

Hermione and Xenophilius' Winter's Tale

by nagandsev

An ill-fated Auror mission leaves a grieving family to carry on; a burdened heart
springs forth hope...

Back to The Burrow

Chapter 1 of 7

An ill-fated Auror mission leaves a grieving family to carry on; a burdened heart springs forth hope...

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The sunlight streamed through the blackthorn's branches and fell upon the withered leaves covering Ronald's grave, still frozen from winter's harshness.

Hermione brushed the decayed foliage gently from her husband's mound, her tears pouring down her cheeks, but she would give no sound to her grief. She forbade herself.

And so the teardrops fell, one by one, absorbed slowly by the thawing earth's pores.

Upon receiving news of Ron's death—no, *murder*, for she would never, ever, accept it as anything else; the mere thought of the phrase 'in the line of duty' was still a fresh desecration to her—she had mourned three days uncontrollably like a wild beast.

Ginny had watched over little Rose and Hugo along with her own children while Harry had wrestled and held Hermione, on and off, in between her thrashing and screaming, her beating his chest as if he were the Auror department incarnate, the sole cause and agent of Ron's death, and if she just beat hard enough, Ron would come back to life.

Like a Time-Turner, she had thought she could go back in time and make everything all right again. She always could. She always had taken care of others, always had been able to right a wrong.

But I wasn't there for you, Ronald, I wasn't there...

No one had been there at the showdown between Auror Weasley and the Death Eater, previously on the run, but then cornered, duelling to the death, Rodolphus Lestrangle. The notorious Lestrangle's last act of murder, before being forever erased as a threat to society by Longbottom's avenging Killing Curse on the loathsome fugitive, was cast and carried out in a blink of an eye on the young father of two.

That ill-fated Auror mission had been last early autumn, even though it seemed to Hermione as if it were just yesterday as she knelt and swept around the thawing grave, plucking randomly here and there at withered weeds and dried twigs.

Now, with the first whispers of springtime approaching, Hermione knelt beside her husband's tomb and concentrated on sharing with him the most recent family news.

"Ronald, we're going home," whispered Hermione, tucking an uncontrollable, frizzy lock behind her ear.

"Little Rose and Hugo and I, we're going back to The Burrow."

Attempting to control her quivering lips and cracking voice, she forced herself to continue and determinedly repeated, "We're going back*home*..."

Her frame shook, and Hermione could do naught but give over to the wave of pain and loss rearing up with a vengeance.

So, she sat on the cold ground, blotched with sparse dead grass and pebbled mud, and wept aloud as if she had just thrown the first fist of dirt on his bare casket.

A Matter of Statutes

Chapter 2 of 7

Pushing herself to carry on as usual, grief-stricken, vexed and determined Hermione runs into the loathsome defendant, Lucius Malfoy, for a battle of the wills.

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As Hermione sat on the cold, muddy ground beside Ronald's tomb, having wept herself into an exhausted state, she numbly reflected on how it had been merely a few hours since it happened. Since she snapped. Since everything in one crystal moment became clear. *What I must do...*

Take the children, leave London, leave the Ministry, simplify things... simplify my life... get away from him, it, this whole treacherous, mindless, corrupt world!

Only three hours ago, she had been in the Ministry of Magic, going through the motions of what her life had become. The cold mausoleum walls of the Ministry bore down on Interrogator Hermione Weasley. In one split second, it all had become utterly overwhelming.

Breaking into a cold sweat, she had fled the adjourned Wizengamot proceedings to seek shelter in her office chambre, but had halted outside the dungeon courtroom in the dimly lit corridor, leaning against the cool marble tiles to collect herself. She felt the oppressive, stagnant air crushing down on her and gulped for oxygen.

She wanted to scream out loud, so vexed and frustrated by the hypocrisy of what had just occurred. Wanting to kick something, she irrationally reprimanded herself. *Why? Why did I listen to everybody? I wasn't ready for this...I wasn't ready to come back so soon!*

With the advice and support of Harry and Ginny, as well as all of the Weasley family, she had returned to work shortly after Ron's death. For a while it had seemed to be a healthy distraction, an expedient way to help the healing process of her grieving, and so Hermione had thrown herself into her new position as an Interrogator with all of its challenges and seemingly absorbing intrigue.

But little by little, the novelty wore off as deeper and deeper the horror and pain of the murder of her children's father...her childhood mate, partner for life, and lover...sunk further in... lost forever; unfortunately, no matter how hard she tried to cover this suffering, the unbearable truth could not be ignored.

The cruel reality of it was an indescribable, frightening void, gaping out and surrounding her in the middle of the night whenever she awoke and reached out for her deceased beloved...searching for the missing presence in her life. In the middle of the day, when she had an impulse to visit him at Auror Headquarters, Hermione froze on the spot, confused, and was forced to accept again and again that Ronald was not there... forever gone... Particularly bitter were the frequent habitual thoughts which included Ron in daily plans; thus again, the sharp stabbing pain of reality cut through the fleeting illusions that he was still alive and would be walking through the doorway at any given moment.

In her grief-stricken mindset, she was left with only one choice: weekly visits to his grave to share with him what he could not corporeally witness*But he can in spirit! We can spiritually commune!*

And so, Hermione had faithfully visited and shared her and the children's lives with Ronald; she convinced herself that she was actually gaining and sustaining a nourishing strength from this vigilance and devotion. But recently, shove it to the side as she might, the anticipation and meaning of the visits had begun to consume her waking and non-waking moments. She had become more and more distracted, despondent, and frustratingly bored by all that she had previously worked so hard to attain within the Ministry. Her life's work the blood, sweat and tears that not only she but also all who'd sacrificed in common pursuit for true justice had come under danger.

It had been a long and windy road from when Hermione had first found employment with the Ministry of Magic as an advocate for the better treatment of house-elves, working with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, to being promoted into the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Finally, at long last, cases from overdue indictments were put into action; her life's work had reached it's culmination and fruition, finally set into motion.

Which was why, especially now, even through personal angst from her devastating loss in her personal life, she pushed herself to carry on. She had finally achieved a high position in the Magical Law Enforcement department, alongside other members of the Wizengamot panel encharged with interrogation of accused individuals. However, the case she had just acted as the main prosecutor and interrogator for, the court procedure and pronounced adjourned judgement on the case, left her swallowing back the bile rising in her throat.

It was all suffocating her.

Hermione patted her forehead, where beads of perspiration formed, and tried to calm her temper, which was surging as thoughts of the events of the past hour repeated themselves.

Corruption! The entire court procedure... There's something wrong with the Special Advisor Doge...how could he have sided in Malfoy's favour, for a prolonged adjournment? The statements, evidence and witnesses were irrefutable; and yet, that vile, slippery toff has managed to infiltrate, to foil the system yet again!

Infuriated, Hermione huffed and launched herself from leaning on the wall to return to her office. Fuming at the suspicion of wrongdoing going on, undermining everyone's

years and years of hard efforts, she blindly ran straight into her dreaded nemesis: Lucius Malfoy.

The notoriously clever, exclusive wizard solicitor, Lester Qualmsick, accompanied the Malfoy patriarch. Qualmsick, upon seeing who it was that had bumped into his client, swiftly made a polite excuse and motioned for Lucius to ignore the Wizengamot Interrogator and continue onward with him. "Lucius, let's be on our way, shall we..."

Smelling blood, Malfoy raised a hand to quiet him. "On the contrary, Qualmsick, if chief Interrogator..." Lucius paused, his grimace deepening as he looked Hermione over from head to toe in suppressed disgust, "*Weasley* has anything further to say to me in person," he leered at her, "I'm all ears."

Hermione bit her tongue; she would not allow herself to be goaded by him to respond, but at the same time, she was not immune...on the contrary, she was even more livid. His trademark arrogant sneer spurred it on. Moreover, the frustration she felt percolated almost uncontrollably upon being within arms reach of the loathsome defendant.

She could feel his vitriolic energy, volatile and dangerous...no court of law could nor would ever change Malfoy's indoctrinated, hardcore hatred*Hatred of all things different from him, but I will not fuel his mentality. I'll not empower him with further attention. Everything I had to say about him, I have said it. In a court of law. I will not lower myself to his level.*

Bracing herself, Hermione resolved not to respond to any provocation he may throw at her. She would not stoop so low. She was going to hold her tongue and walk away with dignity. She reminded herself, *Go to your office, check for any further messages, leave, and go to Ronald. Focus, Hermione, focus!*

It was the springtime equinox, and today was the day she'd promised herself to clean her husband's grave.

So, she mustered up her nerves and gave Lucius an equally cool stare and proceeded to pass him by without comment.

Malfoy's jaw muscle's clenched in throbbing tension; he would provoke a response out of the Mudblood one way or another.

"Nothing?" He taunted her cloyingly, "Not even a congratulations?"

Hermione froze. *Congratulations for what?*

Sensing the witch's façade would burst if he'd just prick her in the right way, Lucius took a step towards the repressed widow. "Pity. I'd thought you'd at least be capable of that..." *Mudblood.*

Hermione didn't need to hear the word to know what the blond pureblood wizard was thinking...the hateful sneer on his face said it all. She instinctively went to her neutral zone. She went numb. She could only blink at him.

It had been a horridly difficult case, seemingly in vain, prosecuting Lucius Malfoy. She had waited for years for this case to be brought forth for trial, and then only to be adjourned, thwarted by the clever Qualmsick pulling out his last line of defence with a wild card: the matter of a statute of limitation on all affidavits and litigation concerning those against his client, Lucius Malfoy. It was claimed that time had run out regarding the longstanding recriminations on the abuse of house-elves and other magical creatures, as well as the long list of war crimes supposedly done against wizards and witches by Malfoy during Voldemort's last reign ending in the Second Wizarding War.

However, due to there not being any precursors for many of these first time indictments, the nature of these proceedings led to the court adjourning, to be reconvened at an indefinite later date.

"You must feel so *unsatisfied*. The feeling of failure, futility must be... inexpressible for you," continued Malfoy, his cold, grey eyes giving way to the slightest glint of malice underlying his words. "A kind of inexpressible *grief*."

Hermione gave a fleeting glance to Malfoy's solicitor Qualmsick, who averted his eyes, and she motioned to pass by Lucius as she replied, "No comment."

Mockingly, he called out, "Well, well, if the Muggle founder and defender of SPEW herself cares not for a thorough requital for me...a justly deserved penalty, what is one to think? Interrogator Weasley, wasn't that pound of flesh you pleaded so pitifully for in vain? Hmm? Justice for the weak, the defenseless, the protection of lesser magical beings?" Menacingly, he stepped closer to her. "House-elves, Muggle-borns and other inferior creatures of the like have no equal place in true Wizarding society." Lucius' jaw muscles clenched in suppressed tension. "I may yet be forced to pay some measly Galleons for your otiose and offensive meddlesome attempts to seek retribution, but let me state for the record to you personally: I have no regrets. Nor will I ever have." He repeated harshly, "Ever."

Breathing deeply to still her nerves, Hermione lifted her head slightly and responded, "Your objections have been duly noted, Mr Malfoy, both now and in the court room. Perhaps your solicitor should remind you to watch your tongue whilst in my presence. I am an officer of the court, no matter of your particular personal opinion about me. Now, if you'll excuse me." She motioned for him to move aside, which he did not do.

Brown eyes met his challenging cold, grey ones.*I will not be unnerved by you, Lucius Malfoy!*

They stared each other down for several seconds.

Then, Lucius seemingly gave in and calculatingly said, "I'm not totally unfeeling to your unmercenary causes and distress, Ms Weasley. On a personal note..."

Hermione couldn't control herself and flinched.

"I must take this opportunity to offer my condolences to you."

This was what she had least expected to hear from Lucius Malfoy, of all people, and the shock of it caught her off guard; she could not help but lower her shields a tad and softly reply, "Thank you, Mr Malfoy."

But this was just what Lucius wished for, her vulnerable spot: her dead husband. Grey eyes glinting with malice, he took a step into her and spoke, barely audible, "You can't begin to imagine what it means to me knowing that there is... one less Weasley in the world... one less Weasley to despatch..."

The sound of a hand slapping a face thudded dully in the dim corridors, absorbed instantly by the merciless black walls.

It wasn't the attack on his person that made Lucius Malfoy's eyes grow wide...he'd rather liked that little surprise, having intended to cause ~~some~~ response from the dirty little Mudblood...but the words accompanying the provoked act, registering slowly in his ears, made his blood boil.

"You, filth," whispered Hermione fiercely, looking straight into the pureblood supremacist's icy grey eyes. "You utter, utter load of filth!"

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Of Miracles and Mulishness

Chapter 3 of 7

Some things have never changed, and Hermione seeks solace and freedom from her exacerbating fears, only to have an ill-fated event challenge her remaining resolution as well as spark some old belligerence between her and a certain flossy-haired wizard.

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Qualmsick grabbed Malfoy's arm before he could act against Hermione in any way and firmly instructed, "Walk away, Lucius. Come with me. Just walk away."

Hermione was frozen in lost moments of time as she held Lucius Malfoy's enraged grimace: Ron's death, flashes of her abuse in Malfoy manor, and Lucius' insults...all clambered around in her head, causing her to feel dizzy with vertigo, and the sensation roared down the words that she'd just heard herself say: *You filth. You utter, utter load of filth!*

The Malfoy patriarch, however, had found his voice. "You'll regret that our paths ever crossed again," snarled Lucius in a low voice. "You'll rue the day that you ever dared to utter those words to me."

Suddenly, the door to the Wizengamot chamber opened fully, and members started to filter out into the corridor.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Lester tugged Lucius slowly away toward the lift.

Hermione was seized by an irrational force and blurted out, "You can dish it out, but you can't take it, can you, Malfoy?"

Qualmsick gripped Lucius' arm with a steel grip to keep the former Death Eater from lunging at her.

"*Dish it out?*" hissed Lucius, his eyes narrowing. "Is that what you want, you little..."

"Lucius, this is neither the time nor the place," Qualmsick reminded him fiercely, and then the solicitor whispered something in the blond wizard's ear, causing Malfoy to halt immediately.

A cold chill went down Hermione's spine from Lucius' sinister visage, which then was unexpectedly mirrored by Qualmsick as well. A sickening sensation washed over her, and she had a flashback of being surrounded by Death Eaters, as years ago in the Department of Mysteries when helping Harry search for his prophecy. Remembering Ron, Luna, Ginny, and Neville, her other companions on that memorable day in the Ministry, she was gripped with a burning ache in her chest.

Ronald! So much has changed, her eyes welled up with tears as she stared at Lucius and realised *and yet, so little!*

Lucius smiled sardonically, noting and taking credit for her renewed painful expression, and allowed Lester to guide him away from the growing cluster of court officials to the lift.

As if hypnotised, Hermione watched and followed them.

As the lift's doors opened, Lucius turned around and balefully mouthed a curse at Hermione.

Instinctively, Hermione's wand had flashed upwards to shield herself, but nothing, seemingly, struck her.

Lucius leered at her, satisfied, and then Hermione saw Qualmsick and Malfoy enter and disappear as the lift hurled them away. She broke out in cold sweat again and heard Minister Shacklebolt's booming low voice calling out to her as everything went dark.

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Hermione had blacked out for only a few minutes. Lucius' ominous image was the first thing that appeared in her mind's eye when she came to in her office chamber. She had been carried there by Shacklebolt himself, but as soon as she had collected her wits enough, despite the concerns of her colleagues, she fled the Ministry.

So that now, as she sat on the cold ground beside her husband's mound, having wept until there was only a void of emptiness left inside her, she mindlessly continued to brush the decayed foliage off his grave, here and there, unaware of time and coldness. So unaware of her surroundings, she wasn't alert to the sound of someone Apparating behind her.

"Hermione?"

The recognition of the voice registered vaguely. The touch of caring hands, carefully helping her to stand, caused a dull ache to throb in her chest. As she felt Harry's arms gently surround and hold her, she felt so very light-headed. A darkness seemed to be billowing towards her, sucking out her remaining strength.

"Hermione?" Harry squeezed and held her tighter; she laid her head on his shoulder, feeling so weak. "Shacklebolt has told me everything he knows. Lucius didn't curse you with anything that we can trace...no doubt he just wanted to unnerve you a bit." Hermione moaned pitifully, and Harry frowned in deep concern and thought, *She's delirious and exhausted!* Potter gave Ron's grave a solemn gaze, and then he whispered above his dearest friend's frizzy hair as he felt her relax her body weight against him, "I'm going to take you home now, Hermione. You can tell me your side of the story later."

"The children, Harry?"

"Ginny's watching them...they're with us at Grimmauld Place."

"Harry... What has happened? What have I done? I shouldn't have...I couldn't help myself. Malfoy..."

Harry's nostrils flared in controlled anger. "Don't you worry about Lucius...Kingsley told me enough for now. I've got Malfoy's number, as well as Qualmsick's...don't fret a second longer. I'll take care of them both."

"No, Harry, you don't understand..."

"With a few other Aurors, we'll put the fear of Merlin into them. Lucius won't dare come near you."

Hermione raised her head. "Lucius mouthed a curse at me...Harry, you didn't see how he leered at me...it was more loathsome than Bellatrix's was when... and I lost my control! Lucius said, you see, he said..." she gulped at the air to breathe, "he was glad Ronald's dead, one less Weasley in the world!" She began to sob anew. "He's such a horrid, horrid..."

Hermione gazed wildly around to Ron's grave, pushing away from Harry. "Nothing's changed! Ronald gave his life to rid the world *of that* mentality, but nothing's changed! After all this time, Malfoy is as despicable, bigoted and evil as ever! Nothing's changed, Harry, nothing's changed!" she repeated over and over until she became incoherent, utterly exhausted.

Harry took his childhood friend into his arms again and held her until he felt her going limp, resigning herself to his help. Assured she was still and finally calm enough, he immediately seized the moment to Apparate them to number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

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Springtime at The Burrow brought forth blossoms and fragrances of all kinds, from the orchard behind the garden to the warm scents of sweet powders and fragrances floating, wafting to and fro, from the kitchen. The comforting coziness of Molly's hearth and home was as welcoming as ever, and little Rose and Hugo had melted under the indulgent attention given by Arthur and Molly; and as children will, they bounced back to their fervent and playful selves in no time after moving in.

It was only, sporadically, at night, when one of them would awake in confusion and cry out for their father, unable to awaken from a nightmarish fear that things had become more difficult to deal with. Those were the worst nights; but as Hermione gazed out at the large overgrown gnome-filled garden of The Burrow, she sighed and gave thanks that the daytime hours and activities erased the dubious and unpredictable evening ones. Temporarily.

It was on these occasions, during these night terrors, that Hermione grew more and more numb, feeling more and more helpless, feeling unable to offer any solace verbally to her children from their feelings of anxiety and fear, their vivid hallucinations.

Or, are they mine? She was unable to remember the specific details of many of her own turbulent dreams, and she awakened in a cold sweat, overwhelmed by an allusive but intense state of agitation.

Only one reoccurring dream could she remember in discomfiting detail: a distorted image of Ron peering forth from an undefined blackness, his body and face half-shadowed, and then Hermione would feel the sensation of indescribable pain and heat... a state of sexual excitement would occur, always followed by a sickening sensation and Lucius Malfoy appearing in dark robes; then, she was falling, plummeting to her death in darkness, flailing around and grasping to cling to any substance, to any life line, but without avail. She awoke each time, panting and trembling in a state of confusion and shame, and dreaded returning to sleep for fear of the replaying nightmare.

Regarding the children, she was only able to hug them and cradle them as if they were infants, shushing and lulling them back to sleep with sweet nothings and soft lullabies. When they were once again in deep slumber, Hermione was left with little to comfort herself, and the tedium of the long, lonely nights, too often sleepless and awake with her evasive fears and worries, awaited her.

The repetitive events drained her of warmth in body and soul; a hard freeze seemed to cover and spread throughout her innermost core each time. The growth and effect of this numbness became noticeable to her more and more distinctly. She began to doubt herself in everything. She no longer knew if it was all in her mind, or if Lucius was indeed the main reason or perhaps merely partially responsible. Worse still, she felt as if her very life force were withdrawing and detaching itself even as her magical power slowly ebbed away all from the grief of losing Ron for she no longer had the concentration and zest she had felt so intensely before. Her heart ached, and it seemed only her children kept her tethered to the here and now life; however, this cloud of depression and self-doubt had accumulatively hung over her for so long, she could not distinguish further the exacerbating causes though she knew her condition had been deeply accentuated by the incident with Malfoy and Quilmsick.

But now, the warmth of the radiant sunbeams on her face helped to push worries aside for the moment, and she glanced back into the kitchen to see Molly bustling back and forth, preparing a basket of fresh baked goodies for her and the children to take on their afternoon walks in the meadows down to the river to play.

Hermione caught Arthur giving his wife a loving kiss, and then her father-in-law grabbed a pumpkin and cinnamon muffin and waved to Hermione before quickly Flooing to work. She smiled sadly to herself, remembering what Arthur had reassured her about, *The Minister said to take as long as you need for your leave of absence. Or, if you'd like, you may work from home on the litigations; whenever you feel up to it, you'll let us know. Just take your time, dear. Take as long as you need.*

And so she had. For the past few months, she hadn't the slightest inclination to lift a single parchment sent from the Ministry; she'd left all the owl deliveries on her desk in the study to collect dust. A numbing inertia crept up silently on her regarding all work-related matters, and she decisively gave what energy she had to the children and daily obligations with only the slightest trace of a nagging guilt regarding her Interrogator duties.

Moreover, today was a good day. A hot spell had blown in and with it a dull restlessness on Hermione's part; the unusual heat wave beckoned her away outside and out of her brooding.

So, as Hermione stood in the main doorway watching Rose and Hugo attempting to catch frogs in the garden's pond, she resolutely decided to make the extra effort to relax and put all her cares away for the afternoon. With the sunlight beaming down, unseasonably hot and glorious, she smiled down at the two Flutterby bushes which had been planted so long ago for Bill and Fleur's wedding. The beguiling little plants still stood; the leaves fluttering softly in the mild afternoon breeze.

As Hermione gathered up a blanket from the clothing line, she gazed over the orchard towards the closest sloping hill and caught sight of a nearby puffy, chimney smoke floating slowly against the bright sky from beyond the hill. She had noticed the smoke before, but she'd never thought or cared to ask about it. *How odd... Whose could that be?*

Before she could make enquiries, the bustling Molly came over and handed Hermione the prepared picnic basket. "It's ready, dear; now you best be off to enjoy the afternoon. Arthur said he heard on the wireless that a fierce storm front is likely to push through soon."

Eager to enjoy as much of the good weather as they could, Hermione and the children walked leisurely down the long lane leading from The Burrow, and instead of heading straight towards the village of Ottery St. Catchpole, they turned left and back-tracked, walking away from the cornfield, and strode over the fields towards the hills in the back of the orchard and garden.

The healing powers of the meadows surrounding The Burrow could not be stated enough. There was something about the sunlight on the golden, open fields full of primroses, gilly and poppies that drew Hermione to them, and she soon began to relax.

Once over the second small hill, the lush meadow began sloping down to the slow flowing river bed; their daily afternoon walks had become a fixed part of an unspoken regime which Molly had gently nudged Hermione and the children into. *More for my sake than for Hugo and Rose, no doubt* reflected Hermione, thinking about Molly's intense heartfelt concern for her and the children. The death of her sons, Fred and now Ronald, was an unspeakable pain for Molly; Hermione and she could communicate and comfort each other at times with just a nod of the head, a knowing smile or a quiet hug. No words were necessary.

It was Molly who had helped them find their favourite spot on the lovely, grassy bank of the river near Bottom Bridge. And as soon as they arrived there this sunny afternoon, Hermione spread out the blanket and set the basket of fresh baked treats on top. Rose and Hugo immediately took off their shoes, over-excited to wade and enjoy the shallow, stone-bottomed water along the bank.

"Mummy, can we go in the water now, before we eat...it's so lovely and sparkly, pretty please?" begged Rose.

Rose was soon to be eleven and did the talking for both her and Hugo; Hugo had stopped speaking since Ron's death. He'd been a late speaker as it was...no uttering a comprehensible word until he was five, and now, as he was nine, the Healers at St Mungo said that when he was ready, he'd speak again; the shock of the loss of his

father was enough to regress him and that it was 'normal'. Everyone would have to be supportive and just wait out his recovery from the traumatic event of his father's death.

However, Hugo would softly say 'Mummy' now and then, in particular, when Hermione would cradle and soothe him from a nightmare, and sometimes he would utter 'Rose', but not consistently.

Unable to deny them, Hermione reminded, "Yes, but remember, only in the shallow, pebbled area...no further."

Hugo nodded excitedly and Rose grabbed his hand, leading him down to the bank. With squeals of delight, the children took off their summer legwear, tossing it on the grassy bank, and in the blink of an eye began wading in the sunlit water.

As Hermione laid out some muffins and scones, the sounds of splashing each other was heard. She smiled, enjoying the sight of Rose and Hugo playing and able to express their happiness so freely, so innocently and full of joy.

Hermione sat on the blanket, cushioned by the thick summer grass, and sighed. A gentle breeze was blowing, and she noted massive, billowing clouds from the north in the distance. *Hmm... the storm is indeed coming sooner than later, but maybe it won't get here for hours...* She lay back and stretched out on the warm blanket, savouring the softness of the lush earth underneath like a big, warm eiderdown duvet and heaved a heavy sigh again. Her thoughts drifted like the fluffy cumulus clouds quickly drawing closer and closer. *Ron would've loved a day like today... the sun, the air, the children enjoying themselves...*

"Mummy! It's Hugo, Mummyyyy!" came the cry of Rose.

Springing up in a flash of panic, Hermione ran and leapt into the water, seeing little Hugo bob further and further away...everything happening as if in slow motion...he was being sucked deeper into the main stream, and the faster she moved the further he was carried away. "*Accio! Accio wand!*" she screamed, simultaneously splashing and diving into the water in a split second decision. But her concentration for summoning was wildly split and unfocused, and no wand appeared. As she came up for air, gasping, she could not see him above the water. She screamed madly, "Hugo! Hugooo! Rose, stay where you're at! Hugo!"

Time had stood still, her heart pounded with a burning pain. She couldn't breathe. *Oh, God, let me die, let me die! But let him live... Accio, Accio, Hugo!*

Rose's screams and cries from the bank were reverberating in the air.

In blind terror and unable to feel the bottom of the river anymore, Hermione desperately swam and splashed around, groping in the dark waters for her son's body...and at that moment, her eye caught sight of another figure, a man of some sort, materialised, blurred and moving, emerging from the water with...

"Hugo!" Splashing and splashing frantically to get out, now feeling the bottom, Hermione lunged forward in spastic movements towards the figures, screaming, mad with fear. "Don't touch him! Let go of him! Is he? Is he...?"

Hysteria took over as she collapsed beside Hugo's body, instinctively and fiercely pushing the man away from her son's body. But the tall figure didn't budge. Before she knew what was happening, the soaking wet, flossy-haired stranger had pulled out a wand, and with a flick of it, Hugo had rolled over, vomiting out the river water.

The wizard was fixated on Hugo and continued to calmly cast various Healing spells on the child, ignoring Hermione's pushing and, by now, hysterical weeping.

Now thoroughly unimpeded, the oxygen was able to flow through to his little lungs, and the child cried out, "Mummy, Mummy!" Hugo sporadically choked and clung to his mother for dear life.

Rose had ran over and latched onto Hermione from behind.

"There's nothing to fear," the tall wizard assured kindly, straightening up and stepping back timidly a few steps from the distressed, weeping family. "He is breathing normally. No water in the lungs. He will be fine."

Clutching Hugo in one arm and Rose in the other to her tight, Hermione gazed at the wizard with a mixture of astonishment and apprehension. Through a haze of simultaneous shock and relief, she couldn't believe her eyes. "Mr Lovegood?"

Xenophilius held Hermione's gaze, seeming to have some internal conflict with himself, abashed and embarrassed, not knowing what to answer. After several seconds, he found his words to nervously utter, "Miss Gran...um, Weasley, I assume you're staying..." The man who'd just saved her son's life seemed utterly ashamed and troubled, but still he offered, "I'll Apparate to The Burrow and bring back help."

"No!" screamed Hermione anxiously. She panted heavily, but controlled herself enough to say, "Don't leave us, don't leave us alone!"

Both children looked up at the tall candy-floss-haired wizard for his answer, scared and apprehensive from their mother's plea. In a small voice, little Rose asked, "What's wrong with my mummy? Hugo's awake...he threw up the bad water! He didn't go to sleep forever like daddy... Why is she scared?" Rose began to whimper softly.

Hermione and Xenophilius locked eyes, one soul understanding the other's past loss, as well as the detrimental fear of another narrowly escaped loss of life, all too well.

Xenophilius blinked hard. Somewhere in his distant memories something clicked. Something painful, vivid. But alive. So alive.

Frightened and confused by her mother's now uncontrollable sobbing, the child repeated, "What's wrong with my mummy? Hugo's awake...you just said he'll be all right! Why is she crying?"

Xeno ever so slowly raised his hands while gracefully kneeling down so that he was eye-level with Rose.

"Sometimes tears, my little one, are *good* things. Sometimes, they are tears of joy."

Rose's eyes grew wider with surprise.

Seizing the moment to further distract and take matters into hand, Xeno raised his eyebrows in a speculative way and enquired, "Have you ever seen a Patronus Charm, my dear?"

Subduing her sniffles, Rose nodded her head affirmatively. "My daddy and Uncle Harry showed me and Hugo." Her eyes shined with excited pride as she added, "Mummy and Auntie Ginny know how to do one too...even though they're witches!"

Xenophilius gave an impressed look and gently smiled, but Hermione could see his eyes were strained, covering a raw pain. "Well, that's no surprise." He lowered his voice to a friendly whisper and shared a secret. "Witches are the fairest and most powerful of magical creatures! Let no one tell you different! And it so happens that your Aunt Ginny and your mother are the fairest and most magical of those."

He gave a cordial nod to Hermione, and then Xeno looked back to Rose and continued good-naturedly, "As you're surely one of the good Weasley family, what might your first name be?"

"I'm Rose."

"Of course, you are, the loveliest little flower..."

"Do you know my grandmum?"

"Your grandmother is widely renowned throughout the land, as only the good Molly Weasley can be...you're staying with her, then?"

Rose nodded.

"And was she home when you left?"

Rose nodded more vigorously.

"Well then, let's cast a Patronus, letting your grandmother know where we are, shall we?"

Xenophilius cast the Patronus spell, and a large hare issued forth from his wand's end, hopping in front of Xeno for a mere moment before bounding off in the direction of The Burrow.

Knowing it would only be seconds before the Weasley matriarch would appear to help, Xeno sat back on the grass, seemingly tranquil and serene. As he smiled at Rose and Hugo, a slight twinkle shone in his grey-blue eyes, and he waved his wand and had several daisies, wildflowers and primroses animatedly dance an upbeat jig for the children.

His captivating their full attention allowed Hermione to finally voice her thoughts. "I didn't see you."

"I was under an Invisibility charm," answered Xenophilius casually, his attention focused between keeping the flowers dancing and gaging the children's mirth, completely avoiding eye contact with her.

Now in heavy thought, Hermione blinked in consternation at the incongruous situation and wizard in front of her. It was in another lifetime that she had last seen Lovegood, and there were still dubious thoughts attached to him and even more dubious feelings. She was conflicted by the fact that she'd never thought much about Xenophilius Lovegood since that horrible day she, Ron and Harry visited his home, seeking knowledge about the Deathly Hallows so many years ago.

Now and then, she'd seen and spoken with Luna and Rolf Scamander, but to her embarrassment, Hermione realised she'd never enquired much about Luna's father on those occasions. They were always quick chat about their careers and their own children with only general references to anyone else not immediately involved in her life.

Perhaps, her lack of enquiry was influenced by and partially due to Ron having so strongly disliked Lovegood in the first place, followed by his keen aversion and scathing criticism of Xenophilius after that ill-fated day when they discovered and experienced his betrayal first hand. Ron had never liked keeping silent about it all, but as only the three of them had known the truth of Lovegood's forced betrayal, and respecting Harry's wishes primarily, both he and Hermione resolved that they'd never reveal Luna's father's disgraceful behaviour on that horrid day. For everyone's sake, they put the matter behind them.

And so, Hermione could only blink in turmoil, conflicted with random, disdainful thoughts about Xenophilius, but also thanking God for Lovegood's presence as she clutched her children closer to her. *It was a miracle...Lovegood saved Hugo's life!*

The children's soft giggles at the delightful silliness of Xenophilius' Light magic entertaining them suddenly irritated and caused Hermione to bluntly ask, "Mr Lovegood, how is it that you were even here? Why were you under an Invisibility charm?"

Again the wizard diverted his eyes from her demanding ones, but he quietly answered, "Usually, one uses them when one doesn't wish to be seen." He gave her a fleeting glance and mulishly added, "By anyone."

Even in her highly emotional state, she felt slightly irked by his response and couldn't help wanting to know further details. With a huff, Hermione took in Xeno with an irritated look while he continued to entertain Hugo and Rose and thought, *How dare you be pedantic with me at a time like this?* An old obstinacy flared up in her unexpectedly, and Hermione belligerently demanded to know, "What were you doing here in the river in the first place?"

Giving a wary look around, but still unable to meet her intense brown eyes straight on, Xenophilius took his time and guided the dancing flowers to on top of the tall blades of grass between them before he intractably replied, "Why, fishing for Freshwater Plimpies, of course, Ms Weasley."

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A/N: The greatest appreciation to the awesome linlawless for her generous heart, time and beta skills!

Of Tempests Past and Present

Chapter 4 of 7

A violent storm erupts, sweeping tempestuous memories to the forefront for both Hermione and Xenophilius.

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Hermione blinked at Xenophilius and frowned in consternation.

Doubting completely that he was fishing for Freshwater Plimpies and not appreciating his mulish tone one bit, she opened her mouth to rebuke him, but at that very second, a loud crack of thunder broke above them. The sky had turned dark with low, ominous clouds flying speedily by, and the wind blew with the fierce strength of an erratic force, causing Hermione to clasp the children even tighter to her. The children cried out in fright as the sudden thunderstorm flashed its lightning bolts sporadically here and there across the sky.

Xeno jumped up, his brow furrowed, perplexed as to why Molly had not yet responded to his Patronus. Heavy raindrops began to plop down, threatening to transform into hail at any second as the wind gusted wildly. In a split-second decision, Xeno turned to Hermione and said, "Come. Let me help you Apparate the children back to The Burrow."

"No," answered Hermione, rejecting his offer immediately. Even though he had been more than gallant, she irrationally disliked the thought of Lovegood taking one of her

children for Side-Along-Apparation. But even more strongly, she distressfully doubted herself; so discombobulated by her night terrors she had become, it was affecting her magical powers. She didn't want to splinch her children, let alone herself.

A pained look crossed Xeno's face for a second, but then he waved it away and whipped his wand at the nearest tree to Summon the blanket with its contents over beside them. A multitude of leaves fluttered across the air and above them, merging with and forming a sealed canopy over the blanket. Xeno flicked his wand again, and as the rain began to pelt the improvised, leafy 'carriage', Lovegood urged, "Climb inside."

He held his free hand out to the children while his wand hand made an opening for them to enter. "Climb on board," he instructed Hugo and Rose. "Let you travel like our mystical cousins of the East on their celestial carpets! Ms Weasley?" he urged as the rain began to beat down upon him.

The heavens opened, and Hermione could do nothing but hurry and follow her children inside.

Close by, a flash of lightning caused the children to squeal in fright, and Hermione called out to Lovegood through the sound of the storm, "And you?"

"Trust me to navigate you to shelter, at least; perhaps you can open your mind enough to see the practicality of that, Ms Weasley!" Without further ado, he swiped his wand, closing the opening, then held his wand steady, levitating the contrivance. Slowly trudging through the pouring rain, he kept them afloat and protected them from the elements.

The enclosed, canopied carpet bobbed gently to and fro like a small boat in the storm.

Hermione was both surprised and relieved that it wasn't long before they came to a halt. *Where are we?*

Xeno reopened the contraption and called out, "Hop on out, my dear Weasleys; we're here!"

Through the tempest, Hermione saw a doorway open with warm scone lighting...a heartwarming sight.

The children scampered out of the makeshift protective covering and through a door that had opened for them. It led into a spacious circular room with a lit fireplace on the far side. Hermione felt the force of the gale wind as she quickly followed behind Hugo and Rose and sighed in relief once inside, looking around and noting the colourful array of unusual pieces of furniture and objects.

A dripping wet Xenophilus entered and placed the wicker picnic basket down on a low footstool beside a wall of shelved books. "I believe I've saved your basket; the blanket, however, is in need of a good drying spell."

And with that, he waved his wand and dried it. Giving Hermione an odd look, he hesitated and then suggested, "Perhaps, now, the children? May I?"

She nodded, and he quickly spelled them dry, but as Xenophilus turned back to the young widow to offer her his wand, she squeaked suddenly, jumping back at seeing something moving in the room.

Hermione had spotted a spherical-shaped creature whose thin pink tongue had snaked out, aiming for the picnic basket full of treats.

The children turned in the direction where their mother's gaze was fixated. Upon seeing a furry little creature endeavour to scavenge their Grandmum's pastries with it's long, squiggly tongue, they squealed and jumped in excitement, ready to run and catch it.

"Children, don't! Don't touch anything or... "

"It's one of my grandson's Puffskeins; actually, the house is full of the admirable little beasts."

Xeno knelt down to eye level with Rose and Hugo and waved to them to have a huddle with him. "Feel free to cuddle the complacent Puffskein and throw one about...if you can catch one, that is," challenged Xeno, wagging his eyebrows.

Rose and Hugo giggled, and Xeno gave them a further, hushed proposal. "However, if you willingly share a treat with one, the ever-docile Puffskein shall honour you with its gift of friendship and introduce you to our dignified Niffles...one of whom shall certainly lead you to hidden treasures buried in the rich earth of which you may choose..."

"Mr Lovegood," cut in Hermione, "I don't believe Puffskeins will do anything of the sort, and there's no need to elaborate." She took a deep breath in order to explain calmly. "If you don't wish for my children to bother the creature, then just say so...there's no need to embellish the truth nor..."

But the excitable Weasley tots were already off and running, searching for the furry little creature who had silently crept into hiding.

Their playful hunting led them around and about in the oval-shaped room, which was a cozy blend of an open living-room space and study, with a grand round table designating a dining area surrounded by several large arched windows in its curved wall. Rose and Hugo soon discovered an adjoining room, decorated in a broad palette of pastels, which lit up magically the second they entered. Squeals of delight sounded forth as they found various clutters of animated carved creatures and other unusual objects scattered about inside. Over the children's whoops and hollers was heard Rose's joyous voice, "Oooh, toys! And...and other weird, *funny* things!"

"Children, don't touch things that aren't yours," snapped Hermione as a seizure of worry gripped her, remembering Lovegood's exploding Erumpent Horn from years past.

"You are welcome to play with them, little ones," called out Lovegood, contradicting her.

"Mr Lovegood!" Hermione wished not to be rude to the man in his own home, but she wasn't used to anyone undermining her authority with her children.

Her tone seemed to tell Xeno this, and he softly explained, "Please, Ms Weasley, it's *only natural* that they should want to play."

"That's not the point, Mr Lovegood..."

"They are my Lorcan and Lysander's play things, meant for children's entertainment," he gently rebutted. "For their joy..." The tall white-haired wizard gave her a concerned gaze, looking her up and down.

His cordial admonishment caused Hermione to feel self-conscious. Flustered, she bit her lip and was about to tell Lovegood that it was her place and hers alone to tell her children what they could or could not do, when suddenly she shuddered violently from the dampness of her drenched clothing.

Noting she was chilled to the bone, Xeno offered, "Ms Weasley, may I, would you like..." He started to raise his wand to cast a drying spell over her body, but stopped, suddenly aware of Hermione's wet clothing, tightly clinging to her feminine form.

Hermione saw his hesitancy and in the instant understood why. Seeing his stalled gaze, a brief but definitely appreciative look...even if it was a fleeting one...caused a warm flush to bud forth on her cheeks.

This physical reaction induced her to instinctively notice the drenched cloth pasted on his tall angular form. Lovegood's cotton-tunic top outlined and revealed his lean, taut torso down to his waist. The strings tying the tunic's front had come unravelled nearly all the way down, and she bit the inside of her cheeks, unable to ignore that he had soft tufts of hair from his lean, muscular chest down to and beyond his navel, forming an eye-catching joytrail.

Hermione immediately averted her eyes, feeling a strange light-headedness.

An awkward silence ensued.

With the children's playful sounds in the background, Xenophilus gave the curly-haired witch an odd look and then offered his wand. "Please, take it." He stepped forward, very gentlemanly, holding it out to her.

His height and grace hit her. *He's very tall and spare...* Blinking, Hermione remembered the very first time she had ever seen Lovegood. *Bill and Fleur's wedding... He was so dapper and dashing...*

Another chill came over her along with a pungent sense of guilt for even noticing another man's attractiveness in such a way.

What is wrong with me? She shook her head slightly and refocused on the here and now.

He just saved my son's life, navigated us to his home for shelter and warmth, and is still standing here soaking wet in his water-filled Wellingtons. No doubt he'll find a Freshwater Plimpie or two inside them...

"No, Mr Lovegood, dry yourself first, please," she entreated and couldn't help but add a small smile. *He's kind and thoughtful, putting us before his own needs...* She suddenly felt the need to explain her situation a bit. "I...I don't know what is wrong with me. I completely forgot to bring my wand, and then I couldn't Accio..."

"No matter, Ms Weasley." He continued to hold his wand out, intent on her taking it. "I insist on you first. I shan't have my guest catch cold on my account."

Feeling they would be there all night, bantering back and forth niceties, she gave in. "Thank you, Mr Lovegood, you're most kind. You're..."

"Oh!" she gasped. For as she grasped his wand with him still holding one end of it, a dull glow issued forth, causing Xeno and Hermione both to inhale in surprise.

They simultaneously released the wand, and it fell to the floor. Xeno backed away from Hermione, slumping down on top of a side table, as if all of the air had been knocked out of him. With an incredulous, awed look, he gazed at Hermione as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

A tingling had gone through Hermione's body, and a splotch of darkness burst forth in her mind, momentarily causing everything to go dark in her vision. After several seconds, she recovered from the surge of magic from Xenophilus' wand.

With only the sounds of the children playing in the next room audible, Hermione and Xenophilus gazed warily at each other.

At long last, Xeno whispered, "It was you!" His hand unconsciously touched and pulled out an object on his chest. Hanging from a golden chain around his neck, he held a glistening symbol.

"The Deathly Hallows!" gasped Hermione.

Lovegood's mouth fell open to a perfect 'O', and he grasped the triangular eye tighter and rasped, "You are a Quester, Ms Weasley?"

In the recesses of her mind, Hermione realized her folly too late. She had revealed that she recognized exactly what the dubious symbol represented, but still, she shook her head in denial and asked, "A Quester?"

"You are a Believer?" A pained look etched Xeno's face. "You seek the Deathly Hallows, too?"

"I...I don't know what you're talking about, Mr Lovegood."

Exasperated, the burdened wizard let out a doubtful huff and challenged, "Don't you, Ms Weasley?" His features had hardened, fiercely tormented by something only known to him.

Her heart thumping wildly, Hermione's eyes widened, realizing the grave meaning of his question as well as the severity of her mistake. Trying to cover her tracks as best she could, she stammered, "No...yes, I mean! No, I mean..."

A sudden pounding on the main door saved her, and Molly Weasley's voice was heard calling out, "Xeno! It's Molly! Hermione!" There was a frantic pounding with the front door's knocker before the Weasley matriarch did away with any formalities and burst through the front door.

Molly took in Xenophilus and Hermione standing in their wet clothing, staring at one another with dazed, appalled looks, and demanded, "Xeno! Hermione! Good heavens! What has happened?"

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A/N: The greatest appreciation to the awesome linlawless for her generous heart, her precious, precious time, and her wonderful beta skills! The awesome banner was a gift to me from the one and only hexgirl; again, the greatest thanks to you ladies for all of the support and inspiration you give me!

Dreams, Arithmancy & Runes

Chapter 5 of 7

Molly and Arthur intercede, Hugo reaches out to Xeno, and Hermione struggles with her increasingly troublesome dreams, leading her to seek Xenophilus for help.

□

A/N: It is with the greatest, deepest gratitude that I thank my alpha beta, the one and only, Proulxes! This chapter would never have happened if not for her and her special gift of generosity and insight, let alone her brilliant writing skills, and knowing exactly what to ask to nudge my Muse along. Also, regarding the character reference in this chapter/story to Luna's mother, until the goddess Rowling reveals Mrs Lovegood's name on Pottermore or elsewhere, I've given her the name of Hibiscus. All characters and the world of HP belong to the divine JKR; I'm just playing with them in another playpen. The awesome banner was a gift to me from the one and only hexgirl!

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Hands on hips, Molly stared in expectation at Hermione, looking alarmingly like a sabre-toothed tiger in place of her usual kind-faced countenance. In the silence that followed, Hermione watched Molly snap a look at Xenophilius, who was staring at the diminutive matriarch in slack-jawed horror, and then back again to her.

When neither answered her, Molly bustled forward, pulling her shirtsleeves up to her elbows, "Good heavens, look at you two, you're soaking wet...and whose wand is this on the floor?" Molly *Accio'd* it into one hand while swishing her own wand first at Hermione and then Xenophilius in order to dry them. "Arthur and I," Arthur entered as she rattled on, "received your Patronus while we were in the middle of... Xeno...what on earth has happened? *Your family is with me...they need you...down on the banks beyond Bottom Bridge,*" your hare said...we Apparated there, but couldn't find a soul in sight! Told Arthur we should try the next nearest place...and it turns out you are here! Thank goodness, but what a goose chase! What with it raining Kneazles and Crups out there!"

Molly was flustered and clearly put out; her clothes were askew and her face flushed with emotion. Hermione suddenly wondered what activity Molly and Arthur had been in the middle of doing when Xeno had sent his Patronus. She bit her lip to prevent a small smile crossing her features at the thought and softly said, "We were waiting...and it began to pour down..."

Hermione was saved Molly's exasperated response by Arthur appearing at the doorway, looking similarly disheveled and flushed. "A little bit of water never harmed anyone," Arthur joked good-naturedly. "Sorry, Molly and I were, um, delayed. But Mollykins got here first, I see."

His wife shot him a *look*. "I searched for them on the other bank's side a bit, but then Apparated straight here, Arthur. Couldn't bear not knowing whether we had to continue looking for them." She folded her arms again, clearly not mollified.

Arthur walked over to Molly and squeezed her shoulder gently. "All's well, love," he murmured. "I spot-checked on the way on up here... through your orchards, Xeno. Looks to be a fine harvest this year." The offhanded compliment clearly was intended to lessen the tension in the air.

"But what in heaven's name happened to warrant sending a Patronus?" demanded Molly.

"Grandmum, Grandmum!" cried Rose, running into the room followed by Hugo. She lunged and threw her arms around her grandmother, and Arthur also found Hugo suddenly clinging to him as well.

There was a hubbub of gasping and cooing as Rose bumbled out the chain of events which had occurred. "Oh, goodness me! Oh, Hermione! Oh, Hugo! Oh, Xeno!" The litany of exclamations poured forth from Molly while Arthur stood by, wide-eyed in astonishment, only to slowly gravitate toward Lovegood and grab him by one shoulder as he shook his hand in deep gratitude.

Molly crossed over, too overcome to say anything, and gave Xenophilius a hearty hug. When she finally could, she gently uttered, "This'll be your wand then, dear Xeno," and she placed it reverently on the side table he'd been leaning on.

Hermione saw the flaxen-haired wizard stare at the wand with a peculiar expression on his face, almost as if he were evaluating something in his mind. His silver grey eyes met hers for a fleeting glance as Arthur scooped Rose up in one arm and took Hugo in one hand.

"Let's be getting these two back to The Burrow..."

Hugo broke away from his grandfather and ran over to the footstool to grab the picnic basket of goodies that had been saved from the downpour by Xeno.

To everyone's surprise, the littlest Weasley then crossed over to Xenophilius and tugged at the tall wizard's tunic to get his direct attention.

"Yes, little one?" asked Lovegood, forced out of his contemplation.

The young child reached in the basket and pulled out a muffin. He held it up to Xeno, and to everyone's surprise, blurted out, "Puffskein!"

All froze in shock.

It was the first word that Hugo had uttered to someone else other than Hermione and Rose since Ron's death. Hermione gasped and batted away tears welling up and threatening to flow. She felt Molly's supportive touch on her arm and mustered the control to hold her tears in. *I have to be strong in front of everyone...can't let them see tears!*

Xeno raised a speculative eyebrow, clearly understanding Hugo. "Ah, yes. A treat for the admirable beast. Well done, little one. I will make sure the deserving creature receives your kind gift of Weasley goodness."

Xenophilius gently placed his hand on the boy's head and smiled tautly.

"That'll do, Hugo," said Hermione, gently nudging her son away from Lovegood.

Arthur hoisted Hugo up, now holding both grandchildren to him like a grandfather bear with two little cubs. He waltzed them to the front door. "Here you go, you little rascals; like Fred and George, you are, getting yourselves into all sorts of mischief."

At the mention of her beloved twins, Molly gave a tight, sad smile, but quickly covered it up with a forced cheerful announcement, "Yes, we'd best be getting back and let Xeno here get some rest from us all."

Hermione's eyes met Xenophilius' and found she couldn't look away. Neither could he, it seemed. Words stuck in her throat, and she could only give him a terse nod and quietly acknowledge, "Mr Lovegood."

She trembled with pent up emotion and bit her lip, reining in her perplexed feelings about the conflicting impulses she was battling with at the moment. She wanted to cling to the wizard and hug him in gratitude as her mother-in-law had had the freedom to do, thanking and pouring her heartfelt appreciation out to him. *But I can't! He's... he's... Xenophilius Lovegood... Lovegood, who happened to be there in the river just when we were... who just happened to be under an Invisibility spell, and just happened... to save Hugo's life...when I couldn't...why couldn't I? Why wasn't I enough? What was wrong with me that I couldn't respond fast enough, and he...the renowned nutter, Xenophilius, thank God...could?*

"Ms Weasley?"

Hermione flinched, startled. *And his wand aglow when we both touched it...what did he mean when he said, "It was you!"? I have nothing to do with the Deathly Hallows, at least not in relation to him...* But a nagging thought flashed across her mind, a memory she had pushed aside and buried a long time ago *He...he couldn't have meant... He couldn't remember that I...I Obliviated part of his memory that day?* She swallowed hard at the distasteful reminder that she had had to Obliviate any traces of their discussion of the Deathly Hallows from Xenophilius' memory on that horrid day, so that the Death Eaters wouldn't know...*so that Voldemort wouldn't find out! We needed time, time was of the essence!* Hermione had had to do what was needed to secure for them protection, secrecy, as long as she could within her means, against Voldemort's followers. *It was all too dangerous! For everyone!* She had had no choice but to use the brutal charm on him.

Confused and conflicted, Hermione backed away from Xenophilius. As she reached the door, she turned back to him and managed to utter, "Thank you for Hugo, for everything... I must go now, but perhaps..." She wasn't quite sure what it was she wanted to say further, and so Hermione could only repeat, "I must go..."

"*Quisque facere debet, quod ab illo factum oportet* Ms Weasley."

One must do what one must? she translated silently to herself and suddenly became concerned at the possible implications attached to Lovegood's comment. Hermione held Xenophilius' gaze, her brow furrowing, and she quietly replied, "Yes, Mr Lovegood... One must do what one must..."

And with that, she closed the door behind her, troubled by her thoughts, before catching up with her family, leaving the pensive wizard to his own solitary thoughts.

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Hermione tossed and turned in her bed, unable to get to sleep. She reflected on the day's events with a heavy but grateful heart. Staring through the darkness and quiet of her room out the window into the starry night, Hermione remembered how her eyes had smarted witnessing Lovegood's kindness to her son, even though she had seen it was with great difficulty for him. *Let alone his saving Hugo's life!*

With a sharp intake of breath, she recalled how being reminded of the Deathly Hallows by Lovegood was painful for both of them; it caused her emotions to surge in turmoil and conflict even now. She turned away from the window's view, onto her other side, and scrunched her eyes tight, determined to get some sleep. But her mind kept racing, flitting from thought to thought, memory to memory, of the day's events. *Hugo almost drowned! Xenophilius... What was he doing there?* She flipped again to her other side... and stared again out the window into the vastness of the fathomless sky. Slowly, lying there in the stillness of the night in her bed, Hermione's tears welled up, mixed with bittersweet happiness, her heart opening to allow a spark of joy upon remembering Hugo speaking to the quiet man, and how gently Xenophilius had responded to him.

At the thought that Lovegood had triggered some spring of need to communicate in her son, a small smile crept upon her lips, and with this conflicting but thankful memory, she allowed herself to relax into a deep slumber.

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Ron's fading image disappeared completely above her. Hermione clawed. She grasped in vain. Higher and higher. The rope she was trying desperately to hang on to evaporated in her hands. She was falling. Surrounded by infinite dark space.

She hit rock bottom, and the darkness surrounding her lightened to a grey haze. As she peered through the heavy mist, she slowly made out what seemed to be a large triangular area of black dirt, a dark wooden border framing it, surrounded by tall tufts of dead grass on the outer side. Then she distinctly made out the outline of jagged rocks in the centre of the triangle, forming a circle.

It's... It's for... Hermione trembled in her sleep. *To conjure the spirit into the physical...*

No sooner had she thought it than a conjuring figure appeared. A wizard sent a baleful curse nonverbally. She felt a wave of nausea pass over her as she recognized to whom the long blond hair belonged. She felt a force. The runic symbol of the *em wah* repeatedly flew in her mind's eye. Then Hermione had the sensation that she was caught inside the top corner of the earthen triangle. She felt pain...as if she were bleeding. And to her added horror, she saw Hugo and Rose lying still, each in a different corner of the equilateral triangle. The image of Malfoy came into the foreground...closer. But then, suddenly, Xenophilius was before her. Like lightning, the *em wah* symbol flew around in her mind again but then morphed into a triangle and circle and was joined with a third...a wand-like line. *The Deathly Hallows!*

She woke up gasping for air. *Runes! That shape... the Hallows... that shape... The equilateral triangle burnt in the ground... the circle of stones.* Her heart was beating fast as she rose and threw on her robe, and as quietly as possible, she crossed the hall, opening the children's bedroom door, checking if they were well or...

Rose and Hugo were safely snuggled under their covers, fast asleep.

Hermione hurried back to her room and crossed directly to her worktable. She felt afire with energy, and a tingling coursed through her that had lain dormant for too long. *Magic!* Her inner core of magic was awakened once more. She felt it sporadically coursing through her, causing her fingers to itch, sensing inanimate objects being animate; her perception of her environment was felt more keenly. Even the cool night air seemed to flow and whirl with a vibrant energy around her. Feeling flushed with excitement and relief, knowing she was *back...* Her magic was *back...* She would use the last ounce of her being to protect her children...and could! Comforted by the flow of force clinging around and within her, she allowed herself to embrace the tiny but significant measure of healing that she was experiencing... She stood stock-still, deliberately quiet, feeling the wash of healing magic soothing the dreadful wound that had been opened by Ron's death. She felt like she was waking from a terrible lassitude. She had never felt so... vigilant!

As she lit a candle, she concentrated hard and whispered, *Accio!*

The onrush of magic prickled through her as the intended objects landed in front of her on the desk, tomes and tomes on Runology. Hermione searched through *Ancient Runes Made Easy*, *The Oxford Rune Dictionary*, *Magical Hieroglyphs and Logograms*, *Spellman's Syllabary*, *Advanced Rune Translation*... But it was the last old book she'd Summoned which she searched and cross-referenced the most. She rifled through *Ye Olde Magick Tome of Runes*, desperately seeking the symbols that kept appearing, repeating themselves.... Taking quill in hand, she noted down what each reoccurring one was possibly indicating, and then she sat down and drew out on a parchment a squared grid, carefully drawing the geometric design from her dream with the precision of the skilled Arithmancer that she was.

Feeling ablaze with determination, Hermione jotted down several formulae, measuring distances from one point to another, calculating the space and time of the finite forms, and ebulliently writing down their meanings. But her exuberance fell as every other couplet of one Arithmantic formula resolved itself with the same meaning: one repeating Arithmantic solution's meaning paralleled to the runic *eh waz* symbol: *Partnership!*

But the other...the other equated to... *Death!*

Her hand shook as she forced herself to check and check again, getting the same solutions over and over *Partnership! Death!*

She desperately compared the measurements of the triangle, the magic circle of the dream so vividly detailed in her mind's eye with that of the Deathly Hallows' circle. Those measurements of the Deathly Hallows, then the magic circle's difference in the circumferences, were then cut by the Elder Wand's formidable line, narrowing and changing the Arithmancy formulae and meaning, and the Runes... The doubt crept in...

She plopped down in her desk chair. Reliving Lucius Malfoy's malevolent curse, she tingled with nausea at the thought of Rose and Hugo being entrapped in her night terrors as well. She huffed and swallowed down the bile that rose in her throat as the thoughts of Malfoy, partnership and death swirled around in her mind... *My children...they were lying on the ground as if ... as if they were ... Between a partnership and death, I'd embrace death, but Hugo and Rose...what does this truly mean? I've never given over to mumbo jumbo, and this... This is maddening... If only there were someone to ask... to discreetly share this with... How could anyone else possibly understand?*

She felt she couldn't turn to those closest to her, as they were already skeptical of her theories and too concerned about her to be able to offer impartial advice or support as it was. Her colleagues at the Ministry were equally unlikely to be of help. She did not want to stir up trouble at work or within the family if she could not prove anything, anyway.

Her eyes gazed intensely into the early morning sky; the stars twinkling down were slowly fading, challenging her to see beyond them whilst they lasted in the soft heaven's mantle.

Xenophilius! Lovegood might be able to help... He's a renowned Runologist... and the Hallows... She swallowed hard as she admitted to herself, *He knows more than anyone... about the Deathly Hallows...*

But doubt raised its ugly head, causing Hermione to second-guess herself yet again.

But my children! I have to protect them... Hermione's rational constitution took its rightful place; her pragmatic nature reasserted itself, and she reasoned *It's just...that horrid nightmare, Malfoy... It can't absolutely mean anything...it's a dream, only a dream...this horrible scare we've all had with Hugo... and seeing that symbol today: the Deathly Hallows!*

But as Hermione stared at the solid calculations and the finite solutions, she felt a chill go down her spine attached to the uncanny feeling of Lucius Malfoy's presence so darkly, profoundly present in her night terrors, his having wormed his way to her very core... Frustratingly, her inability to ignore or deny the Arithmantic geometric predictions niggled away at her, even as she tried to deny that which kept repeating itself, *They must be wrong... wrong...* She gave over to the little voice, which said, *A second opinion is needed!*

To seal her decision came the image of Malfoy's silent mouthing of his curse...but this time, she heard it in her mind's eye like a grotesque children's rhyme *The blood of three shall needed be!*

With a terrifying fear, freezing her, she realised, *Myself and the children!*

There's nothing else for it, decided Hermione, resolutely resigning herself to the obvious. *I must go... to Xenophilus Lovegood! But it's unforeseeable how Lovegood will react to me; he's so... so ... unusual...* She sighed. *Possibly, truly bonkers...* She bit her lip. *What if he causes more harm than good? No. No, if he was sound enough in mind and body to save Hugo, he's sound enough to give me his scholarly opinion about my formulae...his Ravenclaw wit will see to that! Without a second opinion, without help, my children's lives could be at risk...if my Arithmantic formulae hold true, if Malfoy's curse has been cast to ensnare Hugo and Rose as well...how can I risk that? I can't!*

oOoOoOo

"Tell me about him."

"Well, dear, you know," suggested Molly, motioning her hand in a rotating way.

"No. No, I don't understand." Hermione gave Arthur a puzzled look and then turned back again to Molly.

Arthur cleared his throat and, buttering his bread, matter-of-factly said, "After the War... after Azkaban, well, Xeno had never been...always been considered a bit *unusual*... and what with the..."

Molly made a high-pitched sound, clearing her throat, indicating that Arthur should watch his words. The elder Weasley frowned, paused and, surprising Molly, continued on, "The Death Eaters had done a good number on him, torturing him until he was already well broken when they dumped him into Azkaban... The Dementors didn't have much left to play with..."

"Arthur!" reprimanded Molly sharply.

"The point is...when he finally earned his parole, he was... well... Let's just say that there wasn't much left by the time he came home... It's a miracle that he was able to help Hugo at all, given the nearly catatonic state he'd been reduced to by those..."

"Now, Arthur," Molly reproved her husband. "Xeno's always been a little aloof, hesitant to react...it goes way back, ever since poor Hibiscus' accident. Still blames himself, he does...and that, coupled with how he was treated by Bellatrix Lestrange in Azkaban..." Molly clearly had caught herself saying more than she meant to and clucked, "Well, enough of that, Arthur! We all survived... and if some of us are more... damaged than others, then that's the way the Snitch flies. You should stay away from Xeno, my dear. He is better on his own, without distractions that bring back painful memories."

"You knew his wife, Luna's mum? What happened, Molly? Luna has never spoken about the details of her mother's death... Did you know her well?" Hermione was beside herself with curiosity for details about the tragic events.

Molly heaved a heavy sigh. "Not surprising that dear Luna hasn't spoken about it more than necessary... It was horrible. A horrible way to die. And the poor child saw it all. Xeno was a minute too late to save poor Hibiscus."

"Why? How? What exactly happened?" asked Hermione, her voice in a tight whisper.

Now it was Arthur's turn to clear his throat, clearly unsettled by the topic and not wishing for further details to be elaborated on. "The *official* report was that it was an unfortunate accident, Mollykins, remember? No one was to blame, Hermione. Perhaps only Hibiscus herself. But then, she was a very free spirit, even by Xenophilus' standards... The marks of trauma from her unfortunate spell experimentation scarred her daughter and husband for life." The Weasley patriarch cleared his throat again and pushed back his chair. "Well, I do believe I must finally mosey on back to the Ministry." Arthur crossed and gave Molly an affectionate peck on the cheek. "Ginny and Harry will bring Hugo and Rose back after lunch with their own lot along. Can't wait to see little James, Albus and Lily. I'll try to sneak off and back home earlier today if I can."

Hermione noticed Arthur's slightly sober look as he added, "That is, if we haven't any raids to carry out."

Hermione frowned as a melancholic wave of emotion washed over her at all of the different signals she was receiving from Molly and Arthur *Molly knows more about Lovegood than she's told me, much more, as does Arthur... What are they hiding? Why did Molly imply that Xenophilus was at fault? How horrid!*

Hermione stood in the opened back doorway and gazed at the distant puffs of chimney smoke floating softly against the sky *From Lovegood's home!* Her forehead furrowed in thought and concern, and she reflected, *How much more was Xenophilus damaged by the war?* Her brow knitted further as it dawned on her that in all the times she had run into Luna since the end of the war, Luna had never spoken about her father. *Is it possible Xenophilus and Luna are estranged? How... how sad... Why? But Molly and Arthur are wrong about him being utterly damaged... A damaged man could not have acted as he did, plunging into the river and rescuing Hugo. Arthur's right; it is a miracle. Lovegood saved Hugo's life... and the dreams... Why has he appeared in my dreams? With the Deathly Hallows...my Arithmantic formulae have shown me that he could possibly...that the Hallows could possibly counter whatever odious, malevolent sigils that Malfoy may have planned for me and my children... Perhaps... perhaps Lovegood could help... He's a Runologist, like me... and the Hallows...*

Hermione could no longer keep secret her urgent need to visit their unpredictable, eccentric neighbour. She sighed heavily and announced to Molly and Arthur, "I have to see him. I have to speak with Xenophilus Lovegood. Today."

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A Sanctuary of Trust

Chapter 6 of 7

Hermione's visit to Xenophilius reveals more than either expected.

* H *

Molly looked astonished, and Arthur's mouth had dropped opened. After several awkward seconds, he cleared his throat. But before he could utter a sound, Molly did. "Speak to *him*? Xeno? Why on earth, Hermione?"

Feeling like an unbearable weight bore down on her chest, Hermione still couldn't explain all the reasons why she wanted to visit Xenophilius. "It's private, well, confidential."

Seeing the shocked expression on Molly's face, Hermione raced on to explain, *Work related*, that is. One of the parchments Harry sent me..." She motioned her hand towards the study and the pile of papers and mail that had accumulated there on her desk, as if that explained everything. "I'll be returning to the Ministry now, and I urgently need the counsel of another Runologist. A specialist such as Lovegood is invaluable, vital...as he has dealt with cryptic runes his entire life. Remember *The Quibbler*?"

She gave a small smile to reassure Molly and Arthur. "Also I didn't thank the man properly for saving Hugo."

"Oh, well, if that's it," huffed Molly, visibly relieved, "Then, well, you'll need *Crumple-Horned Snorkack* to dispell the first, outer ward..."

"And *Billywig propeller* for the second inner one," chimed in Arthur. "Mollykins, why don't you throw in some muffins and crumpets for Xeno..."

"Oh, yes. Although Xeno is quite a chef himself. I'll never forget those Dirigible Plum scones he made for us." Molly started to flitter around the kitchen, finding and wrapping some freshly baked goodies for Hermione to take.

While Hermione collected her parchments with her runic calculations and notes on the repetitive contents of her dreams, Arthur gave Molly a peck and Flooed off to the Ministry. Checking everything twice, Hermione grabbed her wand and a canvas rucksack, packed her parchments and the pastries, gave Molly a hug and set off, calling back, "If Harry and Ginny bring the children back before I return, could you send me a Patronus?"

Molly had her usual concerned look, but Hermione saw it was etched with another emotion that she couldn't quite identify at the moment. It seemed like Molly gave her a forced smile, saying, "Don't worry, dear. Visit as long as you need." A melancholic look briefly passed over Molly's face as her mother-in-law added, "Perhaps it'll do some good for both of you."

* H *

Out of sight of The Burrow, Hermione experimented with her renewed magical force she felt coursing through her veins. She Apparated herself short distances, from spot to spot until she found herself standing in front of where Lovegood's home should be. The wind was blowing briskly, and she moved a tress of hair from her eyes and tucked it behind her ears as she peered keenly around her. *The storm last night... What a tempest! It was dark and raining so hard, I didn't get much of a detailed look* For she stood in front of a cliff-like wall of white stone. *Looks like a natural barricade...*

She waved her wand, saying, *Crumple-Horned Snorkack*, dispelling the first ward. An oval-shaped entrance revealed itself to her, and she took a deep breath and walked through it immediately casting *Billywig propeller* at the other inner ward. An odd octangular house was then seen; the bottom storey consisted of high walls made of stone and the upper level of wood, blending into a thick thatched roof. *But is it blended with actual tree tops? Hawthornes?*

As she walked towards a small enclosed groove in the stones, assuming it was the front door, suddenly it wasn't her troubled dreams or runes or Arithmancy at the forefront of her thoughts. She remembered what had happened last night after touching Xenophilius' wand and how intensely he had said, 'It was you!'... Upon entering the stone alcove, she pulled a cord dangling before her. *It was spelled with something connected with me, but how? Why? As if I haven't enough to handle!*

Focus, Hermione, focus! You're here to first ask for his help as a Runologist... and more about the Deathly Hallows if it's connected... Then we can deal with other things...

She gasped softly as the door opened, and her eyes fell upon a surprised looking Lovegood.

It appeared that she had caught Xenophilius at an inopportune moment, for he was shirtless, his sinewy, muscular form, smudged with dirt and glistening from sweat. She couldn't think of what to say at that exact moment as one object caught her eye, hanging on his chest. *The Deathly Hallows!*

He was panting, as if he had just sprinted, and said, "Forgive me, Ms Weasley. You've caught me in the middle of feeding time."

"Feeding time?" She asked following his gaze towards the wards. Hermione blushed, casting her eyes about to avoid looking at the way the silver pendant glistened on his skin, and said, "I'm sorry for interrupting you..."

"No, no; it's quite all right..." He glanced back behind him, mumbling under his breath, "Runespoors, Firigawls...but however did you...?" He looked again towards the barrier of rocks in front of his property where the wards were.

"Molly and Arthur gave me the counter-charms. I...I didn't mean to be an inconvenience. It's just that... *needed* to talk to you."

Xenophilius gave her a concerned look, considered something, and then straightened up to his full height. Gazing at her curiously, he finally replied, "Of course you're not an inconvenience. But where are my manners? Come in. Please, come in Ms Gran...Weasley." He gracefully waved for her to enter. "Would you mind following me out to the garden? The Fwoopers are in dire need to be fed. They get rather irritable." After a second thought, he added, "And very loud. And we wouldn't won't that, would we?"

She followed him through the spacious oval-shaped room. Now seen in the daytime, the colourful array of furniture and objects was complemented by the sunlit walls, reinforcing the coziness and relaxing atmosphere of the space. *And no Puffskeins in sight from last night!*

"Excuse me for my appearance, Ms Weasley. Feeding Nogtails can be a bit messy. I have a couple that I'm attempting to domesticate; however, their love of wallowing in the mud is something I am still adjusting to, as they seem to quite luxuriate in it, particularly around their watering place."

Hermione struggled not to be distracted about how lean and muscular the man's form was. "Oh, you're fine...it's fine; I mean, I perfectly understand. Again, I'm so sorry to interrupt you in the middle of your tasks. I had no idea."

"Not at all. Only I must finish." Lovegood led her directly ahead. As they passed through a broad, circular alcove, Hermione noted a statue of Rowena Ravenclaw wearing

her Diadem in front of a stained-glassed arched window. She smiled at the reminder of one of the founders of Hogwarts and stepped out through the open French doors into the sunlight.

She stopped in her tracks and gasped softly. What she saw was extraordinary.

"Mr Lovegood..." She abruptly became speechless, taking in the scenery.

Gurdyroot plants, flowers, butterflies, and a menagerie of fantastical magical creatures were before her. All around her. She found herself in an exotic landscaped garden of sorts.

Standing on a pebbled path, she spotted a Knarl in a patch of wild daises just below her to the left where the cultivated lawn and flower garden ended. The daisy patch extended all the way left to a high white wall of cliffs, which curved and seemed to go on for as far as she could see, intersecting with a thicket of trees in the distance. On her right, a high hill sheltered the garden, making a natural boundary down to and all around a pond below them, creating a narrow cavern before also sloping downward, joining the copse further on.

Lovegood has quite an incredible, sheltered nook! She noted that there were enclaves of Hawthorne trees, which seemed to mark particular areas of the land *I feel like we're in the secluded recesses of a...* At that moment, she couldn't find the right word, for she saw a Moke climbing on the rocky edge of the hill directly above the pond where a small waterfall trickled down in a small stream. It was then that her eyes caught sight of a large creature standing underneath the waterfall in the shadowed part.

She gasped as she took a few steps in the direction of the creature. "Mr Lovegood, that isn't...tell me that isn't a Re'em? They're classified as XXXX by the Ministry. It shouldn't be here." Before she could think twice, she blurted out, "Do you have a permit?"

"Are you here on official Ministry business?" he asked mulishly.

"No, but..."

"I rescued this noble oxen from Dark smugglers on the black market." His eyes shone with intensity as he added, "They were skinning the poor beast alive while draining its blood in order to procure it at its most vital level for Dark magic."

The mention of Dark magic triggered something in her, and Hermione turned to look at him directly, giving a fleeting glance at the symbol he was wearing, and a dull ache went through her temples, causing her to remember her nightmares.

Xenophilus straightened up, the Deathly Hallows glittering on his chest in the sunlight, and stated very clearly, "This is a sanctuary. For all magical creatures who need or seek refuge and protection."

He took a step toward her. "I know you are a servant to the Ministry, Ms Weasley, but I would ask you..."

"I'm not here as a Ministry official, Mr Lovegood. I'm here on private matters." *This isn't the time or place to even think of reprimanding him about legal or illegal possession of fantastical creatures!*

"Then may I ask you to wait here while I finish my rounds." He motioned to a grassy knoll under a large leafy Hawthorne tree directly right of them beside the main garden path. "Um, just a moment." He waved his hand, and a garment flew from where it hung on a bush and swiftly landed on top of the grass. "Please have a seat in the shade, and if you'd like, there's some morning tea still."

As a tray laden with a teapot and cups floated gently out of the house and down to beside her, Hermione reflected on his wandless magic skills *Living alone for so long, he's probably concentrated on developing doing things more without a wand...* Her fingertips felt the cloth she was sitting on. *Is it...? It's his tunic top!*

Surrounded by summer fragrances of sweet grass and flowers, Hermione gave a gentle sniff at the content of tea and recognized the scents of honeysuckle and mint. She took the liberty to pour herself a cup and watched Lovegood as he sloshed in the shallow pond in his wellingtons, gently nudging the large Re'em out of the water and toward hay that had been placed on the bank for feeding. She then saw him disappear into a shallow cave before emerging and going into a stall-like structure in a Hawthorne grove on the other side of the pond.

Hermione turned her focus from him momentarily and gazed at the cumulus clouds drifting by. The sound of a Fwooper was faintly heard, then silence, and then the whirl of a cloister of Billywigs fluttered by safely overhead. Sitting here in Lovegood's fantastical refuge, surrounded by magical Rowans and flowers of all kinds, it was difficult for Hermione to recall her night terrors; all worries, negativity, and irrational fear seemed suddenly non-existent.

She took a sip of the aromatic mint and honeysuckle tea and sighed. All she wanted to do at that exact moment was lay back in the cool grass and let the warm wind flutter around her. *He may be a while with his duties,* she thought languidly, lying back on Lovegood's tunic. She could detect his scent mixed in with the sweet grass and flowers. It had a calming effect on her, a very relaxing one.

A bee buzzed by, and Hermione struggled to go through her mental list of each topic to discuss with Lovegood. For her thoughts drifted back to yesterday, and she couldn't get pass remembering how they had held each others gaze and how she wanted to clutch him and thank him for saving Hugo's life... and how she was so sorry that she had Obliviated his memory so long ago... and her nightmares... and her fears... her fears for her children, of Malfoy, the obscure curse, returning to work... feeling exhausted, and why Xenophilus and the Deathly Hallows had appeared in her tortuous dreams...

* X *

"Ms Weasley? It's fresh, another cup?"

Hermione blinked groggily and slowly sat up. "What...what happened? Did I fall asleep?"

"Merely a brief doze." He smiled gently at her. "Are you feeling well?" Lovegood was holding out another cup of tea, and he had a concerned look.

Hermione saw that his hair was tied back, and he had a clean tunic on. But the Deathly Hallows symbol on his necklace chain could clearly be seen, reminding her of why she was here. "Yes, I...well, I've had very little sleep recently." She couldn't suppress a small yawn. "So sorry."

"Not at all. I'm glad you could relax a wee bit. My apologies for being so long. Perhaps a pinch of Gurdyroot? It's very invigorating."

Remembering the bitter, disgusting taste keenly, she quickly responded, "No, thank you. I'm fully awake."

He seemed to remember something very important. "I believe the good Molly told me that you very much enjoy my blend of mint and honeysuckle that I sent her?"

"Oh, that's yours?"

"Yes, from my garden... down near my Dirigible plum orchards." He motioned toward beyond the Hawthorne tree grove. "I've developed a keen hobby of Herbology. It's become quite a productive and lucrative activity, I daresay."

As he handed her the saucer and cup filled with his freshly ground mint leaves and essence of honeysuckle, Hermione saw that his hand trembled slightly.

An awkward silence suddenly fell between them.

Silence ensued further as they both sipped and gazed at the tranquil pond with only the gentle thrum of the waterfall and birds' chirping heard.

Hermione sipped slowly, breathing in the refreshing herbs, and went through her mental check list again; this time more clear-mindedly and thinking that she just needed to be blunt about things.

However, it was Xenophilius who abruptly broke the silence. "May I be so bold as to speak first, Ms Weasley?"

Hermione nodded, relieved.

"Concerning last night, the spell on my wand." A heaviness filled the air as he struggled to say what he wished to say, for he seemed to have to force himself to continue. "That day during the war... that inevitable, horrid day... The day you came with Potter and your..."

"With Ronald?"

Xeno gave a curt nod and swallowed hard before continuing. "You see, they had taken my Luna. I was out of my mind. Couldn't tell anyone or they would kill her... They threatened to bring me her fingers, one by one." He stopped and clenched his eyes shut for a moment. "Completely, irretrievably mad... myself, the entire situation." Lovegood rubbed his forehead in concentration. "They took my Luna because of what I had been writing... When I had betrayed you and was forced to climb the stairs to prove to... Voldemort's followers that you were there..."

"I would have done the same," Hermione heard herself whispering aloud. She shook her head as if to clear her thoughts and gave him a direct look. "Whose to say I wouldn't have done the same for my child? For my children?" For she remembered Xenophilius in minute detail; how he had miserably chosen to sacrifice Ron, Harry, and her in exchange for Luna. A desperate man, pushed over an edge of no return. A father desperate to save his child held hostage. Forced against his principles. Blind to reason. Indeed, they had all been victims of the circumstances that Voldemort had dictated and subject to the specific ransoms he demanded.

Hermione recalled the look of a man riddled with guilt. But even more, Lovegood's desperation was something that clicked a switch inside her, lit the same dire recklessness and distress that she felt about Hugo and Rose in her night terrors... and in her awake life. The feeling was truly maddening.

On impulse she reached out and placed her fingers on his forearm. His skin was damp and hot to the touch.

"I understand, Mr Lovegood."

Xenophilius gave her a long, steady look, as if reading her every thought, her every move, each blink and breath. "I believe you do, Ms Weasley." His silvery-grey eyes seemed to burn with cold fire as he uttered, "And for that, I am so very sorry. I wish that you didn't understand. But can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgive you?" Hermione froze, needing time to think how to answer. On reflection, she thoughtfully answered, "The war was an insane time; the world had gone irretrievably mad, not you. You were forced to do what you did. How could you have acted any differently with Luna being held for ransom?"

Xeno shook his head vehemently, shaking off her hand from his arm as if it had scalded him. "You didn't want us there, but we were determined not to go away. We stayed and pushed for information; by the time the Death Eaters arrived..."

"No, I betrayed you, all of you, Harry Potter..."

"You tried not to, Mr Lovegood. The temptation would have been too much for anyone under the circumstances. Even in your miserable dilemma, you tried to help us."

"Did I? I can't remember!" he suddenly whispered fiercely, staring at her, a tormented look in his eyes. "You don't know what it means to doubt yourself..."

Hermione made to speak, but he cut her off, insisting, "No, someone such as you, who has never ventured down doubts way...has never been a victim of doubt."

"Mr Lovegood, if you only knew how much doubt has consumed my entire life, causing me to always try and prove myself, and now... it's suffocating me."

Xenophilius' eyes filled with confusion, confessing, "I don't understand. Did you not come here today to confront me about my wand's spell, about last night?"

"I came here for many reasons." She bit her lip, suddenly flustered. Now was the time to press him for more information, but she was suddenly afraid that her questions would bring back those frightening memories that she had sought to erase.

In her hesitation, Lovegood explained, "I had spent years developing a spell that would identify my attacker...the person who Obliviated my memories... I could not imagine that it had been you. Potter, yes. Your husband, yes. But you?" He looked at her curiously. "If it is not about my wand's spell, then what?"

"Because of that." She stared at the Deathly Hallows symbol. "And runes."

"Runes? The Deathly Hallows?" he asked, touching the symbol lightly. He looked at her gravely. "But you implied that you are not a Quester?" He was confused but intrigued at the same time. "It doesn't relate to my wand's spell?"

"No, not directly... But rather indirectly to Voldemort, the Deathly Hallows, and, yes, also you."

Lovegood gave her an incredulous look.

"We... we came to you that day," explained Hermione carefully, then she paused, wondering whether to risk sharing with him some of the truth and which part *Yes, I trust him*. For here in his sanctuary, she felt disarmingly comfortable and safe. "Because we needed to know more about the Deathly Hallows. You were very informative, but that symbol reappeared to me just last night in a most unusual way."

"Did I help you?"

She nodded her head and paused again, thinking on how much she could reveal without revealing too much *Because the Deathly Hallows exist!*

He seemed to sense how difficult it was for her to discuss further and offered, "It's comforting to know... If some good came out of my actions that day... Beyond the physical pain, the psychological pain from that day... afterwards."

"Mr Lovegood?"

He look away from her as if hiding a hidden wound and whispered fiercely, "I can't remember. I couldn't remember!" She saw he clenched a fist as he shared, "There are gaps and voids of that treacherous day. Wheels within wheels of torturous memories... nightmares of the most devastating kind, thoughts that hold no sane reason, no comfort. I remember you, you three, but the blanks...I grasp for understanding and am left with a dark void, again and again."

She reassured him, "Mr Lovegood, you don't seem to be forgetful at all."

"I've regained my senses, well, some of them," he commented with a bittersweet grimace. "But my loss of memory...*that* I had excused, at first, to the Cruciatus curses which the Death Eaters Selwyn and Travers tortured me with, or the mind-numbing kicks and blows when I was too convulsed to respond from their curse. Then there was Azkaban, the Dementors... They stripped what little cohesive, cognitive awareness was left to me, slowly, day after day. And there was Lestranger. Bellatrix Lestranger's visits to me whilst in prison..."

At the reminder of what he must have gone through under the hands of Bellatrix and other Death Eaters, she realized *And he still suffers keenly!* Hermione felt a lump in her throat. *He needs to know!*

She cleared her throat. "I had to rapidly wipe part of your memory...what the three of us had discussed with you. I had to do it. If the Death Eaters knew why we had come, if they had even a small inkling and told Voldemort, it would have been detrimental to everything. But I also needed to help save Luna..."

"My Luna?"

He seemed quite stricken as she divulged, rattling out quickly, "That's why I blasted a hole through the floor, so that the Death Eaters would see that Harry was indeed there. I'd hoped that neither you nor Luna would be further punished. Letting them see us, letting you attack us...I thought it would save Luna, protect you. Voldemort would know that you hadn't lied to them!"

Xenophilius became very still; the information seemed to overwhelm him, and yet he managed to ask, "But the Deathly Hallows? What harm...?"

"It was imperative that Voldemort did not find out that we discussed them; can you imagine what would have happened if he of all wizards knew about and began to desire them? If he actually attained such powerful, magical objects?"

"Then you *do* believe in them, Ms Weasley?"

Hermione stared at Xenophilius. Long gone were the days when she was dismissive about beliefs that lacked physical evidence. Images of Harry's Cloak of Invisibility, the Resurrection Stone, and the Elder Wand flew through her mind. She knew all too well that the Deathly Hallows existed and whispered, "Yes."

"Ah," sighed Xenophilius. He gave her an odd look, saying, "I shan't ask why you had wished to know of the Hallows. I can only conclude that it was *delicate* matter."

Hesitating, Hermione offered him a partial explanation. "While in hiding, we'd come across the names of the Peverell brothers and other fragmented, perhaps related, information, that seemed linked, but I couldn't understand what the symbol actually represented. I remembered you were wearing a necklace with the sign on it at Fleur and Bill's wedding... We were in dire need to know what it truly symbolised, other than being associated with Dark magic and Grindewald...anything else about it, any further knowledge that could possibly help. Desperate times, Mr Lovegood."

This seemed to satisfy Lovegood on some level, for he gave her a calmer look, saying, "Yes, I was told... Well, the belief was that the Elder Wand, the Wand of Destiny, had indeed been found and used. In fact, it is said to have been used in the final duel between Harry Potter and Voldemort... but that Potter destroyed or discarded it forever. Such an anomaly, a wizard who had the strength to resist its temptation is rare indeed. A true Gryffindor's strength."

Hermione gave him a small smile and nodded, agreeing, "Yes, that's what I have heard as well. Harry perhaps wished to save others from it, not to use it for his own personal gain, but to end the vicious cycle of violence associated with it." She knew she was on delicate ground when she added, "Personally, I am relieved that none of those highly powerful objects are accessible to anyone."

"Well, some still hope, Ms Weasley, and believe that they can be used *forgood*." Lovegood looked wistfully at the sky. "There were even further rumours of the Resurrection Stone in circulation but... Ah, Pandora!" He abruptly stood up and took a few steps away from her towards the pond.

Like a lightning bolt, Hermione understood at that instant why Lovegood sought the Deathly Hallows, why he so desperately believed in them *needed* to believe, have hope. *He wishes for the Resurrection Stone; he would bring his wife back! Like Cadmus Peverell who wished to be reunited with his lost love...*

Hermione set the tea down on the tray and rose slowly to stand beside Xenophilius, both staring into the distance, before saying, "I Obliviated part of your memory that day," she swallowed hard at the distasteful memory, saying clearly, "because it was what I *had* to do. And I'm so sorry. When I came to your home, it wasn't my intention to violate you in any way."

"I forced you to do it, Ms Weasley." She looked up at Xeno and saw that a tear had rolled down his cheek. She instinctively took his hand and held it; he seemed startled by the act as he made to pull away, but she held it firmly and repeated, "I had to do what I had to do. It was horrid, but I tried to save all I could as much as I could within my means... It was all too dangerous, for everyone."

Something in Xenophilius seemed to snap, and she felt him squeeze her hand as if in gratitude, repeating his adage from the night before *Quisque facere debet, quod ab illo factum oportet*, Ms Weasley."

"Yes, Mr Lovegood. And you also had to do what you had to do. I understood how desperate you felt then." She held his hand tighter. "I understand still, in fact more than ever."

"Can you forgive me?" she heard him ask, his voice husky and low with emotion.

"Of course I forgive you." She felt something release from within her. "Can you forgive me?"

"My dear lady," he gazed at her as if thunderstruck. "Anything to be forgiven was forgiven long ago, in fact, immediately afterwards. While I lay in Azkaban, I prayed with what I thought were my last breaths that Luna would be saved and that you three could find a way to understand, to forgive me... But I always felt that something vital to full forgiveness was lost along with my memories that were Obliviated. When I was kept alive, only to be tortured, Lestrangle, she would mock and jibe at me...torture me to retrieve those memories... but they were gone. No amount of Cruciatus or Legilimency could evoke anything from within me. I simply couldn't remember. I couldn't remember you..."

Xenophilius gave Hermione an alarmed look. "Thank Merlin for that. Who knows what Bellatrix Lestrangle would have done to you?"

Hermione flinched as Bellatrix's face full of hatred flew through her mind, and she touched the scar on her throat where Lestrangle's knife had cut it.

"But knowing that the information I gave you perhaps helped to thwart Voldemort..." Xenophilius suddenly stopped, seeing Hermione still and pensive. "Knowing that all of it was not in vain, and that you, dearest Ms Weasley, can find it in your heart to truly forgive me."

He turned to her, his tall, lean figure leaned in towards her as she looked up into his eyes, shining with some renewed warmth and fire, snapping her out her thoughts about Bellatrix. "And now, you said you came here because you needed to talk to me. How selfish I have been. You must tell me now how I can help you."

He was giving her such a look of ardent admiration that she felt a tingle go through her, head to toe. She slowly released his hand and took a few steps back, holding his gaze, before saying, "Yes, my rucksack, I have my notes here. Oh, and Molly sent something for you."

Lovegood looked thoroughly intrigued as he watched Hermione rummage through and pull out her parchments. She handed him the wrapped pastries, their fingertips brushing each other's briefly. Xeno untied and placed the muffins and crumpets on the tray, but he then remained standing tall and alert, watching her every move with an admiring regard.

As she unrolled the parchments and placed them on the hill's grassy incline, she felt a slight chill run through her even as her cheeks flushed warm. It intensified as she felt him stand beside her. She didn't look at him as she pointed to the parchments, saying, "It might be better if you first look at the notes I've taken; then I can explain more in detail."

Xenophilius took one parchment and began to study it, his eyes darting here and there, reading and rereading, while Hermione continued, "As you can see, I keep

repeating certain Arithmantic formula...and certain runic symbols keep reappearing."

Hermione noted that Lovegood had gone slightly pale as he took and continued to look through all of her parchments. As he said nothing, she slowly offered some context for him. "I've been having these dreams, well, night terrors actually. The nightmares are the same, repeatedly, with each night a bit more added. That is until last night. Then certain things have appeared that have startled me, confused me even more."

Xenophilius stopped looking at the parchments only to turn to her with an odd, intense expression. He asked, his voice hoarse, "Did something out of the ordinary occur recently? Something that you believe could have triggered your night terrors?"

Hermione took a deep breath and looked down at the ground, embarrassed, steeling herself to meet his eyes before saying, "You."

"Me?" Xenophilius seemed aghast.

"Malfoy first."

Lovegood's features became grim as he asked, "Lucius Malfoy?"

Hermione nodded, and he contemplated something before asking, "You say the night terrors have grown worse? Had you a lethargic sense of your magic weakened more and more?"

"Yes, at least, that was until last night."

"What changed? What happened?"

"You did." He raised his eyebrows, nonplussed, and Hermione hurriedly added, "And the Deathly Hallows symbol and runes."

"Ah, yes," he murmured, shuffling through her parchments again, "The *em wah* and the *eh waz* symbols equated to partnership, friendship, and death are repeated in your formulae." He concentrated his gaze upon one particular parchment before sharply asking, "How did this all come about? How long ago?"

His abrupt tone startled her momentarily. "I, well, these dreams, nightmares... The children have been having them, and I as well. But..." She realized she wasn't answering his question but suddenly felt a compulsion to blurt out, "It was at the Ministry, about three months ago; he was given a pronounced adjourned judgement on the case...how could Special Advisor Doge even side with Malfoy?"

Xenophilius listened stoically while Hermione continued vehemently, "We had a confrontation outside the Wizengamot, and Malfoy mouthed a curse at me...but I can't prove exactly what it was! At the time, the most obvious thing was I blacked out. And it seemed that *that* was that. I mean, I was medically checked, and all that was found was that I was, um, severely upset, ill, and needed a break... from everything. Not a severe nervous breakdown, but... my magic was affected." Her voice had grown quiet and she felt ashamed. "I was overwhelmed. After Ronald's death, it became more and more difficult to keep everything and everyone under control. Myself included. My run-in with Malfoy seemed to push me..."

Xenophilius seemed to sense her discomfort, and she heard him sigh heavily and then say, "I understand, Ms Weasley." Then she felt him touch her hand. He ever so gently held hers in a supportive way, saying, "But you don't believe it has been merely *that* which has instigated your night terrors?"

"No." A tremble ran through her.

"What do you believe?"

No one had asked her this simple question. In all this time, no one had asked her...rather everyone had seemed to avoid it. They had all seemed to dismiss her lethargy, insecurity, and nerves as separate to what had happened outside the Wizengamot that day. No further mention of Lucius Malfoy was entertained.

"I believe," she took a deep breath and then firmly said, "that these nightmares were induced somehow by him from whatever, however, he cursed me that day. The restlessness, the recurrence has grown over time and increases...I believe my magical powers were sapped from me because of him, depleted temporarily." Tears were running down her cheeks.

She raised her head defiantly, "But I'm back! Last night, when I awoke, I felt more clear headed, more afire with magic than ever before, more like my old self again. As if something had broken through this dark muddledness that's been weighing down upon me all this time, enhanced by the horrid visions of that triangle, Lucius Malfoy appearing, my children lying as if they were..."

She wept, but it was tears of relief. Xenophilius had moved closer, and she allowed herself to weep freely on his shoulder.

After a while, she heard him softly say, "The *Intimatus Tam* curse. Dark magic of the most insidious kind."

* H & X *

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The Duplicity of the <i>Intimatus Tam</i> Curse

Chapter 7 of 7

Hermione discovers the nature of the *Intimatus Tam Curse* from Xenophilius; and believing she is incapable of performing its one known counter-curse, she presses him to reveal any other possible options to counter it. Harry reacts to her questionable visit with Lovegood, along with informing her of further unpleasant but definite possibilities to prosecute Malfoy and have him sentenced to Azkaban once and for all.

As he spoke, a slight chill coursed through her as she was being held in his arms, comforted by him.

Trying to ignore the minute trembling, Hermione sniffed and looked up into Xenophilius' eyes. "The *Intimatus Tam* curse?" She shook her head slightly, searching her mental inventory of spells. Blinking at him, perplexed, she said, "I don't know that one."

His silvery eyes glinted intensely as bitterness etched his features. "I would pray not."

Something about the way he replied made her slowly step back from him. Concerned, she asked, "You? You have been cursed with it?"

Lovegood made the smallest of nods.

She looked him up and down, not knowing what she expected to see, but regardless, she searched for some blatant sign, hesitantly asking, "When? Are you all right?"

As if more to himself than her, he uttered, "Once touched by such darkness... Even an Obliviate spell would not remove its malignant spread. Such a one as it can never be erased."

"I don't believe that."

Xenophilius turned his back to her, staring up towards the clouds as she heard him say, "Don't you?"

"No. I have seen...I have witnessed, experienced horrid Dark magic, and have known those who have overcome it."

He turned and gave her a bittersweet look. "Have you indeed?"

"As well as you, Mr Lovegood. You are a survivor." Hermione huffed. "There must have been a counter-curse, for you no longer suffer from it? How did the curse's effect end?"

"It ended with Bellatrix Lestrange's life ending. The good Molly Weasley seeing to that deed done."

Hermione blinked and took a deep breath, needing clarification. "Are you saying I would have to kill...to murder Lucius Malfoy to break this curse?"

"No. I'm saying that his *life force* must end." Xenophilius had a grim look on his face and an odd glint flashed in his eyes as he pointed out, *That* could be done by anyone." He paused before pedantically continuing, "In order for the curse to end, one must understand that this curse is intertwined with his life essence. Or..."

"Or?"

He looked away from her again, but Hermione took a step closer to him, pressing, "There is another way?"

"Perhaps. Theorized, but not proven. At least, not that I know of. But... it is of a dubious, even insidious nature, possibly. Some would say." He swallowed hard. "My exploration of the Dark Arts has primarily been focused on other areas since my release..."

"Dark Arts, Mr Lovegood?"

"With Lestrange's death, I was freed from her direct influence, from her tentacles of allurement and captivity. Though she left permanent stains, imprints, let us say, within me." His features hardened.

He was tortured by her repeatedly in Azkaban...Arthur said...A thrum went through her, and she asked impulsively, "What did she do to you? What did the *Intimatus Tam* curse entail?"

A bird chirped and the summer breeze was felt in a heavy silence that befell them.

Xenophilius was gazing pensively towards the Hawthorne groves in the distance, and after apparently making a decision, he turned to her and began to slowly but steadily explain, "From my research after Azkaban, I eventually connected that its origination was a Voldemort creation, an esoteric one at that, of which, it seems, his closest Death Eaters were gifted with the knowledge and skill... The *Intimatus Tam* Curse causes a person's already vulnerable state to become susceptibly infiltrated by, connected with, the spell caster's *will*, magical force... A fluent connection is formed, initially, and then most deeply rooted in the victim's psyche when he or she has allowed the windows of their soul to be connected with the curser's..."

Xenophilius abruptly broke off, gazing into Hermione's eyes for several seconds before continuing. "It is consciously gained, then unconsciously rooted, deeper and deeper, proliferating into all darker areas, in particular, when the victim is asleep... Slowly, its possessive nature manifests itself in one's waking life, initially erratic, then slowly progressing at different intervals, different levels. And you are rendered helpless, a submissive minion of sorts to the wizard, or in my case, the witch's *will*."

"Like a repeated, continual *Imperio* curse?"

He nodded slowly. "My evolution into becoming a servile agent of Bellatrix Lestrange occurred much more rapidly, no doubt due to my already fragile state in prison and the frequency of her visitations, her access to me, which was daily, haptically, excruciatingly intense..." Xenophilius had a faraway look in his eyes. "She broke me... utterly."

"How?" whispered Hermione.

"Ultimately, she unearthed what I held most sacred and defiled it, had me defile myself... my beliefs, my emotions..."

"Mr Lovegood?"

He slowly looked up and down her face as if searching for something, and then softly, but bluntly asked, "You loved your husband more than life itself?"

Hermione blanched and stammered, "What? Yes, of course...why do you ask such a thing?"

"I, too," Xenophilius touched his chest above his heart, causing a gleam from the Deathly Hallows to shine out from the tunic's loosely tied opening, "My Pandora... Bellatrix entered me, possessed me, sheathed me within her... forced me to... consummate a union with her..."

Hermione heard her own voice whispering, "Sexually?"

Xenophilius did not look at her directly. "Physically, mentally... even emotionally... She would enter my gaol cell, and eventually, at a snap, I would crave her... in anyway she wished..."

"It is an Unspeakable, a derivation, an Imperio curse of sorts," whispered Hermione aloud, quickly followed by, "I am so sorry, so sorry..." Her voice trailed off in a hush, shocked at his vulnerable confession.

Xenophilius straightened his stance and serenely gazed at her, saying, "Do not be. As you have so rightly pointed out, I am a survivor, Ms Weasley. It is what is to be done about your predicament that we must address our attention and energies to..."

Hermione shook her head, unable to speak.

They stood together in silence, the heaviness of his past along with the present situation crushing her chest. Her thoughts were in a whirl.

"I have made you even more uncomfortable; it was not my intention for telling you."

Hermione took a deep breath, raising her chin slightly. "Mr Lovegood, we're adults, and we've both survived tragedies, undergone abuse that no one else can quite understand... Both been at the mercy of madness, victims of Unspeakable curses..."

Xenophilius slowly reached out and gently moved some locks of her hair covering her neck; she felt his gaze on her scar.

"Lestrangle's handiwork?"

She gulped and nodded.

"When you were taken to Malfoy Manor and tortured? *Crucio*ed?"

Her heart began to pound harder the more he gazed at her sympathetically; she found she could only nod at him. Then suddenly she gasped, "Malfoy!"

"He...he violated you there?" His voice was barely above a terse whisper.

"What? No, no. He...I'm *dirty* to him, a Mudblood," her nostrils flared, "beneath him...why would he curse me with such" she hesitated, "*arintimate* curse?"

"The *Intimatus Tam* curse is not solely for physical, sexual, purposes...it is primarily for affording the wizard an exsanguination source."

She felt herself grow faint as he blinked reflectively and added, "Or sources... thus, Hugo and Rose."

At the thought of her children being targeted, her blood curled and then began to boil. She felt herself shake, demanding, "You spoke of a theory, a counter-curse...How or why did you discover one if Bellatrix' death broke your spell?"

"Lestrangle had tortuously *teased* me with glimpses of my cure, let us say, during our *times* together...things that would be impossible for me to attain or to remedy... and thus she prolonged my suffering with the futility of what she dangled before me..." Xeno took in a deep breath, seeming to monitor if what he was saying was appeasing Hermione or not. "But after my clearance and release from Azkaban, I found in the dark moments of the night that I burned with inquisitiveness about what I had been taunted with... I was irefully curious!" Incongruously, he gave Hermione a small smile though his eyes burned deeply with bitterness. "The Ravenclaw in me, I suppose."

He breathed in deeply through his nose and out for a few seconds, his semblance slowly becoming more relaxed as he reflected aloud, "Knowledge is Wisdom. Wisdom is Power. The power to take back one's life again. Draw oneself up out of the lower depths of... madness and turpitude, at least, on some levels. I wished to understand fully and be armed for prevention if in the future..." He broke off abruptly, huffing, "The twisted irony of life...for it seems my mania to research something that should have been bygone, a closed chapter in my life, has not been in vain."

Even in her tenacity, Hermione felt flustered and said, "I'm sorry I am the cause for it being reopened."

He gave Hermione a direct look. "Don't be. Only... there is no guarantee that true help could be derived and achieved...most likely Bellatrix' visions of the elements of the counter-curse were all cruel lies, merely to taunt me with and gloat over my desperation to believe they were truths ... The ways of the Dark Arts are treacherous. Deceptive... I know of no one who has been in need of its cure, nor the success of its tentative counter-curse..."

"But one does exist?"

"Again, theoretically, but not proven."

Hermione said in a small voice, "I loathe Malfoy and all that he represents...what he has done to me and others in the past, the possible unspeakable things he wishes to do in the present, but... I will not, can not murder Malfoy..."

"His death would be a boon to society."

Hermione shook her head. "I will defend myself and my own as best I can. As you said, with knowledge. Tell me what you know of the possible alternative, share with me, for I could not..."

"When you see your children mutilated, laying deathlike by his intentions, placed in that triangle of conjuring death, molested and drained of their blood to the near, very last drop from his sorcery, perhaps then?"

Hermione gazed at him, mortified. "Why do you say such things?"

"I do not wish to," he said in low voice, etched with pain. "But you have seen it...in your dreams."

A fit of contrary denial came over her in the second, a confused but defiant obstinacy as she raised her chin. "They are mere dreams..."

"Do not gull yourself, Ms Weasley. No pretending that *that* which is merely speculated to exist does not then truly exist on some plane of being. You have seen too much, experienced too much to deny the possibilities of how evil may manifest itself."

This time, it was Hermione who turned away, too flustered to reply.

Xenophilius pressed on, "I say these things now because I must, to not do so would be a disservice to you. You have come to me for help...and I'm afraid that only the truth, may it be painful or divine, will be the means to an end to this curse. You can not deny that Voldemort and his Death Eaters invented and pushed Dark magic into the darkest depths... Voldemort resurrected himself through the very blood and bones of others... The sacred nor the ideal have no place in their ideology... Death Eaters have an innate wish to suborn others as chattle..."

Fiercely, Xenophilius held up the Deathly Hallows symbol from his chained necklace. "It is duplicitous, mercurial in its manifold beguiling ways, this symbol. In one form, we have the allure and enticement of the path of cheating death, recalling our loved ones, but like a Metamorphagus, it changes to become the ensorcelling channel for taking force from those that have gone before us, the good and the evil. Their celestial energy bottled up or freely flowing..."

"Mr Lovegood..."

Xenophilius was relentless, spelling out, "The triangle in your dreams, it is an ensorcelling triangle. The Arithmancy formulae denotes this. The Runic combinations are... for communicating with the dead."

"How do you know?" Hermione felt her entire body was thrumming from what he was saying.

"I have tried similar ones...some the very same..." He gave her an odd look, seemingly mixed with both shame and defiance. "For the very same purpose: to communicate with the dead. To explore if the dead may cross over and share any energy, any power, any emotion, enlightenment, with the living."

"Necromancy?" Hermione felt light-headed, staring at him as if seeing him for the first time. "Necromancy, you? ... How could you? Mr Lovegood?"

Xenophilius' voice trembled with emotion, saying, "You judge me and well you should. It matters not. My past transgressions affect you not, except that my first experience, my first enlightenment of necromancy came while I was under, like you, the *Intimatus Tam* Curse."

Hermione felt as if all the breath had been sucked out of her and backed away until she felt the slant of grassy earth behind her and shakily sat down.

Xenophilius apparently saw her level of distress and ever so slowly countered her, sitting down, but not too near, placing her parchments between them.

As she didn't speak, Lovegood slowly, calmly initiated, "We have established it is for summoning the dead. Malfoy wishes to conjure the dead or the power of the dead. It would not be the first time he has put faith and energy in the foulest depths of the Dark in order to obtain or hold position and power from it, from whom he calls forth, or crave knowledge of the future."

"The Hall of Prophecy," she whispered softly. Images of Lucius Malfoy emerging from the shadows of the Department of Mysteries' chamber with other Death Eaters, ordering the deaths of her and her mates, demanding that Harry turn over his prophetic orb, flashed through her mind.

A million thoughts whirled around, and she stared at Lovegood, all her previous preconceptions about him gone, replaced by a grey fog of a stranger.

But Xenophilius seemed determined to keep things business-as-usual somehow and had taken up her parchments again, analyzing them, as she tried to breathe through the dull dizziness she felt from the whirlwind of information being considered. In between her hodgepodge of thoughts, she voiced, "But why me?"

"The blood, the life force of a true enemy, is always the richest current to be used for Dark magic."

"You know this?"

Without a second thought, he quipped, "Of course. And the blood of innocents, your children, Rose and Hugo."

"How..."

"An ensorcelling triangle such as depicted for the purposes denoted in your notes requires the blood of three."

As he continued to study the parchments, Hermione watched him, conflicted, in awe at his unflinching determination and directness, but still resisting confiding more. And yet, she felt a tug and need and belief that she could trust him. *I need him. Need to trust him further as he has me, revealing so much to me...*

She took a deep breath and took the plunge. "Ron's image appears and disappears, usually above me... in my dreams...", she began quietly.

Xenophilius looked up from the parchments, simultaneously lowering them. He locked eyes with her, giving Hermione his undivided attention.

"I claw at darkness... like a wild animal. I grasp in vain. I have the sense of falling, surrounded by infinite dark space."

As Lovegood watched her intently, her eyelashes fluttered as she recalled, "I'm spellbound in a large triangular area with jagged rocks placed in a circle." Hermione trembled slightly. "I know it's to conjure the spirit of someone, something, into the physical..."

The wizard raised an eyebrow in speculative thought.

"I feel a nauseous sensation; Malfoy is above me. I feel a force. The runic symbol of *theem wah* appears. Then I'm bound in the top corner of the burnt, earthen triangle; there is pain...as if I'm bleeding. Hugo and Rose appear, lying still, each in a different, remaining corner of the triangle. Malfoy is closer, closer..."

Hermione gave Xenophilius a soft look. "But you appear... Yes, you're in my dreams." She gulped, holding his gaze. "*Theem wah* symbol appears... then the *eh waz*... The symbol morphs into a triangle and circle and is joined with a third...a wand-like line."

"The Deathly Hallows."

"Yes, the Deathly Hallows... For some reason," she actually gave him a small smile, "It seems they've led me here to you."

Xenophilius breathed in deeply as Hermione asked, "Tell me what the possible counter-curse is, Mr Lovegood, no matter what it seemingly entails, however dubious the visions Bellatrix conjured for you... For whatever it is, it seems I need you to help me, if only to instruct me. If we can forgive one another, surely we both can trust each other? Shall we? If it involves Dark magic," she gulped again, "surely we can help each other to not go too deep?"

Xenophilius looked away for several seconds before quietly saying, "Ms Weasley, you have given me much to think about... I will surely share with you everything I have discovered possibly relevant, real or seemingly unreal...all that is known to counter the *Intimatus Tam* curse and similar derivations, other than ridding the world sooner than later of the likes of Lucius Malfoy..."

Xenophilius broke off and rose taking a few steps away from her, again pausing as he seemed to struggle with something in deep contemplation.

Suddenly, he turned around to her. "I would ask that you give me this evening to collect my notes as well as my thoughts...could we perhaps meet again tomorrow afternoon and consult further then?"

Hermione felt giddy with relief. "I start back at the Ministry tomorrow in my position as a chief Interrogator in the Magical Law Enforcement department." She took a deep breath and gave him a hopeful look. "My first day back...I could stop on the way home, if that's convenient, or perhaps later, after the children have settled down."

"I shall be here afternoon or evening for you."

As Hermione gazed up into his eyes, a slight chill went through, and then, the sensation was followed by a warmth, pulsating sporadically. The clashes of energy caused her to tremble slightly, and she momentarily attempted to cover it up, saying nonchalantly, "Well, then, until tomorrow."

"Your magical energy is fluctuating against the curse, his energy." Xenophilius had seen her slight quiver; his facial muscles clenched in concern. "It's a milder symptom of the curse, but not a debilitating one...at least, it wasn't for me, merely a constant nettlesome reminder. Please, wait. First," he decisively took off the Deathly Hallows and laid it on the ground.

Accioing his wand, he proceeded to do a Gemino spell on the necklace and chain.

Hermione watched with curiosity as the duplicate lay before them, gleaming.

Xeno paused and asked, "A catch phrase of your choice. Ms Weasley, one that you could easily use for a Protean Charm summons."

"To communicate back and forth?"

He nodded, waiting for her.

She looked at him and said bluntly, "*I need you*."

Xeno tilted his head, focusing and spelling both necklaces. Finishing, he slowly bent down and picked up the copy, and just as slowly came and put it around her neck.

"Wear it in good health...if and when you need me, related to the night terrors, Malfoy, or anything else you may feel you need, either say or mouth the words and I shall come."

He picked up and placed back his own necklace as a spark of reciprocation went through Hermione, who asked, "And you? It is a Protean charm, is it not? If you need help, or...or to tell me something important, you can communicate with me, yes?"

Xenophilius straightened up to his full height and his facial muscles softened to a smile.

As she looked up into his eyes, he gently said, "I shall also say the same words if I need to call for you, Ms Weasley. But do not worry; I shall not use the charm unnecessarily."

He's so considerate, kind and thoughtful towards me... She suddenly didn't want to have to leave. "Between now and tomorrow, anytime, necessarily or not..."

She broke off, for he was giving her such a warm and inviting look, his height and grace hitting her. She wanted something more from him. "Shall we be friends, Mr Lovegood? True friends? For I feel we are already that and much more, in some ways. I've told you things that I've never told anyone else..."

"As have I, Ms Weasley."

She determinedly stuck out her hand to seal the deal.

He took her proffered palm in his, but suddenly, she felt Xenophilius bend his head lower and place a gentle kiss on her forehead.

As he raised his head and stepped back, he said. "Friendship. A friend in need is a friend indeed. "

At the old Muggle proverb, Hermione couldn't help herself and broke into a broad grin. "True. But I don't think the creator of that adage had us and my predicament in mind as a byword."

"Yes, for it seems he or she would then be a soothsayer, no doubt a magical creature of formidable means."

* H & X *

Hermione arrived back home to find that Harry and Ginny had brought her kids back, along with theirs, and Molly and Arthur had prepared a celebratory meal of sorts for the entire family.

She felt a level of peacefulness and hope from her visit with Xenophilius, and soon found that she could not help but be distracted by thoughts of him and her predicament throughout supper as the domestic and social chatter bounced around the table.

She could feel the Deathly Hallows' necklace cool against her skin. It had a continued calming effect, and when her thoughts flitted from Xeno to Malfoy, the *intimatus Tam* curse and its potential counter-curse, she had to keep pushing them aside to focus on everyone asking her about going back to work the next day, or Rose possibly entering Hogwarts' newly established pre-school programme in the autumn, and whether a private tutor for Hugo and his special needs should be considered as well.

Unlike his sister and cousins who were whooping and chasing each other around the house, Hugo had climbed onto Hermione's lap and was enjoying playing with her locks of hair and relishing being held tightly by her. As she amiably nodded and tentatively agreed to consider this or that speculation from her in-laws, Hugo suddenly pulled out her charmed necklace, cooing loudly, "Shiny!"

All conversation came to an abrupt halt as all stared at the triangular emblem gleaming in the late afternoon light.

"Where the hell did that come from?" The heated remark came from Harry, and as Hermione looked at him, she saw his eyes were as dark as his tone.

"It's nothing. Just a gift."

"A gift, dear?" Molly asked, concerned. "From Xeno?"

Hermione nodded, only to hear Harry snarl, "Take that off...take it off now!"

"I will not, Harry!" huffed Hermione defensively.

"How dare you wear such a thing...and it's from him, loony Lovegood?" sputtered Harry. "What did he do to you?"

"Don't talk to me as if I were a child, Harry. He didn't do anything to me; we had a very informative, productive visit together."

"About *what* exactly?"

Hermione gave Harry a stubborn look. "None of your business, Harry."

His face flushed red, pained, but he managed to tersely utter, "Hermione, let's talk privately. Now. Please?"

"Yes, why don't we take the kids outside a bit to burn off some more of their energy after such a wonderful meal, Mum?" suggested Ginny, sensing Harry and Hermione's urgent need to hash out his concerns.

Arthur swooped down and took Hugo in a playful bear hug from Hermione and herded the other grandchildren out towards the orchards as Molly and Ginny gave her and Harry worried glances before going out.

Hermione marched directly to her study; Harry followed her and barely waited until they were inside, behind closed doors, before exploding, "What is all this about, you visiting Lovegood?"

"Harry, what are you upset..."

"Molly said you needed to visit him regarding some urgent material I had sent you for the department..." Before Hermione could explain, he continued, "Which I played along with, not to worry, as we would *not* want to upset Ron's mum, would we...but now, you're wearing a bloody Deathly Hallows necklace, Hermione?"

"Harry, it's nothing," stated Hermione again as calmly as she could, for she truly felt under the façade she was trying to maintain in a muddle with all the information she and Xenophilius had shared; she wanted time to sort things out. She did not want at this moment, nor have the energy or clarity, to include Harry.

"What?"

"Harry..."

"Hermione!" He pushed his spectacles back, visibly upset. "I can't believe I actually have to say this, but what is it that Xenophilius Lovegood, of all people, can help you with that I can't?"

Hermione stayed mum, sighing. Several seconds ticked by with them glaring at each other before she offered, "I'll tell you when I'm ready, Harry. For now, it's nothing..."

"You trust Lovegood more than me? When did this happen?" pleaded Harry in a stricken voice.

"Harry, it's not like that..."

"Then what's it like?"

She couldn't answer him.

"Besides Lovegood and our past with him," Harry motioned his fingers between them, "Hermione, since working in the Ministry, as an Auror, I know things about Lovegood, confidential things from files kept after the war, Azkaban testimonies...just..." Harry looked like he was in agony. "Just stay away from him."

Hermione crossed over and sat down by her oldest childhood friend. They stared at each other, both holding back yet trying to appease the other.

Harry moaned, "And for fuck's sake, take that thing off... The Deathly Hallows symbol, really, Hermione?"

It was too early to include anyone else; and between a mixture of doubt, need, and inexplicable shame at that very moment, she offered, "Harry, I just went to pay Lovegood a visit and ask him about some runic references...and also, he saved Hugo's life..."

This seemed to spark off another issue that Harry was ruminating. "Yes, Molly told me all about it. Which is another thing, what happened, Hermione? Why weren't you watching the children..."

"How dare you, Harry. It was only for a second!"

"Yeah, a second's all you needed for your son to nearly drown and some lunatic to save him!"

They both froze, huffing at each other. Hermione started counting to ten silently, hoping not to explode and remind him of all the times incomprehensible accidents had happened to his children on his watch.

Harry was the first to speak. "I'm sorry. Forgive me. I'm...I'm worried about you, Hermione. I vowed to take care of you and Rose and Hugo. After Ron's death... You and I have been closer than a brother or sister could ever be, and yes, more than that at times, it seemed... I cannot *not* be overly concerned, overly protective about you. Whatever the hell this is...I mean, how can you feel you can't come to me if something is bothering you? If you need help about *anything*?"

"It's complicated, Harry, at the moment. I'm not a hundred percent certain about all my information yet..."

"You don't need to be with me. I worry about you. I care. I love you. Rose. Hugo. Anything that affects any of you affects me."

"Harry... Harry, I just need a few days...just a few days to get back into the rut of the department work, revise all of the current cases, past cases, cold cases...really, Harry. Just a few days. Please. Just let me get my head around things again and focused."

She took his hand and squeezed it tightly; they held each other's gaze, and all of the closeness of their past and present surged through and between them, causing Harry to give her a sigh of resignation as he took in her determination and strength of will. "Very well. But the next time you feel an urge to go to Lovegood's, I go with you..."

She began to protest and he cut her off, saying, "It's not just to escort you; coincidentally, we, the Ministry, have a legal matter to discuss with him."

"Harry, what is it?" *Is it about his illegal magical creatures?*

"I was going to wait until tomorrow at the department to brief you, but well, there's a final list of witnesses for charges that have never been pressed, and so, no statute of limitation applicable, and with them we can prosecute and nail Lucius Malfoy, Azkaban, once and for all. Can't wait for his slippery solicitor, Lester Qualmsick, to try and slide out of this one. Third time's a charm, right? He'll get life."

Hermione's heart began to pound harder at this news, memories of the last time she was in court flooding back to her. "What does Xenophilius have to do with Malfoy?"

"Not him, Luna." Suddenly, Harry looked uncomfortable and shifted in his seat. "It's about the goings-on at Malfoy Manor with the treatment of prisoners during the war, when the Manor was being used as one of Voldemort's headquarters. Luna..."

Hermione frowned in remembrance. "I know, she was one of the first kept there along with Dobby, us, Mr Ollivander...tortured*Crucio*ed. The Snatchers did not discriminate..."

"It not just about the Snatchers...Scabior, Greyback and those other thugs. I've asked Luna to testify about her treatment, her torture... specifically related to Lucius, and well, sit down, Hermione. As you know, wizards were murdered...Mudbloods..."

Hermione felt exasperated, listing further, "And purebloods, blood-traitors; wizards and witches tortured with Unspeakables, mutilated, raped..."

"Exactly."

"What are you saying, Harry?" Her brow furrowed. "Luna? We know she was held the longest, physically tortured and used as bait by Voldemort, but... No. She was a year younger than me..."

"Her rape..."

Hermione felt nauseated, shaking her head. "No, Harry, no."

Harry had centred himself, speaking calmly and gently, "She won't testify unless her father*allows* it; she feels strong enough to deal with and confront and endure a trial against Malfoy, but she fears her father will react... unpredictably. She said he was *delicate*, whatever the hell that means."

Hermione had reached her brink; she felt overloaded with unforeseen information pouring down upon her. "Oh, Harry... I need time, time to think...yes, we have to proceed carefully; the Lovegoods have been through so much... Please, by all that you care for, do not approach Xenophilius yet about this? Promise me."

Apparently Harry saw that she was being deeply affected by a multiple number of things known and unknown to him and nodded, staying silent for a few seconds, before daring to lighten the mood and slightly tease, "*Xenophilius* is it, not Lovegood? That must be one hell of a spell he whammed you with..."

Relieved Harry had softened and seemed to respect her wish to be patient and wait, she gave him a smile. "Harry, he did not spell me. He's a good man, that's all. An incredible wizard, misunderstood...he and Luna have endured unbelievable things..."

"You *admire* him...don't deny it. Hermione. I know that look."

Hermione wasn't going to get into it with Harry, stating simply, "He's quite misunderstood."

Harry's eyebrows raised in disbelief.

"Quite." Her grin broadened as she saw Harry's reaction, and she could feel her pushy tendencies taking over. "But for now, Harry Potter, I need you to back off. I need a few days to put all my ducks in a row."

Harry made some clucking sounds before leveraging, "I will give you forty-eight hours. And then, I can't help myself, Hermione. I will badger the truth out of you like nobody's business."

"Truce, then?"

"Truce. Well, a forty-eight hour one, that is."

Hermione threw her arms around and hugged her dear friend close. "Thank you for understanding, Harry."

"But I don't, Hermione. I don't."

I don't either, she thought to herself, for this heated discussion with Harry had caused her to feel an even stronger yearning to see Xenophilius as soon as possible.

* H & X *