. It was small, but genuine.

His mouth curved in response. "Hermione."

"If you wouldn't mind talking to Penny, Lucius, there's something I'd like to do first." He nodded as if he already knew her plans. "Thank you," she said.

As Lucius strode to the staircase and surface Hermione turned her steps toward the hypostyle and the infirmary beyond. When she passed the small room where Edouard and Ali slept peacefully, she glanced at the two men before continuing on her way. Bill and Cormac appeared just as they had when Hermione first arrived in Egypt, and she swallowed her repressed emotion at seeing them lying motionless, her gaze lingering on the curse stigma discoloring Bill's face. Her destination was the adjoining room which Severus now shared with his godson. Since last seen, Draco's pale blond hair had been braided as had Severus', evidence of the care Penny lavished on her charges.

Hermione stepped next to Severus' bed and took his unresponsive left hand in hers. Gently, she traced his long fingers, feeling each scar, proof of his masteries in both potions and Dark Arts. The abrasions on his knuckles were almost completely healed after repeated applications of Murtlap essence. She stared at Severus' prominent Roman nose and his black eyebrows, envying his ridiculously thick eyelashes. In stasis, he appeared younger than his fifty years, but there would never be any denying the hard life he had lived. Her heart ached, and she swallowed against the sudden and overwhelming urge to cry. She placed Severus' hand once more on top of the covers, and then delicately glided her finger over his brow and the jutting ridge of his nose, lingering over the pliable shape of his mouth.

More than almost anything, she wished he would open his eyes and look at her. "I miss you," she murmured, and then swooped, brushing a kiss across his unresponsive lips before leaving the room to face the coming conflict.

Of course, Penny had refused to wait in the tent.

When Hermione returned to the antechamber, Lucius was practicing his most unctuous persuasion to an unreceptive audience.

"No, Lucius." The healer firmly stood her ground. "I will be safe in Severus' lab, and I will be near in case of an emergency." Then she held out one hand; in its palm were two dark green vials. "Here, take these. It's called Boost; it will give you approximately eighteen hours of peak mental and physical performance."

"I've never heard of it." Hermione accepted the potion with gratitude.

"It's a trade secret," Penny handed the second bottle to Lucius. "I doubt even Severus knows about it."

Hermione offered a toast to her companions before swallowing the vial's contents in one mouthful. Lucius chuckled when she grimaced, his amusement entirely at her expense. She stuck out her green-tinted tongue, and laughed when he, too, expressed his displeasure at the horrid flavor.

"I know it tastes dreadful," Penny said, "but it's efficacious. Most healers carry a small supply with them."

"This is rather ... quite ... remarkable, really." Hermione bounced on the balls of her feet, suddenly filled with all the eagerness of Weasley men at the prospect of a game of Quidditch. She grinned at the others and drew Bellatrix's wand.

"Good luck," Penny said, and then sighed heavily. "I hate waiting and feeling useless."

Hermione suggested Penny sort ingredients for the papyrus-under-glass potion, and was rewarded with a quick, hard hug.

Watching the healer depart, Lucius muttered, "Optimist." He spun to face the magical barrier and drew his wand.

"I've always seen you as an elegant man," Hermione commented, privately amused when he preened at the compliment, "and yet, your choice of wand is surprising."

He twirled the silver-chased length of ebony she had seen him wield so often recently. "Do you think it effeminate?"

"Not necessarily," she hedged.

To her surprise, he teased her. "Where is the bluntness I have come to expect from you?"

"It's not really my business."

"Then why mention it at all?"

She laughed a little shakily. "Nerves."

He smiled knowingly, and then said a little wistfully, "It was Narcissa's wand."

"Oh." Hermione's paradigm, which had altered significantly since she'd arrived in Egypt, suddenly completed its parabolic shift. "I am sorry."

Lucius stiffened. "I do not appreciate insincere condolences."

"It's not insincere," she said heatedly. "I am terribly sorry for your loss. Anyone could see how close you were. You and I may not have agreed on many things..." she shrugged, "...or even most things, but your wife's death is a tragedy I don't wish on anyone."

He cleared his throat. "My mistake."

"Apology accepted." She settled into a dueling stance. "Are you ready?"

He shifted into position, two steps behind and three to her left; perfect placement in case things went awry. "Do you plan to let me in on your little secret before you fling yourself directly in harm's way?"

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "Minerva McGonagall is a master of transfiguration." Lucius was a clever man, and when his eyes widened, she laughed. "Obvious once you have the right piece of the puzzle, isn't it?"

Astonishment, fury, and perhaps despair warred for prominence in Lucius' manner, and Hermione watched him control the tumultuous emotions. "How did we not know?" he finally asked.

"These are anomalous circumstances. It took the combined efforts of four diligent and competent wizards to eliminate other possibilities before this one seemed credible. And because the covenant has been adhered to for centuries. Unless I miss my guess, there will be an example made of this case."

He looked in the direction of the barrier and then at Hermione. "You may be right."

"Shall we?"

"Are you certain you want to do this?" he asked.

"Yes." Hermione faced him, staring directly into his pale blue eyes.

Lucius raised his wand. "*Legilimens!*"

His presence in her mind was entirely different than Severus' had been. Despite his modesty, Lucius was an excellent Legilimens. He did not wander through her memories, keeping his connection light and at the forefront of her mind. Nevertheless, Hermione exerted herself to ignore the double vision caused by having him as a mental passenger.

"Our wards first," she said. "Three, two, one." With a flick and a swish, the double wall of security spells they had cast earlier that day disintegrated in a swirl of gold and silver smoke. The taint from Bellatrix's wand slithered into Hermione's awareness.

Hermione took a deep breath, quelled her nerves and incipient nausea, and with a wave of the Dark wand, she repeated the exact sequence of motions she had watched in Severus' mind two days before. Her casting was spare and elegant, and one by one she dismantled the protections between her and the anomalous creature that had directly condemned four men to a slow and painful death.

Before countering the last spell, one of Severus' own devising, Hermione tested the connection to Lucius. It was there, strong and supple in her mind.

She gritted her teeth and flexed her wrist. The final shield tumbled to the sandstone floor like a waterfall cascading off a cliff, spraying magical sparks as the defensive charm evaporated into the ether.

Although prepared for a confrontation, Hermione nevertheless recoiled as the transparent sphinx spread leapt forward, its wings spread to their full extension. It focused on Lucius. Hermione side-stepped quickly, drawing attention to herself.

The sphinx pivoted, roaring its challenge at Hermione. Within seconds, the intimidating creature connected directly with Hermione's mind, abruptly terminating her mental link to Lucius. "You are trespassing, woman." The creature's accent was strong, but her words comprehensible. She made a disparaging, dismissive gesture toward Lucius. "Why do the bidding of the Tainted One?"

Hermione ignored the diverting gambit. She concentrated, projecting clearly in thought and words, "We -- I need the cure for the curse you placed on my friends."

The sphinx's smile was as ugly as the one Hermione had seen in Severus' memory. "You refer to those marked by the Betrayer as friends?"

"The Betrayer?"

There was no answer to Hermione's question. If anything, the sphinx's mood darkened, and the antechamber's temperature dropped by several degrees. Her expression became sly. "If you wish to acquire the cure you seek, you must first win the right. You must answer my riddle correctly."

"All right. I'll answer your riddle." Hermione replied mentally, and vocally for Lucius' benefit.

A blast of confusion flooded Hermione's mind, and then the following questions tumbled over one another in quick succession. "Do you not wish to know how many have come before? Or how many have been successful? Do you not wish to ask what their answers have been? Or how they failed?"

"Not really." Hermione kept her Dark wand trained on the sphinx. "I'd rather get down to business. I have a cure to administer."

The sphinx snarled; spectral saliva dripped from fangs protruding beyond the human lips of the ghost's mouth. "So be it." The heavily accented words echoed harshly in Hermione's brain. "Answer this if you can:

"Womanly features, yet my claws gouge mine enemy

Leonine in form, yet my wings carry me to safety."

It was the same riddle.

Hermione hid her relief. The sphinx's riddle matched the challenge issued to Severus, confirming Hermione's conjecture. It meant that while the others' answers were all true, they had been insufficient.

Weighing her conclusion a final time, Hermione glanced sidelong at Lucius. He was a formidable sight. His stance was perfectly balanced; Narcissa's ebony wand was held lightly in his hand, and his expression was lethal. Hermione had no doubt he would avenge her if necessary. She smiled, surprised by a sudden spurt of affection for the blond wizard she had once hated so bitterly.

Unaware of the byplay, the creature demanded, "Your answer, woman."

Hermione settled her weight on the balls of her feet, just in case, and took a deep breath. Once again she replied verbally and mentally. "The answer to your riddle is two-fold. You are a witch..." triumph radiated from every ethereal line of the sphinx's form, and then Hermione completed her answer, "...and you are an animagus."

The ghost screamed as if she had been cut down by an Unforgiveable, but Hermione held tight to the mental connection, wincing even as the shriek reverberated like the crash of cymbals in her head. Beside her Lucius flinched, but he held steady, the light of success gleaming in his pale eyes.

Hermione said, "Please let me pass." The softly wailing sphinx moved toward her privileged domain. Hermione followed her, asking, "In addition to the cure I seek, will you answer another question?"

"You have vanquished me."

"You must know that you violated the ghosts' governing covenant; doesn't that make you subject to reprisal?"

The sphinx seemed to shrink. Her shoulders hunched, and she folded her wings tight to her body as she backed into the well-kept west hallway. Hieroglyphics depicting scholarly research conducted by both men and women were chiseled and painted on the walls. Here and there were images of early wizards and witches wielding short sticks, but Hermione didn't pause to look.

"I was tricked," the sphinx said.

"That's dreadful. Was it the Betrayer who tricked you? Was he also a ghost? Perhaps we can report him to the ghost council."

The ghost snarled then, and her fangs shimmered in the mage-light, appearing more ominous than ever. "The Betrayer was a live-one. Like that one there." The ghost gestured at Lucius. "He bears the mark."

"Are you saying he bears the Betrayer's mark?" Suspicion took root in Hermione's mind.

The sphinx moaned. "I cannot bear this ... he forced this existence on me."

"You're an animagus. Why don't you transform back?"

"My knowledge was stolen." Suddenly the sphinx roared and leapt forward, but Hermione refused to give ground. Hermione's teeth chattered when the apparition impacted with her. After several seconds, during which Hermione thought she might freeze, quite literally, the sphinx backed up, "The Tainted One cannot enter here. He has not paid the price."

Hermione turned; Lucius was closer than before. A case of surreptitious creeping. It would have been amusing in any other circumstances, but not then. However, his expression was fierce, his jaw clenched. "I'm all right, Lucius," she called out, "but the sphinx wants you to wait. I think there's more to the story than we have deduced."

He snorted, halting in his tracks. "Do not befriend her, Hermione, and do not go beyond my line of sight."

"Thank you," Hermione said before turning back to the ghost. "Please don't attack him. He said he would wait as long as he could see me."

"You cannot trust his kind."

"Once I would have agreed with you, but his son is in the other room, and he would never jeopardize anything that would protect or cure his child. Will you show me what I need for the cure?"

"You've answered the riddle correctly, woman. You have been granted access to my library." She had reached the doorway at the end of the corridor, and seemed to regain some of her earlier haughtiness. "It does not grant you my assistance."

Hermione conjured her bluebell flames, and followed the sphinx into the pitch black room. She spun the flames into a ball of light and levitated it into the vast room beyond the ghost. "Oh!"

She had understood it was a library.

But she had never seen a library like this, not even at Hogwarts.

Hermione stepped into the vast room, breathing reverently. The chamber was at least as large as the forecourt, and shelves had been carved into the walls in a series of cross-hatched alcoves. Scrolls upon scrolls were heaped in the declivities. In the center of the room two rows of stone tables, similar to the mustaba Severus had used for his potions workbench, ran parallel to the long sides of the library. In all likelihood there were thousands of scrolls in this ancient archive.

An image of Severus' sleeping face and Fleur's heart-broken sobbing settled in her mind. It could take years to find the other half of the antidote. Then she remembered the sphinx's comment about her knowledge having been stolen.

"I could help you," Hermione offered.

The sphinx hissed. "That is what he said. I do not wish the assistance of a Betrayer's minion."

Certainty of the Betrayer's identity hovered at the edge of Hermione's mind, but she only said, "I do not bear any mark." When the sphinx hesitated, Hermione followed up on her momentary advantage. "What if I help you first? Then you could show me what I need to counter the curse."

The sphinx lowered her magnificent head, and her braids swung forward, the beads clattering almost musically. "That would be acceptable."

Fervently hoping the spell would work on a ghost as well as a wizard, Hermione raised her wand to cast the charm she had first seen in the Shrieking Shack during her third year at Hogwarts, when Remus Lupin discovered Sirius Black was not the mass murderer he'd been led to believe for fifteen years. A bolt of white light struck the ghostly specter. She shrieked; her wings absorbed quickly into her shoulder blades while her paws transformed into dainty hands and feet. The animagus' body shrank and straightened, altering until a petite Egyptian woman dressed in a linen garment draped across one shoulder but baring the opposite breast stood before Hermione. Silvery tears streaked down the woman's cheeks.

"Mut bless you," she said ardently, turning her hands over and over, touching fingers to her face, twisting to see that she had no tail or wings.

Hermione smiled and turned to wave at Lucius. He rolled his eyes, and she was sure he said something about Gryffindors, but she couldn't really hear him.

"You have gained my assistance. I will show you what you seek." The ghost floated toward the center of the library to one of the stone tables. It was the only one which had been in use.

Hermione trailed behind her, angling as best she could to remain in Lucius' line of sight, but she could only see his boot.

Suddenly, the ghost wailed and the hairs on Hermione's arms stood on end. "What's wrong?"

"That is the Betrayer's table. Those are the things he used until the night he erased my memory and disappeared. I had believed him sincere. He was respectful of the knowledge I protect."

The suspicion bloomed into awful comprehension. "Did you know his name?"

"Of course I knew his name!"

"Was it Tom Riddle?" The sphinx didn't react, and then Hermione tried, "or perhaps Lord Voldemort?"

The ghost screamed in anguish and fury, Hermione heard Lucius' feet pounding in the hallway; she whipped around and dashed to meet him. "No, Lucius!"

He skidded to a halt, the curse on his lips breaking off mid-cast, his chest heaving as he regained control. "What the hell is going on?" he asked, furiously.

"I believe we've found another of Tom Riddle's victims," she said quietly, even though the animagus' sobs easily covered Hermione's words.

"By all that's holy," he muttered, "will it never end?"

From behind Hermione, snatches of unintelligible ancient Egyptian phrases were screamed, and as a result of the mental link Hermione still had with the ghost, she caught bits and pieces: "rend ... faithless ... duped ... betrayer."

Greatly daring, Hermione touched Lucius' arm his left arm. "I don't think she's terribly ... er ... stable."

He snickered. In anyone else it would have been a more plebeian sound. "A not insupportable assumption."

"She's agreed to help me find the cure, and perhaps she might tell me more than we expect. But, Lucius, you cannot enter the library. I don't know what she'd do to you."

He looked down at her upturned face. "Is that concern? For me?"

"Yes," she said simply.

His color heightened, but he asked lightly enough, "What will I tell Severus?"

"I'll happily tell Severus everything. You're his friend, and I can't save him only to tell him that you were shredded to little tiny bits by a vengeful ghost."

Some of the tension flowed out of him. "I will wait here. I do not like that I cannot see you."

"I promise to scream like a girl if I need you." Suddenly the banter was no longer light-hearted, and he winced. "Sorry," she said.

"I had a family to protect, but none of my family enjoyed hearing you scream."

"Bellatrix did."

"I do not consider her family."

The wails from the library had faded to the sounds of a woman crying, and Hermione straightened her shoulders. "Once more unto the breach," she murmured.

"Be careful."

"Thank you," she said and re-entered the library.

The ghost hovered above Tom Riddle's research table, ectomorphic splotches of silver dotted some of the papyrus scrolls, but the ghost seemed wholly unaware of it, so lost was she in her misery.

Hermione's mental tone was gentle, and the link grew stronger the closer she drew to the table and the ghost. "That's what Voldemort did. He abused people's trust. He wanted power and control and immortality."

"Where is he? Tell me," the ghost demanded. "I wish to repay him for all his *kindness*."

"He's dead," Hermione said. "He killed and injured a great many people, and was defeated eight years ago." She was taken aback by the viciousness of the ghost's expression, but then again, she herself had probably worn the same expression when Bellatrix Lestrange fell to Molly Weasley's curse. Hermione had been disappointed not to have been the one to do it, but incredibly glad the malignant wretch was dead.

While their minds were still linked, Hermione asked, "Will you please tell me where to find the cure I seek?"

The ghost raised her arm and drifted lower, closer to the table, so that her transparent hand lay atop the uppermost papyrus. "Here. I cannot help you find the other sheet. The Betrayer stole it, but without this any attempt to heal the afflicted will fail."

Carefully, Hermione slid the ancient papyrus off the pile of other valuable artifacts. As she rolled it into a scroll, she noted its pliability and tucked it up her sleeve. The scratchiness was somehow comforting. "Thank you," she said and meant it.

"It must be applied within twelve moon cycles to be effective." Then the ghost screamed. "I taught him! I gave him the secrets of my domain. I believed he came to share my burden, but he was faithless!"

"An oath-breaker." Hermione agreed.

"Yes!" The ghost sounded as if she were still in her animagus form and hissing like a large, predatory cat.

"He didn't deserve your generosity."

"He abused my trust. He left me ... trapped in the dark. I know not for how many moon cycles, but I am in your debt, woman."

"And you have upheld your end of the bargain. I'm terribly sorry you were taken advantage of."

The ghost rose in the air, her tears leaving silver trails across her cheeks.

Hermione decided to press her luck. "Earlier, you mentioned a mark. Will you tell me what you meant?"

"This?" the witch said, and turned away from Hermione separating her multitude of braids to reveal a dark tattoo at the base of her neck. It was a hieroglyph, and one Hermione recognized from the temple above ground.

"Mut?" she whispered.

"All who devoted themselves to the collegium were marked."

"Is there a way to remove the tattoo?"

The ghost angled her head haughtily. "Those who served the Betrayer do not deserve such release."

Hermione said, "Some did not want the mark, and were branded nonetheless."

The ghost's eyes widened. "They were marked against their will?"

"Some. I would help them if I could." She pulled memories of Draco's sixth year to the forefront of her thoughts. Of his insurmountable task, and the ultimatum he faced should he fail. Of his deteriorating condition over the course of the year. Of his desperation to save his family.

"You know that man?"

"He was the first you cursed."

The ghost drifted toward the floor, her expression puzzled. "I do not understand. Why did he seek the cure when he had yet to suffer my retribution? Is he a Seer? Oooh," she wailed. "It is bad luck to curse a Seer."

"He is not a Seer," Hermione practically shouted the words in her mind. "His mother was cursed by the Betrayer. That same curse and he was desperate to save her life."

If possible, the ghost became more transparent than ever. "My fault, my fault!" she cried and flew around the library, darting between tables and around the columns holding the ceiling in place. "I revealed all my secrets and he perverted them."

Hermione watched the unhappy spirit until she calmed sufficiently to slow down and drift back toward the Betrayer's table. Hermione had the impression the ghost spent most of her time at the table, as if picking at a scab which would not heal. "You could help others he betrayed."

The sphinx glanced up, her eyes welling with silvery tears.

Hermione asked, "Will you tell me if the mark can be removed?"

"If those who wear it repudiate the responsibility of their pledge, it can be removed. You see, it is a mark of the faithful."

Hermione blinked rapidly, her thoughts in a jumble. Foremost was the hope that removing the mark could save Severus if the cure was ineffective. He certainly wasn't faithful to Voldemort. Beyond helping Severus, Hermione dare not think. "Will you show me?"

The ghost stared at Hermione for a long time. Then she said, "You have received the treasure for which you answered my riddle, and I am not bound by my nature as a sphinx to aid you now." Hermione searched her mind for a convincing argument, but the ghost spoke over her chaotic thoughts. "You were not required to reverse my form. It was an act of kindness, and I sense it is in your nature to be kind. What you ask of me now may balance my error in judgment."

"I don't have the words to tell you how grateful I would be."

The ghost smiled, and it was no longer intimidating or terrifying. "The mark can be removed by an incantation. It is empowered by the desire of the caster." She reached for the pouch hanging from the belt at her waist, and withdrew a short, slender reed. Hermione correctly deduced it was the ghost's wand. The ghost waved it in an inward spiral. "This is the motion. Intent is what gives the incantation its power. The one who wishes to remove the mark must also say, *kafir* at the beginning of the spiral, so that the belief dwindles to nothingness at the end."

"Can you demonstrate?"

"It would not work for me. I still believe."

"I see," Hermione replied. "Thank you "

Suddenly and unexpectedly, a bright light spun into the vast library, a wisp forming into the antlers and head of Harry's Patronus. His voice echoed in the room. "We're here." The temperature in the library dropped; within seconds Hermione was shivering with cold, her teeth chattering, lips blue. She spun around, looking frantically for the cause.

The ghost, floating next her, collapsed to the metaphorical ground, weeping uncontrollably.

The ghost council had arrived.

~o0o~

End-notes:

1. The answer is *spider*. This riddle may be found on page 629 of the American edition of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Harry Potter may not pass the sphinx guarding the maze until he answers her question.

Seven

Chapter 7 of 7

When a colleague is discovered to be missing in action, Hermione Granger is sent to Egypt to investigate.

Riddle Me This

Author's notes and disclaimers found in Chapter One.

Chapter Seven

I never was, am always to be,

No one ever saw me, nor ever will,

And yet I am the confidence of all

To live and breathe on this terrestrial ball.(1)

"Are you sure this is the right consistency?" Penny asked, staring critically at the thick gloop through which she was dragging a malachite stirring rod.

"It's probably the honey." Hermione leaned toward the healer to take a look. She leveled her wand at the flame beneath the hammered bronze cauldron. "It should be easier when the cauldron heats up."

"No!" Alex Rosier interjected from his place at the end of the stone bench. Hermione paused and looked at him askance. He jabbed his finger at the papyrus he and Lucius had finished translating earlier but continued evaluating nuances of the complicated antidote they were brewing. "Lucius believes it's a multi-use potion and I concur. It's both topical and oral in application. Once you add the ground coriander seeds, Penny, you must halve the potion. The removed portion needs to cool sufficiently, and then goat's milk is added to it."

"We don't use the goat's milk in the cooked potion?" Penny put the earthenware jug back on the bench.

"It appears not," Lucius remarked, joining the conversation. He removed a pair of silver-framed reading glasses, and looked toward the end of the bench where Penny and Hermione stood concocting the potion he and Alex had translated. "According to the *metut neter*..." he indicated the papyrus, "...the method of preparation splits as the potion itself is split."

"*Metut neter*?" asked Penny. "Is that another ingredient?"

Alex smiled. "No. Lucius is referring to the recipe. It's a phrase roughly meaning words of the gods in hieroglyphs."

Penny glared at the blond, and Hermione scolded. "You needn't make this more challenging."

Contrition on Lucius resembled a sulk on anyone else, Hermione thought, but she picked up her pestle and ground the coriander seeds in her mortar. Grinding tiny balls wasn't the easiest of tasks as some of the seeds had a tendency to rise to the top of the deep-dished mortar, and then roll out altogether. "So, after we divide the potion, we add goat's milk to one half as it cools. Then what?"

Alex said, "You incorporate the goat's milk using five spoons."

"Five spoons? Serially, simultaneously?"

Penny suggested an egg beater.

"No." Alex looked at the papyrus under-glass. "It is five spoons, and it appears they're being used simultaneously."

"I suppose it isn't any odder than using coriander in powder, seed, and oil form," Hermione said.

Penny grunted as she dragged the stirring rod through the thickening potion. She added, "Or the precious metal the first scroll referred to turning out to be bronze rather than gold or silver."

Lucius reseated his glasses on the bridge of his nose and perused his translated notes. He then verified his translation against the second piece of under-glass papyrus. "Once the goat's milk is added, Hermione, I believe you store the topical portion in a pot covered by enchanted linen."

"Enchanted?" she asked.

"Moisture resistant."

"Oh," Hermione said. "That makes perfect sense."

"Does it?" Lucius inquired politely.

Penny answered him. "It won't leach any of the emollient properties from the topical ointment that way."

Hermione nodded, and finished grinding the seeds. She stepped closer to Penny. "Here. I'd offer to take over, Penny, but you're better at potions than I. I'll finish the ointment if you like, unless you'd like to punish Lucius and make him do it."

"Punish me? Whatever for?"

"Being difficult," Penny said as she carefully measured the ground coriander into the cauldron. "No, Hermione, you do it. Lucius can confirm the translation while we finish."

"Yet again," Lucius muttered as if greatly put upon, but he didn't mean it. He had as much vested in the antidote as anyone, and he bent to his task once again. Hermione rolled up her sleeves before retrieving the square of linen Alex had found in the local market when he'd acquired half the potions ingredients. When she glanced at Lucius, he was staring at her arm. Suddenly remembering where she was, Hermione silently cast a disillusionment spell on the scar carved into her forearm. As the word *Mudblood* disappeared, Lucius jerked his head up, and his gray eyes met hers for a brief moment before he looked away.

Hermione continued with her task, using her willow wand, touching it to the center of the natural linen square and nonverbally casting *impervius*. Then she checked her notes and grimaced. "Are you sure we can't make Lucius do the frog liver?"

"Squeamish?" asked Lucius.

"A little," she admitted, and then summoned the jar of live frogs to her workstation.

Penny was using both hands now to stir the potion. It had thickened further with the addition of the coriander, but she glanced up at Hermione. "How did you manage in Potions class, then?"

"I was generally so busy keeping Neville from exploding cauldrons I didn't have time to think about it, but since I've left school, I rarely make my own. Besides, it helps to be friends with a potions master." She smiled and Lucius chuckled. Hermione retrieved the beaker of Nile water gathered specifically for this purpose, and checked her knife, testing its sharpness before setting it on the table next to her wooden chopping board. She then summoned a pithing rod from the second set of floating shelves hovering above the work-bench.

"Ugh," she said as she removed a frog from the jar. Her face was a mask of revulsion as she pithed the poor creature's brain before laying it out on her chopping board. She kept the frog in place with a Sticking Charm and then picked up her knife. "I really, really wish Severus were here."

"You want him to dissect your frog?"

"Among other things." Hermione deliberately chose to think about Severus as she sliced the frog's stomach from cloaca to neck, and opened the small amphibian to reveal its internal organs. Fortunately, the liver was easily found; although squeamish, Hermione was nonetheless deft and capable. Once removed, the liver was placed in the beaker of Nile water. "Only the one? I'd rather do them all at once."

"It's one for the whole antidote, and it must be freshly killed."

Alex said, "It was a better price for a dozen frogs rather than buying them one at a time. If we botch the potion this time, we'll have to do it again later."

"All the more reason not to botch it in this first attempt," Hermione said as she cast *Evanescio* and *Tergeo* on her work area and hands. "What's next?"

"I'm ready to halve the potion now," Penny said, relief coloring her words. "Lucius, will you help for a minute?"

"Certainly." He removed his glasses, slipped them in the breast pocket of his shirt and came to Penny's side. "How may I assist?"

"If you could levitate the cauldron so Hermione and I can do this," she said, directing him and pointing at the earthenware bowl. Hermione quickly placed the earthenware bowl under the lip of the cauldron, and in a smoothly coordinated move, they divided the potion with no spillage. Hermione then collected the carefully measured gill of goat's milk, placed it on the bench next to her bowl, and reached for the five spoons.

"Wait a moment, Hermione."

"Lucius?"

"This seems a ludicrous instruction. I do not believe our translation is accurate. No offense, Alex, for I was equally willing to let our initial interpretation stand; and yet, this seems too simplistic a solution. I'd like to consider it for a moment."

"We don't have much time, Lucius, the mixture is cooling as we speak."

He glared. "I am quite aware of the time, Penny."

"Wait!" Hermione exclaimed. "Did you say *five* spoons?"

"Yes."

"Please check the number."

"Why?" Lucius asked, as Alex bent over the papyrus and counted by touching the glass for each 'spoon' he saw depicted. "It's definitely five," Alex said.

"I think," Hermione said, looking at Lucius, "it isn't spoons. Rather the spoons are fingers. I think I have to 'stir' the goat's milk into this mixture with my hand."

"It's possible."

"It makes more sense this way. As the concoction cools, it will be harder and harder to incorporate the goat's milk. I think it might be impossible with a spoon, or even five spoons. But if I use my hand, it's not only possible, but it's easier."

Lucius eyed the dark brown paste. "Are you willing to take the chance?"

She knew he didn't mean the translation alone, but also the potion and this, their first opportunity to cure the four afflicted men. "If it doesn't work, then I will do all the frog dissection necessary until we get it right." She lowered her voice, "It makes sense this way."

He closed his eyes and she knew just how desperately he wanted to cure his son. His sigh was one of hope and disappointment. "There is no real need for haste. We will make this potion until it is perfect."

"I honestly think I'm right about this," Hermione said. "These recipes are practical."

"And your interpretation makes more sense." He nodded. "Shall I pour?"

"Yes, thanks." And Hermione laughed a little when he cast a Pouring Charm rather than using his hands to lift the goat's milk. She stuck her hand in the warm, viscous potion and began the process of incorporating a cooler liquid to a hotter, thicker mixture.

"If you haven't added the milk, Lucius, stop." Alex's face was practically flattened on the glass separating him from the papyrus. Hermione and Lucius looked at one another.

"What's wrong?" Penny asked, using a pipette to add three drops of essential coriander oil to the cauldron. Earlier, Lucius had questioned her use of the Muggle measuring device. Penny had replied, "I'm not Severus. I need to be exact; he does it by instinct and experience. I have to follow directions, and I don't want to take unnecessary chances." Lucius had apologized for doubting her and complimented her dedication.

But that moment had been swept under the carpet with each ambiguous direction, and now, Alex looked at his companions. "I don't think this is a goat."

Hermione groaned and stopped kneading the thickening mixture. "I know I said I'd do as many frogs as necessary, but I was hoping...."

Lucius stared at Alex. "Are you certain?"

"Unfortunately yes," Alex replied.

Lucius said not another word. He spun on his heel and departed the room. Penny, Alex and Hermione shared puzzled looks, and then Penny and Alex just stared at Hermione. "What?" she asked. "What did I do?"

"Nothing at all." Penny's tone was soothing. "We'll have to try again. Alex and I will clean up, and you go talk to Lucius."

Hermione held up her dripping hand. "I don't think so."

"You get along well."

"We have a common goal."

"It's more than that, and you know it." Penny's lower lip began to quiver. "Please, Hermione, I don't want to wait any longer."

Before Hermione could do more than raise her wand to clean her hands, Alex said, "I want to help, but I'm exhausted. Aren't you? We've been at this all night."

Hermione looked around the lab, at the mage-lights floating in the corners and hovering over each of their work areas. She then looked at the work-bench, at the cauldron now cooling because Penny had pulled it away from the fire. "You're right. I hate to say that, but you are." She and Penny exchanged a look. "I'll talk to Lucius," Hermione said, acquiescing to Penny's silent plea. "But then I think we all need to eat something and sleep for a while. After that, we can start again."

Penny nodded, and now that no one was racing to get the potion brewed, she drooped like a wilted hot-house flower.

Hermione turned toward Alex. "What is it if not a goat?"

"A cow. I'm almost positive it's a cow. We assumed it was a goat because goat's milk is so prevalent in healing potions, but the horns are different."

Hermione closed her eyes, felt the Boost elixir still humming in her veins. There was another full hour before she would crash, and crash hard. "Let's resume in twelve hours. That gives us all considerably more than a nap, and Alex, please acquire the cow's milk before then."

Penny nodded. "I'll clean this mess up and then check on the patients before I turn in. You know, Hermione, you should probably check on Harry, too."

Hermione gasped. "I forgot about Harry."

Alex's eyes were wide. "You forgot Harry Potter?"

"He isn't Harry Potter to me. He's just my friend." She unrolled her sleeves, and tucked her wand in the left sleeve for easy retrieval before departing to find Lucius and then Harry. Or Harry and then Lucius. Whoever she found first.

For the first time there was no magical barricade glittering in the forecourt, or blocking the hallway leading to the remarkable library. Hermione would always wonder what happened to the ghost sphinx, but she was gone.

Upon the arrival of the ghost council's imposing adjudicators, one had passed through the wall into the infirmary; two had immobilized the distraught ghost sphinx in a swirl of icy fog. The fourth ghost, speaking impeccable English, had politely but firmly ushered Hermione to the forecourt, asking no questions and answering none. The only germane comment she could elicit from him had been, "This is not the provenance of live ones. You may not interfere."

When the four had reconvened, they vanished as if they had never been, but they had also taken their prisoner with them.

As Hermione turned toward the hypostyle and the infirmary beyond she discovered how well sound carried in these corridors.

It appeared as if she had found Lucius and Harry. Together.

Oh, dear.

Considering his mood when he'd left the lab, Hermione was a little surprised Lucius was willing to talk to anyone at all, and wondered what he had to say to Harry. When she heard her best friend say her name, she stopped feeling even the slightest bit guilty for listening.

Lucius's sounded exasperated. "I know Hermione Granger is your friend, Potter. Is it so inconceivable that she might also be mine?"

"Oh, I don't know," Harry said, sarcastically. "You're only the man who released a snake whose entire purpose was to kill or eat Muggle-borns, and who, along with your cohorts, attempted to kill her at the Ministry Dolohov almost did kill her and then, when we were taken prisoner..."

"Merlin's bollocks! Are you going to repeat every skirmish during the last war?"

"Only those where you attempted to kill my best friend. I don't want you trying to worm your way into her good books. She's too soft-hearted for her own good."

"So you worry about her being friends with me? Do you think I would take advantage of her?"

"No! That's disgusting. You could be her father!"

Despite provocation over the years, Hermione had rarely been furious with Harry, but her temper rose as she listened. She knew what he was doing, but he had misinterpreted the situation.

Hermione stepped into the infirmary. Harry blanched as if she had hexed him, but Lucius smiled and said, "Hullo, darling. What took you so long?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "You," she said, pointing at Lucius, "go visit Draco. I will join you shortly."

Lucius smirked. "Yes, dear," he said before he stepped into the second room.

"And you..." Hermione stalked toward Harry. "What were you thinking?"

"Er ... of protecting you?" Mage-light glinted off his glasses, but the sheepish expression in his green eyes was discernable.

She huffed, her anger evaporating. "Harry Potter, you of all people should know I don't need protecting, and if I do, I'll ask for help."

"That's true," he said, perking up. "You did send me that Patronus."

"Yes, I did. And thank you for acting so swiftly. Do you know what the ghost council will do to the sphinx? She was as much a victim as anyone."

"And if you can't cure them?" Harry waved his hand to indicate the coma-induced victims.

"She will still have been Riddle's victim, but you're right. I won't be quite as sympathetic. If we can't cure..." She pinched her lips and could not finish the sentence or even consider failure.

Harry stood at Bill's bedside and looked at his brother-in-law's peaceful, scarred face where the curse still held sway. "It's rather sad all 'round, but it's their jurisdiction and we can't interfere. They officially thanked us for our intervention."

"Did they?" Hermione asked, and then, after a moment, "How long are you staying?"

"Until Bill wakes up."

"Harry..."

"No, Hermione. This isn't an official investigation, and I'm here as your friend and Bill's brother. Fleur's a basket case, and while we all understand why you can't talk about what's really happening here, I don't have that luxury. When I go home, I'll be taking Bill with me."

Hermione opened her mouth to argue with him, but then thought better of it. Harry could be incredibly stubborn about things, but he had been helpful. She could tell he was bracing himself for an argument. He had that angle to his head and he had crossed his arms. No doubt he held his wand in one hand, just neatly tucked along his forearm. So she did the last thing he expected. She agreed.

"All right," she said, and laughed his obvious shock, "but you get to do the frogs' livers."

There was a snort from the adjacent room, and Hermione ignored the fact Lucius was blatantly eavesdropping on her conversation. "You can stay with Penny and me, if you like. There's enough room."

"Isn't that a bit like flouting local customs?"

"I don't have to be as much of a stickler for custom as others, besides, you're you."

"Thanks, Hermione." Harry was entirely affable now that he'd got his way. "Where are you staying?"

"Next to the sacred lake, in a tent."

Harry choked. "Surely you're joking."

"No. Not really. It's a nice tent."

Harry laughed. "Oh, Christ! What git put *you* in a tent?"

Lucius appeared in the doorway, his cheeks pink. He said frostily, "I was not aware of Miss Granger's dislikes when I made the arrangements for her accommodation."

"I told you I didn't mind, Lucius."

Harry was still laughing, and when he momentarily caught his breath, he asked, "She didn't hex you? She must really like you then." The impact of his latter statement drove the mirth from his face, and it was Hermione who laughed then.

Lucius sketched a bow in her direction.

Hermione waved her fingers at him, as if to wave away an annoying insect, but she said, "Alex is going to get the cow's milk for the potion and we'll try again later today."

"Why not now?" Harry asked. "It's barely noon."

"London time," she corrected him. "I haven't slept since yesterday, Harry, and I some sleep."

"If you're admitting it, Hermione, you're further gone than I thought. I'll walk with you, and then I can poke around the ruins while you sleep."

"I'd appreciate it," she said. "If you'll give me a moment."

"Of course."

Hermione walked to where Lucius stood. "I know you were angry before, but I honestly think we'll get the potion right on this next attempt. We'll be better rested -- you are going to sleep, aren't you? and Alex will have re-evaluated the papyrus before we begin."

He inclined his head. "I will go to the flat shortly. I concur with your decision, and will allow myself to be swayed by your optimistic outlook."

Hermione smiled at him before she continued into the second room to stand next to Severus again. "I got the answer," she told the unresponsive man. "Thank you for your help." And without caring whether anyone saw, not even Harry, she leaned forward and brushed Severus' unresponsive lips with hers. Then she straightened and left the room. She didn't notice Lucius watching her, but Harry commented on it as they walked up the stairs leading to the Precinct of Mut.

"Lucius isn't interested in me, Harry. But I do think we might be friends one day."

"How can you say that?" He kicked a pebble down the incline; it bounced and rolled until it reached Isheru, and then disappeared beneath the green surface of the water.

Hermione said, "I believe he's changed."

"It's not that easy!"

"No. It isn't." They skirted the lake and Hermione directed them toward the small palm grove sheltering her home away from home. "None of it has been easy, Harry. For any of us."

"Bugger!" Harry swore.

"What? Momentarily puzzled by the seeming non sequitur Hermione looked around for what could have caused Harry's reaction.

"It is a tent," he said with disbelief while gaping at the cloth structure. "It's a fucking tent."

"I know!" Something about his expression set Hermione off, and she laughed until she cried, and then she waved her wand and the entrance magically parted for The Chosen One.

"It's a lot nicer than the one we used," Harry said while investigating the kitchen. "Hey, you've got beer. You hate beer."

"I don't hate beer." Hermione kicked off her shoes and padded across the carpet. "I just don't like it. Anyway, that's Cormac's."

"Then it's all right if I nick one." He pulled a can of Sakara beer from the cold storage unit.

"It's practically an obligation."

"Too right it is."

"Um. Harry, you should know Cormac's engaged to Penny."

"He isn't!"

"Really he is. And she adores him. So be nice. This has been really hard on her." Hermione thought of how horrible she felt about Severus being in a coma, and they weren't even a proper couple. Yet. Suddenly, a yawn hit her. "All right. G'night. I'll see you later. We're brewing in about eleven hours."

Harry crossed the room and gave her a one-armed hug. He pressed his cold and slightly beer-wet lips to her forehead. "Sleep well, Hermione."

"Thanks." She barely got her clothes off before crawling under the sheet, and she was snoring before she knew she was asleep.

As Harry had said he would, he was the one to gut the frog and excise its liver for the next antidote trial. Whether it was the sleep, the cow's milk, or the luck of the Chosen One, the second batch was perfect. Hermione's tasks had been to agree with Alex's reading of the hieroglyph for cow versus goat, and kneading the milk into the halved recipe.

When Penny chanted the last refrain of "*Magic is effective together with medicine. Medicine is effective together with magic*" the oral antidote was complete. In her hammered bronze cauldron sat a softly simmering magical potion whose color was closest described as honeyed amber with a greenish tint.

The entire second brewing process had been smooth and without incident. Harry and Lucius had been civil, Alex had been slightly awed by Harry's presence, and Hermione and Penny had been refreshed by a solid nine hours of sleep.

"Who goes first?" Harry asked as he handed the first of twelve vials to Penny for her decanting process. Hermione used her fingers to scoop equal portions of the salve into small pots whose screw-top lids had been lined with enchanted linen.

"They all do," Penny said. "There are enough of us to administer the potion simultaneously. Alex, however, is going to bed."

"How can you be so cruel, Penny," Alex said petulantly. "I've worked just as hard as anyone here."

"I suppose that's true, but you didn't get as much sleep as the rest of us, what with collecting the fresh milk." Seeing his stubborn expression, Penny shrugged. "All right. You can be our scribe, Alex, but first send a Patronus to Ayman with the good news."

In the end, Penny gave the first vial to Lucius, and Hermione smiled at him as she also offered him a pot of salve. "Remember you need to cover every bit of affected skin. I'm planning on making wide margins!"

Suddenly, Hermione wailed, and spun around, taking in the state of the lab.

"Hermione?" Lucius asked.

"Look at this mess. Severus will kill us if we leave it like this."

Lucius smirked. "We'll use it as incentive." He then turned and left the room, the vial and pot clutched tightly in his hands.

Alex and Penny followed him, but Harry hovered in the doorway as Hermione didn't follow. "You coming?"

"In a minute. I really can't do this to Severus, he'd be furious."

"All right. Want help?"

"No, it's all right. I won't be long."

"kay," he said and turned in the direction the others had gone, carrying Bill's cure with him.

It didn't take long to put things away, clean the cauldron and other utensils and paraphernalia. Hermione left the remaining frogs in their magically sealed jar, and then grabbed her own vial and pot of salve.

When she entered the infirmary, Harry was asking Alex, "How long does it take?" while liberally coating Bill's face, paying particular attention to one of Bill's blackening scars.

"There is no literal translation of time for this. Our best interpretation was 'soon'." Alex was seated at the small desk in the corner of the room, dutifully recording the events.

Hermione passed Harry and then Penny who was gently applying the salve to Cormac's ear. "Give him the oral antidote first, Hermione, then apply the salve. As it's absorbed, keep applying it."

"All right," Hermione said. "How do you think it will affect the Dark Mark, Penny?"

"I don't honestly know, Hermione, but it's possible the salve will remove the Mark as well as the curse manifestations."

"Wouldn't that be ideal?" She thought of what the ghost sphinx had told her about the mark and its removal. Hermione hadn't mentioned it to anyone else yet. In all the hustle and bustle decoding the papyrus, brewing the antidote, and handling Harry and Lucius' interactions, Hermione hadn't remembered. Later, she would review the memory in a Pensieve, or perhaps let Severus watch it through Legilimency.

In the second room, Lucius was already working on Draco. The covers had been folded back to reveal Draco's chest, and Hermione winced to see how widespread the curse was. Angry fingers of shriveled, blackened skin had spread everywhere, from Draco's navel right across his pectorals, and there was even one long tendril of black that had spread into his armpit. Lucius, his mouth set, was diligently applying the salve, and didn't look up at her entrance.

"Do you want me to get you another pot of ointment before I start on Severus?" Hermione asked. Her reward was a glance and a swift smile.

"Thank you, no. If I need more, I can summon it from here. You've delayed your own reunion long enough."

"I appreciate that." Hermione stepped next to Severus, and mimicking the wand motions she had seen Penny perform numerous times, Hermione elevated Severus to a half-recumbent position. She popped the cork out of the vial and opened Severus' mouth before emptying the contents of the small bottle. She pushed his jaw up, shutting his mouth, and watched him convulsively swallow. Her eyes widened. "He swallowed it, Lucius! I thought they couldn't move."

"Penny terminated the healing coma. We're now waiting for the asphodel to pass from their systems. It is why we don't know how long it will take for them to awaken."

"Asphodel? Isn't that used in the Draught of Living Death?"

"Indeed. Severus restructured his elixir to include asphodel to work in tandem with the healing coma. He wanted to take no chances."

"He's very thorough."

"He is."

Hermione smiled at the affection in Lucius' tone, and then she set to work applying the second half of the antidote. She pushed the loose sleeve of the linen shirt Severus wore up above his elbow, revealing the ugly Dark Mark and the withered and blackened curse trails spreading across his forearm. Even though he'd been put into stasis the quickest of the four, it seemed the Dark Mark had accelerated the curse's progress.

Hermione rubbed the salve into his skin. It felt something like a badly darned sock, hard and ropy, and she applied a thicker coating over the toughest spots. She murmured as she worked. Only later did she remember what it was. "Nor is the earth the lesse, or loseth ought." Another scoop of ointment, another ridge of black to coat. "For whatso'er from one place doth fall, is with the tide unto another brought." She eased his arm out of her hand and then she unplaited his long hair. He would have hated it, she knew. "For there is nothing lost ... that may be found ... if sought."

"That was quite lovely, Hermione. If I am ever ill, I shall have you read poetry to me."

How she might have responded to Lucius' raillery was never to be known, and she certainly forgot. For at that moment, Draco awakened, and Lucius' inarticulate cry of joy brought tears to Hermione's eyes.

Draco's voice was dry and cracked when he spoke. "Father?"

Hermione was too busy watching Severus to look at Lucius, but she would never forget the sound of his voice when he said, "Draco?" nor would she ever, ever tell anyone that she had been present when the Malfoy patriarch had lost his composure and cried while gathering his son to his chest.

Fortunately, she didn't have long to dwell on the happy reunion taking place behind her, for between one breath and the next, Severus, too, had awakened, and Hermione bent her head to fulfill her promise.

My first displays the wealth and pomp of kings,

Lords of the earth! their luxury and ease.

Another view of man, my second brings,

Behold him there, the monarch of the seas!(2)

Once Penny was satisfied all four of her patients were recovering swiftly, black curse lines diminishing even as she flicked and swished her wand in a series of diagnostic charms, she agreed to release them from the infirmary. Draco and Cormac were instructed to take several days to fully recuperate, considering the length of time they had been held in stasis.

With little fanfare and a great deal of solicitude, Lucius took his son to his flat where he assured Draco that Chaucer waited to ply the young master with every luxury imaginable. Rather dazedly, Draco followed his father from the infirmary. Hermione wondered if Malfoy the younger had even noticed her presence.

However, before his departure, Lucius informed Penny that he had arranged for her and Cormac to stay in a hotel on Luxor's west bank until they returned to England. Apparently, he had heard Cormac coaxing his beloved to move the date of their wedding forward, and in a grand gesture, Lucius declared he would do his utmost to assist the course of true love. Penny was so effusively happy, she hugged the startled wizard.

It seemed to Hermione that Cormac's arrogance had taken a lethal blow as a result of his experiences in Egypt. When he left the infirmary to acquire a Portkey for the next morning, he thanked Hermione with more graciousness than she had ever seen in him.

Bill was last to awaken, but when he did, there was a flurry of activity. Harry assisted the curse-breaker to his feet, bringing him up-to-date in seven short sentences. Bill wobbled into the second room, where Hermione was applying an additional layer of salve to Severus' Dark Mark. Despite her sticky hands, the redhead grabbed her in the tightest hug he could manage.

"Thank Merlin, you're brilliant," Bill said before calling out to Harry that he would be right there so they could pack his things. Then with a nod to Severus, a quick word of thanks to Penny, he rejoined Harry. The sound of Bill's demands for additional information faded as the two left the infirmary.

Penny requested Severus remain for a multitude of analytic spells. Contrary to her earlier speculations, the salve had not removed his Dark Mark.

"I want to make sure you won't experience any negative side-effects of the Withering Curse," she said, "or as a result of the interaction between it and the Dark Mark."

Hermione sat quietly, savoring their success. She watched Penny plying her wand in a complex series of swirls over Severus and his arm.

Several minutes later, Harry returned for Hermione, ostensibly requiring her assistance. "You can help Bill sort out his things so we can head home."

"You're taking Bill home now?" she asked.

"The sooner the better."

She smiled, but followed Harry. "And you need my help to speed you on your way...."

As soon as Harry reached the subterranean forecourt, he rounded on her. "Were you *kissing* Snape?"

"Yes." Astonishingly, the direct answer derailed an indulgent diatribe on Harry's part.

"Oh. Well." He turned, and dashed up the stairs. "Come on!"

"What? Where?" Hermione followed, taking the steps two-at-a-time.

"I wasn't kidding." Harry burst into the scorching afternoon, but it didn't check his momentum. "We need to get Bill home as soon as possible. Fleur's water broke this morning. Ginny sent her Patronus."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"You had enough going on at the time, but Hermione, we've got to get him home."

"Right." They sprinted the rest of the way.

In the tent, they found Bill's things flying through the air, shrinking as each was magically stuffed into a duffel bag Hermione hadn't seen before.

"What else do you need?" she asked.

"Nothing you haven't already done for me. You have no idea how relieved I am that you're methodical and question everything." Bill shook his head. "The covenant has held for so many generations, none of us even considered it." He crossed the room, steadier now. "It must be a Muggle-born thing," he said and tweaked her nose.

"Bill!" She batted at his hand.

He laughed, but sobered quickly. "Thank you for my life, Hermione."

"You're most welcome," she said, deeply touched by his sincerity.

Unexpectedly, the fire in the pot-belly stove burst into green flames and Molly Weasley's voice called out. "Harry? Are you there, dear?"

Before he replied, Molly could be heard speaking to someone behind her. "Fleur, calm down. Hermione promised to get Bill home. He'll be home."

Bill grinned, the scar pulling at his mouth made it a little lopsided. He grabbed a handful of Floo powder and tossed it into the stove. "I'm here, Mum!"

"Thank Merlin," Molly said fervently.

Bill leaned forward, but just as quickly pulled back because his wife's head suddenly filled the stove. "Beel? *Ma chere?* Is it you?"

"Yes, Pet," he said, soothingly. "I've missed you."

"Oh, Beel." Tears streamed down her beautiful face. "You must come home. I have waited and waited... but I cannot wait longer." Fleur spied Hermione over Bill's shoulder. "ermione! You 'ave kept your promise. You've found my Bill, and ... and ... you will be godmother to our *petit* Louis, *n'est ce pas?*"

"Of course," Hermione said, and despite the emotional scene, she was smiling. She had done it. She had saved Bill. And Draco, and Cormac, and Severus.

Suddenly, Fleur cried out; her head disappeared from the flames.

Bill shouted, "Fleur?" He whirled toward Harry and Hermione. "I have to go. Now!"

Molly's head poked through the flames. "Oh, hello, Hermione dear. Thank you for finding Bill for us. Bill, we'll meet you at St. Mungo's. I suggest you hurry." And as quick as a golden snitch evading capture, the Floo connection was terminated.

Immediately, Harry adjusted his Portkey's destination to St. Mungo's reception room, asked Hermione to send him anything he had forgotten, and shoved the Portkey into Bill's hands. Together the brothers-in-law spun out of sight as the dark-haired Savior of the Wizarding World called out, "*Portus*".

Hermione remained behind to tidy up and call in a report to Bogrod.

Twenty minutes later, Severus came to find her.

Hermione offered him tea.

"Sit," she said, busying herself in the kitchen. "There's still some biscuits Lucius' house-elf brought."

"Chaucer?" Severus asked as he made himself comfortable on the sofa.

"That's the one." Hermione levitated a tray filled with tea things into the living room. She poured, doctoring Severus' tea exactly as he liked, and handed him the mug before she sat in the overstuffed floral chair facing him.

Severus stared at her. "He's notoriously shy."

"Really?"

"He disguises it with a churlish demeanor."

Hermione thought perhaps Severus wasn't talking about Chaucer at all. She sipped her own tea, and settled for staring back at Severus. "I can't tell you how good it is to see you."

Her comment might seem out of context, but it was clear from his expression, Severus had followed her train of thought as if he, too, had been a passenger.

His mouth quirked, but he controlled it. "It feels quite good to be seen, Hermione."

As she took a biscuit, she asked, "Is there anything you need, or want?"

"I want many things, but for now, I would settle for you explaining how you vanquished the sphinx."

Suddenly, she grinned. "I was right, you know."

"How so?"

"It was a basilisk," she teased him.

"Hermione," he said warningly. "Explain."

"It might take some time."

"Something I have in abundance."

And so she told him, and then offered to show him.

*The ghost smiled. "The mark can be removed by an incantation. It is empowered by the desire of the caster." She reached for the pouch hanging from the belt at her waist, and withdrew a short, slender reed. The ghost waved it in an inward spiral. "This is the motion. Intent is what gives the incantation its power. The one who wishes to remove the mark must also say, **kafir** at the beginning of the spiral, so that the belief dwindles to nothingness at the end."*

"Can you demonstrate?"

"It would not work for me. I still believe."

"I see," Hermione replied. "Thank you "

Hermione was abruptly released from the spell and she fell against the back of her chair, staring at Severus' shocked expression.

"Is this true?" he asked hoarsely.

"I don't know. You're the only one who knows besides me."

He stared at his left forearm. "For more than thirty years this mark has dominated my life," he said. "Chained me to one master and yoked me to another, branded me in the eyes of our society, but now... This is a gift, Hermione, an extraordinary gift."

She said nothing, merely watched him digest this new possibility.

When he closed his eyes and leaned back against the sofa, Hermione stood and took two steps toward him. He opened his eyes and she held out her hand. He linked their fingers and tugged. She willingly folded onto the sofa, fitting herself against him.

Hermione said softly, "When you decide what you want to do with this knowledge, Severus, I'll be happy to help."

"Thank you." He said nothing for several minutes. "It is most peculiar. I've wanted to be rid of this thing -- practically since the day I was branded. And now, with the prospect of fulfilling that desire, I cannot say I deserve to be free of its taint."

"Bollocks!"

Severus wasn't now, nor had he ever been, afraid of her glare. "What?"

"If you want to flog yourself on occasion, I know a discreet shop where we can buy any number of whips and paddles," she said tartly.

"Hermione!" He appeared amused and shocked in equal measure, and he couldn't seem to gain control of his mouth. It wanted to grin.

She remained stern. "I'm not telling you when, or where, or even that you must, but Severus, don't let misplaced guilt make your decision."

His nascent grin disappeared. "Hermione..."

"It's no longer a theoretical discussion, Severus." After a moment, she conceded. "All right. We won't discuss it further."

"As if we haven't before," he said, wearied by the topic. "*Ad nauseum, ad infinitum.*"

"Not in the last couple of years, at least. Give me some credit."

"True enough." Severus pulled her back to his side, where they spent several minutes finding the right position. Finally, when Hermione's head rested on his chest, he wrapped a curl around his finger, he said, "Tomorrow will be soon enough."

She nodded. "Good." And then she said, "I have several things to tell you."

"Oh?" She felt the tug on her hair and imagined he was straightening a curl, perhaps visually measuring its length. He asked, "More good news?"

"It's tempered, actually. Some good, some bad. Which would you like to hear first?"

"Are you leaving me?"

She sat bolt upright; the strand of hair wrapped around his finger pulled taut, but its pain was negligible. "Severus, no! Of course not."

A crooked smile curved his lips as he released her hair, pulling her down into a searing kiss. She was breathless when it ended. He said simply, "Then there is no bad news, so carry on."

Hermione thought she might be starry-eyed. "You're ... you're ... rather sweet, really."

"Say that again and I'll hex you," he threatened.

Hermione laughed. "I'll just think it very privately, then." When he resumed toying with her hair, she settled back against his chest. "Anyway, let me tell you my news," she said. "I've been given another assignment." She felt him tense, and continued quickly. "I'm to remain in Egypt as Gringotts' representative overseeing the exploration of the magical collegium."

Severus angled his head to nuzzle her throat, and murmured against her skin. "And I thought you were procrastinating to spend time with me."

She hummed in contentment, but said, "I wouldn't call it procrastination. I'm ascertaining your well-being after your ordeal. You are a colleague, are you not?"

"Indeed," he said softly.

Hermione sat up straighter, taking Severus' hand in hers. She thought she might be developing a bit of an obsession with his hands as she stroked her fingers over his knuckles and tendons and along the blunt tips.

"Gringotts' decision apparently coincided with Lucius' renegotiating the terms of the contract. I understand he cited recent circumstances to trigger an amendment stipulating an on-site curse-breaker, and I'm it." She felt him smirk even if she wasn't currently looking at him. "What?" she asked.

"Lucius likes you."

"No! And what do you mean 'like'?"

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Granger. I did not say Lucius fancies you." He twisted the word 'fancies'. "I said like, as in he is fond of you." Severus' hands urged her to shift position, and when she moved, he rose to his feet. She angled her head to look at him. His tone was light, but the impact of his comment was anything but that. "I should have shagged you senseless long before this."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Yes," she agreed, and then, after a moment, she asked, "Why didn't you?"

"I wasn't convinced you would be receptive."

"Surely it was obvious I cared."

"Cared, yes." His expression was inscrutable, but she knew him well. "But Hermione, you are passionate about many things, including your friends. How was I to know your feelings were more than platonic?"

"You could have asked," she said stubbornly.

"Do you honestly think I would jeopardize our friendship?"

She rose, and he sidestepped to give her room, but then she closed the distance between them and took his hands in hers. She stared at him. "We should've used Legilimency years ago!"

"Years?" Severus's voice cracked, but he didn't look away. "Surely not."

"Well, no. Not years. But only because I thought it was a hopeless case."

Severus didn't pretend to misunderstand. "Lily," he said and dragged his eyes from hers.

"Lily," she replied. Hermione's throat tightened, but she didn't relinquish her hold. She was determined enough to weather the storm, should there be one.

Severus stared across the room. It was clear he didn't see the organized piles of notes and journals, or the clutter in the kitchen. Hermione told herself every second of suspenseful agony was worth it if Severus was the reward for her patience. He didn't release her hands, but absent-mindedly stroked her wrist with his thumb.

Some time later, he sighed. "I loved Lily for a long time."

Hermione flinched.

Although Severus wasn't looking at her, he felt her reaction and pulled her tight. "I am a cautious man, Hermione. I loved once with my whole being. You know how that turned out. For twenty years, I was a pawn of competing masters, and carried a crushing weight of regret."

Hermione had never before understood the literal definition of bated breath, but she comprehended now in full measure.

"I don't give my heart easily," he said, and she felt his head angle so he could look at her.

She raised her eyes to his. "Have you?" she asked, faintly.

"Have I what?"

Hermione asked softly, "Given your heart?"

Severus' voice was deep, silken and played on her nerves like the finest of bows on a Stradivarius. "Need you ask?"

Her heart started again; it had been metaphorically petrified from the moment Severus had said a dead woman's name. With a little cry, Hermione pulled him to her, and their lips met in a rough but profound kiss. It gentled quickly, evolving into a more loving expression. When they finally caught their breath, she said, "I love you."

"I know." He smirked, briefly, but then sobered immediately. "And I you."

Cupping her face in his hands, he kissed her again, a mere grazing of lips. It left her breathless nonetheless.

"Shall we?" Severus asked, his lips quirked into a wicked smile she had never seen before.

"Yes," Hermione replied, and then blinked. "Wait. Shall we what?"

He arched one eyebrow rakishly, and replied, "Get to the shagging."

Hermione giggled. And then she laughed. She conjured her bluebell flames as she towed Severus toward her bedroom, thankful she had transfigured the cot into something larger that very first day. She sent the ball of fire toward the ceiling, but not too close.

Exhilarated beyond measure, Hermione was quite literally trembling by the time they reached the side of her bed. Neither was laughing any longer, but the mood had shifted to something more intimate and more complex.

Severus tucked his fingers in the loops of her jeans. His eyes were very dark, but she could no longer see them as he lowered his head and kissed her again. Their noses bumped, but they adjusted quickly. When Severus broke the kiss, he asked, "Are you sure?"

To answer him, Hermione pulled her wand and cast the only spell which corkscrewed into a woman's abdomen leaving a trail of purple sparks.

She grinned at him; he returned it with that wicked quirk of his mouth.

Severus removed Hermione's shirt with her cooperation, and then he tossed it into the corner. His hands smoothed down her arms, and suddenly Hermione's insecurities, few though they might be, swamped her delight. She attempted to pull her left arm from Severus' touch.

He frowned and released her, but when she reached for her wand, he said, "No, Hermione. You do not need to hide from me."

She paused mid-reach. "It's..." Unexpected and unwanted tears filled her eyes. "It's so ugly."

Severus lifted her left arm, cradling the forearm in his hand. Tenderly, he brushed his fingers over the scar Bellatrix Lestrange had carved with a magical spell-blade. "It is no uglier than the Dark Mark, and unlike me, you did nothing to deserve it."

"But you can remove the Mark now, Severus. It will be gone. And this..." she nodded at the word that had been thrown in her face since she was twelve.

"Hermione, if removing my Dark Mark leaves you in any doubt about my feelings..."

"No. No. I want you to remove it. I would ... I would erase this if I could." And even though his touch was gentle, Hermione scrubbed at the scar and avoided his eyes. "I *hate* it!"

"Hermione, look at me." Reluctantly, she did. What she saw in his face set her heart pounding. "We will find a way to heal this," he said, and she recognized truth when she heard it. "Then," he continued, "we will remove these remnants of war together."

"And if we never do? Never find a cure for this" she asked, indicating her forearm, yet she was coming back to herself, and her voice was stronger than it had been.

"Then I will wear the Mark for the rest of my life."

"No, Severus!"

He spoke over her, "I had expected it to be so. I never thought it would be possible to remove, and I have been resigned to that fate. Does it repel you?"

"I'm in love with you; the Mark doesn't matter."

"Do you think I'm less capable of looking beyond the superficial when I see you?"

"I'm being ridiculous," she said a little shakily.

"No, my love. Only human."

"I'm sorry."

"No need. It has been an eventful few days."

Hermione swallowed hard, forcing the remnants of her insecurity down, and she managed a laugh. "I'd say that was an understatement. But now that I have my heart's desire, I don't want to waste another moment." She flipped the buttons on her jeans, and shoved them and her knickers to the floor, leaving her clad only in her bra.

"Heart's desire?" he asked, his eyes caressing her body, leaving a trail of fire where he had gazed.

"Oh, yes," she said. Realizing that he might have a few insecurities of his own, Hermione stepped close and leaned forward to kiss him with burgeoning urgency.

When she moved to unhook her bra, Severus stopped her. "Let me."

His voice resonated deep within her, a frisson of anticipation swept down her spine, and goosebumps prickled her arms.

"Please," she whispered as she fumbled with the buttons on his white shirt.

Within seconds, she was naked while Severus was only half-dressed. Black hair dusted his pectorals, narrowing to a trail leading to his groin. His trousers were unzipped but had not yet gone the way of her jeans and his shirt. White pants showed in the gaping vee of the open zipper.

Hermione traced the waistband of his pants, and when she dipped her fingers toward the point of the zipper's vee, she brushed the hot, hard ridge of his growing erection. Severus pulled her closer. His voice was husky. "Touch me," he murmured.

Her answer was a gusting breath of excitement, and fingers slipping beneath the waistband of his pants. Severus' skin was silken to the touch, and she explored freely.

His breath rasped in her ear, and his hands, those deft, capable potions master's hands glided across her arms, her shoulders, her face, her back, and her breasts. One nipple was rolled until it budded in a tight peak, and then, his hand slid down, down, down, until his fingers threaded through the bushy curls at her pubis, seeking and finding the pulsing, overly excited bundle of nerves waiting to be set on fire.

Hermione cried out, and Severus covered her mouth with his own. Their tongues delighted in their dance, and suddenly Hermione was falling backwards, landing on the soft, transfigured bed. Fortunately, Severus had pulled back so they didn't end up biting one another's tongues as they landed.

He chuckled ruefully. "I have always strived for grace."

"I think you're very graceful. Fucking sexy."

His eyebrows rose in gratified surprise. "Sexy?"

"Very." Hermione barely recognized her own voice. "Let me show you."

He helped her remove his trousers and pants, and then her hands were everywhere. Within brief moments, Severus was between her legs, with Hermione guiding him to where she wanted him to be.

"So wet," he said as he slid home.

Hermione arched her back. "Yes." The word was an elongated sibilant sound of joy that filled the room.

She threaded her fingers through his long, lank hair. As Severus thrust unevenly, he bent to kiss her. Hermione wrapped her legs around his narrow hips, locking her ankles to keep him buried deep, and twined her tongue with his.

They found their rhythm, excitement and heat building between them. Hermione's fingers dug into his back as she rocked her hips, and Severus' strokes became faster. They were no longer kissing, but straining toward a release just beyond reach. Then, she slipped one hand between them, using her nimble fingers to press and encircle. Within seconds, white sparks dotted her vision and Hermione cried out his name.

Severus' thrusts were erratic now. His voice was hoarse. "Oh, fuck!" he shouted as he climaxed. He hung his head, his hair tickling her neck.

Hermione was happier than she had been in a very long time. After a minute, she said, "If you'd taken your own advice and shagged me sooner, we could have been doing this for months."

Severus laughed, and rolled to her side. "I'll make it up to you," he said.

"I'm counting on it."

She saw the sparkle in his dark eyes, and kissed him because she could. Then he raised one hand and silently summoned his wand. One non-verbal spell later and they were clean, still naked, and lying together beneath a sheet.

Severus stared at the canvas ceiling, watching Hermione's bluebell flames bob at the apex of the room. He suddenly asked, "What's the bad news?"

"Huh?" Hermione's brain was temporarily on hold. Fabulous sex had a way of doing that. She thought she might grow immune to it over time, but hoped reality would prove otherwise.

"You know," Severus said. "Good news, bad news. What's the bad news?"

"I thought you said ... Never mind." She grinned at him. "The bad news is I get to keep the tent."

Severus laughed. "You're not serious."

"I am indeed." She glanced at him through her lashes, watching as laughter morphed into a grin. Hermione adored his grin. It was wicked, and sly, and charming. Of course, it might also have to do with the placement of his left hand, but still.

"Then I know just who to see about a place to stay," he said.

"I thought you lived..." she frowned. "Aren't you staying with Lucius?"

He seemed to have an inordinate fondness for her hair, as he began to wrap a curl around a finger. "I've been staying with Lucius for months. In Draco's room. I packed my things before I came to see you."

Anticipation ghosted across Hermione's skin. "Did you?"

"I did. You know Lucius insists Draco live with him until he is fully recovered."

"Isn't that only a matter of days?" she asked, concerned despite the circumstances.

"Lucius will use the time to his advantage. Having lost Narcissa so recently..." Severus broke off, his expression pensive.

"He'll want to keep Draco close. I understand that." She glanced at him, only to find he was watching her fingers trail through his chest hair. "But why do you"

"I would rather not accept Lucius' largesse indefinitely; yet, with the discovery of the library.... Just think, Hermione, how many other potions lie undiscovered in that archive." He glanced at her left arm, recalling his promise to her mind. "We have pursuits of our own," he said, "but nothing says they can't lie parallel to your official assignment."

"Nothing at all," she said, smiling brightly.

"While I am here, however, I'd like space of my own."

Hermione brushed a strand of hair out of his face, and Severus leaned into the caress. After a moment, he said thoughtfully, "There are two bedrooms here, aren't there?"

"Yes."

At her tone, he rolled away from her, angling his head so he could look directly into her eyes. "If you aren't ready to take that step, Hermione, I understand."

"Severus, I definitely want you." Hermione's voice was laden with meaning. "I had thought perhaps if things went well -- we could use the second room for our own library."

That wicked grin flashed again, and as Severus rolled her over and nestled between her legs, he said, "I foresee things going very well."

"Me, too," she said and kissed him.

My step is slow, the snow's my breath

I give the ground a grinding death

My marching makes an end of me

Slain by sun or drowned in sea(3)

~oOo~

End Notes:

1. Another riddle found on multiple sites, including braingle.com. The answer is *tomorrow*.
2. This is the first stanza of the riddle Mr. Elton sends to Emma in Jane Austen's novel of the same name. The answer to the charade (as Mr. Elton would call it) was *courtship*.
3. It is a *glacier*. Another riddle found in multiple locations, including the daily riddle.com and braingle.com.

Please indulge my final nod to the genius of Severus Snape as a character and as portrayed by Alan Rickman. I have quoted a couple of sentences from Snape's opening Defense Against the Dark Arts lecture in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (page 177, American edition) in the Legilimency scene between Severus and Hermione. I have also quoted snippets from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*: Book 5: Canto II. Many of you will recognize them from when Alan Rickman's character, Colonel Brandon, read them to Marianne Dashwood during her recovery in the film *Sense and Sensibility*.