

Parallel Dilemma

by nagandsev

Hermione is thrown into a parallel universe where everything is the same but different. While there, she finds another who has suffered the same fate as her, and together they try to find their way back to their home universe. Originally conceived as a gift for nottonyharrison for the GE Fic Exchange 2013, based on her wonderful prompt; due to helpful encouragement and much needed sprucing up, and generous support by a help-squad of wonderful witches, the story has now been given more proper love and care.

Perturbations

Chapter 1 of 11

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Author's Notes: First, my greatest thanks to nottonyharrison for her wonderful prompts, and the mods over at GE for advising me to give this story more love and care! As so wisely and kindly pointed out, this story needed more proper development and connective narrative, so it is with the deepest appreciation to all my lovely betas, helping me revise and fine tune the original version: lyn_f as my initial SOS beta, then stgulik as alpha beta extraordinaire, contributing her magic, and then alpha sorceress proulxes, alpha and coauthoring more than bits and pieces, helping me to broaden my universe further...you ladies are the best!

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Hermione gave a pensive look around the Time Room and tucked a loose lock of frizzy hair behind her ear. She looked back at her assigned partner, Marcus Flint, trying to hide her irritation with her colleague.

It'd been six years since the destruction of Voldemort. Six years since Kingsley Shacklebolt had become Minister of Magic, leading a massive reform of the Ministry. She had been proud to support Kingsley when he asked her to take a leading role in the newly established office for eradicating pro-pureblood laws in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. She had flourished under the pressure, impressing colleagues who were years older and more experienced than her...so much so that, once the new legislation was in place, Hermione had been offered a transfer to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and placed into the elite Intelligentsia Unit of the Auror Office.

True, Kingsley had chosen her for the Investigation Department, a subdivision of the Auror Office, rather than placing her as a regular Hit Wizard Auror, such as her current partner Flint was. But the Minister had again emphasized that he prized and needed her intelligence over her brawn for selective, clandestine assignments, such as this current one was. Hermione knew that Investigative Aurors' duties centred on the investigation and tracking down Dark wizards, whereas Hit Wizards were more of the muscle power when it came to the actual, physical arrest of dangerous criminals.

Muscle power was something that Flint had in abundance, she thought. The man radiated a kind of brutality that was deeply unsettling. He slouched against the wall of the corridor, chewing a nail, the muscles of his arms shifting and moving under the sleeve of his too-tight jacket.

Catching Flint giving her an odd look, she suddenly shuddered, and the memory of reading about how it took a team of Hit Wizards to arrest Sirius Black when he was thought to have murdered Peter Pettigrew and twelve Muggles came to mind. *Yes, it would take the likes of Marcus Flint to go after murderous criminals,* she thought, giving her partner another wary glance. That was why she was determined to be thorough in any calculations and investigations which she was in charge of...one could always be deceived by seemingly obvious facts right in front of your nose and be completely wrong about someone!

Focusing back on the here and now, she sighed again, frustrated by her lack of progress in this current assignment. Someone had forcefully entered the Time Room and the Space Room in the Department of Mysteries a week ago. But the manner of the break-in was disturbing, to say the least. So Kingsley had chosen her to investigate and Flint more for the physical arrest, defense and back-up protection in case she needed it...or so Minister Shacklebolt had said.

At the initial briefing, Hermione had been ecstatic at the prospect of solving an impossible crime, one that had never been committed before. She had immediately consulted the criminal record archives and was intrigued by all of the different cases; some had come close in attempts of breaking into and entering the Department of Mysteries, but most of those were illegal attempts into the Prophecy or the Love chamber. So far in her research, she hadn't come across one that had involved the Space and the Time rooms.

That was why her botheration with Flint was increasingly difficult to keep at bay. From day one, he had struck her as disinterested and ambivalent about each and every step of the investigative process. He had been utterly bored at researching and cross-referencing any former cases even remotely related, and Hermione had ended up doing all the parchment reports herself. It was only when they actually moved on to physically check the Department of Mysteries itself that he had somewhat perked up. But that had only lasted until they arrived there. Then, Flint's disinclination seemed to consume him full force, and Hermione had to prod him along, searching the main rooms that were targeted.

Nothing appeared to be missing in the Time Room except one old astrolabe, but in the Space Room, the constellations and planets had been disturbed...she had cast detection spells throughout the week, revealing that their longitudes and latitudes had been misaligned. Although just today, when she and Flint had made the first round of checking the Space Room, the heavens seemed to be back in line and in harmony. Hermione was stumped, but didn't want to admit it. *There was a deviation there and now it's normal... Or does it just seem to be normal? Maybe that's what the phantom intruder wants me to see...wants me to believe! Maybe there's some Charm cloaking the true situation... I detected the briefest abnormality just this morning even though visually everything seemed in place... I must check the room once more before we leave today!*

It was a conundrum Hermione wanted to find out the answer to. Along with all the many others: Who and what had caused the disturbances? When and how had they accessed the rooms? Was it an inside job? Outside? *This is a terrible situation to have some phantom intruder gain access and who has the skill to produce unknown havoc,* thought Hermione fretfully. *The Minister chose me to head this mission, so let's get to it!*

She raised her wand to cast again a detection spell in the Time Room before moving on. She felt a surge of pressure because of Kingsley's faith in her...pressure to solve the mystery in the face of 'proper police work', such as Flint offered. She tried not to let it make her more nervous and unsure.

She gave her partner another look and said, "Let me check one more time before we leave here."

Casually, Flint pushed himself away from the wall and spat the fingernail he had been chewing onto the floor.

"Yes, why don't you do that, Auror Granger? That's an absolutely brilliant idea," commented Flint, smiling pleasantly.

She blinked, unsure of his ingratiating manner. His expression indicated that he wasn't being disrespectful, although his words bordered on the sycophantic with her.

Hermione didn't care; well, she tried not to care. Ever since her first encounter with Flint at Hogwarts, she'd felt a mutual dislike to him. She knew it was a lingering childhood peeve. Although the strong memory of Draco Malfoy calling her a Mudblood, and Marcus and the other Slytherin cronies laughing, encouraging his cruel, racist behavior, had happened so long ago, some days the painful memory still flared up now and then.

She'd been surprised someone like Flint had made it into the Auror squad, but Harry had let her know that the former Slytherin classmate was exceptionally clever and skilled. Additionally, after the Second Wizarding War, Marcus was a willing and enthusiastic informer for the Ministry, very cooperative in helping root out and lead raids on former Voldemort followers who were still very active in causing harm.

So Hermione had bitten her lip, held her head high, and tried to ignore any dirty looks she thought Flint gave her *The past is the past, Hermione. Let it go,* she told herself.

"The intruder isn't here," stated Hermione as she finished casting her Homenum Revelio spells around the Time Room.

"Surprise, surprise," muttered Marcus sarcastically.

"What's that supposed to mean exactly, Flint?" demanded Hermione, trying to remain calm and professional in the face of his obvious derision.

She was trying hard not to let him unnerve her, reminding herself yet again that many Hit Wizards shared his attitude and behaviour.

Marcus smirked and shrugged his shoulders in response.

Hermione's eyes narrowed in pensive thought. "You agreed to this assignment, Flint. You needn't have if you weren't planning to cooperate."

"I'm cooperating..." He cocked his head and gave her an odd look again. "I'm here for you, Granger."

She gave the tall, muscular Slytherin a cool stare. There was something about his barely concealed smirk that she couldn't quite put her finger on that bothered her. After several seconds of staring him down, she said, "Very well, Flint, follow me."

The two Aurors left the long, rectangular room of the Time Chamber and made their way back into the Department of Mysteries' highly polished dark corridor. Hermione checked her watch, her heels clicking sharply on the polished marble of the flooring as she set a quick pace along the passageway. Flint was walking more languidly, deliberately falling behind her as she walked.

"Keep up, Flint," she snapped, irritated. "Our allotted time is running out for today...we need to push on."

"We've been given specialized, authorized clearance. What's the rush, Granger? Our clearance here is for as long as is needed. Besides, we haven't checked out what's behind those two doors." He nodded towards two doorways at the farthest side.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Weren't you even listening when Doctor Bridenbough was showing us around, Flint? What part of 'The Love Chamber's door cannot be unlocked by Alohomora, or other straightforward magical means' did you not understand?"

She saw his face flush with the insult, but pressed on regardless. "It is not possible for anyone to enter or leave that chamber without half the Ministry knowing that the door has been breached. The thief was detected for the first time along this corridor...but he or she could not have come out of the room because *the door cannot be opened*"

Flint's upper lip began to curl back in a sneer, but Hermione continued on. "However they got into the Department of Mysteries in the first place, they were undetectable until he or she entered the Time Chamber, stole an astronomical clock, an ancient clockwork astrolabe, and then came here..." She pointed at the Space Chamber's door

which they had arrived at. "This door *unlike the Love Chamber* shows signs of a forced entrance."

"And that one?" Marcus pointed to the farthest door.

Hermione's throat tightened as a flash of that horrid day when the battle in the Department of Mysteries had taken place over Harry's prophecy. The screams, the pain, the hexes and spells that were thrown around still caused a sickening feeling in her chest. *And Sirius Black went through the Veil! It was horrible!*

Hermione's thoughts flew to another time and place. She remembered one evening staying at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, right before her fifth year going back to Hogwarts, during the time of the Order of the Phoenix meetings and helping Molly Weasley de-spell the place from Dark magic. One late evening after all had gone to bed, she had crept down to the kitchen for some milk, feeling her stomach upset, only to find that the glasses and cups were on a top shelf, unreachable without magic or a chair.

Oh, Hermione! she thought, berating herself. Having not brought her wand, she pulled a heavy old kitchen chair from the corner to stand on. She carefully climbed up on it, trying not to worry by the cricking and slight wobbling her weight caused. As she reached for a cup, she felt her body waver as the chair shifted sharply to the right.

But she immediately felt a strong hand firmly hold her at the waist. She glanced down to see Sirius steadying her with one hand and his other on the back of the chair.

"I'd be careful if I were you. Kreacher's probably spelled it to break. He's, um, *mischievous* that way."

Hermione held the cup in her hand, not knowing what to say. She was embarrassed that Harry's godfather had caught her in such a mundane, yet potentially dangerous act. *That's all I need to do, fall on my arse right in front of him. He'll let Lupin know how so very wrong he was about me being the brightest witch of my age...look at me without a wand... What he must be thinking! Can't even Accio a cup!*

In the second it took for the chair to fully crack and give way, Sirius had caught and swooped Hermione down, standing her carefully on her feet.

"There you go, all safe and sound now." Sirius gave her a broad grin as she stood there dumbstruck, holding the cup in her hands. "Glad to help a young damsel in distress." He let go of her waist and raised an eyebrow. "Did you just need a mug or something else to go in it?"

"M-Milk," she answered, finding her voice. "Thank you for...I'm not always wandless. Didn't think anyone else was up...I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"Nah, I barely ever sleep," said Sirius, whipping out his wand and *Accio*ing a bottle of milk from the larder to the table. "Here you go."

He flicked his wand once, repairing the broken chair and waving it back to its corner, and then he flicked again, and a whisky glass along with an accompanying Firewhisky bottle landed on the table's other side.

"I'll join you for a late nightcap, shall I?" He plopped down not waiting for her to answer.

Hermione smiled shyly, but joined him, sitting and pouring herself a cup of milk while he gave himself a generous shot of liqueur.

They sat there in comfortable silence, each sipping their own beverage, until Sirius said, "Glad I was up, prowling around. That could have been a serious accident there, Hermione."

"I'm usually not like that," she said, still abashed at appearing foolish in front of him.

"Not like what? You're human. It's all right, kid. Accidents happen. Merlin knows, they happen to me all the time."

Stubbornly, she insisted, "I'm not like that...I usually have my wand; I'm fairly good in Charms, Transfiguration class..." she began to list, feeling a need to prove herself in front of the distinguished wizard.

"You like books, right?" asked Sirius, interrupting her.

"Yes."

"Take your milk, kid, and follow me. There's a book I want to show you...and it's *not* cursed," he added with a cheeky grin.

Hermione followed him as he led her to the front parlor in front of the fireplace. She sat as he put his drink down and then watched Sirius' gaze begin to roam over the shelves. "Is it *Magical Constellations*? Or is it *Constellations of the Magical Heavens*?" she heard him mumble.

"Ah, what the hell..." she heard him say as he cast his wand across the rows. Several books flew from the shelves, piling themselves on the coffee table before her.

It had been a wonderful night. Sirius had double-checked each and every book for Dark Magic before handing it over to her. They were lovely ancient tomes from his family's private collection, all going into exquisite detail of the history and related fields of magic which the constellations affected. Sirius had pointed out to her the beautiful moving pictures of the heavens and relayed humorous stories of his times in Divination classes, particularly when he had to cover Astrology.

Hermione had smiled and laughed so much that evening with Sirius. So that now, as she stood staring at the dubious doorway that Flint was pointing out, she could only think, *There was so much more to Sirius than people knew. He could be kind and so funny. He died so young... died before his time, before he should have...*

She forced herself to swallow hard to relieve the tension caught in her throat before replying, "The Death Chamber? Nothing there. If the perpetrator went in undetected and hasn't come out by now... they never will."

Flint seemed disgruntled, pursing his lips in deep thought about this. His heavy brows were knitted and his lower lip thrust out. He looked like a child who had had his Gobstones confiscated.

"Fine!" she exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air in exasperation. "If it means so much to you, we'll take a look in the Death Chamber...but only after we search the Space Chamber..."

"The Space Chamber, again?" He rolled his eyes, clearly giving her an it's-a-waste-of-time expression. "We've already checked it once today. Thoroughly."

"I detected an anomaly for the briefest second, but an anomaly nonetheless." *And if I don't double-check now, I won't be able to sleep a wink tonight!* she added to herself.

"You detected a lag of time in your spell applications," quipped Flint belligerently. "So what? I thought that was normal for this... place."

"Oh, so now you're the expert?"

He shrugged, irritating her. "I wasn't assigned as your partner for this just because of my good looks," he joked caustically. His shifty grey eyes looked her up and down. "Are you telling me that you got your measurements wrong, Granger?" he smirked rudely.

Choosing to ignore any innuendo, she stubbornly reminded him, "There's an anomaly. We need to check. It's our job." Turning back to the Space Chamber's door, she offered, "Look, I know you weren't keen on the floating about in here so you can wait outside while I run a series of spells to distinguish and identify any irregularities in the space between Uranus and Pluto...that's where there was a fluctuation."

"As you wish," he replied darkly. "That fucking place makes me want to throw up."

His surly manner only accentuated her annoyance and increased her determination to get to the bottom of whatever this burglary really *meant*.

She had enough to deal with in her personal life...Ron was being unbearable at times; far too self-centered on his career; oblivious to her needs, both professional and personal ones... Everyone said it was a natural phase in their not-even-close-to-officially-announcing, pre-engagement period, as well as it being a necessary time to think things over in regards to their professional ambitions. She gave a heavy sigh.

*Still, I can do without getting noncooperation at work from colleagues...*She gave Marcus a frown. "Why don't you go interview the ninth floor caretaker or something? I'll meet you at the lift."

"Yes, why don't I, Granger?" Flint sneered. "But you see, Shackbolt told me not to wander too far away from you. So I think I'll wait outside."

Irrked, Hermione turned from Flint and made her way into the dark room full of planets floating in mid-air; she let out a deep sigh, reflecting on how in this chamber wizards studied the aspect of space, and how it was considered one of the limits of magic along with time. *Mmmn, the Space Chamber...* She felt immediately at peace in this room.

Hermione allowed herself a small smile as she gazed between the last two planets, peering intently up into the darkness. She raised her wand to cast first the same identification incantation she had used several hours earlier, but paused right before incanting it.

She blinked in disbelief as she was struck by the realization that she definitely could see, visible to the naked eye, an abnormality wavering in the dark mass for a split second.

There's...there's something there...an anomaly, fluctuation...something irregular here!

As if hypnotized, she stared into the uncanny heavens and began to make out the faintest star formation, some constellation; she couldn't quite put a name to it at that exact moment. Just as the recognition of what it exactly was came to her, a hex hit her full in the back, and she felt herself falling forward into the darkness of the mysterious space, the black void consuming her utterly.

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Hermione's eyes fluttered open. She felt faint. She was aware of who she was, and she knew she'd been hit by a powerful hex, but couldn't remember who had cast it. Like faraway echoes, the sound of worried voices reverberated around her, but she was unable to make out the words yet... The lights danced as her eyes grew more accustomed to the glare from them, and her heart pounded as it dawned on her that she wasn't in the Space room. Unlike the cool darkness and crisp, clean peaceful atmosphere she was surrounded with there, wherever *here* was had a musty warmth, like a faded liqueur scent, and she detected sweet tobacco lofting in the air somewhere.

Her head was pounding and she tried to speak. But her mouth was too parched and her jaw felt stiff as she tried again to utter a word. She felt the smoothness of leather under her fingertips, confirming that she was lying on a soft sofa of sorts, but was confused as to how she got here. *I'm not supposed to be here! But where...?*

Like a bolt of lightning, a pain struck through her head as she tried to remember where she was supposed to be and, frightened, she cried out, not knowing where she was now. The muddled echoes of male voices started to become clearer, one very distinct, but her head was killing her, and she felt like she would slip into unconsciousness. She whimpered, thinking, *Has my memory been modified?* Her vision was blurry. But slowly, with muddled awareness, she recognized where she was *Minister Shackbolt's office!*

Dully, she could hear Kingsley arguing with someone. "You found her just as we found you...unconscious and on the Space Room's floor. A Healer should be..."

"Wait, Kingsley...it's probably just a case of exhaustion, over-exertion. It even happened to me there, remember? And I snapped out of it immediately. She, especially, shouldn't have been allowed to go directly back on duty, so shortly after..."

"Look! She's coming to!"

The voices ceased and Hermione felt someone near her.

"There, there, Hermione, take it easy," came the rich, deep voice of Kingsley Shackbolt, responding to her struggling attempt to sit up.

"Easy does it!"

"Minister, what am I doing here? What happened?" she asked, her voice and energy weak.

Kingsley gave a grave, uncomfortable look to another figure on her other side.

"Well, we were hoping you might be able to help us out there, Granger. What's the last thing you remember?" questioned a haughty, smooth voice.

As the sound of *that* voice, who exactly was speaking, dully registered, Hermione felt a wave of nausea roll over her *It...it can't be!*

Willing herself to turn her head to the commenter, her mind incredibly registered the incongruous realization that she saw black, Muggle motorcycle boots joined with black denim trousers. As her eyes caught a heavy-metalled belt buckle and slowly rose and locked on to his upper body, she swallowed hard as she took in a very fit form. She gazed at a very masculine form with a taut tattooed chest barely concealed by a half-opened, deep purple tunic, layered with a form-fitting velvety jacket. She gasped as she made eye contact with the dark poised form of a wizard who, her rational mind screamed out, could not possibly be there: *Sirius Black!*

Oh my god, but it can't be! Sirius? He went through the Veil! He's...he's dead!

It wasn't the hex she'd been hit with in the Space Chamber that affected and made her black out momentarily again, but rather the overwhelming emotions of sheer disbelief. Her rational mind folded in on itself, disappeared, and she went weak with shock, and fainted.

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Where am I? This must be a dream...he's not real, not alive... What's happened to me?

Hermione kept her focus on the snifter of Firewhisky, which had been handed to her by none other than one of her best friend's previously deceased godfather! Sirius looked the same to Hermione, maybe only a little older, which had only added to the masculine, virile energy he exuded. She tried to dampen her awareness of his vigorous physicality by focusing on the more immediate predicament.

His chiseled features, accented by the very trimmed, stylish moustache and tousled, long hair she remembered that he wore, heightened the concerned expression that he was giving her.

She avoided looking further at Black directly, as her mind was racing, irrational and wild. *He's dead, but then, am I? Where am I? This is a dream...no, it's real... Shackbolt, the Minister...he's the same; he's real! But, Sirius...? Oh my god, oh my god... I've lost my mind! Can't wake up!*

Feeling panic set in, she forced herself to take a sip of the burning liquor.

"Just take it slowly, Hermione," offered Kingsley gently. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Hermione blinked hard in thought. She desperately searched her memory and bit her lip in frustration before finally mustering enough will to vocalise bits and pieces. "The Ministry... The Department of Mysteries... We were in the Time Room..." *God, and then what happened? I...I can't remember details!* Her brow furrowed, deep and pensive, and she tried to piece together step by step what she could. But she could only jump sporadically in her thoughts. "Then we were...I was... I entered the Space Chamber."

Sirius made a sudden movement at this revelation, but Hermione saw Shacklebolt stop him with a sharp glance and hand held up.

"*We?*" asked Shacklebolt, concerned. "Who else was with you? You started to say 'we'. Please, Hermione, take a moment and think hard. Who was with you?"

At this, Hermione's mind went blank. Her mouth dropped open in momentary confusion, searching her memories as hard as she could. There were gaps in her mind...huge, gaping gaps. "It's difficult. I have these holes in my memory. I...I don't know..."

"You said 'we'," pointed out Sirius patiently, although his voice seemed strained and forced. "Think! Who was the last person that you were with?"

Being addressed by Black startled Hermione, and she snapped around to him, but froze momentarily as if Petrified.

"You!" she exclaimed in disbelief. "How are you even here? I don't understand..."

Sirius eyes' flashed with a painful emotion, and he clenched them closed. But when he opened them again, he gave her a deliberate cheeky grin, his undeniable handsome features almost softening the burning intensity he showed as he flippantly remarked, "I'm here because I've been laying off the liquor. Your number one gripe, yes, Auror Granger? The reason you've deemed me *lacking in perfect form?*"

"What?" gasped Hermione, utterly confused.

Taking in her mouth opened in shock, a scowl suddenly crossed his face as he barked, "Needed to catch up on my paperwork, being reinstated and all the fuddy-duddy, bureaucratic...you know, Granger, ministerial obligations and such! But today, be rest assured, your *superior* is completely in top form and ready for duty, ready to serve you, *princess!*"

His gruff change of tone and sudden surly countenance towards her enabled Hermione to clear her head a tad. "W...What?"

If she wasn't mad, if this was a dream, she was ready to wake up.

"You heard me," he said, swaggeringly pouring himself a Firewhisky. "Ironically, I believe this calls for a drink." He lifted the snifter and announced, "Let's celebrate, shall we, Minister? The return of our top girl!"

With his back to the Minister, but facing her, Sirius' expression changed to one of desperation at Hermione, as if there was something she should be seeing clearly, something she was supposed to be responding to. He had a look of expected hope battling with profound disappointment. The more she stared at him confused, the more the pain deepened in his eyes.

What does he want of me? What is he searching for looking at me like that? She thought frantically. *What am I supposed to say and do? He's looking at me as if... as if he knows me, but... How could he? He's dead! He's supposed to be dead!*

"That'll do, Sirius. Hermione needs time to recover from," Kingsley gave a long sigh, "whatever this is...whatever has happened to her."

Looking at the recognizably trenchant Sirius Black and then at the austere, earnest Shacklebolt, Hermione's head was in a whirlwind as an inconceivable truth dawned on her. This truly was real. She wasn't going to wake up. *Kingsley...Sirius...everyone, everything is real!*

Keep it together, Hermione, she commanded to herself. *I need time... Time is of the essence!*

Her thoughts raced, *I must find out exactly who and where I am in this... this...whatever, wherever this is...if Sirius is alive, what else is... different?* The possibilities astounded her. *Keep calm, just keep calm...*

She looked up again and Sirius locked eyes with her.

Yes, kitten, keep calm... bide your time... just keep calm... She gasped softly, hearing Sirius' thoughts in her mind.

Impulsively, Hermione knocked back another gulp of Firewhisky, relishing on some level the burning *realness* of it. She forced yet one more swig, seeing Sirius' eyes glint with a secret, and slowly the swanky tall wizard tossed her a flashing grin. She finished off the fortifying liquid, giving her the sensation that she was thinking clearer and in control.

Sternly, Kingsley announced, "We'll put you under twenty-four hour observation, Hermione. Sirius will watch over you. If all is well tomorrow, we can slowly start retracing your steps."

Shacklebolt turned to the impudent Black. "Summon a Healer at the first signs of anything... further abnormal in her condition. By rights she should be on the Janus Thickety Ward." Then the Minister gave a long, deep sigh and pointed out, "You told me that you wanted a second chance for redemption, Sirius. Don't blow it. I'm trusting you."

This seemed to pacify Black, as he now peered at Hermione with a somber and grave look.

Kingsley turned back to the frizzy-haired witch. "Granger, we need to get to the bottom of what is happening in the Department of Mysteries. Black is Head Auror, and doubly, the best Investigative Auror besides you that I have, despite his... weaknesses... and you clearly need better back-up. Now that he has his drinking under control, are you prepared to work with him again... to make restitution for your loss?"

"My loss?" Hermione's heart began to beat harder, faster. She wasn't sure if she could take much more and so simply nodded in reply. She needed answers, and she needed them *now*.

If anything, she'd get them out of Black, one way or another...especially as it appeared that he owed her something, was in her debt. *Shacklebolt trusts him enough... but he seems to be laying it on thick as if he's covering up... something... There's only one way to start finding out about things!* She gave the Minister another nod of agreement, hoping that this would placate any suspicions Kingsley was having about her stable mindedness.

I refuse to accept that I've gone mad. I refuse it! As she gazed at Sirius, internally confused and bewildered, she pleaded with herself. *Don't let them see you sweat, Hermione! Just nod in agreement and keep your chin up! You've got to work out what's going on and the last thing you need is to be committed to St Mungo's...* Taking a deep breath, she nodded carefully and schooled her face into a suitably calm and determined mask.

"Very well, then. Black?" Kingsley crossed over to the large fireplace in his office and indicated it as he spoke. "You can Floo to Alphard's place; I've had it directly

connected. If Granger's well enough in the morning, try to get here around ten, and we can start putting the pieces together as best we can. For now, I think we all can do with a good night's sleep."

Sirius came and stood in front of Hermione, offering his hand to help her up.

She took it lightly and allowed him to tug her to her feet.

There was something about the now softness in his eyes as he gazed at her that made her shy at his touch. It reminded her suddenly of how Ron looked at her whenever he was about to kiss her. And this wasn't Ron. It was Sirius Black, Harry's godfather. He was debonair, a risk taker, and...as she stared into his intense eyes...yes, undeniably handsome.

Even as a young woman, she had admired him from afar on several levels, ever since she and Harry had rescued him from Hogwarts, from being delivered to the Dementors.

She swallowed hard, remembering back before that, how brave he had been holding off the transformed Remus *He was willing to sacrifice his life for us*. Her throat tightened even now with the vision of Sirius, transfigured into his Animagus form, throwing himself at the rabid, murderous werewolf.

Abruptly she dropped his hand, embarrassed, and she flinched away.

Obviously miffed, Black bit his cheeks and then said as neutrally as he could, "You'll need to let me hold you... the first time...wouldn't want anything else to happen to you today, Granger."

"It would be advisable, Hermione," assured Shacklebolt. "Just this once, or until you're stable enough on your feet."

She protested, "Stable? Of course I'm stable enough! I don't need..." She broke off, stumbling, the hard liquor and an overwhelming feeling of exhaustion struck her like a sickening wave.

Black steadied her on her feet, ever so gently holding her, pulling her closer to him.

Hermione looked up into his stormy grey eyes, frowning and unsure, a frisson of unexpected excitement mixed with guilt coursed through her. Not having any other choice under the circumstances, she masked her flustered state with a huff and said, "Very well. Let's get this over with."

Tentatively, Sirius held her even closer to him; she could feel the heat radiating off his taut, muscular form. As his distinct masculine scent hit her, she heard him utter the address as they both stepped together into the fire, Flooing themselves to a safe space, and just as important to Hermione, somewhere which she prayed held answers for her.

oOoOoOo

Agitations

Chapter 2 of 11

Hermione discovers more of where exactly she is, and what has happened to her, as well as getting to know and trust Sirius again.

oOoOoOo

With a loud roar, they swept out of the fireplace. Hermione promptly shoved Sirius away.

"Ruffled your feathers, Granger?" he mocked gently. He was standing before her, watching her carefully.

"You were supposed to take me home!" she exclaimed.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, sweetheart." He made a theatrical wave of his arm. "This's home."

Hermione blinked and looked around in confusion. She took a few seconds to catch her breath, taking the room in while Sirius proceeded to motion here and there; lit candles appeared, burning bright, and soon the high ceiling of a spacious living room was made visible.

She frowned. The room *was* familiar to her...startlingly so. There were French doors leading out into a hall, and to her right was an open front salon. She looked over to her left and saw a large archway leading to a dining room.

Hermione fought to contain her rising anxiety as she recognized its layout and design. The room was cleaner and brighter than she remembered and much of the furniture was new, but...

Am I in Grimmauld Place? But... It looks so different! Her head throbbed as she remembered being there very recently...Harry and Ginny had invited her over for dinner with Ron. But the walls were different colours... The furniture was not the same. *How is that possible?*

She slowly focused on the details in the room, illuminated in the flickering light of the candles, and her heart started to beat more quickly. As she did so, she slowly began to recognize personal belongings filling the interior's nooks and crannies here and there: her grandmother's lace doilies, her parents' travelling souvenirs and trinkets; she even spotted some of her favourite Muggle books tucked in the shelves of a bookcase.

What the hell was going on?

"Sirius, what are my things doing here?" She had meant her voice to sound strong and accusatory, but all that had emerged was a frightened whisper.

He went very still before her; his brows furrowed, watching her cautiously. He looked as if he was poised on the edge of something, ready to fight...or run.

"Hermione," he said carefully and deliberately, taking a step towards her, "I told you; this is home."

She shook her head in denial, holding her hand up before her to stop him coming closer. "I *am not* home. I don't live here! Harry inherited it after you...you..." She couldn't finish the sentence. Her chest began to rise and fall as her breathing sped up. Her mind twisted, whirled with the memory of the past few minutes. "Back in his office... Shackbolt said this was Alphard's...your uncle's place...didn't he? W-Why would he say that when Harry lives here?"

Sirius frowned. "Harry doesn't live here. I gave it to *you* after..." He stopped abruptly.

"After what?" Her outstretched hand was now shaking badly.

"After..." He slowly walked towards her, softly saying, "Granger... Hermione... Please, sit down."

He reached out to touch her fingers, lightly enveloping her hand with his. His sudden kindness threw her into further bewilderment, and she felt frightened. "No! I want some answers, Sirius Black, and I want them *now*!"

"You really should sit down, sweetheart..."

"I said no...and don't call me *sweetheart*!" She shook her hand free of his fingers and drew away from him.

Sirius glared at her in frustration and ran his fingers through his hair. "Very well. Don't then. Suit yourself." He abruptly turned and headed towards the dining room archway, calling back, "Let's see what kind of alcohol you keep here."

Hearing Sirius opening and slamming cupboards, Hermione stood in the middle of the spacious room, feeling lost and confused. Her disorientation increased in a flash as she zeroed in on a framed photograph on one of the bookshelves.

Sirius had reentered the room and was saying something, but she couldn't understand him. She felt an adrenaline rush and could only stare at the photo. She forced herself towards it, her heart thumping wildly as she saw who was in it.

It was a picture of her and Ron. She wore a bridal gown, and Ron was handsomely dressed in formal groom robes, but Harry and Ginny were laughing behind them, as if teasing them, dressed in T-shirts and jeans.

She started hyperventilating. *What? WHAT?* The room started spinning.

"Granger? Here let me help you." She felt Sirius put his arms around her and let herself be guided over to a large Chesterfield sofa near the fireplace. Plopping down on it, still clutching the picture in her hand, she heard Sirius call out, "Kreacher!"

There was loud pop, and the ancient house-elf appeared, asking, "Yes, master?"

"Please, bring some food here for Auror Granger and myself." On a second thought, he added, "And a bottle of elf-wine and one Firewhisky decanter while you're at it."

"Yes, master..." Kreacher actually bowed slightly to Sirius before Disapparating away.

Even in her numb state, Hermione couldn't control her amazement at his behavior and whispered, "You...you were polite to him!"

Sirius gave her a puzzled look. "Why shouldn't I be? He serves me well."

But...but you've always been horrible to Kreacher! What has happened? Who are you?

Something in Hermione snapped, and she felt tears rolling down her face. She was all too conscious that Sirius still had an arm around her shoulders and was holding her hand with his. She could feel his heat, and for a second, she just wanted to melt back on him, into him, be held by and to hold him. To hold someone. She was drowning. Drowning in her doubts and fears. The fear that she had truly lost her mind.

Her soft brown eyes looked at him, vulnerable, unsure. "Please," she whispered, "Please, *whoever* you are, *wherever* we are... tell me what has happened."

A pained look passed over his dark features, but he said kindly, reassuring her, "I *am* Sirius, Hermione..."

A wild look flashed through his dark eyes, and he hesitated, obviously conflicted by something weighing heavily on his mind, before slowly saying, "Perhaps not the Sirius *you* know, but it's me, Sirius, nonetheless."

Hermione tried to comprehend what he was saying. "Sirius...?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"I... I feel dizzy. My lips are tingling," she gasped for air, "And my hands... I can't get enough air..."

"Kreacher!" bellowed Sirius.

A popping sound was heard, and the elf appeared before them. "Yes, master?"

"Bring a Calming Draught, immediately!"

In *crackles* of Disapparating and Apparating again, Kreacher stood before them again with the potion.

"Here, Hermione, drink some of this. It should help you relax but still be able to concentrate." He looked worried as he held the cup to her lips. She managed to swallow some liquid down and felt immediately the effects. A warmth flowed through her hands and lips, and within seconds, she felt clear-headed and centred.

She saw that Sirius looked relieved as he watched her. He relaxed a bit as well, reminding Kreacher, "Some food *now*." He turned to Hermione. "You still look a little peaky...must be starving. A bit of nourishment might help you from feeling all wobbly. But first, take another sip of the potion."

She forced herself to do as he said, managing a bit more. Looking satisfied, he took her glass and placed it on the coffee table.

Now able to catch a second breath, Hermione forced herself to try to think rationally. He was staring at her with the same guarded intensity that she remembered from the days back at Grimmauld Place during the War, but his face was fuller than she remembered, and slightly tanned. Polyjuice made from hairs taken before he had died would have made him thinner, gaunt even... *This* Sirius was different. It had been years since Sirius passed through the Veil...and this one was certainly older than the one in her memories. She noted the faint silver streaks at his temples. It could not be Polyjuice. She was too close for a glamour charm to be effective.

That had to mean....

But she had seen him fall, seen him *die*, the glow of Bellatrix' curse on his chest as he had flown through the archway in the centre of the chamber.

"How did you survive?"

His dark eyes burned with intensity as he whispered fiercely, "I'm the same as you."

She blinked, trying to understand clearly. "What?"

He patiently repeated, "I'm the same as you." He ever so slowly touched and lifted a fallen tress of her hair from her face and gently tucked it behind her ear.

A feeling of strange discord thrummed from deep within her as he touched her...his seemingly natural familiarity with her, his comfort around her.

His voice turned husky. "I'm lost like you. Misplaced."

She fought to understand, wishing that her head was clearer, despite the draught. "What happened to you? How are you *misplaced*?"

"I...I'm not sure. I have some theories, but nothing concrete..." He was interrupted by the pop of house-elf Apparition as Kreacher appeared with a large tray laden with food and bottles, which he placed on the low coffee table in front of the sofa. The house-elf asked, "Does master wish anything else?"

"That'll do, Kreacher."

The house-elf Disapparated, and Hermione gazed again, glued to the photo in her hand.

"Here. Eat," he ordered, passing her a sandwich. "Where do you want me to start?" he asked quietly, pouring wine into two glasses.

She took a small bite from the sandwich and shook her head. Looking around, she uttered weakly, "Everything is so similar and yet... different, and yet... the same."

Sirius followed her gaze and, apparently comprehending, asked, "Don't you recognize your home?"

"It's not my home," she informed him vehemently. She placed sandwich and the picture down on the table with a snap. "It's not my home; this isn't my life...I want my life back...!...where's Ronald?" she suddenly demanded.

It was Sirius' turn to be shocked; he paled and didn't answer her.

She pointed at the photo and asked again, "Where is Ron? That's a picture of us." She swallowed, perplexed. "Is that *awedding* photo?"

Sirius blinked and then croaked out, "No." An odd look crept over his face, and he softly said, "A rehearsal... Your wedding rehearsal..."

Hermione recoiled, shaking her head. "But I'm not married!" she blurted out. "We're not engaged and definitely *not* married." *That sounded wrong, somehow... disrespectful to Ron.* She fought to correct herself, babbling, "Well, we're almost engaged. Where is he? If this is our home, if this picture is real, he should be here!" Her voice was rising higher and higher. Ron was dependable... reliable... He would know what to do to help her. "Where *is* he?"

But even as she asked, she already knew the answer by the way Sirius' pained look silently implored her not to demand he spell it out.

"Sirius? Sirius, answer me! You know, don't you?" In spite of the calming potion, an overwhelming fear hit her, and she jumped up. Sirius lunged and grabbed her, holding her in a clumsy embrace as she thrashed around, pushing at his chest. "He's dead, isn't he? Sirius? Here...in this nightmare of a place...he's dead? Answer me! What the hell is going on? *Where the hell am I?*"

She was shaking in his arms, sobbing, and he sat her back down and held her as he *Accioed* the Calming Draught and firmly insisted, "You must drink every drop." He gave her a gentle smile. "And then I'll start telling you what I can."

She managed to down it all and slumped back against him, growing limper and limper until she lay quiet in his arms. Hermione heard him whispering sweet nothings to soothe her and slowly she laid her head on his shoulder.

Seemingly succumbed to the position, Hermione sniffled and stared over at the photo as Black offered some concrete information.

"You see," Sirius spoke quietly, "where *I* come from, your Ron is alive, very much alive."

Hermione could feel her body respond, tensing to this; she took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he continued, "In my world, you're *realmost* engaged to that ginger idiot who'd kept that filthy rat traitor, Pettigrew, as his pet all those years..."

Hermione became still at this. "We are? Ronald and I are together? Almost engaged?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. He's trying to get you to be exclusively his, but..." Sirius stopped, and Hermione looked up and watched him as he mulled something over in his mind before answering, "Yes, you and Weasley." Sirius eyes narrowed, giving her a small, forced smile of affirmation. He cleared his throat. "But here... *Here*...you hate my bloody guts."

"No, I don't..."

"The Hermione who exists *here*... resents me... She's... You've... No, *she's* blamed me for what happened to him, Ron's death, for not being there..."

"What... happened?" she heard herself ask. She didn't want to hear it in detail but knew that she must if she were to understand, to deal fully with this strange new world she found herself in until she could possibly figure out how to reverse what had been done... *If ...* Her head hurt at the impossibility of *if*.

"How? How did Ron...?"

"He fell through the Veil. Here. On an Auror's mission, right before the wedding day..."

Hermione gasped and Sirius tightened his grip on her. They stayed that way: Hermione slowly trying to make sense of it all, to put things in their proper place, to categorise the facts that she knew from *her* reality. *Not this! Whatever, wherever this is!* she thought desperately.

Holding her in his arms, Sirius continued to silently comfort her, giving her a gentle squeeze now and then, seeming completely comfortable with letting her be in his arms, letting her sort through things as long as she needed.

An old clock chimed midnight, and yet they continued to sit there together in silence in front of the lit fireplace. Time ticked on.

But your Ron is alive and well! Hermione kept telling herself. *Your Ron is enjoying his Quidditch matches and pub mates, so much... so much that he's refused to even talk about a possible formal engagement announcement, not to say anything of a wedding date...it's always caused a row between us... Neither of us can admit that we're just not ready... just don't want...* She stopped herself. Her problems with Ron belonged *there*...not *here*!

Feeling a wave of deep insecurity wash over her, Hermione pressed her head against Sirius' chest as if she could press it all away and wipe away the horrible event she'd just heard, whether *real to her* or not. She could hear his heart beating loud. Loud and fast, and she became aware of how tense and firm his body was. His muskiness filled her senses.

Hermione slowly sat up, suddenly feeling oddly discomfited at being in such close proximity with him. Perhaps it was because of the loud beating of his heart, or perhaps Sirius' unique masculine scent being unexpectedly pleasant to her, or perhaps the undeniable affectionate way he cradled her to him as if he'd done it before, as if he were used to comforting her, holding her.

With that realization, she became self-conscious and forced herself to move away from him, dispelling the need to have physical contact with him.

Sirius appeared to tense up as she shifted her body weight away from him and saw her look of embarrassment, and in the second, she knew he knew why. He didn't move but watched her silently as she scooted away from him until her back touched the sofa's side.

Hermione's thoughts were in a whirl, and she turned away from him to concentrate as she struggled to try to make sense of this place that she had found herself in. Her eyes roved across the well-ordered room, filled with knickknacks and mementos from a life that she had not lived. A place at once familiar and, at the same time, completely alien.

"No, not a place," she murmured to herself. "Not a world... not worlds...universes."

"Universes?" asked Sirius.

Oh, sweet Merlin! That's it! "I think we need to talk about it...*this*," she waved an arm around the room for emphasis, "in terms of universes."

"Us?" Sirius smirked. "In terms of universes, Granger?" He flashed her an amused but charming smile that caused her to give him a weak one in response as she repeated, "Yes, universes."

"I have a different way of expressing what's happening to 'us', but let's hear your take on it. Ladies first."

"You see," Hermione sat on the edge of the sofa, the Calming Draught now allowing her full reign of her thoughts once again, slowly grasping at and putting the pieces together, hoping they would fit, "there are theories... these Muggle theories about the universe we exist in. In your universe, Ron is alive and in mine he is alive, but we're not yet engaged in mine either...we're, well, sort of...but here..."

"And Remus?" Sirius asked suddenly, interrupting her.

"Lupin?"

"In my wor...universe, Remus is alive...and Nymphadora, but here," Sirius swallowed hard, "they're... they're not."

Hermione's sad brown eyes told him everything he needed to know. "So, also in yours...they're..."

Hermione nodded in affirmation. "The final battle, the battle of Hogwarts, against Voldemort..."

Sirius huffed; she could see that the thought of those he loved and knew to be alive *in his* reality non-existent, dead in hers, had hit him hard.

"So..." she began again. "So, you are definitely not from this reality... this reality's past or from mine...?"

Sirius shook his head. "Nah... like I told you, I'm not from here." He gave her a concerned look. "And obviously I'm not from yours, am I?"

Hermione turned away from him, gazing into the fireplace, and shook her head *no*, feeling ill at the thought of having to tell him what she had seen happen in the Death Chamber.

"Know how I knew it?" asked Sirius, his voice almost chipper, causing her to turn back to him.

Hermione shook her head, feeling the combined effects of the evening's Firewhisky, calming potion and exhaustion weighing down on her, anchoring her in place, and Sirius' warm gaze, like a beacon, steadying her.

"At the beginning...you didn't like me in my world...or protested and disapproved of my habits, too bloody cocky you kept telling anyone who would listen. Except for right before I *switched over* to here; you began to..." Sirius seemed to become unsure of what he was saying or perhaps how much he wanted to say to her. "But here, you can look at me without... With those lovely eyes of yours, with need and warmth."

They both stared at each other; something unspoken passed between them.

He cleared his throat and spoke quietly. "As I started to say earlier, I arrived here pretty much as you did, searching for a perpetrator in the Department of Mysteries, and arrived here weeks ago, just before..." Sirius sighed deeply and then decided to get straight to the point. "In *this* universe, it was your...Weasley went through the Veil just before your wedding day. He said it was to be his last Auror mission before he married from what I understood. I had just *arrived* here myself. All I knew to do was to shut up and listen...not an easy task for me...but twelve years in Azkaban taught me one thing, patience. Watch and wait. Take it all in; try to make sense of what the hell was going on. We were called in; there was abnormal activity detected... Again, as in my universe and no doubt yours, an intruder had broken into the Department of Mysteries and had been traced to three rooms: the Time Chamber, the..."

"Space Chamber," piped in Hermione weakly.

"Yes, and the..." Sirius hesitated, "the Death Chamber. We were split up. I went to the Time Chamber and Weasley went to...We were going to meet up at the Space Chamber. Neither of us fancied the floating about, and we were going to draw straws on it...I waited and waited. He didn't show and I went to look for him. He wasn't there. I called for back-up. Eventually, our tracers detected an entrance; someone entered the Death Chamber, but... no exit." Sirius paused and held her tighter. "Recent activity was detected from the Veil... Someone had gone through... *him*..."

Sirius paused, as if he expected Hermione to rebuke or utterly reject him. But she only watched him, waiting for him to continue.

He swallowed hard and recounted further. "You see, I had just arrived here myself the very day before...before it happened... During briefing, I was able to hide my disorientation under the guise of pulling an all-nighter of too much liquor and carousing about...no one questioned my behavior. Weasley offered to lead the patrol... His murderer is still on the loose."

"Murderer?" whispered Hermione.

Sirius was clearly riled up. "Of course he was murdered...Weasley wasn't the suicide type. He had everything to live for. He had *you*."

Hermione felt her face burning as she sat up a bit, and Sirius gave her an appreciative look, his face flushed as well. His eyes shined and his jaw muscles clenched hard. Then he looked away into the flames of the fireplace and in a strained voice pointed out, "That's the thing...this intruder must have already been in the Death Chamber. Merlin only knows for how long beforehand and why..." Sirius let out an exasperated sigh. "Afterwards, I didn't attend the memorial service. I was angry, drunk, sulking about, and went back to the Space Chamber determined to finish what we'd started. Determined to find some further concrete traces of the bastard who did Weasley in. I know in my heart it's connected with our predicament. Deep dark magic and madness running amok in the Ministry." Hermione could feel heat and energy emanating off of Sirius, as he ran his hand through his hair in agitation. "I entered the Space Chamber and then thought I saw something in the darkness...a constellation pattern I'd seen before..."

"Between Uranus and Pluto?"

He nodded, swallowing hard. "It was the same constellation as when I'd come through... from my time, my universe. But *there*, nothing else happened. I had half-expected someone to hit me in the back with a hex again, to wake up somewhere new...but nothing happened. Nothing. I had to accept that the perpetrator was still on the loose. And I was stuck here. So, here I still remain. Only then weeks later, you've now shown up..."

Sirius turned again to Hermione. Something painful seemed to go through his mind before he said, "The Hermione from *there* had returned to work after a bereavement leave; she was all hell-bent to find the perpetrator, the *phantom intruder* she called him. She received elite permission from the Minister to have unlimited access to the Time and the Space Rooms. And just today, I and my *new* partner were assigned to her, for protection while she did her thing this afternoon." Sirius huffed. "She ordered me to the Death Chamber and my partner to the Time Room while she searched alone in the Space Chamber."

He gave her an odd look. "Needless to say, I found you hours later, unconscious on the floor in the Space Chamber. Your vital signs seemed to be all right, except for your unconscious state, which struck me as too coincidental, being like I was. I wanted to protect you, help you if I could...if you were like me, if the same thing that had happened to me, happened to you. I thought that perhaps you were from my universe, so I carried you to the Minister's office. But upon awaking, you were very much different... from either the Hermione from my place or from the previous one here. You were too... *different*."

Sirius' gaze at her changed to a warm, contemplative one. "You looked at me as if you couldn't believe I existed... And there was a sadness and shock there that I've never seen before. By anyone."

Hermione's heart started pounding; she became dully anxious to avoid telling him bluntly why she'd been so shocked. *You're dead in my universe!* Her brow furrowed in thought as she deliberately changed the subject. "So you also can't remember...you don't know who it was who hexed you from your original universe?"

"Unlike you, I do!" Sirius sat up straight on the edge of the sofa, excited. "I didn't see him actually do it, but I know I was ambushed there by my fucking bastard partner, Marcus Flint, but of course can't prove it...the problem is that *here*, he's lauded as an outstanding Auror by everyone, as some bloody war hero or such."

A sharp pain went through Hermione's head, and she winced.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," she stretched back, feeling a heavy grogginess come upon her, the dull throbbing in her temples growing stronger, "just it would be difficult to prove your partner in your universe did it, and why would he?"

Sirius became taciturn. After a few seconds, he replied, "I don't know."

"Could it possibly have been anyone else?"

"It could be anybody. I'm not well liked, there or here...apart from among my personal friends that is.... I've been called foolhardy and impulsive all my life...not characteristics that inspire loyalty among my colleagues. In addition, I happen to have been promoted to Head Auror here, above others who were no doubt hoping for the role for themselves. There would be many who would be eager to have me, um, *disappear*..."

The throbbing in her head increased in a flash as Hermione unwillingly remembered Bellatrix Lestrange's triumphant screeching of 'I killed Sirius Black' and her mad gloating laughter in the Death Chamber on that horrible day Sirius went through the Veil. She stared at Sirius in consternation, and he met her gaze, curious.

They both fell silent, looking at one another, and then an unforeseen warmth enveloped Hermione as she suddenly felt grateful that somehow *one* Sirius Black was here in front of her, alive and well. She gave him a bittersweet smile; he wasn't supposed to be real, but he was.

In that second, she felt an overwhelming need to help him, help him get back to his universe as well as she to hers. She knew she would help him however she could, that they would help each other...for it appeared that that was all they had...each other.

Sirius apparently saw some change in her demeanour and asked, "Are you alright? Perhaps we should go to bed."

She started at this and he quickly corrected, "That you should get some sleep. We'll talk more tomorrow."

He gave her a cheeky grin. "But first, please finish your sandwich...you don't want to hurt Kreacher's feelings, I'm sure."

She gave him a small smile as she sat up. He looked relieved when she also started snacking on a few pastries and grapes and joined her.

There was a peaceful silence between them as they sipped and supped in front of the fireplace.

As she nibbled on a cinnamon tart, letting her mind just focus on the here and now, she tried not to notice his bared chest showing through his half-unbuttoned shirt, displaying the indistinct tattooed design on his taut, sculpted chest. She looked away, back to the fireplace, confused by the rush of emotion running through her.

Her troubled eyes gave Sirius another fleeting glance. He held more answers.

Quietly, she asked, "But how did *you* end up here exactly? Before you were hexed, what were you doing in the Space Room?"

"In my world... so many things are similar to *here*, as they surely are in your *universe*. Me and my partner had been called in, given secret clearance and permission to search the Department of Mysteries to search for a thief and a murderer. A nasty piece of work...violent and Dark. By a real bastard." Sirius bit his cheeks in surly reflection. "My partner for the patrol that day, a Snivellus-looking recruit..."

"Like Snape?"

Black looked like he would spit. "Yeah. Just like here, like today when you arrived, it was Marcus Flint. Another Snivellus, if there ever was one."

Hermione's jaw muscles tensed as she gritted her teeth and clenched her eyes shut. The word grated on her nerves, but she could not remember why.

"What is it, Granger? What's upset you...the mention of Snape? Or Flint? You're remembering something?"

"I...I don't know," she whispered tersely, her head throbbing. "No... I can't remember."

Several seconds passed by and then the pain stopped as quickly as it had begun.

Hermione opened her eyes and found Sirius' grey ones peering deep into hers, haunted and glinting with suppressed secrets. He was so close to her.

"I-I'm fine. It's passed. It hurt like hell for a bit, but it has stopped now." Her voice was soft and whispered.

As they held each other's gaze in tense silence, she couldn't ignore his dilated pupils or the darkening look as he took in her flushed countenance. She felt herself grow warm being in such close proximity to him. And such close scrutiny. Such intimate scrutiny.

Again, she could not help but notice his lithe form, his lean muscular chest exposed up close now from the tunic's opening. She was near enough to see the tattooed

patterns in detail as well as his dark chest hair forming and trailing downward in what could only be a very distinct treasure trail. Hermione instinctively gave a fleeting glance downwards, immediately regretting it as she heard Sirius gently tease, "Like what you see, Granger?"

The air had changed, something sultry and electrical seemed to fill the space, and Hermione was only aware of her breathing becoming exigent and pronounced as her chest began to rise and fall in a heavy slower motion.

She stuck her chin out. "What did you say?"

Sirius swept his long hair out of his eyes and decisively spelled it out again. "I said, sweetheart, do you like what you see?"

Hermione blinked at Sirius, embarrassed. As he boldly moved over, sitting closer to her, she protested, "Don't...please, don't call me sweetheart."

This seemed to keep Sirius in check, and he searched his thoughts about something. "Even here in this place and time?" He swallowed hard and bit his inner cheeks. "You have no feelings for me in your universe?"

"Feelings?" Hermione blinked, her eyes wide at the truth her brain wanted to scream, but her heart urged her to keep quiet, keep it secret; it would be too brutal, perhaps too devastating for Sirius, and she needed his cooperation, his full objective cooperation. *Surely being told you're dead, even in another time and place, would be withering to his ego...Who knows how he would react?* But another part of Hermione felt he should be told the truth from her reality. *You're dead where I come from!*

"No," she said quietly, shaking her head, unable to tell him the absolute truth. "No, no feelings. Well, not those sorts of feelings... I mean, I admired you greatly," Sirius raised an eyebrow at this, "You were kind to me, funny, brave, and I've always felt terrible that you were seriously wronged for most of your life." *And I was only fifteen when you died!* "But no, erm, never any romantic feelings..."

"*Romantic* feelings?" Sirius' features softened. "Yes, I gathered as much."

He reached out and brushed her hair back again, letting his fingertips linger longer than needed, outlining the softness of her cheek, her delicate chin, before lowering his hand.

Sirius held her gaze and softly shared, "This is very difficult for me on many levels, you see, Auror Granger. In my time...universe..." His voice became husky. "I'm quite attracted to you. Ever since we began working together in the Auror department...and right before I *left* there, you'd given me reason to believe it was mutual."

He lowered his head as if he was going to kiss her and Hermione jolted back.

"Dead!" she blurted out.

Sirius froze. Then slowly he straightened up and cocked his head slightly. "Sorry, didn't quite catch that..*WHAT?*"

Hermione shook her head. Like a slow motion Muggle film, she again recalled memories of her fifth year at Hogwarts leading up to that horrid day in the Department of Mysteries, in the Death Chamber, when Sirius went through the Veil.

Huffing in disbelief, Sirius rose and stiffly walked over to the fireplace, leaning forward with his hands on the wide mantle, heavy in thought.

Sweeping his long dark hair out of his eyes, he stared into the flames and asked quietly, "So, Remus, Tonks... and me? The final battle...Voldemort got me?"

"No. No, it was... It was before that... in the Department of Mysteries. Bellatrix... Your cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange, hit you with a curse, and you went...you fell through the Veil."

Frozen, Sirius made no movement, and Hermione couldn't bear him having his back to her and rose, crossing over to stand by the mantle near him. She gently placed a hand on his shoulders, causing him to flinch and turn around to her. The flames from the fireplace threw shadows on his somber features, but also cast a light across his eyes full of torment and passion.

His voice hoarse with emotion, Sirius rasped out softly, "So, of course I mean nothing to you...I don't exist. I died before we became... before you grew up into the incredible witch that you are. Before you transferred to the Auror department, before we... got to know each other as colleagues, as friends... as potential lovers. I'm dead. Already dead to you."

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Tribulations

Chapter 3 of 11

The evening entails a discussion of parallel universes, 'thin places', biker chicks, and sleep. Hermione and Sirius resume their roles at the Ministry, only to find themselves in another taxing situation.

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We got to know each other as colleagues, as friends... as potential lovers? thought Hermione slowly, letting Sirius' perception of *them*, the Hermione he knew in *his* universe, sink in.

The seconds ticked by in silence.

Sirius stared at Hermione with a pained look in his eyes, conflicted, and then he started to say something else to her, but changed his mind. He turned back to the burning flames in the fireplace, and Hermione frantically searched her mind for any coherent answers to this unbelievable predicament. In the heat of the moment, she felt Sirius' distress and forgot her own.

"Multiverses!" blurted Hermione.

Sirius blinked. "Sorry. Multi-what?"

She waved an arm impatiently. "Multiverses. Many Muggle scientists believe that our universe...well, each one's universe...exist in parallel to each other... and that there are points at which they touch."

The look he gave her was uncomprehending. "They... touch," he repeated slowly.

"Yes!" Hermione's heart was beginning to thud in her chest again. "It's also quite a common metaphor in Celtic Christian theory. Some theologians call where they touch 'thin places'...although in this case it's more to do with the relationship between Christian ideas about heaven and earth..."

She broke off as Sirius shook his head, his face twisted reflexively in confused disbelief. "Sorry, sweetheart, still don't get it... Divination wasn't my thing."

Hermione huffed impatiently, drumming her fingers on the warm oak of the mantelpiece. "Nor mine. It's not Divination; it's..." She stopped. *How to get Sirius to understand?*

Her eyes roved again around the well-ordered room, filled with her knickknacks and mementos from a life that she had not lived. But apparently another Hermione had. A Hermione that Sirius knew well.

She huffed, excited, but tried to explain slowly to him, "Okay, forget Muggle spirituality. Multiverses. As I started to say before, many Muggle scientists believe that our universe... well, each one's universe...yours and mine..." Sirius was biting his cheeks, tense, and visibly seemed to be trying to keep his impulses in check, impatient. He began to pace, but Hermione pressed on, determined that he understand. "The point is, there's a theory that states that many universes exist parallel to each other."

Hermione bit her lower lip in concentration. *Yes! This could be it! But how did it happen to us?* "These distinct universes within the multiverse theory are called *parallel universes*."

Sirius made a disparaging noise. "Parallel...What? Look, you've suffered a gods-awful shock, Granger. I don't bloody know what got me here, but I can tell you I've tried to do everything, to find out everything I could think of to get back home...from the Hall of Mysteries to fucking soothsayers in Knockturn Alley... I've talked to every shade of weirdo you can think of, run the risk of being suspended for psychological evaluation by Shackbolt, and ultimately I've found myself back where I started! It all comes down to the same fucking thing in the end, sweetheart...." He stared at her as he spoke, and for a moment she saw a flash of near madness in his eyes.

She took an involuntary step backwards. "But..."

"But *nothing!*" he spat. "We're trapped here. That's a *fact*. I know it, because I can feel *it* here," he thumped his chest for emphasis. Again, she saw that wildness in him, barely constrained, and felt an odd lurching in her chest. There was almost a desperation to him now, like an animal trapped in a cage.

He must have seen the alarm that she was feeling reflected in her face, because suddenly he drew back and took a deep breath, calming himself with a visible effort before her.

"I'm sorry," he muttered quietly, his eyes darting to the fire again. "Don't usually lose it like that."

She took a step towards him, impulsively placing her hand on his arm. "Sirius, *listen*. A few believe that it's possible to contact these parallel universes, to jump from one to the other, but maybe it's a point to start at, for us...we can help each other work this out, to return to where we're supposed to be, you see?"

He was concentrating on her in a way that was making it difficult for Hermione to keep her train of thought. She became aware of how close he was to her, his chest rising and falling, his bare forearm hot beneath her fingers. His eyes flashed with suppressed emotion as he confessed, "After all this time... it's... just difficult for me to hear what you're saying, sweetheart. I think..." His Adam's apple bobbed as he paused, deliberating something. His stance was taut and tight, like a panther ready to pounce. She stood, still and tense before him, conscious of the flexing of her fingers on his pale skin, the scent of his skin in her nostrils. One heartbeat... *two*. His throat convulsed again and for a moment she thought he was leaning towards her...

Abruptly, his head jerked upwards, and his arm fell away from her to his side. Then he flashed her that quick, cocky smile she remembered from her youth and cleared his throat. "I *think*," he repeated, his voice lighter and stronger than before. "I think we should go to bed...that you should get some sleep. We can continue talking in the morning."

Hermione gaped at him. "But..." she started to say as he brusquely turned away from her, making his way to the hallway, saying, "Don't know about you, but my head's about to explode if we talk anymore about Divination...but a good night's sleep and I'll be all ready and willing in the morning...I'll check the bedroom situation upstairs, alright, kiddo?" Before she could answer him, Sirius had already disappeared up to the first floor.

What the hell...? she thought, baffled by his sudden mood changes. *One minute he's as upset as I am about this bloody situation, the next he's bouncing about wanting us to get some sleep!* She shook her head, remembering how Molly and Arthur had once tried to correct his impetuosity, that Snape had scorned him for it. She remembered how he had stared at her when she mentioned the possibility of travelling between different universes. He had looked almost unhinged for a moment.

She suddenly wondered how safe she was with him, feeling unconsciously in her pocket for the reassuring weight of her wand. Finding it, she breathed easier.

She could hear him walking around upstairs... the muffled sound of a cupboard door being opened and shut again. He had offered her no violence, only help and support. She thought about the look on his face as he had insisted that she eat, his warm hand on hers as he passed her the wine. The feel of his skin beneath her fingertips by the fireplace.

He's Harry's godfather, she thought to herself sternly. *He would never hurt you. You're probably still in shock, and you need to sleep if you're going to sort this situation out and get home. Now, get a bloody grip and follow him upstairs.*

"Sirius?" she called as she reached the first floor landing. "It's vital that we have a common understanding before we interact with others further...before we go to the Ministry tomorrow. If I'm going to be able to face Shackbolt convincingly and all the others under a disguise of being her...the Hermione that they all expect to recognize, then..."

Hermione froze. She had stopped in front of the opened doorway on the left, and what she saw slightly unnerved her. *Ron's things?*

She stepped into the room. Looking around, she saw Gryffindor and Quidditch paraphernalia decorating all of the walls. It was definitely Ron's bedroom; besides the Gryffindor bed covering, Hermione spotted Ron's personal things. She walked over to a card-album and slowly opened it, revealing Ron's old Chocolate Frog card collection from when they were children. Hermione's throat tightened up as she closed her eyes and reminded herself, *Your Ronald is well and alive!*

"Hermione?" Sirius had returned from down the hall. He was carrying blue fluffy towels folded in his arms.

She closed the card-album and turned to him. He seemed embarrassed as he offered, "I thought you might like a bath... or a shower, or something. Sorry, I wasn't sure whose room was which. I've actually never been in this room, as is." He swallowed hard. "I was only here in *this* Grimmauld Place one time before I... before Weasley... I immediately moved to one of the Ministry's Auror hide-outs." Sirius looked around assessing. "But it seems like Weasley pretty much had similar taste like my ginger partner did." Sirius turned and closed the door slightly. "Yup. Same taste." He let out a cheeky grin, seeing something humorous.

Hermione took a step, looking around his side and let out an 'Oh'. On the back of the door were multiple Muggle posters of half-clad women in suggestive positions on various Harley Davidsons.

Hermione's raised an eyebrow and frowned. "Really? My Ronald would never have these..."*"Demeaning, objectification of women things...ever!"* she wanted to say, but didn't. "Ron is *not* into biker chicks."

Sirius grinned, amused, but nodded in agreement with her. "You're right. Absolutely. I'm sure your Weasley is right as rain, true blue. However *this* Weasley seems to have been very much like mine. You see, Harry and Weasley were, um, very curious about bikers." Hermione's eyebrow went higher.

"So I did the only thing I could do, and took them to a bikers' club that I'm an honorary member of." Hermione pursed her lips. "Harry didn't care much for it, you know, being raised by Muggles, but Ronnie boy, uff, let's just say, it made quite an impression on him. Fun times."

Hermione frowned. "Sirius, I also grew up with Muggles, and for your information, they are not primarily half-naked motorcyclists straddling..." She became flustered and felt her cheeks reddening as she noted one model in a poster straddling a leather seat in bliss. "Well, they are not all like that!" she snapped.

Sirius gave her a curious look. "I know, Granger. I think the Weasley *here*, like in my wor... universe, um, was really into Muggle things, like his Dad. Um, from what I understand, Harry, Ron and I lived together for a few years here, a sort of a crash pad for mates..."

"You mean a bachelors pad," she quipped, shuddering.

Sirius smirked, "Nah, nothing awful like that...just three wizards who hadn't found their life partners yet. But that quickly changed...Harry soon married Ginny, living back at The Burrow, and once Ron became engaged to you, I stayed around at various Auror nests. *The lone wolf.*" His mouth twisted sardonically. "This place was to be yours." His eyes saddened. "Truth be told, I've always hated this bloody house; it was a horrible place to grow up in. Like in my world, having wonderful mates at school helped me endure it and forget things... temporarily, but..."

His voice faded off as he looked around at the room again. He abruptly changed the subject. "Shall I show you your room? I think I've found the main bedchamber. It looks like a lady's room, anyway. Here, down the hall."

Hermione followed Sirius slowly out of Ron's room, thinking, *So, Grimmauld Place was always something horrible for Sirius?* She felt dizzy a bit as an on-rush of questions washed over her. *Who is this Sirius, exactly? How much more was his life similar to my Sirius'? Different?*

Her thoughts were cut off as she entered the room at the end of the hall, a large bed chamber with an en suite bathroom off to the left. Hermione felt a sharp tingle course through her. It was her room, rather, her ideal room...her style, her favourite colours...if she could choose her perfect bedroom, this was it! She slowly walked over to the four-poster bed, gasping softly.

Sirius placed the blue towels self-consciously down on the bed covers and cleared his throat. "Well, then. I'll leave you to it. Erm, it looks as if the bathroom is adequately supplied with anything and everything to meet all your needs. The Hermione *here* seems to have kept it well-stocked."

Hermione suddenly felt exhausted. It was all too much. *The Hermione here! Where is she now? Is she in my universe? In Sirius'?* The room started to move a bit. He was right. She needed sleep. And fast. If this was still where she would be when she awoke, she would continue questioning it all, but for now... "Sirius?"

His eyes gleamed with expectation as she said, "Thank you. For everything. And you're right."

"I am? About what?"

"We need to go to bed." He looked amused. "Sleep. We'll continue this in the morning then?"

He was looking at her with an odd look she couldn't make out as she continued. "We need to be in agreement about everything. I need you..." She stopped. "I need you, to face Shackbolt convincingly."

Sirius gave her a sad smile. He seemed to sway forwards for a moment, but then he stopped, stood straighter, and his smile took on a more dashing and cocky flair. "We need each other, kid," he said. "Don't worry; everything is going to be all right."

As Sirius turned to leave, Hermione had a last moment of inspiration. She grabbed at his arm and caught it, causing him to turn once more to face her. "Sirius? We'll need to get further access to the Department of Mysteries. I think the first place to start is requesting access to the Ministry's Department of Mysteries' archives, their Restricted Section, Azkaban records of..."

His eyes danced in the pale light of the bedroom, and he covered her hand on his arm with his own. It was roughened with calluses and very warm. "Shhh, that's enough...it'll all be waiting for you in the morning. Sleep, Hermione, rest. I'm here; call me if you need me...I'll be in the room on the right side...the old study has a comfortable lounge couch. And don't worry; the Ministry is the one thing that has stayed consistent. Unperturbedly impervious. Always there, same as it ever was. Sleep, sweetheart."

Hermione rolled her tired eyes and almost protested again about the *sweetheart* calling, but as she started to speak, Sirius lowered his head.

There was a second, just a second, when Hermione thought he was going to kiss her on the lips.

But he moved his head and kissed her on the cheek, saying in a low voice, "Call me if you need me. For anything." Then he left.

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Hermione's hands shook slightly as she placed an ancient astrolabe checked out from the Time Chamber onto the Head Auror's desk. She clamped down on her emotions ruthlessly, telling herself to *focus, focus, focus!*, as she turned and addressed Shackbolt directly. "I'll also need time to evaluate and match any corresponding Arithmantic coordinates of the Space Chamber with the deciphered Runes, theoretically formulated, regarding the distances between planets."

The Minister raised a brow and gave Sirius a look for affirmation on what he was hearing. But the Head Auror only shrugged and crossed his arms against his chest as he sat on the edge of his desk while Granger continued to list out what she needed to proceed further into the investigation.

"Anything else, Granger?" Kingsley asked.

"No, that's all for now, Minister. Although once I've narrowed it down, I'll officially request additional access to these Chambers." She pointed at a list of parchment on the desk. "We'll need access to the Time Chamber, Space Chamber, and if necessary, the Death Chamber, as well as any other chamber that may prove relevant for Head Auror Black and myself."

"Very well. Then I'll leave the two of you to get to it. You'll let me know what else you need, I'm sure, if something else should arise. And Granger...Hermione...be careful." Kingsley turned and headed towards the door to leave, but turned back right before he left to say, "By the way, I'm more than pleased that the two of you have, um, worked out your differences."

"Head Auror Black and I have come to a... an agreement of sorts, a professional understanding."

Kingsley gave Sirius a stern look. But as he watched Black, who appeared busy checking his immaculate fingernails, seemingly bored, his momentary concern dissipated, and he said, "Right, then, Granger." He duplicated her parchment with a quick Geminio spell and said, "I'll also be assigning an Unspeakable to internally guard and appropriately aid you two, as needed. I don't want anyone to be alone at any time. Unspeakable Parkinson and Hit Wizard Flint, as external back up, will also be assisting

you."

Marcus Flint? registered Hermione slowly.

"Parkinson?" barked out Sirius. "That traitor's daughter? I thought she'd left the country!"

"Sirius, you're not one to be calling names; the past is the past!" Shacklebolt reminded him sternly. "Miss Parkinson has an untarnished reputation in her present position, as far as her work record goes, assigned to the Department of Mysteries. She's proven herself very loyal, Sirius, just like you. Whatever happened between you two after Voldemort's demise, well... that's water under the bridge now and *classified*."

She couldn't stop herself; Hermione shot a quick, questioning look at Sirius.

"It wasn't me...it was the *other* Sirius," he hissed back, and Hermione could have kicked herself.

"*What* was the other Sirius?" Shacklebolt asked sharply.

"Well, you know," offered Sirius nonchalantly, "the other Sirius, the *spy*."

Kingsley sighed. "I know, I know: it was the job, the undercover work, Black. You were only doing what you had to do to get information from her."

Sirius nodded, clearly playing the part, and Hermione turned back to the astrolabe to prevent the Minister from seeing the flush in her cheeks.

Then the Minister pointed out, "And Flint has been invaluable."

"I know he has, *here*," grumbled Sirius under his breath so she could hear him. "A war hero... Just...there's something..." He cleared his throat and raised his voice for Shacklebolt's benefit. "This isn't an appropriate assignment for him, Minister."

"Give me a reason, Sirius, one good reason for not assigning him to you," challenged Shacklebolt, urging him to speak his mind. Hermione could tell from Kingsley's body language, that he was used to Sirius objecting to his decisions. She fought a smile: just the same as in her world....

"I don't like him."

"Besides that?" Kingsley waited, expecting something more.

"I don't trust him."

"And why not? What has he done to you?"

Sirius made to answer and Hermione immediately realised the danger. She moved her foot to the side and carefully trod on his boot.

Sirius bit his cheeks, not answering. Silence ensued and Hermione waited with her heart thumping loudly *Don't blow this, Sirius! We need time! If you tell him the truth, everything will be shut down, and we'll be incarcerated, interrogated, never left alone for a minute...stuck here for good!*

"Nothing." He shrugged again. "He's just a slippery-looking berk if you ask me. Always will be." He flashed Kingsley a cheeky grin.

The Minister sighed. "Sirius, when will you boys ever learn to get along? If that's what this is about, then I'll make sure he's permanently assigned to you."

A knock was heard on the door, and Kingsley called out, "Enter!"

A tall, muscularly built figure entered the room carrying a few ledgers and a book; Hermione recognised him immediately. She experienced once again the disconcerting sense that this person was not the man that she knew.

Hermione heard Sirius inhale in a hiss as she watched Flint cross over to Kingsley.

"Minister Shacklebolt," acknowledged Flint politely, then he turned to Sirius. "Black." Marcus hesitated momentarily before saying, "Auror Granger." He quirked his head in his peculiar way as he smiled ingratiatingly at her. "So glad to see you are up and about...the Minister told me there had been some, erm, accident?" Flint looked around to Kingsley for confirmation.

"Yeah, some accident, Flint. Where the hell were you?" snarled Sirius before Shacklebolt could respond.

Flint seemed sincerely taken aback as Kingsley intervened, saying, "That'll do, Sirius. I've asked Marcus to come here so that we may informally discuss what happened last night before any official statement goes on record."

"Official statement," politely mocked Sirius. "Official statement?" His voice was rising noticeably. "With all due respect, Minister, Flint went bloody AWOL on patrol last night...or, since we're all being so lovely and polite...how about, he *fucking* disappeared?"

"Sirius..." started Kingsley

"Sir, may I?" interjected Flint. "Minister, please?" Kingsley motioned for him to proceed.

"For the record, I did not go AWOL." Sirius let out a derisive sound, but Marcus continued, determined to speak his mind. "I was only following orders, which you, Auror Granger, had instructed me to do."

Hermione gazed at Marcus Flint, and for some reason, she felt more and more mesmerized by him with each word he spoke.

"You said you wished to search for the *phantom intruder* in the Space Chamber alone. Remember, Granger?"

Hermione started to shake her head in denial, but in a second, she nodded instead, and a dull throb pulsed in her temples.

Keeping her attention focused on him, Flint continued to address her. "And you ordered Auror Black to the Death Chamber and me to the Time Room. But you called me back and sent me to attain a book from the Ministry's Restricted Section that you needed immediately...something you wanted to urgently cross-reference..."

"Book? What bloody book?" demanded Sirius fiercely.

"This book," answered Flint through gritted teeth, offering the tome to Hermione. She gasped as she read its title: *Constellations of the Magical Heavens*.

"Remember?" asked Marcus softly as Hermione looked up into his eyes.

Hermione felt a sense of conflicting emotions...for the briefest moment she had a flashback, like déjà vu, as if Marcus was standing over her, only aware of him repeating the word 'remember' over and over. But then the sensation was gone, and she could only answer, "Perhaps... Yes, I think so."

Satisfied, Marcus turned to Sirius and Kingsley smugly confirming, "You see?"

"And so you left her alone, just like that?" badgered Sirius.

"What was I supposed to do, Black? She ordered me to go!" argued Flint, losing his cool. "She had you to back her up, didn't she? I thought you'd have been enough protection without me for five minutes, but obviously I was wrong!"

"But you were gone more than five minutes, Flint...where the fuck were you? What took you so long?"

At this, Flint's face flushed scarlet, and he gave Sirius a nasty sneer. "I...I went to find someone to get the book for me, since I didn't have direct access to the Restricted Section archives."

Sirius egged him on: "And?"

"And I got, erm, distracted... for a few minutes."

"Ha!" guffawed Sirius. "Let me guess, you ran into our one and only resident Unspeakable Pansy Parkinson?"

Neither affirming nor denying, Flint continued, "I didn't realize I was gone so long...it just seemed like ten or fifteen minutes... But when I went back, um, the Space Chamber was empty. The Death Chamber was empty...I realized everyone was gone." Marcus shrugged. "I went to Minister Shacklebolt's office, but he told me to wait outside. Later, when he called me in, I was relieved to hear what had happened...that *something* had happened, an accident, but that everyone was alright."

"Alright?" Sirius rose slowly and crossed to Marcus stealthily. "I found Granger, unconscious on the floor in the Space Chamber *Unconscious!* You slippery little shit..."

"That's enough, Sirius, enough," cut in Kingsley sternly. "Auror Granger is back to her old self today. And we can proceed onwards. Here's my official decision: Flint, you will continue to assist Investigative Auror Granger with her research and cross-referencing...have you a problem with that?"

"Absolutely not, sir," replied Flint eagerly. "You know I love research."

Hermione's head throbbed, and for some reason, his words didn't seem to ring true.

"Granger?" asked Shacklebolt. "Any problems with continuing your research and investigation with Flint as usual?"

If that's what the other Hermione was doing, if she was okay with him, I should continue working in the same manner, with the same people.

"No, sir. Not at all."

"Head Auror Black?"

Sirius gave a fierce look at Hermione and then Marcus.

"What does that mean, research together...remind me again how exactly is Flint assisting her?"

"Contributing to solving the investigation, Black." Marcus smirked. "Cross-referencing with her, lots of literal interaction, as well as bringing her the best cup of tea or coffee that the lady would like." He smirked again and Hermione could almost feel the tension radiating between the two men.

Sirius didn't answer. Instead, he looked directly at Hermione; she pleaded with him with her eyes to go along with it.

"Very well, Minister," he bit out eventually.

"Good, Head Auror Black." Shacklebolt turned to Hermione and Marcus. "The office next to here will be used solely for this investigation...this way you two have some privacy to work in, without the interference and distractions of your old open offices. And if you need Head Auror Black's assistance, I'm sure he'll be more than happy to oblige."

As Kingsley motioned for them to follow him out, he said, "Hermione, let's have that list of other classified files, parchments and books you asked for, and then you and Marcus can get right to it." The Minister and Flint exited, their voices reverberating and then muffled as they apparently went into the newly assigned office next door.

As Hermione gathered parchments, book and the astrolabe and started to hurry after them, Sirius grabbed her arm and whispered, "Don't you dare drink anything that wanker gives you!"

"Granger, you coming? The Minister's waiting to talk to us in private." Flint had appeared at the doorway and was staring at the couple, amused. *Our* office is... inspirational. You'll find it very conducive to working together."

Hermione gave Sirius a small smile, appeasing him with, "Don't worry. I won't."

As Sirius let her go, he glared at Flint and informed him, "I'll be checking in on you...often. So don't get too comfortable there, Flint."

Flint smiled cordially at Hermione as she passed and then turned his back to Sirius without replying.

Neither Hermione nor Sirius saw Flint's sinister grimace as he followed her, watching her every step.

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A/N: My greatest thanks to the wonderful lyn_f, initial SOS beta, and stgulik, beta extraordinaire, for the earlier version help, and then, my deepest gratitude to the one and only proulxes for her alpha/beta help on this chapter, in particular, generously collaborating with me and contributing parts to the story with her own caring magical touches...thank you beyond words!

Revelations

Hermione starts to discover and piece together clues about her case as well as discovering more about her Investigative team—Parkinson, Flint, and Head Auror Black, who is having trouble keeping his personal feelings and impulses from interfering with his professional ones. Hermione tries to keep focused on malignant Portkeys, ancient wizards, and keep her distracting feelings at bay—both the job-related and the Sirius-related ones.

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Hermione placed the parchments, book, and astrolabe down on her desk in her doppelganger's office and gave an appreciative look around.

There were shelves of books to the ceiling, and in one corner area, she saw what was obviously Flint's workspace, filled with an exotic assortment of neatly aligned quills beside an impressive Slytherin-crested paperweight atop a tidy stack of old documents.

She then noticed other piles and parchments on a centre table with objects of different shapes and sizes lying in front. Some of the curios glimmered alluringly, but others were dull or crusted as if charred and chiselled objects of olden times.

"What...what is all this?" she asked quietly.

Kingsley raised his eyebrows. "All of your research items have been moved here from your former office, Hermione, and placed exactly how they were there. Flint and I oversaw everything. Nothing should be amiss...is there something wrong?"

"No," she lied. "No, just, um, I didn't expect such a thorough, thoughtful job...no unpacking to do." She gave a weak, forced smile to Kingsley and then to Marcus, who was sitting very still on the edge of his desk, arms folded and watching her.

"This had been left opened on your desk before...before you went down to the Department of Mysteries last evening..." He handed her a small black box.

Hermione didn't recognise it, though it was obvious that she was expected to. She took and gazed upon the ordinary looking box as Kingsley suggested, "Perhaps you want to check the contents... I took the precaution of sealing them within, Hermione." Kingsley lowered his voice, instructing, "To open, just tap with wand and say, 'Stoatshead Hill'."

Hermione smiled at the password, remembering Kingsley's passion for Quidditch. "Thank you, Minister."

Kingsley smiled back. "Good to have you back in top form, Granger. Then, I'll leave you two to get on with your work." And with that, Shackbolt left them.

Flint watched Hermione as she slowly walked toward the middle table. One glimmering, dark, glass-like figure drew her attention in particular. Something gleamed deep red inside.

"I wouldn't touch that one yet...I'm not quite finished," she heard him say in a warning voice.

Hermione looked up at Marcus who neutrally asked, "Remember?"

A sensation, a realization of *not* remembering, not being able to associate the items with anything relevant washed over her as her temples throbbed in a dull pain and she stared into Marcus' eyes for some clue to what he asked.

I can't remember... I don't know what I'm supposed to remember! Each time he says that, I feel... numb, go blank...

She had to shake her head 'no'.

"It's alright, Granger. You don't need to remember... I'll take care of it for you. For us."

He whipped out his wand and sent a soaring hex at the strange stone, which sparked momentarily and then went dark and charred like the others. "That's what you have me for, your top Hit Wizard, right?" He gave an odd look to her and then sent another hex at another stone: the brief burning emitted a muffled shrieking sound before going dead.

"What...what was that? What did you just do, Flint?"

"Safety measure. Dark objects with powerful enchantments, Granger. It needed to be destroyed...I do the dirty work, remember?"

Her head throbbed again in pain.

"Dark Objects? Why..." She stopped herself and slowly backed away from him to turn back to her desk. "I need... I need to refresh my notes."

"You do that, Granger. And I'll just update my paperwork as well, but first..." She heard hexes cast one after the other. She couldn't suppress a small shudder as she sat down and tried to ignore Marcus while questions swam about in her mind. *What were he and the other Hermione doing? What signifies those objects? Why are they even here?*

An uncanny feeling arose in her as she heard him send yet another hex and then cross over to his own workspace, shuffling objects and parchments around, opening and closing drawers. Looking over to the centre table, she saw that all of the stones were now completely charred.

Hermione's hands shook slightly as she moved the ancient astrolabe from the Time Chamber to one side of her desk and made a small space between the parchments, placing the book *Constellations of the Magical Heavenson* top of them. Hermione drew out her wand, tapped and whispered the spell Kingsley had told her, unsealing the little black box, and opened it widely.

Inside were a few parchments and a similar object as those that Flint had hexed behind her, a large amulet of sorts. Or so it seemed...*It's larger and bulkier. It's like an object for ... I don't know ... like a Portkey or something to contain magic within.*

She shuddered again, feeling a wave of tiredness wash over her. *Keep focused! All of this meant something special to the other Hermione. Focus! Focus! Focus!*

She took out the parchments, unrolled one and read, 'Found in Space Room'. *It must relate to this*, she thought touching the charred object.

She put it down and unrolled another parchment, recognizing the handwriting as being Shackbolt's. He had listed several book titles as 'kept in the Ministry's Restricted Section'. Skimming over it quickly, she sat up straight realizing they were all Dark Magic titles: *Sonnets of a Sorcerer, Secrets of the Darkest Art, The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts, Confronting the Faceless, Elementum Deorc Coercere ande Coarcere: Blod ande Fortia, Magicke Moste Evile*...these last two titles were encircled in red ink.

Hermione blinked as something resonated about one of them, *Magicke Moste Evile*.

"Horcruxes!" she whispered aloud.

"What did you say, Granger?" asked Marcus, cocking his head.

"Nothing, Flint, just thinking aloud."

Something sparked inside her, and she took and opened *Constellations of the Magical Heavens*

This book was also in the Restricted Section here; the other Hermione needed it, or so Flint said... but it's not on this list...

A flash of nostalgia hit her, remembering the first time she had ever seen the book with ~~her~~ Sirius so long ago, in another lifetime, and she impulsively whipped out her wand and shrunk it with a quick *Diminuendo*. She felt an instinctive need to keep it near to her and placed it in her jacket's inner pocket. *I'll reread it this evening when...*

Her attention was caught by the parchment that had lay underneath it. *'Inventory of confiscated and returned books...' It's signed 'M. Flint'*. She compared it with Shacklebolt's list and noted that the two books that Shacklebolt had encircled were missing on Flint's.

She rechecked the lists again. *What was I...am I looking for? What's the connection?*

Her eyes smarted as she summed up her inner most concentration. *Dark magic books, Ronald's death...here, that is... Dark objects with powerful enchantments, perhaps maligned Portkeys.* She bit her lower lip, intensely worried. *Horcruxes? But why did the other Hermione need a Divination and Astrology book?*

oOoOoOo

Hermione's neck was stiff from her reading position at her desk. She gave Marcus a fleeting glance across the room; he was concentrating heavily on the extra parchments she had given him, quietly and earnestly double-checking everything she had written in a daily report so far. It had to be near mid-afternoon, and they had both been working without a break.

Hermione had spent every minute reading methodically through and making order of all the various other parchments on her desk collected by the ~~other~~ Hermione. A pattern of content had appeared. A very unsettling one. *Dark objects...enchantments placed on the objects... intentions? To protect the wearer in the case of Dark amulets, to prevent damage to the object itself, to transport as by a Portkey...* Hermione stopped and stared at her note. *To transport?*

I need access to these Dark magic books!

"Flint," she announced, getting up stiffly, "I need to go down to the Restricted Section...I need access to a few books."

"The Restricted Section? Books?" He bluntly asked, "Why?"

"Because I do," she replied, a bit irked as her stomach rumbled. "There's a discrepancy between these lists...I need access to these books encircled."

"Discrepancy, Granger?" questioned Marcus, getting up and crossing over to her. He looked over the list she handed him. "We might get access, but you know the policy...for research access only. You're unable to take them out."

"There are two books not listed here," she pointed to the book titles, *'Magicke Moste Evile and Elementum Deorc Coercere ande Coarcere: Blod ande Fortia.'*

Flint seemed unperturbed. "Well, that is obviously some outdated list...I've made the most current one. It was given and confirmed by our top source. Just today in fact."

"The Minister?"

"No, *our* Unspeakable. Parkinson." Marcus gave Hermione an odd look. "Pansy Parkinson, remember?"

Hermione blinked. *Our Unspeakable Parkinson?... No, I don't.* She looked away from Flint, trying to piece together her thoughts again. *The list... the list!*

Suddenly irritated, she replied, "Of course I know who Pansy is." She huffed, "Has the Minister *ever* given you a list?"

"The Minister? Why would he, Granger? As if the Minister doesn't have better things to do than make a library list," he scoffed. "That's what all of us minions are for."

Everything Flint was saying rubbed her the wrong way for some reason. "It's not a library list. It was purposely..." Hermione stopped herself in time. *There's a reason why Kingsley gave me the list and hasn't given Flint one. Patience, patience.*

"I need to go to the Restricted Section," she repeated, "so I'm going."

Flint was visibly miffed. "Well, I'm going with you."

"I think I can manage checking out a book or two."

"It depends on the book...the ones on this list are not allowed out of the Restricted Section's privacy room, and you don't know what you'll be handling. It's my job to remove curses from Dark objects," he insisted belligerently. "So if you go, I go with you."

Stalemated, Hermione glared at Marcus. "Let me take some things with me." Wand waving, Hermione *Diminuendoed* the little black box, filled once again with the charred object and parchments, and throwing her cloak around her shoulders, she put it in an inner pocket and grabbed Shacklebolt's book list. "Ready!"

Marcus smiled strangely at her before gesturing for the door. "Shall we?"

oOoOoOo

The air seemed heavy with foreboding for Hermione as they reached the eighth level and exited the lift, making their way to a dark alcove designating the Restricted Section's perimeters.

From the shadows a figure appeared, asking, "Who wishes to enter?"

Before she could speak, Marcus answered, "Granger and Flint."

The figure stepped into the black marble corridor's sconced light, revealing a tall, slender, but very curvaceous witch, wearing a skin-tight bodysuit. The V-necked front showed off her revealing décolleté with a pendant laying strategically above a pushed up cleavage.

"Granger and Flint? What an unexpected pleasure...how may I help you?" It was Pansy Parkinson. She arched a black penciled-in eyebrow, accentuating her heavily painted face.

Hermione blinked as she heard Marcus inhale sharply and become very alert, standing up to his full height, gazing admirably at Pansy. "I...we...I need the custodian of the Restricted Section. I need access to some books," she managed to say, showing Parkinson the two encircled titles on Shacklebolt's list.

Parkinson's expression was neutral. "I am your custodian for all of your needs." Her gaze at Hermione turned heavy as she said, "Remember?"

Hermione became very still.

Pansy suddenly seemed amused by something only she knew, explaining, "The Minister assigned me to be your Unspeakable's *support*, to internally guard and appropriately aid you, as needed. That includes the Department of Mysteries chambers as well as any other normally forbidden room, such as being given direct access to the Restricted Section on your behalf by our dear Shackbolt. You need only ask and I'll give you what you need." Pansy smiled at Marcus. "As your specially assigned Unspeakable, your secrets are safe with me."

Pansy motioned to them, saying, "Follow me." Slowly, they went through the shadowed area into a brighter lit but formidably enclosed atrium.

Directly across the atrium space was an opening to an inner chamber. Hermione noted the opened, gilded outer doors with a high relief of an unfamiliar but portentous figure above the archway.

This is so very different from the Restricted Section I know in my Ministry... It feels much more ominous and oppressive she thought, stopping and staring at the projecting image above the passageway. "Parkinson, who is that supposed to be?"

Pansy raised an eyebrow in astonishment at Hermione. "That? How could you not know?"

"It's the father and protector of all *pure* knowledge, *sorcery* knowledge, that is, Granger. Herpo the Great," Marcus cut in defensively. "Perhaps being a Mu..." He stopped himself in the second as if he'd bit his tongue, but then continued, "I'm sure Muggle-borns are not so familiar with this esoteric, great practitioner of magic."

Hermione face burned red; she felt a humiliation she had not felt so deeply for a long time...she felt as if she were fourteen years old again and Draco Malfoy had just called her a Mudblood with *her* Marcus Flint and the other Slytherin cronies sneering and laughing at her on the Quidditch field of Hogwarts years ago.

The day she learnt what the word Mudblood meant.

The day she learnt why some wizards believed they were better than others.

Hermione took a step into Marcus and faced him off squarely.

"I know who the ancient Greek wizard *Herpo* was, Flint," she tried to control her voice from rising in emotion, "But you've *go* your facts wrong...he's not as *esoteric* as you believe him to be. *All* wizards know him for what he was: a Dark Wizard, a Parselmouth, a breeder of the first Basilisks and an inventor of vile curses, of...of..." she couldn't help herself and blurted out, "of Horcruxes and other evil curses!"

Marcus looked like he was biting his cheeks in restraint as she added, "And his name isn't Herpo the *Great*, it is Herpo the *Foul*!"

Hermione turned to Pansy, who was staring curiously at her, and bluntly added, "Why there is a high relief of him *here* in the Ministry of Magic is beyond me!"

Marcus defensively spouted out, "Because, regardless of what you and others *like* you may feel, he was one of the earliest, greatest wizards..."

"*Dark* Wizard, Flint...call him what he was!"

Belligerently refusing to, but continuing to force his point, Marcus repeated, "Earliest, greatest wizards, and his work is a vital, lasting aspect of magic even today!"

Marcus' chest was rising and falling as he contentiously argued, "Where would you be, *any* of us be, Granger, today if not for him? Hmm? Everything you are as a witch, a defender of the *good*, everything we hold near and dear and *wish* to keep near and dear is because of him...his contribution to magic... Without it, how could we defend ourselves against the Dark Arts? It takes Dark magic to fight Dark magic, yes?"

As Hermione stared at Marcus, feeling shocked and not knowing what to say, conflicted by seeing him, *this* universe's Marcus, as if for the first time, Parkinson chimed in, saying, "You two can argue History on your own time...I have rounds to make below on the ninth floor soon."

Seemingly bored, she turned to Hermione and asked, "Do you wish to enter now or come back tomorrow?"

Cheeks still burning with outrage, Hermione took a deep breath and focused. "Now, Parkinson." She turned to Flint, vexed. "You can stay here...*don't* need your help!"

Marcus gave a look to Pansy and then back to Hermione. He contemplated something and said, "We don't have to agree about everything; in my opinion, it's better that we don't. I'm a professional, *Auror* Granger, and you're my partner, and it's my job to go with you and..*help* you. So with all due respect, I'm going in with you whether you want me to or not."

Hermione bit her tongue as the thought 'I won't be forgetting this, Flint!' ran through her mind, before saying, "Very well. Let's go."

Hermione looked again at the Restricted Room's gloomy entrance and felt as if she were about to enter a mausoleum of sorts, her unease increasing as Parkinson insisted, "Your wand, Granger, give it to me. No wands allowed."

"What about Flint's?"

Pansy's eyes shone with amusement again as she concurred, "Absolutely. Auror Flint?"

Hermione couldn't help but notice Marcus and Pansy exchange self-satisfied smiles.

However, Parkinson's mirth disappeared as she instructed, "You may Summon the books you need, verbally, but a warning: if you wish to harm any book, the hex will be ricocheted back on you. There is a special quill which will only write on the preset parchments for note taking. If you attempt to mark a book, the quill will *alert* me. You have been warned."

Hermione's mouth went dry as a fanatical zeal gleamed in Pansy's eyes, but she managed to utter, "Understood."

Marcus nodded in agreement, and they both proceeded to walk through the large doorway. What Hermione perceived at first as a slab of dark stone immediately barricading further entrance was, in fact, a walled façade, forcing her and Flint to go right, entering the inner chamber. Immediately to their left, two lit sconces threw light over an ancient table and two chairs. Hermione went forward a few steps taking in the shelves of portentous Dark tomes.

"Which first, Granger?"

Her throat felt parched in the dry, claustrophobic space, and she hesitated. There was a strange aural effect in the circular room of muffled whispers emanating and softly sighing.

She shook her head slightly as if to clear it, gulped and said, *Magick Moste Evile*."

Flint's eyes flashed, and he waved his hand, concentrating directly towards the dark shelves.

Within seconds, a heavy old book flew and landed on the table.

"Wait, Granger." Flint's eyes seemed to roll back briefly before closing them entirely shut, and his mouth moved, contorted with inaudible words.

The book's pages quivered, and then a soft whiff of light caused the pages to flutter animatedly before ceasing all movement.

Marcus' eyes opened, and he said, "Alright, Granger...it's safe. You can touch it."

Hermione was momentarily speechless, registering Flint's skill with nonverbal, wandless magic before managing to utter, "Thank you, Flint."

She tentatively took the book, sitting, and turned toward the back, remembering where she had found information years before when she helped Harry out. She reread the references mentioning Horcruxes and then turned and scanned through pages, searching for possessed amulets, Portkeys, talismans, Time-Turners...anything that could be used to propel a wizard through time and space.

Finding a detailed section about enchanted Portkeys, she immersed herself into taking notes on the given parchment with the special quill.

"And what about your partner, Granger?" piped up Marcus. "Not going to throw a dog a bone?"

Startled, Hermione looked up. "What?"

"Anything I can do, Granger?"

True, she had forgotten about him, being so absorbed and concentrated on copying down as many facts as quickly as possible. But Marcus sat stoically, patiently, causing Hermione to offer, "Um, Flint, perhaps you could look for possessed objects, anything and everything that catches your attention in the book *Elementum Deorc Coercere ande Coarcere: Blod ande Fortia*.

Marcus stared at her for a few seconds before responding, "Very well, Granger." He turned and motioned for the book to come to him. Nothing did. He appeared to Summon it again, and again, nothing happened.

"What's wrong?"

"It seems that it is not here. How about another one?"

"Not here? But it has to be here." She tried herself. *Accio Elementum Deorc Coercere ande Coarcere: Blod ande Fortia!*

Nothing happened.

That is, nothing inside the Restricted Section room; however, suddenly, heated shouting was heard from the outer atrium. First, it was Pansy's voice, and then followed a male voice, demanding, "Give it to me now!", and a sound of a loud hex followed.

Hermione gave Marcus a quick look, grabbed her parchments, and they both ran out to see what all the commotion was about.

What they met was an irate Sirius and equally furious Pansy glaring at each other.

Hermione cried out, "What is going on?"

Sirius was breathing heavy, as if he'd been outrunning a Hippogriff, and barely could answer, "I'll tell you what is going on, Investigative Auror Granger...I've just been searching the entire bloody Department of Mysteries for you! In case you have forgot, it hasn't been the safest of places lately, and then, I find that you're without your wand. *Parkinson* of all people has it..."

"It's called *protocol*, you boor..."

"Don't talk to me about protocol...it's called 'questionable authority', Parkinson! You're an Unspeakable, not an Auror..."

"You're not my superior, Sirius Black!" snarled Pansy viciously. "You have no authority over me..."

"Granger is your superior in this little *special* hierarchy that the Minister's created here..."

"So..."

"So Granger must have her wand at all times...bottom line! She's an exception to any bloody rules you may make up for Merlin-only-knows-what reasons, just to strut about like a..." Sirius stopped and controlled himself, before continuing, "Let me remind you all again why Minister Shacklebolt has grouped us all together. It is so that A: no one need be alone at any time or without any back up during any stage of this investigation, B: Unspeakable Parkinson is to internally guard and appropriately aid you two, which means," he gave an exasperated huff as he looked at Pansy, "that everyone one else in our little party is *your superior*... and C: Hit Wizard Flint, as Granger's partner and external back up, will notify me of each and every step of the investigation and how you will be assisting."

Black gave Flint a tense look. "You should have brought me the day's report, thus far, as well as informed me you were going to the Restricted Section. If I remember correctly, you failed to do so on the day of Weasley's death. *There's* a breach of *protocol*," he gave Pansy a hawkish look and then to Marcus, "one that you'll not make again, Flint, or even Shacklebolt won't be able to keep you on this case...understood?"

The atrium became so still one could hear a pin drop.

Sirius handed Hermione her wand back that he had evidently confiscated from Parkinson and ordered, "Upstairs, Granger! My office. Right now."

"My, my...I do so love your *dominant* side, Head Auror Black. Don't you, Granger?" giped Pansy.

"Mind your mouth, Parkinson," warned Sirius, suddenly dangerously cool.

"Or what, you'll make me?" Pansy cackled in such a crazed way as to give Bellatrix Lestrange a run for her money.

For a second, Hermione felt fear for Sirius, so fierce was Marcus' expression as he stepped in front of Pansy, saying, "I think you need to take Granger and go upstairs, Black."

This seemed to push Sirius' pugnacious buttons at full tilt, as Hermione saw him literally challenge Flint, face to face, saying, "You're telling ~~me~~ what to do, Flint? *Your superior?* Hmm?"

Hermione couldn't breathe as she watched Marcus' complexion turn several shades of red, about to explode with volatile suppression.

"Sirius!" Hermione quickly corrected herself. "Head Auror Black!" *You hotheaded, petulant...what has got into him?*

Trying to defuse the situation, she quickly stammered, "I agree...I think we need to go upstairs and further discuss what is so out of line that you...you..." Her voice faltered as Sirius turned to her with such a mixture of pain and disbelief in his eyes that it made her completely speechless.

"Then I'll explain it to you, in detail," he said, his voice now somewhat calmer. "Come with me, Granger." Sirius abruptly walked in the direction of the lift as Hermione searched for what to say to Parkinson and Flint, who watched her with odd expressions.

"I'll be back, Parkinson...tomorrow. Alright?" She took a few steps before turning back and asking, "Could you check for the whereabouts of a missing book, *Elementum Deorc Coercere ande Coarcere: Blod ande Fortia*? It wasn't in the Restricted Section, and it should be...Flint, could you catch her up on things?"

Marcus cocked his head slightly and assured her, "Absolutely, Granger. I'll fill her in on all the details."

oOoOoOo

Hermione entered the lift. She could feel Sirius' volatile energy radiating from him.

Neither spoke as they started to ascend through the intricate shafts of the Ministry.

Hermione gave Sirius a cool look before turning back and staring at a scruffy mark on lift's doors. He seemed to still be quite stirred up but was fuming silently, holding it all in.

Hermione told herself she didn't care how or what he was feeling.

How was I to know that I needed...Flint needed...to tell him where we were going? Every bloody step? It's ridiculous. But then she remembered what Sirius had reminded them about '... you failed to do so on the day of Weasley's death...'

Alright, it's a dangerous Wonderland I'm in...there's still some phantom intruder at large. I know that all too well! But it was just a minor slip up...he didn't need to sweep in and interrupt my research in such a manner as...

Suddenly, Sirius slammed the emergency button and the lift jerked to a halt.

Hermione waited, breathless, as Sirius searched her face for an answer to a question she didn't know.

After staring each other down for several seconds, she challenged, "What?"

Sirius backed up against the lift's other side, just looking at her as if she should know.

Pissed off at Sirius, a flare of anger swelling uncontrollably up, she resented feeling inadequate in anyway. *It's been a long day, a hard day...trying to catch up and make sense of what is going on in this universe, basically being called a Mudblood by my irritating but very skilled Slytherin partner...and having to see and be dependent on Pansy Parkinson of all people!*

"It was one slip-up on Flint's part..."

"Don't make excuses for that git...he knows better; he's had more than a fair chance..."

"I was in the thick of it...gathering vital facts!"

"Your *phantom intruder* is still at large, Auror Granger, or have you forgotten what has happened to us..."

"No, I haven't forgotten..."

"Have you forgotten that I've lost partners, both here and *there*...Weasley, Moody was murdered..."

"Of course I haven't forgotten...how can you even suggest that? I'm trying to *solve* the problem, not *avoid* it..."

"Are you saying that I'm avoiding...that I'm a *coward*?"

"Oh, good heavens, Sirius, of course I'm not saying that!"

"Then use your head, Hermione, think! Be careful...if that slippery pillock Flint can't follow basic safety procedures after all that has happened..."

He huffed, running a hand through his hair. "I went to your office and you weren't *there*. Auror guards in the main atrium hadn't seen you leave the Ministry. I searched the Department of Mysteries and was afraid...afraid I would find you... I thought something *happened* to you, Hermione. Do you understand?" His voice was full of raw emotion. "I don't want you..."

"I'm *not* a child, Sirius Black!"

"Trust me, I *know* you're not a child, Granger..."

"Oh, do you, Black? Why don't you show me then..."

She didn't finish her sentence. Sirius' lips had stopped her words.

Shocked and surprised, she only knew the pressure, the *urgency* of his kiss, pressing and searching, hard and deep. His lips were firmly, hungrily urging hers, and his moustache's whiskers sent a tingling, tickling sensation to course through her to her very core.

She felt him tentatively touching her around the waist. Instinctively, she pressed into him, breathing in his musky scent, encouraging him to touch her further, with more certainty and need. *I want him to...* Their teeth awkwardly hit as their need to taste and touch each other impulsively grew more desperate and needy... and irresistibly *necessary*, expressing to each other what they could not in words.

She felt his hand slowly brush and outline her body upwards...her nipples hardened to his touch, and then she could feel his fingertips stroke across the contours of her breasts, gently stroking up along the sensitive skin of her neck to caress her cheek before breaking off contact.

Hermione was panting softly as he drew back his head, gauging her response.

Then he broke off full contact and slowly stepped back.

"I'm sorry. Sorry. This is so difficult," he confessed, conflicted, and Hermione knew that he wasn't referring to the case.

We got to know each other as colleagues, as friends... as potential lovers, remembered Hermione.

Just as mixed-up, she offered, "It's all right, Sirius."

"Is it, Hermione?" he replied bitterly.

They stared at each other.

Hermione's heart was thumping wildly in her chest.

And then with a quick movement, Sirius punched the button again, and the lift continued upwards.

Neither spoke as the lift stopped and they stepped out.

Feeling confused and contrite, Hermione said, "Oh, we got off on the wrong stop. This isn't our office level."

"No, it's the right stop...at least," Sirius stopped and sighed in frustration. Then he straightened up, visibly attempting to make an about-face. "I had wanted to ask you out for a late lunch. That's why I initially went looking for you, but..."

Sirius' jaw muscles clenched in tension.

"If you can forgive me, forgive my impetuous actions and words of the past ten minutes..." He stopped and tried again. "How about a bit of fresh air and a bite to eat, Granger? I know it'd do *me* some good. How about you? Would you care to join me? Please."

She could see he was still all rumpled and stirred up, but was trying his best to put his best foot forward, so she let him know that all was forgiven as she smiled and gently teased, "Yes, *Head Auror Black*."

"Thank you, *Auror* Granger." He tilted his head a bit; his dark eyes framed by his dark long bangs were sad and full of remorse, affecting her.

She felt a warmth flush over and inside her, thinking of what had just happened on the lift and how she wasn't sorry that it had happened...for she now felt an irresistible tug towards him. She wanted to kiss him again, touch him... Any reservations of who they were, *where* they each had come from... had been breached, and any hesitation evaporated from her psyche for the time being. *Perhaps... perhaps we could... No, it's happening too fast, too soon... and... and... Yes, this is difficult... And she wasn't thinking of the case.*

They made their way through the Ministry of Magic's busy entrance atrium to the fireplaces connected to its Floo network. As they slowly approached a fireplace, Sirius cleared his throat. "May I choose the place?"

"Certainly. By all means...only once we get there, I have so much to tell you." She was beaming with excitement to share with him all of information she had pieced together.

Hmm, maybe it would be better if we just went home...to Grimmauld Place? Kreacher could bring us a meal like yesterday, and we could sit together on the sofa and...

Suddenly, her thoughts were no longer solely on sharing her paperwork with him but...*I've never been kissed by a man with a moustache... I liked the way it, um, tickled me...*

Sirius' voice brought her back to the moment. "Hermione? I'm all yours. Then, er," he hesitated as he opened an arm, inviting Hermione to stand close to him, "shall we, together?"

Another wave of heat washed over her as she and Sirius instinctively touched, stepping into the Floo together. He whisked her away, and within seconds, she was stepping out and blinking her eyes, adjusting to an old but comfortable sight.

Sirius grinned. "The Leaky Cauldron."

Hermione was a little taken aback as several people around one of the larger tables started to come and greet her. In a blur, she recognized Neville's smiling face, replaced by his wife, Hannah's, replaced by Dean's, Seamus', Ginny's.

"I thought a familiar place might be a welcoming sight," whispered Sirius concerned. "Do things look the same?"

"Yes, it's still the same, but Sirius..." She was cut off by none other than Harry coming forward and hugging her as if he'd never let go, and she continued to spend the next hour overwhelmed with suppressed emotions as person after person welcomed her with warm embraces, smothering hugs, and caught her up on their lives.

In the middle of what was the second or third round of drinks, Neville kept repeating, "You're back, you're back!" echoed by Harry, who sat on her left side, proclaiming, "Yes, she's back!"

Hermione gave Sirius a tense look but tried to make light of the strange feeling she was having to their reactions, teasing Harry back, "Where have I been?"

"Ron would have wanted you to move on, Hermione," spilled out Ginny, becoming all teary eyed in her, by now, tipsy state. "It's good to have you back to your old self. I'll tell mum and dad you're ready..."

"Ginny, no!" She must have said it a little too vehemently because Ginny appeared shocked and hurt. Hermione tried to gloss over it. "I mean... I'm in the middle of a very important... After we close this case... It's still too much, too soon." She looked at Sirius on her right, sitting at the table's head, whose eyes burned with regret...or was it bitterness? She needed another ally in the group and turned to Harry on her left. "You understand, Harry, don't you?"

The look he gave her was one of patience. "Of course I do, Hermione. We'll be looking forward to a big get together at The Burrow when you finish. When you're ready. It'll do us all some good. Promise?"

"Promise," she answered, forcing a smile.

This seemed to appease everyone, and the general discussion relaxed into miscellaneous *this* and *that* conversation.

Sitting there, absorbing it all in, Hermione felt incredibly exhausted and confused. They were all people she knew but didn't know; she felt like a horrid imposter of the most despicable degree. *I'm not the Hermione they think I am!*

Suddenly, she heard Sirius whisper in her ear, "I'm sorry."

She turned her head, and her lips brushed his cheek as he drew back. She felt her cheeks grow warm from the near contact but felt even more flustered as she saw his eyes burn with regret. "I thought...I thought you would like this...it'd be something *nice* for you."

"It is...it is *nice*... It's just...so much was discovered today. I want...no, *I need* to share with you my discoveries as soon as possible, and I can't *there*..."

"Here you go, Granger," announced Hannah as she placed another drink in front of her. "One more toast, everyone...Here's to our Hermione!"

"I really shouldn't, everyone. I have work to do...I have..." Harry gave her a look, and she forced herself to toast along with them.

There was a roar of noisy proposals from everyone toasting, and Hermione was seized by a dire need to escape. Sirius must have seen how overwhelmed she was feeling as she heard him offer, "Would you like to leave?"

She nodded emphatically. "It's just too much!"

Sirius took action immediately, rising and whispering something in Harry's ear.

Harry gave Hermione an understanding smile, saying, "Just go...get some rest...we'll be in touch soon."

Sirius announced, "Everyone, it's been lovely, but we have to get back to work...duty calls!"

Among the good-natured protests, Hermione assured her friends as Sirius and she made their way back to the Floo, "I'll keep in touch...as soon as this case is over, we'll do this again...it's a promise!"

Pacifying everyone with this, she turned with Sirius back toward the fireplace. Her head throbbed with too much information and emotions from the day's cumulative events, and as she felt Sirius standing beside her, she looked up at him and asked, "Can we just go home?"

"Absolutely, Hermione." He gathered her into his arms and Flooed them back to Grimmauld Place.

Hermione felt a flood of relief of being once again inside its walls. Feeling her tension melt away, she brushed an ash from her sleeve and heard Sirius say once again, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"I thought... I thought it was what you needed. To see the others."

She saw the disappointment in his face and immediately explained, "Sirius, it was so thoughtful of you... It was wonderful, seeing everyone like that; it's just...there's so much I've discovered today, related to us, to our *dilemma*."

Standing near him so close, looking up into his gentle, dark-grey eyes and the affection she knew they held for her, was dangerously tempting her to lean forward and initiate what he had broken off in the lift. *Business, Hermione! Focus! You have to show him what you've found!*

She took off her cloak and plopped down on the sofa, taking out her wand and the little black box. Casting an Engorgio charm on it, she said, "I need to show you what I've brought from the office. You'll understand why it's *urgent* that I show you..."

Suddenly, a strained siren sound came from the Floo, and they heard Shackbolt's voice reverberating: "Code Black. Repeat: Code Black. Bourgin and Burkes. Code Black."

Sirius looked alarmed for the briefest second before snapping to full attention, wand whipped out and in alert mode. A fierceness marked his features again as he vehemently grabbed Hermione by the shoulders and ordered, "Don't leave here for anything in the world! Do you understand? Stay right here!"

And before Hermione had time to protest, he bolted for and threw himself into the Floo and disappeared.

oOoOoOo

A/N: I can never thank enough the one and only Proulxes for her talented and caring beta help and guidance with this chapter, in particular, as well the entire version of this story. She knows what questions to make me answer and keenly nudges me to dig deeper...her contributions and wisdom have been food for the soul and my Muse, which again, I am so very thankful for!

Stipulations

Chapter 5 of 11

Hermione does the only thing a Gryffindor lioness can do—she goes after Sirius.

oOoOoOo

"Don't leave here for anything in the world! Do you understand? Stay right here!"

What? What just happened? What the hell is a Code Black?

"Sirius!" cried out Hermione, running to the fireplace. *Just like that? He's gone?* Panic twisted her stomach into a tight knot.

She stared into the hearth and repeated aloud Shackbolt's words, "Code Black... Borgin and Burkes*Borgin and Burkes?* But that's..."

With a lump in her throat, she remembered. *That horrid shop that specializes in Dark objects, anything with strong magical properties...anything and everything devoted to the Dark Arts!* She tried to gulp the tension away as she remembered one of her first Investigative Auror assignments. *That first time when Marcus Flint and I went there, in search of Dark talismans...We were such novices! Borgin was so loathsome!*

Her heart started thumping hard as another, older memory of her, Harry, and Ron came back; visions of following Draco Malfoy through Knockturn Alley flashed through her mind while deciding what to do. *Death Eaters... Draco was letting other followers, other Death Eaters, into Hogwarts through that Vanishing Cabinet...in Borgin and*

Burkes!

She started to pace, then stopped. *Knockturn Alley! If that's where Sirius is, that's where I must go!*

She gripped her wand tightly as she grabbed Floo Powder, hesitated for just a second. *But Sirius told me to stay here!* Then she stepped forward and whispered fiercely, "Diagon Alley!"

In the moment, she was stepping out into an obscure tight space between shoddy buildings. Looking up, she made out a sign in the darkness 'Scribbulus Writing Instruments'. *Knockturn is near!*

Hurrying along a cobbled alleyway, she followed the street signs, marking the way, concentrating on recalling the general twists and turns she needed to take.

As she passed The Coffin House, then The Spiney Serpent, she knew she was now deep within Knockturn Alley.

Pursuing another cause this time, Hermione avoided a few straggling passers-by in the ominous quiet of the nocturnal stillness and pressed on down the dark, crooked street. She made an abrupt sharp turn on the next corner and walked down the steps leading off the main pavement, passing Ye Olde Curiosity Shop... *Borgin and Burkes' rival competitors!* As she made an immediate sharp turn to the right, the gloomy shop appeared, nestled in among the darkest corner of the narrow lane, its forbidding exterior just as Hermione remembered it.

A dimly lit glow emitted from inside, but the building appeared undisturbed, other than puffs of smoke spouting from its chimney top. She shivered *What was the emergency? What if Sirius isn't even here?*

Do I just go inside? Is that... Suddenly, she made out several figures in the dark, closing in on the building from the rooftops, surrounding it from out of the shadows of neighbouring structures.

She stepped back against the wall of the building nearest her, only to have someone's hand cover her mouth and jerk her against the body it belonged to. Her squirming and muffled protests were quickly encased in a Muffliato charm cast around her by the ruffian, who would have frightened her further if she hadn't instantly recognised the musky scent and masculine feel of the body she was being pressed back against.

"I told you to stay put!" came Sirius' voice, low and tense, as he slowly released his hand from her mouth. But not his hold around her waist. He held her clasped against him in an iron grip. She could feel his chest rising and falling, strained in emotion. "I don't want you in harm's way, Hermione! Go back!"

Letting him know she had no intention of returning, she defiantly demanded, "Tell me what this is...what's happening? What's ~~s~~Code Black?"

Seconds passed as a battle of the wills engaged silently between the two, both breathing heavy, their bodies as one, standing there in the shadows, tense and alert.

She could feel Sirius' internal struggle fade into resignation as he huffed and gave in, saying, "It's a special signal we use inside the Ministry, between ourselves... the remaining Order members... *Black* is the code for Dark followers or suspicious events which bear the marks of former Voldemort-related activities..." His grip relaxed a little, enough to allow Hermione to wriggle around, facing him, their breath warm and fast in the cool night air.

"The Order of the Phoenix?" Hermione saw Sirius' eyes shining, dilated.

"Yes. We know there is a traitor in our midst, several perhaps, within the Auror department, so the Order members have banded together again as a special unit."

She could feel his muscles flexing under her fingers pressing against him as she said softly, "Sirius, I was and always will be a member of the Order...no matter what *universe* we're in. I'm not leaving! I'll stand by your side and fight along with you all!"

Sirius smiled a wolfish grin, then let go of her. "That's the spirit... my Gryffindor lioness, through and through."

They heard a yell that snapped their attentions towards the building.

Apparently, the other Order members had continued on with their reconnaissance maneuver, and Sirius snapped, "Wands up! Aim to maim and be ready to kill...be sure *they* will!"

Hermione raised her chin and grinned. "Constant Vigilance!"

He just paused a second to touch her cheek, as if to say goodbye, before ordering, "Follow me!"

They made their way into the dusty shop entrance. There were smells of something burning coming from deeper within the building somewhere.

Sirius motioned to Hermione to follow him, then signalled to two others to move forward...her heart skipped a beat as she saw Harry and George give her a quick look of acknowledgement before snapping back at the task at hand. Then she heard a voice calling out, "Borgin! Where are you? It's Arthur Weasley from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. On behalf of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Spells and Protective Objects, I order you to come out and give way for inspection."

There was a pause for several seconds before Arthur called again, "Borgin!"

A scream answered all.

Hermione shuddered. *It sounds like the scream of someone being tortured...someone suffering the Cruciatus Curse!* The tortured person seemed to be a floor below them. *Or is it above?*

In a blur, she was quickly following Sirius and other Order members through a doorway that led to a back storeroom of sorts, filled with Dark objects. Hermione glimpsed human bones and withered body parts of animals. She barely missed brushing against some sort of Medieval torture instrument with pointed edges as she rushed along.

"Watch yourselves!" warned Sirius, motioning forward.

There was an opening in the back of the room, the air smelt fouler as they drew nearer. Going through, it first sloped downward then upward as if it were leading to an upper floor rather than a cellar. As they entered the space above, several things happened at once.

In a small, sooty hearth, something was burning, and Mr Borgin was writhing around on the floor screaming, "No more! Don't! You can't take it back. *he'll* kill me! He'll *kill* me...I told him I had it! I promised him!"

Hermione caught sight of two figures in the far right corner of the room...both black shapes. She gasped at their identical, mutated faces before being aware that the other Order members were spreading out throughout the room to corner the two intruders. *There's something familiar about them!*

Hexes flew from George and Harry's wands at the perpetrators. A jolting breaking of glass was heard as one of the figures crashed through a large dirt-stained window. Then the other turned and viciously sent a hex to Borgin lying on the floor...the man screamed in agony as visible slashes let forth blood.

Hermione saw Sirius barrel towards the remaining figure, and she sprung alongside him, casting an Immobulus Charm at the person but was simultaneously met with an attacking, deflective hex creating a wall of shielding fire with roaring flames between them and the culprit.

In that second, none other than the Minister himself Apparated into the room. Shacklebolt instantaneously released a charm, dispersing the flames, and with a wrathful look, he cast another spell, causing the flames to completely cease.

She heard the bleeding Borgin rasp out vehemently, "You!"

Hermione turned and saw Borgin with his arm extended, a death-grip around his wand. "You...that Mudblood witch! It's all your fault! It's..." Borgin slashed at Hermione, even as a green bolt of light soared from the assailant wizard's wand across the room, hitting the seedy, drenched man, shutting him up forever.

The Killing Curse had hit its mark.

But Hermione had been thrown down, her head hitting the floor hard. Someone was laying half on top of her.

"Harry, George...after them!" she heard Arthur saying, "Bill and Neville have sealed the outside area with Anti-Disapparition Jinxes...they're trapped in the close vicinity. The perpetrators will be on foot, heading for Floo connections! Hurry! I'll be following on..."

"No, Arthur, stay with *them*; I'll do the further back up," came Shacklebolt's deep rich voice.

"Let's just...here we go, Sirius," Hermione heard Arthur utter as she felt the weight of Sirius' body being rolled off her. "There we go, my dear girl. Sirius? Oh my," responded Arthur in concern.

Her head was throbbing with pain from the impact, but she struggled up into a sitting position. She wiped at something wet on her clothing *Blood!* But it wasn't hers.

Eyes clenched, Sirius was gritting his teeth as if in unbearable pain. She quickly saw why. Bleeding profusely, his body began to shake *He took the curse that Borgin meant for me!*

As Sirius' body began to convulse, she cried out, "Hold him, Mr Weasley, while..." She knelt and shut her eyes tight, concentrating with all her body and soul. She recognized the curse immediately. *Sectumsempra...the counter incantation is...?*

Her mind reeled, trying to recall the incantation. It had been so long since she had researched and learned the counter curse...since Harry had used it against Draco Malfoy in their sixth year. Mustering her concentration, she began to tremble slightly. *I've never used it!*

As Sirius' blood bled forth, pooling on the floor, she started to whisper, then softly chant *Vulnera Santera*, her wand tracing over and over Sirius' body. She felt as in a trance as she passed her wand over and around his body, feeling her energy and life-force pouring forth, channelling through her wand onto him, *into* him, and knew not how long it was before Arthur said, "The bleeding has stopped."

Hermione felt exhausted, drained, her body was shaking from her ministrations. She irrationally told herself *this shouldn't be happening...whatever this is...* She warily looked around, dizzy, only to focus in on Borgin's corpse, and suddenly a wave of anxiety washed over her, an impulse to grab Sirius and disappear. She felt desperate; she felt she needed outside help. She felt she needed...

"Kreacher!"

There was a loud crack. The ancient house-elf stood before them.

Hermione realized she was panting loudly from the exertion, feeling faint and depleted, but gave Arthur a steadfast look. "If he's taken to St Mungo's, they'll want to know what has happened and where, *details*. The Order's secret unit within the Auror department could be compromised if they give him a potion that allows him to *relax*..."

"And if it accidentally slips who all was involved, we'll be busy Obliterating the entire staff when our attention and energy are needed elsewhere." The Weasley patriarch frowned. "It's imperative we keep this within our own circle at this time. We can't risk the traitor hearing and catching on that we're trying to *catch* him."

"Not the *fucking* hospital...just take me home!" came Sirius' voice abruptly, gruff and highly agitated.

Both Hermione and Arthur snapped their attention to Sirius, who had become conscious momentarily, only to fall back into a feverish delirium.

"I can continue to heal Sirius if Kreacher can take him...he needs Blood Replenisher and complete rest to fully recover." She gave the wizened old house-elf a look for help. "Take Sirius back home and keep him there, watch over him...if he needs help, *help* him...but don't leave his side! He must have bed rest. Do you understand?"

Kreacher gazed at her with his drooping eyes, croaking out, "Kreacher shall aid if needed. Kreacher will help the Master. Mistress wishes me to take Master home?"

Feeling a little thrown off by the house-elf addressing her as the 'Mistress' of the house, she pushed that aside to confirm. "Yes, Kreacher *Exactly*. I'll be right there," she blinked, wondering fleetingly about house-elves' magic, before adding, "find me Essence of Dittany, Moonstone and..." The sight of Sirius' still visibly slashed and bloody body caused her stomach to lurch. "And some Blood-Replenishing Potion. Can you do that?"

"Yes, Mistress." And with another loud crack, both Kreacher and Sirius were gone.

Arthur helped Hermione slowly get up. She glanced at Borgin's grimaced face, stone dead.

"Hermione, my girl, you're not much better. Your head..."

"I'm fine, Mr Weasley."

"*Arthur*, Hermione."

They swivelled around at the sound of figures entering the room, Apparating, and one climbing back through the broken window from the connecting rooftops.

"Where's Sirius?" asked Harry, beelining to Hermione as George crossed over to the hearth, took a poker and scraped something out.

Hermione answered, "He was hit by a Sectumsempra curse, but I stopped the initial bleeding. Kreacher's taken him home." Harry gave her a curious look as she clarified, "To Grimmauld Place."

There was urgency in Arthur's voice as he said, "Harry, why don't you see that Hermione gets to a Floo safely. We'll check everything and clean up here."

Bill was examining what George had scraped out. "Dad, it seems they were burning things."

"But why? Dark artefacts was Borgin's livelihood."

"Getting rid of evidence?"

"Put together what you can...I'll be right back," said Harry. He turned to Hermione, "Let's go...Sirius needs you."

Hermione nodded, and she and Harry with wands up and on full alert were quickly making their way out of the precarious shop and back along the crooked streets to the nearest common Floo, Hermione asking, "Harry, what is this all about?"

"When he has healed more, Sirius can fill you all in about our surveillance these past few weeks...I must get back. There's some connection between missing artefacts from the Department of Mysteries. We've trailed and pinpointed Borgin and Burkes as an enclave of activities, been monitoring it for about a month now, since, well, since..."

"Ron's death?"

"Yes."

They had arrived at the fireplace in the tight space beside Scribbulus.

Harry looked down into Hermione's eyes, tense and serious; his jaw muscles clenched as he pushed his glasses up. "Listen to me, Hermione. You need to lay low for a day or so."

Her oldest best friend seemed to be deciding about something until he continued, "You'll have to first Floo to the Ministry, and then to Alphard's...Grimmauld Place. All Floo network actions are being heavily monitored now. I'll send a Patronus later on tonight with an update. If any further complications with Sirius...contact me, immediately! Send Kreacher...he'll be loyal to you."

"Yes, I know; he already is...it's a bit odd." Hermione's voice faltered a bit. The elf seemed to recognize her as his master's equal *An equal partner*. As if she and Sirius were one and the same to Kreacher.

"It shouldn't be. It's not just elf magic that is different from ours." Harry gave Hermione a bittersweet look. "As you well know, they have an uncanny accuracy and ability to see us and those we love as we truly are."

"Those we love?"

"Absolutely, Hermione." Harry cleared his throat. "Right. Sirius *needs* you." Harry impulsively hugged her, repeating, "I'll send a Patronus *soon!*" before letting her go.

After Flooing and switching in the Ministry's Atrium, Hermione called out, "Kreacher!" as she leapt out of the fireplace into the parlour room of Grimmauld Place.

With a loud pop, Kreacher appeared in front of her.

"Where did you put Sirius?"

"Master is in the Master's bed chamber," croaked the elf, motioning upward to the first floor.

Speeding up the stairs, she hesitated at the landing, wondering whether to continue to the second floor. *Is he in his old bedroom?* She checked the study room on the first floor and then started back towards Ron's room when she saw her room's door open down the hall.

Kreacher appeared in the doorway; the door creaked further open. "The Master is *here* in the master bedroom."

My room is the master bedroom? Sirius gave it to me... Hermione's thoughts were cut off by what she saw upon entering the room. *On the floor? Bleeding afresh again?*

"What's happened?" She rushed to the side of the bed, a bloody trail marking the floor, looking down at Sirius. She was shocked at what she saw. *He's nude! And his cuts are bleeding again? He's unconscious!*

"Master wished to get up, *fought* to get up, to leave again. He fell, and the wounds from the wizard's curse reopened. Kreacher could not see where the Master was bleeding from. Kreacher removed Master's clothing. Elf magic cannot heal this curse. Mistress said she would be right here." Kreacher's eyes were large and searching as they stared at Hermione. "Mistress did not come. Kreacher could not leave the Master alone. Kreacher has been waiting."

Of course he has! That's what I told him do!

Trying to stay calm, Hermione asked, "You've found some Essence of Dittany...some Blood-Replenishing Potion?"

"Yes, Mistress, there on the dresser."

"Kreacher, bring me some clean cloths and a jug of hot water as well."

The elf Disapparated and Apparated back immediately with the items.

Hermione levitated Sirius onto the bed and rolled her sleeves up, instructing, "Listen to me carefully, Kreacher. As I heal the open wounds, incanting, as soon as the skin closes, you will pour a few drops of the Dittany where the fresh skin has grown over. Understand?"

"Yes, Mistress."

Oh, Sirius! Trying to keep her panic at bay, seeing the duvets soaked with his blood, she knelt beside him and concentrated again, singing in a soft lull, *Vulnera Sanentur*, her wand slowly going over again his form. But this time, she could see not just the blood but the fresh cuts and gashes opened on his bare skin. She concentrated harder as one raw wound ever so slowly ceased to bleed, but his sculpted form was deathly still, like a fallen statue.

Don't die, Sirius! Don't die!

They worked together, Kreacher and Hermione, she spelling the slashes to close, the old elf administering the drops of brown liquid sealing and healing further. She felt, each time, her energy draining from her and was lost in time, lost in the trance of the incantation. What seemed like hours passed until at long last all wounds were healed.

She collapsed back against the plush pillows lining the grand headboard and gave the steadfast elf a tired but appreciative look. "Kreacher, Sirius needs the Blood-Replenishing Potion. We might have to force him." She had barely finished speaking when she saw that he held a phial of the liquid in his hand.

She looked at Sirius laying beside her, and now that she had had a moment to catch her breath, she felt her cheeks grow warm as she realized she would need to prop him up and *hold* him, help him, lest he choke. She reached for her wand and Accioed her blue bathrobe, placing it over his very defined torso and waist area.

"Kreacher, um, I'll hold Sirius up against me, and when I tell you 'now', be ready to pour a dosage of the potion in his mouth."

Kreacher nodded and croaked, "Yes, Mistress."

Hermione took a deep breath. *Right. I need to just...* She slowly wedged a leg and then her arms and body under Sirius' torso, enough to lever him upwards and inch him

on up to a semi-sitting position against her. At the contact of his bare flesh against her chest, the feel of his body, her heart started beating faster. Sirius was of a lean build, but muscular and *hard*... and his unconscious weight *heavy*. Huffing, she gave him an awkward hoist up against her more, squeezing him in the process, and he stirred in her arms, half-turning, his inertia pressing her down. "Sirius, it's all right. It's me. Hermione. You've been hurt. Do you understand? You must drink this potion. You've lost a lot of blood. Sirius?"

His eyelids half-opened, and Hermione saw that his focus became alert, his grey eyes burned in recognition as he fiercely whispered, "Hermione!"

She reassured him, "Yes, it's me." Sirius had twisted around; the bathrobe had fallen completely off, but she kept focused to the task at hand. "You were hit with a Dark curse, a Sectumsempra...Sirius, you must drink the Blood-Replenishing Potion. Trust me." She motioned to Kreacher. "*Now!*"

To her surprise, Sirius was able to fully sit up and knock the potion back, grimacing and exclaiming, "Gah!", and then to her utter annoyance and shock, he made as if to get up, asking groggily, "Where are my bloody clothes? I have to return..."

"You're *not* going anywhere, Sirius Black! You've just nearly bled to death...twice mind you, and..."

"Kreacher, my clothes, now!"

The elf gave a look to Hermione, then Sirius, then back again to Hermione.

"Kreacher, you are not to give him his clothes back," a wave of frustration washed over her as she added, "or let him leave here until I say so!"

But Sirius was clumsily reaching for his wand lying on the bedside table, his sinewy muscles on his back flexing with the strain. Hermione couldn't help but notice how they rippled in his upper back, which caused her to glance all the way down to his defined buttocks. *Very defined...*

"Sirius!" She grabbed her wand. "Don't make me Stupefy you...you're not going anywhere. The reconnaissance is over for tonight! Harry says we're to lay low for a day or so..."

Suddenly, a bright-white, translucent animal appeared, a stag. It spoke with the voice of its caster, "Stay where you are. Situation under control and covered. Will contact you both tomorrow. Send Kreacher immediately if you need."

Harry! Hermione gave a huff of relief. "See? I told you so. You need to rest and heal..."

She turned to see that Sirius had collapsed down, unconscious again. Apparently, he had given over fully to his weakened state upon hearing Harry give the confirmation that he wasn't needed. *What a stubborn, resilient, exasperating man!*

She stopped chiding him inwardly as she slowly stared at the mosaic of scars and wounds marking his sinewy, sculpted body. Slowly, she took the fluffy bathrobe and covered his hip area, her body quickly feeling leaden as the events of the day took their toll on her.

As she pulled the soft cloth up more on his torso, her fingertips grazed the soft tufts of hair which formed his well-defined treasure trail downwards... She looked back upwards and her eyelids were getting heavier and heavier with sleep as she struggled to study his tattoos of runic symbols on his pectorals. Groggily, she strained, making out the patterned symbols meanings: Friendship, Loyalty, Love... and... Passion!

Where's my wand? She sluggishly grasped it, and with the last drops of her energy, she Accioed for blankets; two flew to her, and she gently covered Sirius fully before pulling one over herself.

Exhausted, she fell into a deep sleep of troubled dreams.

Muffled sounds.

Hermione heard muffled, distorted sounds, vague and mumbled, distant and dull.

Through the haze in her mind, she heard a smooth voice whisper in her ear, "I've taken a part of you...your memory, your essence... My precious ~~sonduit~~... I've even erased the exact memory of who it is that has done this to you. How does it feel, Granger?"

Hermione felt a weight lift off her; she watched as a form rose and stood above her, tucking a silver chain with a phial-like pendant inside his shirt. Dark hair. Tall. He seemed to float.

No, I'm floating... Where am I?

"Everything I've done to you, everything I've used you for, you will forget and keep hidden, forgotten... When you hear the word 'remember' from me, each time, the memories will be muddled, buried deeper and deeper ...become vaguer and vaguer..."

Hermione felt a hex hit her; she felt something inside her...something foreign. Something being taken from her against her will.

She heard screaming and felt pressure and being thrown, hexed, transported, *falling*. Her body hit a hard surface. Her head hit something hard. Her head was burning. Inside her was burning. A searing pain. Then all was dark. She lay in darkness, dimly making out stars, constellations. She became fixated on one formation in the heavenly bodies. Then she heard screaming as he struck her again with a hex from behind...

"Hermione! Wake up, wake up!"

She was gulping for air, as if from almost drowning. She gasped and cried out, "I remember!"

oOoOoOo

A/N: The greatest thanks to my dearest, very patient and caring, alpha/beta Proulxes...thank you for all of your keen insight and wonderful nudging, eternally grateful!

Elicitations

Partial truths and feelings are drawn out; both Hermione and Sirius connect more of what has happened to them in the past and present, sharing a common memory, as well as discovering their undeniable current connection.

oOoOoOo

I remember!

"Don't touch me!" She pushed against the man holding her and cried out, "You can't make me...you *won't* force me, control me! You can't! I *won't* let you!"

Where am I?

"I'm not *him*... You've had a nightmare, Hermione... stay with me... you're awake; it was a dream. You've had a fright from a dream, love."

She knew that voice. She *knew* him.

"Sirius?" She blinked, feeling dazed, alarmed, her heart pounding, but it dawned on her where she currently was, ~~wh~~*he* was. *I was dreaming, a nightmare... Sirius, he's real!*

His face was so pale, but his eyes burned in concern.

She realized she was panting hard, her heart thumping harder. "It's you, Sirius?"

"Yes, Hermione. It's me. You're safe. He can't harm you anymore."

"Who?"

Sirius spoke quietly, calmly, "You tell me. His name. I must have the name: Who do you remember? *What* do you remember?"

She clenched her eyes, straining to express it. "Say it again. Say it again, Sirius!"

"What?"

"That word 'remember'... say it!"

"Remember."

And there it was. Hermione sobbed. She clutched Sirius. Something had cracked inside her mind, opened in her will... a chink of clarity cast light on the greyness, on the muddled thoughts held captive within her. A throb of lucid strength went through her.

Something solid. Safe. She was being held in Sirius' arms, in a protective hold. She felt his muscles flex under her fingertips and buried her forehead on his shoulder covered by fluffy bathrobe material.

"Coercere amnestos!" she whispered.

"What...?" Sirius' body rippled as if in a spasm.

"Sirius?" She raised her head so that she could look at him only to find he had his eyes shut tight.

"That curse!" He opened his eyes slowly, looking at her, pained. "How do you know it?"

"I don't... just now. I remember, and there are *others*, but I *can't* remember them, can't verbalise them. I think..." She was caught between tears and exhilaration, crying, *"Conduits!"* He hexed me, *used* me as a... conduit, a vessel, my body..."

Her thoughts jumped as she remembered the obvious. *Sirius suffered the same by someone! Someone did this to him as well!*

She touched him delicately on the chest, as if to make sure again he was real. *Your* body... we were conduits for a magical current of energy and force, a corporeal current through time and space."

Sirius' face darkened with intensity. "Who? Hermione, who did this to you? *I need* you to say his name. That's all." He was squeezing her upper arms so tight her eyes smarted with tears.

Suddenly, Hermione pushed away from Sirius and pressed her back against the headboard, straining to remember. With eyes clenched tight, she shook her head, and the tears began to roll down her cheeks. "I can't... I *can't!*" A wave of nausea rolled over her. "I know it was *him*... but I can't say *his* name, identify him... what is wrong with me?"

"It's all right," he assured her calmly, and she could see he struggled to stay controlled, as his following words signified his true emotion. "That fucking bastard Confunded... Obliviated... *erased* selectively, took a part or parts of your memory. *What else did the fucking scum do to you?*" whispered Sirius vehemently to himself.

Hermione couldn't answer, and she saw Sirius raise a fisted hand to his mouth and a flash of fury in his eyes and then his struggle and resolve not to lose control, asking in a hoarse voice, "Then, the place... *where* were you? Can you give me any context to go by? If you're unable to tell ~~me~~*who*... can you describe anything else?"

"Darkness. Floating... I was floating... stars, constellations... Then I was speeding through... flowing through *space*," she shook her head, struggling to recall the sensation, "like through a dark tunnel, on a long, long flowing slide, but he... *he* was so heavy, on me, in me... as if we were one... one form, one energy moving through time and space." The last words were spoken in a hushed whisper.

Sirius' dark grey eyes were stormy and shining with moistness as he stared at her in compassion. Hermione felt his inability to speak and found herself reaching out and their fingers gently touching, intertwining, silently comforting each other, holding hands.

They sat like that, just being with each other as time ticked on until Hermione opened her eyes wide and groped for her wand, suddenly highly agitated. She Accioed the book *Constellations of the Magical Heavens* along with the objects she had brought from the Ministry but hadn't yet shown Sirius.

Within seconds the items landed on the rumpled bed in front of them.

Sirius stared at them, then Hermione, his expression weighed down with care.

"The *other* Hermione had already collected a number of objects related to this universe's phantom intruder...she's left clues for us," explained Hermione slowly. "She must have been near to solving a working hypothesis, in the process of verifying it when we *switched*."

Sirius didn't say anything but carefully picked up the charred object. He held it up towards the sconced lighting, studying it.

"Do you recognize it?"

Sirius blinked in consternation, finally answering, "It *seems* familiar... as if I've seen it before...but that's impossible, isn't it? It's almost like a pendant, an amulet for wearing..."

For wearing? thought Hermione. Her brow furrowed in concentration. *I've seen one recently... not a burnt one, but...* The image of tall, slender figure appeared, a curvaceous witch, wearing a skin-tight bodysuit, a revealing décolleté with a pendent laying strategically above an accented cleavage. "Pansy."

Sirius scowled. "Parkinson?"

Hermione made as if to shake the image from her. "She was wearing one... an unusual pendant. But that's not an uncommon thing for a witch to wear, is it?"

Sirius suddenly rubbed his face as if to clear his thoughts, and Hermione felt something was...*off*.

"Sirius, you reacted a bit *strongly* about her when you first heard that she was assigned to us, and today at the Ministry, the hostility was, well, barely controllable, mutually volatile."

Sirius huffed, but gave no reply.

Hermione felt compelled to find out. "What...what happened between you two in your universe?"

"Nothing. Nothing, in *mine*." A stubborn look overtook him. "Well, there was a time when she seemed to be, er, *infatuated* with me. She'd just begun at the Ministry and was fawning over anyone and everyone in high positions when she could, even over that bloody Flint...not that it took much flattery to latch on to him, but... He didn't seem to return her interest for very long. I don't know... She disappeared, I think." He shrugged. "I heard different rumours that she had left the continent for a Foreign Office position or had taken unconditional vows, Unbreakable Vows, sequestered as an Unspeakable of sorts, deep in the belly of the beast, in the Department of Mysteries...in the Time Room? Or was it the Love Room? I've never thought much about her since."

Hermione remembered how Marcus had looked at Pansy today and how Pansy could have murdered Sirius with her eyes. She softly quoted, "'Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned.'" Sirius gave her a puzzled look, which caused her to spell out, "A witch rejected in love can be very angry and *very* dangerous."

Sirius' jaws clenched. "Alright, then. In *my* world she threw herself at me, continuously, and in the most, *erm*, provocative way... Witches like her, they make me...let's just say I have an adverse reaction to them, like to my cousin Bellatrix. And you know how *fond* we were of each other... She loved me *todeath*," he dryly commented, his eyes flashing dangerously with the renewed memory of Bellatrix having succeeded in her ultimate goal of finally murdering him in one universe.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring *that* up."

"You have nothing to be sorry about...ever," he whispered vehemently. Taking a moment, he admitted through gritted teeth, "However, the Siri*us* *here* seems to have been, um, more unscrupulous than me. There seems to have been some reconnaissance work of sorts, in the interim shortly following the war, involving the Pansy *here* and him." He let out a deep sigh.

"All I have is a jotted note 'found in Space Chamber'. Could it be related to her?" speculated Hermione in a small voice and showed him the small parchment from the box. "I'm assuming it refers to this charred amulet, as it was the only object in the box." Sirius still remained silent. "What is it, Sirius?"

"It's familiar... but I can't place it. It's burnt beyond recognition."

"Yes, I know. I wish Marcus had left them alone...at least until I had time to catch up on everything..."

"Flint?" Sirius' eyes flashed with a dangerous look.

"He was...he was destroying this and other amulet-like objects in our office. He said it was for safety measures. He needed to destroy Dark objects with powerful enchantments." Hermione shivered. "It reminded me of when we tried to destroy Horcruxes..."

Sirius leapt off the bed and began pacing, only to stop abruptly. "Horcruxes?" He spat out, "Fucking *Horcruxes*? Voldemort's legacy to his continued *admirers*."

"And this book..." She held up *Constellations of the Magical Heavens* "At first, I wondered why it wasn't on Shacklebolt's list, or rather, why it was considered a Dark book..."

Ruffled, he snatched it and gave it a quick, recognized glance. "Of course, it's full of Dark magic tips and tales. I'd know it anyplace. Regulus and I were bred and raised on these books."

"But it seemed so harmless when you showed me it before..."

"When I what?" The look Sirius gave her was one of incredibility.

"When you..." Hermione stopped herself. *That was the other Sirius, my Sirius...of course he doesn't know what I'm talking about* She shook her head, "It's not important. It's..."

"You almost fell. That old rickety chair, cursed to be irreparable," said Sirius softly. He gazed at her bittersweetly.

"You...we...have a shared memory? It also happened in your universe?"

Calmer, Sirius slowly sat down on the edge of the bed, holding *Constellations of the Magical Heavens* gazing almost reverently at it in his hands. He raised an eyebrow as he shared, "You were kind, very kind to me, keeping me company in my insomniac state...my recollections of Divination classes were something of particular amusement to you, having survived Sybill's classes... Your laughter that evening was music to my ears. I was deeply glad to make you smile; it had been a long time since anyone enjoyed my company."

He gave her a soft look, and then something occurred to him, and he slowly opened the book. "*But* this book wouldn't have been in my family if it wasn't Dark... Yessss," he hissed softly as he thumbed his way to the back. "Herpo the Great, his teachings were lauded and spoon-fed to me as early as I can remember." Sirius' face muscles clenched. "Dark Astrology, Dark Arithmancy, Dark Divination..." He clucked disapproval as his pointer finger skimmed quickly, suddenly stopping and tapping at a reference. "For example, Herpo the Great..."

He said it again! Hermione couldn't help herself and corrected him. "You mean Herpo the *Foul*."

Not understanding her dismay, he slowly sidled closer to her, resting against the grand pillowed headboard beside her, showing the page. "Nah, any Dark wizard worth his salt knows him as Herpo the Great. He was..."

"I know who he was." She suddenly shuddered. "You're not a Dark wizard, Sirius, no matter..." Her eyes had become moist with emotion.

"Hermione?"

"Marcus also referred to him as Herpo the *Great*. Insisted on it."

Sirius' mood darkened immediately. "Flint? What else did he say?"

Flustered, Hermione started to hem and haw. "Flint just...well he... Well, he started to call me a Mudblood, but stopped himself in time..."

"WHAT?"

"He's extremely skilled at wandless magic..."

Fuming, Sirius frowned. "As am I. What of it?"

"No, it's...I mean *powerfully* so." Before Sirius could comment, she added, "He can place counter-curses on Dark objects...the book that I Summoned in the Restricted Section, he didn't let me touch it until he had removed any Dark charm or harmful agent from it." Her face scrunched as she recalled Flint's actions. "It was as if he was suctioning the Dark power."

"To where?"

"What?"

"Transference of Dark energy from a Dark object goes from one matter into another."

Suddenly dreamlike, Hermione whispered, "*Magicke Moste Evile*. Flint's eyes flashed and with a wave of his hand and an inaudible spell, the curse within the book...the energy of it whiffed out... It had been removed. He knew how, nonverbally. I've never experienced anything like it."

"The Dark energy was channelled somewhere," insisted Sirius as he rolled the charred object in his hand. "Was Flint wearing a pendant too? Like Parkinson?"

Hermione's eyes widened at the possible parallel. "I...I don't know." She tried to remember how Marcus was dressed. "Flint was wearing a high turtleneck. Dressed neutrally. Unlike Pansy."

"Parkinson and Flint..." Visibly miffed, Sirius huffed. "I used nonverbal magic before I could walk or talk...removing spells from Dark books is child's play. There's more to it than Flint flexing his ability... What else did the bloody git say about Herpo?"

"He was very adamant about the ancient wizard, reveres him as the father of *all* magic."

"Well," started Sirius, only to stop, contemplating the conundrum. After a few seconds of consideration, he reminded her, "There isn't Light and Dark magic; it is how we choose to use it that makes it Dark or Light."

"I think Flint has other beliefs about that, what constitutes magic and who has the right to use it. You didn't see him...didn't *hear* how he spoke about it." She shuddered.

"So he reveres Herpo only...or the bastard *worships* him?" demanded Sirius darkly.

"Sirius?"

"I don't know exactly *how yet*, but I know it was him that cursed you...that bastard...I'll end his miserable life if it's the last thing I do before I allow him to further harm you!"

Sirius spoke so vehemently that a flashback of Sirius yelling at Pettigrew in the Shrieking Shack came to Hermione. *I would have died! I would have died rather than betray my friends!* flew through her mind. He would have murdered Pettigrew if Harry hadn't stopped him.

"But the proof! The proof, Sirius...we have to have concrete evidence... before accusing or confronting anyone... And... and Flint could have killed me many times..."

"He doesn't want you dead; he needs you alive."

She was speechless by his remark, and seeing her shock, Sirius thumped the page. "This coerced amnesia and conduit curses... The selective memories that you've been able to recall from your traumatic experience...the victim...the *conduit* must be alive. Otherwise, you're useless to him... the object must be living to *baused and useful*."

"And what about you? If, hypothetically, it was Flint," she swallowed hard, her breathing was becoming shallow and she started to feel lightheaded, "*whosed* me, who attacked you? Was it Flint or... Parkinson in your universe?"

Sirius' facial muscles clenched in thought, his eyes darkening as he forced himself to admit, "I can't remember." With a bitter twist to his lips, Sirius handed her the opened page. "But this is why the Hermione *here* had this book, *Constellations of the Magical Heavens*, she'd discovered one of the phantom intruder's dirty little secrets."

Hermione slowly read aloud, "As referenced in *Elementum Deorc Coercere ande Coarcere: Blod ande Fortia*, through revered and vile sacrifice Herpo the Great invented such methods and processes for sojourning the constellations. In order to do so, the vital component must be a conduit by which a wizard must use living creatures as their *current* to help transport themselves in time and space. Naturally, a wizard or witch would be the most desired and most powerful conduit one could use being Magical creatures, but needless to say, they would also be the most elusive to procure. Regardless, the final incantation after several sources have been attained is *Portus Constellatio*."

"Yes, that's it!" Hermione scooted closer to Sirius, and he gave her a curious glance as she inadvertently brushed against him, showing him the paragraph.

Hermione repeated, "Through... *vile* sacrifice Herpo the *Foul* invented such methods and processes for sojourning the constellations."

She pressed her head back against the pillowed headboard, lethargical, and the book fell from her hands into her lap. She closed her eyes, pensive, whispering, "And the counter-spells? There must be a way...anything done by Dark magic can be undone... reversed...we must find that book!"

"Which book?" asked Sirius quietly.

"*Elementum Deorc Coercere ande Coarcere: Blod ande Fortia*," replied Hermione, opening her eyes again. "All references that we have so far, all clues lead to Herpo the Foul's work. Or rather I need to be able to cross-reference and understand his 'inventions'...the conduit wizard or witch," she took in a deep breath, "is the vital component,

but that extract mentions 'after several sources have been attained'. I *must* get a hold of that book!"

Hermione felt an overwhelming wave of exhaustion roll over her and clenched her eyes again as a single tear rolled down her cheek, thinking of the futility of their predicament. She felt Sirius moving and opened her eyes enough to see him stand up and carry something back over from a low chest of drawers. It was a small tray with food and tea.

"Eat something, then rest; we'll continue this," he nodded at the items of discovery scattered on the bed as he placed the breakfast tray at the foot of it, "afterwards. I'd awoken way earlier this morning before your nightmarish recall; Kreacher was en garde beside the bed, insistent that I take more Blood Replenishing Potion and some nourishment." Sirius gave a small smile. "He was also insistent to keep me in your lovely soft bathrobe...that I not be allowed to dress myself. Blocked every attempt for me to either transfigure clothing or Summon anything. He said it was on the *Mistress'* orders." His eyes twinkled in amusement.

Seeing the food, an automatic rumble in her tummy was heard; she realized how depleted she was of energy, and she could feel her cheeks turning red from his gentle teasing. In defence she pointed out, "You were delirious last night. *Stubborn* and delirious, determined to leave...you would have Flooed yourself in harm's way or splinched yourself or worse. I had to keep you here... safe. Protect you from yourself, Sirius Black."

"And you? Kreacher told me all about it."

Hermione gave him a puzzled look.

"You don't seem much better than I was." Sirius' gaze suddenly became fixated on her body. "That's ~~my~~ dried blood on you?"

She followed his gaze and saw her clothing, stained. "Yes. You...you took the hex meant for me. A Sectumsempra. You could have died."

Sirius sat on the bed again and quietly confessed, "Of course, I took it for you. I would die for my friends...for those I love...for you."

Hermione felt her body flush warm as Sirius leaned closer to her, his voice husky with emotion, saying, "I'd die a thousand times over for you and more."

Then their lips met.

oOoOoOo

A/N: Hermione quotes phrases from the English playwright and poet William Congreve: "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned," spoken by Zara in Act III, Scene VIII, *The Mourning Bride* (1697). My deepest gratitude to the one and only Proulxes for her alpha/beta work on this story and continued guidance and specific feedback on each and every chapter...thank you! Also, the greatest thanks to the very patient and brilliant writer and admin Clairvoyant for helping to fine-tune the story's punctuation and content: *mwah*!

Relations

Chapter 7 of 11

Sirius hesitates, leaves, and Hermione goes after him to help rid him of his ghosts—nothing a little loving healing won't cure, so she thinks... But will it worsen their dilemma?

A/N: *Regulus' note to Voldemort, from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007). My greatest gratitude to the one and only Proulxes for her alpha/beta work on this story and her unconditional friendship, as well as the same thankfulness to the admin goddess, Clairvoyant, for her saintly help and *patience*.

oOoOoOo

Hermione kissed Sirius with an urgency she never knew existed.

Reciprocating just as needily, then breaking for breath, he cupped her cheek and covered her face with featherlight kisses before claiming her lips lightly with his own.

Her fingers grasped and clenched at his bathrobe: she needed to touch him, feel him. She ran her fingers through his hair and then discovered the contour of his neck, shoulders...her fingertips grazed under the opened robe's cloth, feeling the heat and sculpted form of his torso. She started to slowly open the robe further, following his heat, going lower.

Suddenly, Sirius broke off the kiss, pressing his forehead against hers; noses touched, their breath warmly panting against each other. Hermione felt herself melding into him; she touched his face, ran her fingers over the stubble on his chin and lightly outlined his tickly moustache.

"Sirius," she whispered softly and pressed again against his lips with hers, insisting that they continue.

"You're going to break my heart," he whispered and paused, giving her an odd look, and abruptly stood up, running his hand through his hair.

What? She didn't understand what he was doing or saying. Hermione rocked backwards on the bed, adrenaline pumping through her system making her lightheaded with surprise.

"*It's* going to break my heart," he uttered, correcting himself. He looked away from her, closing and tightening the robe around him. "But if I truly want ~~to~~*help* you at this moment, if I truly want to make you happy, I need to..." He seemed suddenly unable to look her in the eye and glanced around the room as if searching for something. He inexplicably took his wand and waved it around in an S-shape. "Knowing my *notorious* family as I do, there might just be some good to come out of this *Revelio!*"

There was the slightest pause before Hermione heard thumping and thudding in various degrees of loudness throughout the house, as if objects were unable to get out of confined spaces.

"Hidden objects sealed away in the house." He seemed to not know exactly what further to say about his actions and awkwardly suggested, "Eat something, freshen up...rest a bit if you wish. I need to find something. I'll be in one of the other rooms if you need me."

And with that, he left.

What the hell is wrong? How could he stop like that? Why? What does he mean that he needs to find something? He needs to...What did he mean I'm going to break his heart? She sat back against the pillowed headboard, exasperated. *Wasn't I showing him how I feel about him? What kind of woman does he think I am?*

She sat there struggling with her emotions, whether to go after him and demand what was going on in that impulsive, erratic brain of his or to wait until he returned before confronting him. As her stomach rumbled softly, and she glanced at the dry blood stains on her clothing, she calmed a bit and decided to collect her thoughts more. However, she could barely concentrate on anything other than asking herself, *What is wrong? I know Sirius wants me...and yes, I want him as I've never wanted anyone or anything in my life before!* She was trembling from the feeling that had enveloped her.

She was so flustered and confused that she barely registered eating something.

She barely registered showering and dressing in the undergarments and old Muggle tracksuit she found in the other Hermione's wardrobe.

She barely registered grasping her wand and leaving the room in search of him, determined to find out why he had rejected her clear intentions to fully reciprocate.

Hermione only knew that she had climbed the stairs to the top floor and had entered Sirius' old bedroom: a single lit sconce showed that no one was there, but a refurbished and familiar Gryffindor look surrounded her. Even the old posters of Muggle girls on motorbikes still hung unmoved, permanently stuck to the wall, accenting which of the Black brother's room this truly was. Hermione couldn't help but smile at the posters' defiant symbolic stance as she left and slowly gravitated to the door opened directly across the hall with the sign 'Regulus Arcturus Black' nailed upon it.

She entered quietly, and in the soft light, she called for him.

"Sirius?"

She found him sitting on a small settee, a pile of books and trinkets on the floor beside it. He was wiping his eyes with the heel of one hand, holding a framed picture in his other.

Hermione swiftly took in this Regulus' room: it had been converted from the younger brother's bedroom, formerly strewn with his family's crest and Slytherin décor, photos and articles about the Dark Lord and his followers hanging all over the walls. Now it was a somber, austere study of sorts: half a sitting parlour, half of it shelved with books from the floor to the ceiling.

She saw on the wall of the sitting area where Sirius was that the entire wall was covered with framed pictures of varying sizes and shapes along with several parchments. As she walked closer, she glanced over the photos and became mesmerized by the figures of Albus Dumbledore, Fred Weasley, Ted Tonks, Dirk Cresswell, Colin Creevey, and so many others. Her focus kept coming back to several photos that had the moving forms or blinking eyes of other unexpected but familiar faces that made her chest burn with a heavy, maudlin emotion. *There's Nymphadora, Remus... and Professor Snape!*

She slowly crossed over and sat down beside Sirius. They both gazed silently at the wall, but she could feel his turmoil evoked from the assemblage of those deceased.

His pain is my pain; his loss is my loss...ours!

She felt an uncontrollable yearning to touch him, kiss him, be with him. Be *one* with him.

"It's a private collage of loved ones, a war memorial of sorts... A commemoration to those fallen or who have passed away," remarked Hermione in a quiet voice.

"Yes."

"May I?"

Sirius showed her the picture he held so tightly. She gasped at the three figures in it.

Two easily recognizable adolescent wizards, James Potter and Sirius, seemed to be urging on the photographer to take the photo while the third person standing on the teenage Sirius' other side, a tall, scowling youth with black hair and grey burning eyes, was staring balefully forward. The sullen youth was slightly hunched, arms crossed tightly over his lean chest, as if he was in pain.

Harry's father, Sirius, and... Regulus? She was confused by the incongruousness of the three of them ever being together and asked, *When* was this taken?"

She watched Sirius' eyes narrow. "It was... right before he disappeared. That year...the last time I saw him... Well, the last time I saw him *alive*. Only a few photos remain. Lily took this one. I was living at the Potter's. I knew Regulus was *deep* in it...but I had also heard through the grapevine that he wanted to leave..."

Sirius was struggling with attempting to make light of it contrary to what he appeared to be feeling at that moment, saying, "I still wanted to protect the little git, even though he had rejected me, *despised* me, and renounced me being his kin, his *brother*."

"I don't believe that, Sirius. He didn't despise you." She squeezed his hand encouragingly. "I believe he was scared, alone, understood too late how diabolical Voldemort and his followers were, wanted to get out, but couldn't. I think he did what he could and kept face to protect his family...his brother. If Voldemort knew he still cared for you, he would have used it against both of you in the most despicable ways. Believing that both of you had become meaningless to one another *worked*...it satisfied Voldemort and didn't attract his attention further."

"I could have, *should* have protected him more, but it didn't happen," argued Sirius, visibly troubled. "The Potters offered to give my brother a safe house until we could arrange to sneak him out of the country, beyond Voldemort's and his followers' awareness, beyond the Ministry's...away from my parents reach. Regulus agreed to meet me, but... *Something* happened. He didn't meet me later at the clandestine rendezvous point agreed upon. He never showed. At the time, I took his no show as a final answer of where he had decided his true loyalties lie or that he had turned tail at the crucial time... It was only much later, years later that the truth came out."

Hermione took his free hand into her own, covering it protectively. "Regulus did a great thing. An incredibly *brave* deed, Sirius. Without his sacrifice all those years ago, we wouldn't have been able to defeat Voldemort. Everyone's contribution was needed and vitally helped our cause...sacrificing his life like that." She kissed Sirius softly on the cheek. "The ultimate sacrifice for those he loved." She gave him a soft smile. "Well, that's your *true* brother, that was the *true* Regulus, wasn't it?"

Sirius held her gaze and whispered, "Yes." He lightly kissed her on the lips before deepening it.

Catching himself once again, he stopped, and she saw him make a decision to redirect his focus. "I found something relevant, although not exactly what you want." He picked up a book from the pile and showed her its title: *A Translation of Herpo the Great's Treatises of Fundamental Magical Truths*

"I'll look at it, later." At that very moment, she couldn't give a fuck about Herpo the Foul. Sirius, on the other hand, she was very concentrated on.

"Sirius, you need to make peace with Regulus' memory, with *yourself*. You are proud of him, aren't you? He did what he felt he had to do. He was true to himself at the end, to you...he protected his family the only way he knew how with the choices he had before him. He was truly a noble brother in blood and deed."

"In the end, of course I am proud of him. Just... what a miserable, fucking life he had. Growing up in this madhouse."

Hermione became acutely aware of the myriad eyes watching them from the vast array of pictures, and she instinctively wanted to be alone with Sirius in his intimate state.

"Sirius, come with me." She needed to get him out of the somber room. "We'll take the book and look through it; we can come back here later and go through more things."

She tugged him gently up, and he paused for a moment, saying, "Let me just..."

Sirius placed the picture back on the wall where it hung beside the framed note from Regulus to Voldemort found in the fake Horcrux so long ago:

To the Dark Lord

I know I will be dead long before you read this but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can. I face death in the hope that when you meet your match you will be mortal once more.

*R.A.B.**

Sirius took a deep breath and said, "Regulus, Snape... Sacrificing themselves at all cost under the guise as Voldemort's followers. Fuck it all... *Whoknew?* Rest in peace." He grabbed the Dark book about Herpo's treaties and stared at the pile consisting of other dubious family belongings.

"Sirius, come." She took and tugged his hand again gently, leading him out of the room.

As they entered the corridor, their hands gripped each other's tighter, and Hermione felt a surge of uncontrollable longing and guided Sirius not down the stairs but directly back across the hall, leading him into the centre of his old room.

Sirius became hesitant, even though his eyes were burning with emotion, mumbling, "My old *sanctum sanctorum*..."

Hermione locked eyes with him and ran a hand up his chest and through his hair, guiding his head downward. "Exactly."

Her lips met his, seeking and demanding that he reciprocate her need. *Our need*...

"Hermione, are you sure?" he asked, his voice husky and low.

She pressed against his sculpted form, her eyes losing themselves in his grey ones as she slowly caressed his body with her hand lower and lower, down his side, near and around his groin, intentionally *not* touching his erection.

She heard the book fall to the floor. Wands fell from pockets sporadically as they began to move synchronously towards the bed.

"Sirius," whispered Hermione urgently as he swept her hair back and kissed her neck, his soft mustache tickling her sensitive skin, causing her to tremble uncontrollably, driving her mad. She moaned and undulated as his hands felt and caressed her body, moved with her, held her and followed her movements, both swaying and losing themselves into each other.

Their slow dance of love-making turned quickly into a frantic fandango.

All of the frustration and insanity that they were existing in, experiencing in the here and now exploded, and all Hermione was aware of was Sirius; their bodies melded together, grinding into each other, leaving no parts of each other untouched.

Hermione felt the back of her legs hit the bed, and in the next second, they had tumbled onto the mattress, she rolling on top of him, covering his face with urgent kisses. Sirius nipped and sucked at her neck in between his heated whisperings of "Hermione". Both of their dominant wills challenged and tested the other one's out until Hermione decisively sat up straddling Sirius, panting hard. Her fingers grabbed the bathrobe's belt and unknotted it in quick, determined movements. She heard his breathing become pronounced as she pulled both belt and robe away from his body.

Their eyes met as she reached out and slowly began tracing the mosaic of tattoos and scarred wounds marking his sinewy, sculpted form. Her fingertips traced down the soft tufts of hair of his treasure trail until she reached his lovely cock. She delicately traced its warm firmness and continued on, feeling over his defined thighs and back again to his notable, hardened manhood.

Hermione gazed at him, curious and admiring; her cheeks burned as her eyes met his again.

"Come to me," he pleaded softly.

She slowly lowered herself; her clothed thighs brushed his erect cock's tip as she stretched upwards, meeting his mouth. Her fingertips outlined his rugged jaw-line as their mutual kisses searched and demanded union.

In a delicious haze, Hermione felt Sirius' fingertips exploring her breasts, searching for the opening to her top and, finding none, impatiently grabbing her buttocks, nudged her hips to move forward. She undulated at his insistence, rolling her hips, pressing against his full erection.

Apparently, it was his undoing because she was flipped onto her back, her top pulled up and over her head. She clumsily undid her brassiere as he lowered his head, his mouth capturing one of her nipples, rolling his tongue around and sucking its hardened point while his hands slipped lower to tug her tracksuit trousers down. Eager to be unencumbered by clothing, she helped him pull and take them off as the cool air hit her exposed flesh.

His fingers grazed over the soft, damp cloth of her knickers and continued to slowly explore around and between her legs. As his fingers gently felt underneath the moist material, she heard Sirius moan softly as he discovered how abundant her wetness was. All thoughts of extraneous foreplay seemed to disappear, and he peeled her knickers down, tossing them aside.

Ever so gently, he lowered his head and pressed his lips on her vaginal ones, slowly increasing the pressure with circular motions; the feel of his tongue lapping out strategically over her clit caused a tingling sensation to burst from her core throughout her body, down to the tips of her toes and throughout her breasts.

He broke from this position, impulsively rising upwards, nipping and licking her abdomen, naval, ribs, breasts on the way...on and upward, she felt his ministrations until he reached her awaiting lips that met his with a crushing kiss. Her hands felt his flexing muscles down his back to his buttocks, urging him on until her fingers found and stroked the length of his shaft, stroking him slowly up and down, up and down in an erratic rhythm until she began to pump him in smooth, even strokes. He huffed in between uttering soft expletives. Responding to her will, he pressed his body between her legs spreading for him. She felt his cock's tip seeking entrance and heard Sirius' barely audible, "Please, Hermione..."

"Yes!" she answered and clutched him to her with all her strength, encouraging him to enter her, relishing the feeling of his burning weight pressing down on her. Her breasts were rubbing against his firmness and heat, and she continued to cling to his lean muscular form, her fingers memorizing every inch of him as she felt downward and pressed against his buttocks. She could feel the tip of his cock placed in the centre of her wet heat, but he was delaying, rubbing his knob's end teasingly around her labial folds, poking and pressing against her clit before gradually guiding it back to her vaginal entrance. Her moans were soft and suppressed, waiting for him to plunge inside her. Her muscles clenched in anticipation as she felt Sirius cup her buttocks, and she cried out with release as he slowly pushed the head inside her, sheathing half his cock within her tight, wet heat.

He stopped, gasping, "Fuck, Hermione, you're so tight, love."

He pulled out slowly, and she whispered impatiently, "Sirius," only to be cut off as a bolt of pleasurable sensation coursed through her, feeling his lips firmly nip and suck at her sensitive skin on her neck, the whiskers causing her to tremble again uncontrollably as they pricked and tickled her. Then her mind went blank as she felt him begin to tease her sex with his skilled fingers. All she knew was him caressing her folds, then carefully inserting first one and then a second finger inside her. His burning mouth continued to plant kisses, lowering his head downward again until she whimpered with a breathless mewl, his tongue searching ardently between her vaginal lips and finding her most sensitive nub. His sucking and swirling intensified even as he guided her to lift one leg and place it over his shoulder. She grasped and clawed at his shoulders to brace herself as her body undulated and curled beyond her control.

"Oh, oh my god," she cried in breathless delight, feeling waves of pleasure rolling over her body, building in intensity as he suckled her clit; he was holding one hand placed behind and under her buttocks as the other held and braced her firmly in place. He lapped and sucked, swirling his tongue harder and faster, burrowing into her rhythmically and then back around and on her clitoris, urging her to come, his tongue jutting down and around her swollen nub, tongue fucking her hard without mercy. "*Oh, fuck... fuck...*," she gasped and gave over to the all consuming sensation, climaxing.

She continued to shudder from his ministrations and abandoned all rational thought as she gave in to and luxuriated in the myriad physical sensations she was riding at the moment. She was only aware of him continuing to kiss and lick around her sex and inner thighs, alternating between placing soft love bites and swirly licks here and there. *His fucking, wonderful moustache will be the death of me!* she thought, shuddering again in climax at its titillating sensation. As her breathing began to slowly become more normal, he paused to look up at her, gauging her pleasure for several seconds before huskily saying, "I could do this all night. What do you want?"

Breathing heavily, she curled up enough to trace his lips with a fingertip and whispered, "*YouNow.*"

Eagerly complying, he positioned himself again, the tip of his cock placed in her wet heat's entrance.

She lifted her hips, pressing against him, and not needing any more encouragement, Sirius pushed inside her burning wetness, sheathing himself deep within her heat. He drew in his breath sharply and then slowly moved his hips around, his cock being pushed deeper within her, allowing her body to adjust to his size. She gasped and mewled as he proceeded to slowly pull out of her only to then thrust deeper each time in controlled, steady motions. She dug her fingers into his back, and his rhythmic, thumping pace steadily increased, each fucking motion, hard and urgent, inward and upwards, deeper and deeper.

Something opened inside her, a flood of need and longing. Hermione gave over to the sensation and began to meet his thrusts, their rhythms slapping flesh against flesh, the grinding thrusts growing wilder and wilder. Her vaginal muscles began to clench and tighten around his cock, and he gave over to pounding madly into her sex. She held onto him, her fingers grasping where they could to brace herself, trying to meet his vigorous thrusting. But as the feeling of both of their bodies tightening was mounting in an exquisite pain, his huffs of exertion mixed with her cries as a mounting climax impelled them frantically on.

Hermione cried out in wild abandonment as his thrusting increased in dizzying speed and force. She felt her vaginal muscles begin to clamp him even tighter and faster, signalling her unstoppable, oncoming climax. He seemed to feel this intensely, as she heard him moan anew, and their mutual pace of fucking began to blur any known sensibilities of speed. She clenched her eyes from the intensity, seeing flashes of purple and red; her only other awareness was of his thrusting and pounding into her in a blissful rapture of rhythm.

Suddenly, he hit an exquisite, raw spot deep, deep within her, and she froze in ecstasy, crying out, "*Sirius!*" Her toes curled and her body shook. Convulsing in orgasm, she clawed and clung to him for life. As her fingernails marked his back, a searing bolt seemed to shoot through him, and in rapid, fervent pulses, he stiffened and spent himself, coming deep inside her.

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Hesitations

Chapter 8 of 11

Sirius and Hermione's brief time of bliss together is interrupted by an innocent remark, which precipitates a quick return to the Ministry where they find more obscure goings on....

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During the night they barely noticed the spectral lynx Patronus that arrived to inform them that all was secure and to return to the Ministry the next day.

They had barely acknowledged the message amidst torrid lovemaking, followed by bouts of sleep.

And so it was in the following morning, lying satiated and intertwined together with Sirius, Hermione struggled to think about the upcoming day as she felt Sirius slowly stroking her arm.

He stilled momentarily, asking, "And this?" His fingertips ever so lightly felt over her neck, the circumscribed raised ridge of her pale, sensitive skin, evidence of a thin cut scarring it.

"Who did this to you?"

Hermione shuddered as Sirius traced his finger over her scar. "It was a long time ago, Sirius..."

"Who?" he insisted quietly, and she squeezed her eyes shut at the memory of the foul breath, the cold, slick feeling as the knife's blade was dragged across the delicate skin of her throat.

She swallowed. "Bellatrix."

He gathered her to him and held her tight. She heard him ask softly, "What happened?"

She shook her head slightly and repeated, "It was a long time ago. Before the final battle... Harry, Ron and I were captured by Snatchers and taken to Malfoy Manor where...where..." Her throat tightened. "She wanted... she wanted Harry, and I couldn't..."

"Bellatrix still lives in your world...universe?" His voice and body had tensed.

"No. Molly killed her. During the final battle."

Hermione felt Sirius relax a bit as he said, "As in mine."

She nestled closer to him, throwing a leg across his thighs. She smiled as she saw his cock rise to half-mast and breathed in his musky scent, and with one arm stretching over his chest, she squeezed him tight. She felt him kiss the top of her head. Hearing his heart beating steady and loud, she sighed in contentment.

"Hermione?"

"Hmm?" she groggily responded, relishing the warm, lazy feeling.

"I've been thinking," spoke Sirius quietly.

"Um hmm?"

He slowly continued, "About your thin places."

She raised her head and gave him a soft peck on the cheek before nestling her head again on his shoulder, mumbling sleepily, "What about them?"

"What if... what if besides places that meet, that touch, we are the thin places?"

"We?"

"Yes. You and me."

She gave him a wide grin. "You mean our bodies?"

"Yes. Well, not just our bodies..." He reciprocated with a wolfish grin. "Our minds and emotions and magic, you know?"

Hermione raised her head again, admiring him, and then softly laughed, happy. "You're full of surprises, Sirius Black. Why on earth are you thinking of thin places of all things?"

She sat up a bit beside him. His eyes were shining at her, full of tenderness and something else that she couldn't quite put her finger on. Besides satisfaction, his expression had a kind of peace that she had never seen before on him.

He reached out and caressed her face, tucking some of her wild locks behind an ear and kissed her firmly on the lips, before answering. "Well, lying here with you evokes something inside me, an energy both passionate and relaxing, like a chord of music or such." He huffed and seemed slightly embarrassed. "Holding you in my arms, I don't know... I remember happier times... and I'm thinking about the future...our future... together."

She was momentarily speechless, not knowing quite what to say. Her own thoughts and body were still lingering on to and savouring the lasting sensations of having recently climaxed together; she had enjoyed that, besides Muggle motorbikes, Sirius seemed to have a full knowledge of Muggle Kamasutra positions.

They had lost themselves in time, in each other, and hadn't awareness of anything else except her sitting on him with her legs wrapped around his waist as he sat cross-legged: his guidance, helping her move her hips with his hands stroking or clenching her bottom as he caressed her breasts and neck with his mouth, his whiskers tickling and sending indescribable sensations throughout her body as she undulated and rocked with his cock thrusting deeper and upward inside her, in rhythm with her.

She trembled slightly from the pleasurable recall and asked, "What memories?"

"When James and Lily were alive, soon after their honeymoon, Voldemort had approached us, James and me, to join his ~~cause~~, promising an exception to his rules...Lily being the exception."

Hermione gave him an affectionate squeeze, content that he felt relaxed and secure enough to share with her further details of his past.

"In brief, I played along to infiltrate his inner circle, but James and Lily outright defied him, insulting Voldemort's *generosity* to them even more... The Order had me take them to a safe place for a brief spell. We went to western Ireland." His forehead furrowed, remembering. "Once there, Lily Apparated us to a spot, one of her favourites she said."

"She'd been to Ireland?"

"As a child, yes. With her family. A place near Kealkil in the western part of the county Cork." Sirius smiled and kissed her forehead, remembering, and continued, "The local Muggles there told us that the standing stones in this circular space were believed to be a calendar of sorts, charting celestial positions, a vortex of time and space charting the position of the sun and the heavens... I don't know why but I thought about what you were talking about yesterday, your Muggle Divination..."

"Spirituality."

"Right. Muggle spirituality. Points in time and space where your multi-verses cross as well. Where they touch, the 'thin places'."

He looked at her intensely. "I remember so specifically that the energy in the circle was warm and welcoming. Like you." He kissed her. "The same ~~feeling~~, being with you, *being joined with you*" He deepened the next kiss, and she lost herself in his touch.

When they broke for air and continued holding each other in comfortable silence, she regained her breath fully, clarifying, "Well, different Muggles think about them differently. Some spiritually, some scientifically... Some call them thin places, others multi-verses, existing parallel to each other, but yes, they believe that there are points which touch, specifically, as well as broader theories regarding time and space that naturally include the points, the places where they touch. In fact..." Hermione hesitated to continue, but Sirius seemed to be waiting, keenly listening.

So she did. "There's this Muggle, this physicist, Einstein... He said that time was relative."

Sirius smirked. "Physicist?"

"Yes, he saw and studied the world and universe in terms of matter and energy and the interactions between them..."

"Like a wizard? Arithmancy? Divination?"

Hermione smiled at him, enjoying the idea. "Well, yes, one could say he was a kind of a wizard for Muggles." She chuckled softly and continued, "And from one of his theories, his theory of special relativity, other theories sprung, all about travelling into the future and parallel universes, thought transference, *actually* transferring yourself from one universe to another..."

"Like magic? Apparating, Disapparating? Portkeys through time and space?"

"Well, yes, sort of." Her breath hitched. *How to explain more clearly?* "Let's say, if it's possible to manipulate a few electrons, an object you can see in front of you which exists simultaneously in a parallel universe..."

"*Electrons?* Objects? Manipulating, like casting a spell? What about a person? Like you?"

"Yes, like casting a spell on me... and you. Right. Exactly. *We're* both in a multi-state condition, a spelled condition, and travelling through time or being propelled from one universe or dimension..."

"Hermione..." Sirius was giving her a very patient, but soon to be impatient, questionable *look*.

She bit her lip, searching for similarities that they could relate to in the Wizarding world. Her eyes took in the Gryffindor banner softly lit in his room, sparking her to recall associations. "Just say you see a Snitch flying through the air, but maybe in a second universe, the Seeker has already caught it. Or looking the other way. Or they don't even play Quidditch there."

He smiled warmly. "Really, Hermione? Quidditch?"

She persisted, saying, "Then you're in Hog's Head, meeting friends, having a Butterbeer or two. But in another universe, where your particles just can't keep up, you're actually at number twelve, Grimmauld Place still getting dressed."

"Or still nude."

"Yes, or still nude..." Hermione stopped and blinked. *Is he laughing at me?* "Sirius! Be..."

"Serious, I know."

"What am I going to do with you?" she murmured.

"Anything you like. I'm all yours."

"Anything?" *You wonderful, exasperating man!* She kissed him impulsively and nestled her head under his chin, enjoying his heat and hardness and the steady beating of his heart.

He clasped her lovingly, tightly, and kissed the top of her head again. "I feel this incredible, unexplainable connectedness with you... and I thought, well, *think*... Look, my whole point of bringing this up in my clumsy, roundabout way is that..."

He paused, and she looked up again and saw that he was deciding on whether to say whatever was on his mind or not, which he bluntly proceeded to do. "Maybe all of this was meant, was supposed to happen."

Hermione blinked, stunned. "What?"

"Everything seems to come down to the same thing: thin places, multi-verses, Muggle and magical force and energy. This was meant to happen."

As Hermione slowly rose to a full sitting position, Sirius sat firmly up and then leaned back against the pillowed headboard with a look of hopeful expectation on his face.

She couldn't respond as a million thoughts flew threw her mind, and he watched her intensely before quietly asking, "What is waiting for you to go back to?"

Hermione gave him a puzzled look, before answering, "The same as for you...our past lives... *Ourreal* lives."

"You're not real? I'm not?"

He leaned forward and touched and stroked her slowly from her neck down across her breasts, gently laying his hand on her heart, her nipples hardening at his touch. "This isn't real?"

"You know what I mean," she whispered.

"No." His look was earnest, and his voice was etched with a pained tone. "I don't."

He removed his hand and shifted, sitting with one leg bent upwards and his arm stretched out on it. He looked at her, concerned.

"We were both cursed, against our wills," she pointed out slowly. "You said you wanted to return..."

"Did I? Yes, perhaps, *before* last night..."

"You said because here... *here*, Remus is dead; Nymphadora is dead. Everyone you knew and loved has passed on, crossed *overthere*... And *there*, you have everyone, everyone you've spent a unique lifetime knowing and loving and living for."

"Not everyone." He gave her a fierce look.

Hermione gave him a bittersweet smile. "Yes, everyone. Even me. Well, *theother* me."

"She's not you," Sirius whispered out, his voice unable to hide the pain. "*That* Hermione is not you. She could never be." His jaw muscles clenched. "Nor do I want her to try to be."

"Sirius," she trembled as his raw emotion struck a chord, unnerving her, "our actions here can't change our *ultimate obligation*: to reverse the curse that was wrongfully done to us, to return to our rightful universes..."

"What or *who* are you going back to?" he demanded.

"Our true lives, Sirius."

"And Weasley?"

"Ronald?"

"Yes. *Your* Ronald. There. You're not engaged, no mutual bonding to one another. No Unbreakable Vows made..." Sirius must have seen her rising anxiety as he stopped momentarily, seeming to carefully choose his words. He took a long deep breath before saying, "You'd be going back to a loveless relationship..."

"I love Ron. We've known each other almost all our lives..."

"Yes, I know. I know, but it's a friendship love, a childhood love...*nothis*."

Hermione moaned softly as he gathered her in his arms and felt his lips, his kiss deepening; his hands touched her as if to record every inch of her into his memory, causing her to tremble as he heatedly repeated, whispering in her ear, "Not this..."

"Sirius, it's difficult to listen to you when you...", she whispered, her voice trailing off, and she felt him pull back and saw him stare at the ceiling momentarily, apparently

collecting his thoughts.

Once he seemed to regain his train of thought, he said, "This multi-verse, parallel switch you've been going on about...that's happened to both of us... Hear me out, please."

Hermione waited, her heart thudding hard as a definite ache spread in her chest, but this ache was new, twinged with dread.

"Let's say the Hermione that was *here* has gone back to your universe. What has she found?" Before Hermione could speak, he held up a hand bidding her to wait and just listen to him. Continuing, answering his own question, he explained, "She's found a Ron, an alive Ron, who she's no longer in shock and mourning for, but rather, she is enjoying watching his chip-eating, Butterbeer-drinking, Quidditch-playing self...very much in love with him and enjoying a second chance to be with him..."

"Are you finished?" she asked impatiently, ready to rebut his speculations.

"No, not yet... Hear me out." He proceeded slowly. "And say the Sirius from *here* has gone to my universe where he has discovered, I'm certain by now, a very different dynamic with the Hermione *there*. He's discovered Weasley is alive and well. That *that* ginger is one lucky bastard. And no doubt, right now *that* Sirius has moved on and found a way to enjoy life with other old friends, free from the guilt and loss of this universe."

Sirius' eyes searched hers for understanding. "Given the choice to return to here, to a place where most of his best friends are dead, where he's marked as an untrustworthy drunk by the Hermione *herewhich* do you think he would choose? To return or stay where he is?"

Inexplicably, Hermione slowly pulled away. This was something that she had unconsciously wanted to avoid, to ignore somehow *How have our doppelgängers found their new lives, their second chances? Are they alive even? Dead? Incarcerated? Happy?*

"We agreed we must go back, Sirius," she replied quietly.

"Did we?"

The strange painful sensation going through her pulsated, but she forced it aside to make her point. "I cannot *not* know how and what exactly happened. I must understand everything, must make a choice from knowledge, not ignorance, Sirius."

Sirius huffed, and then with the most earnestness she had ever seen, he swore, "I will help you *pledge* to help you find whatever counter-curses to those used and whatever can be done to undo the Dark magic that has taken place, to discover and know how to reverse and return us... I vow to avenge the wrong that has been done us, Hermione." He took her hand in his gently. "But it doesn't mean that a *goodness* hasn't come from all of this; we don't necessarily have to act on what we find. It's the choices we make and the choices we *don't* make now that matter." He searched her face with hope for a sign of agreement. "*Foius*."

It pained her, but she couldn't stop herself from saying, "*This* wasn't meant to happen. It wasn't meant to be for either of us...us being *here*, together, was not the natural order or natural evolution of our lifetime in each of our respective universes... I'm supposed to still be living in a dimension of a near past, you in an almost tangible future, our dimensional universes flowing beside each other in their own respective speed, not overlapping, not intertwining, *not* connecting..."

Seeing the disappointment in his eyes, she felt an ache welling up inside her uncontrollably, causing her eyes to moisten up, but she forced herself to repeat, "This wasn't supposed to happen, Sirius."

"This?"

"Us."

"But it did. *We* did."

"It was an accident..."

"A magical accident."

Hermione was speechless at this.

Sirius gave her a poignant look. "Accidents happen. One must make the best of it. And ours *ours* was a truly magical accident, Hermione. Which *did* connect us; which did bring us together in the most irreversible way, regardless of what choices we make here on out."

The atmosphere had changed. Their brief idyll was now ended.

Brutal reality had reared its ugly head and forced the inescapable truth glaringly back in front of them. Between them. Breaking them apart.

Sirius had a desolate look on his face as he watched her get out of bed, picking up and dressing in her garments that had been strewn around.

As Hermione pulled her top on, Sirius slowly stood up and crossed over to her. "I've scared you, and that's the last thing I wanted..."

"No. No, you haven't. It's just that I..." She couldn't form a clear thought. "I need *to think*, Sirius. I need... to be alone with my thoughts and think about things."

"Alone? Think?"

"I...we need to get back to the Ministry. As soon as possible."

Hermione blinked away tears that were threatening to escape. She shut her eyes tight as Sirius carefully held her and kissed her gently on the lips, his touch and taste slowly undoing her will to resist him.

She struggled within, knowing that she needed to have a clear head. "Sirius... Sirius, listen to me," she softly begged. "I need you to be patient with me."

"I am," he murmured as he began to plant a trail of soft pecks up and down her neck.

Tensing, she repeated, "I need...we need to get to the Ministry. We're expected there."

He stopped nuzzling her and slowly stepped back.

She had to stay firm and clarified, "I can't think straight. I need to find answers to our...*situation*."

He gave her a curious look, a stern but defeated one, painful to see, causing her to finish dressing, pulling her tracksuit trousers on hurriedly.

As Hermione picked up her wand, she heard him say, "I won't detain you further."

She looked at him and saw that his features had turned neutral, his stance centred and detached, and then he shouted abruptly, "Kreacher!"

The house-elf appeared with a pop in between them.

"I believe the Mistress has something to say." He gave her an indifferent look. "My clothing?"

Hermione gasped softly and ordered, "Kreacher, return Sirius his clothing and freedom to leave."

Kreacher snapped his fingers and Sirius was fully dressed instantly. As she watched him adjust and tuck his freshly laundered garments, Hermione felt her cheeks flush and slightly light-headed at the sudden change of coolness in the air and chemistry between them.

"Master is dressed and free," croaked the old house-elf and popped out.

She saw Sirius Accio his wand and calmly announce, "You're right. The Ministry is waiting for us. There's work to be done. How could I forget *that*?" He crossed to the door to exit but stopped to inform her, "I'll be downstairs waiting for you at the Floo."

He gave her one last look, saying, "Don't forget the books. I know how much you need *them*." Then he left.

The tears rolled down her cheeks as she grabbed her wand and shakily picked up *A Translation of Herpo the Great's Treatises of Fundamental Magical Truths* from the floor, the final remnant of their recent hours of passion, and very slowly, she went down to dress for returning to the Ministry of Magic.

She collected *Constellations of the Magical Heavens* and the other objects, strewn around the bed in the master bedroom, and with a wave of her wand, she shrunk them all with a quick Diminuendo and put them in her cloak's pocket.

She slowly made her way downstairs to the fireplace where Sirius waited patiently, seemingly aloof.

He suggested that she Floo first, separately, and he would quickly follow, saying, "It's perhaps best if we didn't arrive anymore at the exact same time, together."

She hesitated and felt numb, not knowing if he was respecting her immediate wish to keep some distance to think properly or if... She shook her head, trying to keep strong, knowing that she needed all of her wits about her to think through everything.

With a heavy, nagging sensation, she thought, *Who knows what we'll have to face today! And... and how could Sirius truly believe that this was supposed to happen to us? And how do I know for certain it wasn't? And does it matter? What if we are stuck here? What if we can't find a way to undo what has been done? Would that be so terrible?*

Even the feeling of dread and anticipation of what she would further find and what choices there would be to make were not as strong as the miserable feeling she had of experiencing Sirius visibly detaching himself from her in body and spirit.

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Hermione sat bereft at her desk in her office.

Uncharacteristic to his nature, Sirius had stoically escorted her, once Flooing to the Ministry of Magic. Silently, they rode the lifts to their offices' level. And silently, they headed to their separate office doors, but as she turned the handle, Sirius suddenly stood close beside her, saying, "Let me first."

She saw that he had his wand gripped tightly in his other hand, and the memories of Borgin and Burkes came crashing down around her: everything they had shared and who their main, mutual suspects were and the possible dangers that lay ahead struck her to the core.

Sirius seemed to read her thoughts, as he said in a low, barely audible voice, "Just keep appearances up, as is. The past two days never happened: Borgin and Burkes never happened; we never happened."

Hermione felt more confused than ever and searched his eyes for an answer.

"*Pretend* it never happened...you're good at that," he clarified bitterly.

What is he saying? "Sirius..."

"If Flint and Parkinson are indeed who and what we believe they are... They must not suspect that we are on to them, yes? At all cost. Understood?"

"At *all* cost?" she questioned seeing a reckless flash of daring in his eyes.

Seeming to ignore her question, Sirius pointed out, "And *you* don't go anywhere without me or...well, just inform me of each and every place you need to go: the Restricted Section, the Department of Mysteries, wherever your findings take you."

Familiar warmth, softening his harsh expression, appeared briefly as he whispered, "If anything *happens* to me, confide in Harry. He'll help you. Help you in any way he can to get you back to *where* you wish, where you truly belong."

"Sirius?" She gasped. "What do you mean tell Harry? What are you planning to do?"

His voice became louder, as if he were listing points to someone else. "You have work to do. I have work to do." He made a nod behind him, indicating something or someone, and said, "Anything, and I mean anything you further discover relevant to us, this case, inform me immediately."

He snapped back into a fully authoritative tone as Minister Shacklebolt was seen coming towards them. "Understood, *Auror* Granger?"

Sirius swung her door open, his dark grey eyes flashing, obviously searching for Flint as he bounded inside.

But the office was empty. Marcus was nowhere to be seen.

Hermione walked in, crossing to her desk, glancing around, wishing she could confront Sirius about his unknown, impulsive plans. *The Minister is here, but Sirius has that wild look in his eyes. Oh God, I hope he doesn't plan to do anything rash!*

She gave a quick glance around before giving Sirius an urgent look, saying, "I'll talk with you soon. *Need* to talk to you soon, about *everything*."

"One can always hope," he flashed a cheeky grin, "Can't they, *sweetheart*? Good morning, Minister."

"Sirius," greeted Shacklebolt, and then he saw Hermione and smiled. "Hermione, thank you for getting our Head Auror back on his feet." He turned to Sirius. "I need to brief you on some vital information, some updates since we last saw each other."

"My office is your office, Minister. Shall we?" Sirius waved his hand towards it.

Flustered, Hermione listened with anxious curiosity. The Minister seemed aware of this as he gave her a knowing smile, informing, "Then, I'll call you in."

"Yes, sir."

Hermione looked at Sirius, his jaws clenched, and then at Marcus' empty desk. She turned directly to Shackbolt, asking, "Sir?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

"Where is Flint?"

Kingsley gave a thoughtful look and replied, "I believe the Senior Undersecretary requested to see him."

"The Senior Undersecretary?" asked Hermione, confused.

She searched Sirius' face for any outward sign of concern, but found none, which only caused her to be more alarmed for some reason *But a Senior Undersecretary would be Shackbolt's second-in-command, answerable only to him as the Minister for Magic and no one else. But that...that can't be! Don't tell me Dolores Umbridge still holds a position here!*

She had forgotten how different this universe was: the intense past hours spent with Sirius had been a blissful interlude for her, temporarily erasing anything before. But at the mention of the odious position of the Senior Undersecretary, hearing it brought her back to this stark reality and the sobering, multiple possibilities that could exist that she hadn't even a clue about here in this universe, possibly affecting everything. *Umbridge created the Muggle-Born Registration Commission when Voldemort was indirectly controlling the Ministry! What all has that evil toad done here? And Flint is with her?*

Hermione felt her chest tightening.

"Yes, Hermione." Shackbolt gently reminded her, "Senior Undersecretary Malfoy."

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A/N: My deepest gratitude to the one and only Proulxes for her continued alpha/beta work and support on this story, as well as my endless appreciation to Clairvoyant for her patience and brilliant admin support...thank you!

Confirmations

Chapter 9 of 11

Hermione researches further the Dark methods of Herpo the Foul. Flint confirms everything she and Sirius surmised about him during their intense time alone, leading Hermione to begin to lose control.

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Hermione felt an electrical current from within spark all the way through her.

"Senior Undersecretary Malfoy?" she repeated, staring at Kingsley and then to Sirius.

Shackbolt gave her an odd look as Sirius' eyes grew wide in realization that this was something new and shocking to her, and he loudly commented, "And how is old Lucius? Which new commission is he proposing today?"

"Oh, you know. Same old, same old." Kingsley gave a tired sigh. "Nothing new up his sleeve. Always the same. He wants a registration for this and for that, to register various types of wizards...but we have more urgent matters to discuss, Sirius. Shall we?" The Minister nodded towards the Head Auror's office, and Sirius gave Hermione a look.

She implored him silently with her eyes that she wanted to speak with him further as soon as possible. He started to respond but turned his head, distracted by another figure approaching.

"Minister," said and saluted Marcus Flint breathlessly, his chest heaving with exertion and sweat beading his forehead and upper lip. "Good afternoon, sir."

Kingsley's eyebrows raised in mute question at the man's sudden appearance.

"Forgive my intrusion, sir," Flint was holding himself ramrod straight, the epitome of a dutiful Auror. "But I need to report to Auror Granger that the book she had asked for has been located."

Hermione felt a peculiar rushing in her ears. *The book? The **book**...*

Her heart pounded. *Home*, she thought.

Kingsley's brow furrowed. "Book? What...?"

"*Elementum Deorc Coercere ande Coarcere: Blod ande Fortia!*" she gasped hurriedly, ignoring the strange, twisted expression on Sirius' face as she reeled off the title.

Flint smirked and nodded. "The very same," he confirmed. "Parkinson is waiting to show it to you in the Restricted Section *if* you would care to accompany me?"

Hermione clutched Sirius' arm.

Sirius gave her a grim, subtle nod, but even though Hermione took it as an affirmative, she couldn't shake off a feeling of sudden uneasiness and looked at Sirius and then to Shackbolt, asking, "Minister, if it's all right? Head Auror Black will come with us?"

Before Shackbolt could answer, Sirius replied, "I have this meeting with the Undersecretary and Minister...but Harry can go in my stead? And then join us afterwards."

Even as Hermione's forehead furrowed, wondering about Sirius' reply, she heard Flint irritably snarl, "Potter!"

Harry had arrived and was blocking Flint's path.

"Ah, good," boomed Shacklebolt's voice. "Harry can go with you, and when you three return, come directly to Black's office."

"Sir?" asked Flint, as if he didn't hear correctly. "Me, as well?"

"Yes, Marcus. You, as well. The Undersecretary will be joining us. Didn't he inform you?"

Marcus hedged, "Er, I think he mentioned some sort of meeting, sir. I didn't realize it was ~~now~~...today."

During their exchange, Hermione couldn't help look at Sirius. *You're not going with me?*

He held her gaze, his jaw muscles clenching; his stormy grey eyes flashed at her with an emotion she couldn't put her finger on, unreadable.

Sirius diverted his eyes from her, curtly ordering Flint, "Well, get to it then and back as quickly as you can. Wouldn't want to keep Malfoy or the Minister waiting, would we?"

Flint huffed, threw a resentful look at Sirius and turned sharply away only to come to an abrupt halt.

Harry stood again in his way. "Hermione?" offered Harry, motioning the way to the lifts.

Hermione felt the energy of everyone, crisp and electrical. *Sirius, Harry, Flint...they're all on edge, as am I!* As they walked away and entered the lift, her mind raced, trying to puzzle out what Sirius and Kingsley were up to.

As the lift carried them down to the lower levels, she tried to calm herself, thinking, *Undersecretary Malfoy? How was I to know that I needed to know about Undersecretary Malfoy?*

Her thoughts were interrupted by Harry incongruously engaging Marcus in conversation.

"Missed some action the other night, Flint, at Borgin and Burkes."

Marcus grunted, affecting disinterest. He slouched against the lift's wall.

Harry pressed, "We could have used you around."

"How so, Potter?"

"Some nasty business was going down. An excellent Hit Wizard like you would have come in handy. But you weren't on duty."

"Even Hit wizards have to sleep, Potter, as you well know." He sneered, adding, "Yeah, I heard old Borgin was knocked off, burgled or something. What was nicked?"

Hermione and Harry's eyes met. *Only Order members would know anything about this... and of course, the murderous intruders...*

Harry kept cool. "We'll never know. Seems like the culprits stole some things, burned some things in the process, wished to get rid of some kind of evidence..."

"Connected with a Dark artifacts shop? Incriminating evidence? You jest, Potter," jeered Flint sarcastically. "You'll make Head Auror in no time."

Harry laughed, his eyes flashing. "You think, Flint? Gotta' get rid of Black first, though, right?"

The lift halted, and Marcus gave a sardonic look to Harry as he jerked the caged doors open. "Our stop."

Oh my God, was it him? He stole from and murdered Borgin? But why? He tried to murder me? But if it was him...but no, Sirius said Flint would need to keep me alive... a living conduit?

The air on the eighth level was thick with tension, heavier than ever before to Hermione, suffocating. Showing his drawn wand, Harry gave her a reassuring look as Flint impatiently took the lead several steps ahead of them heading hurriedly to the Restricted Section.

Hermione spoke in a low voice. "Harry, what are you trying to do? Why provoke Flint when we can't prove anything yet..."

"Can't we? I think we just got a confession, don't you?"

"Not quite. We can't yet connect him directly to the break in and related murder of Borgin, but..." She stopped herself, unsure of how much more Harry knew about Flint in relation to her and Sirius. *If anything happens to me, confide in Harry. He'll help you. Help you in any way he can to get you back to where you wish, where you truly belong.' What all has Sirius told Harry?* She blinked, remembering Borgin and Burkes. *But there were two intruders!*

Hermione whipped out her wand and silently cast a Muffliato around them. "Harry, listen to me. I don't know what all Sirius has or hasn't told you related to Flint, but we're going on speculations, strong ones but still without concrete evidence. Just do what I say." She softened her bossy nature, adding, "Go along with me, trust me, Harry, please? It's vital to everything we've been working on."

Frowning, Harry pushed his spectacles back but shook his head in agreement. "Alright, Hermione."

She silently dispelled the charm as they reached the Restricted Section's entrance alcove.

Pansy Parkinson awaited them, arching an eyebrow high as she registered Harry accompanying Hermione. Her heavily painted face forced a tense smile as she informed, "The book, *Elementum Deorc Coercere ande Coarcere: Blod ande Fortia*, was located, Granger. It's set out for you, ready and waiting."

Hermione tried not to stare at Pansy's pendant glittering on her cleavage. *It seems alive with energy within... Is it a possessed amulet? A Horcrux? A container of Dark energy? A conduit?* She tried to suppress a shudder and keep her heightened nerves at bay. "You...you remembered."

"I remember everything, Granger. Don't you?" Pansy gave a slow look to Harry and then back to Hermione, adding, "A blessing or a curse?"

"Pardon?"

"Memory." Pansy touched her pendant and grimaced slightly. "To remember everything... Even the unbearable and more..." A flicker of a soft emotion fluttered across her face. "Emotions. The emotions are what are too..."

Hermione stared at Pansy; something seemed off. Parkinson's usual hard-nosed sharpness was dulled. There was a softness to her edges she had never witnessed before.

"That's enough, Pansy. We've got an urgent meeting to hop to." Flint cocked his head at her as if to remind her of something.

Parkinson flinched momentarily but continued, annoyed, "How it feels to be... Where is Black?"

"With the Minister." Marcus snapped, "Granger, shall we?" He brusquely motioned toward the inner chamber's entrance.

"I'll go in with Hermione, Flint," stated Harry abruptly, apparently forgetting his agreement with Hermione.

"Why, Potter? That's my duty, isn't it, Granger?" Flint was giving her an odd look. "You might need me for *myspecial talents*. Remember?"

There was a strained silence. Hermione looked between the two men. Harry's jaw was set, and she could feel his magic, aggressive and protective, thrum through his body. Opposite him, Flint's tense body language mirrored Harry's, his lips drawn back in a smile that revealed his teeth. *At this rate we won't find anything out about Flint's involvement in the attack on Borgin and Burke's! I've got to get Flint on his own and see if he'll give anything away, the arrogant idiot.*

Hermione affected a bright smile towards Harry, putting her hand on his forearm to attract his attention. "It's all right, Harry. Flint always goes with me. It's our routine," she said, digging her fingers warningly into her friend's arm.

Harry's eyes met hers and she felt his mind brush hers. She felt his worry and concern, but she shook her head fractionally, and saw the flash of his understanding.

He relaxed slightly and stepped back. "Okay, Hermione," he said. "I'm sure that Pansy and I have *gofots* to catch up on while you two check out the books." He grinned at Parkinson, who grimaced slightly at Harry's words, but nodded her agreement.

"I'll be right here when you get back," Harry added unnecessarily.

Flint snorted under his breath, but Hermione felt bolstered by Harry's support and trust as she always did. She took a deep breath. *Right, come on!* she told herself firmly. *Time to get some answers.*

Plastering what she hoped was a convincingly confident smile on her face, she gestured before her to Flint. "Lead on, Auror Flint," she challenged him in a voice that was steady and true.

Marcus' look was calculating, but he quickly smiled in response and bowed. "Ladies first," he countered.

She faltered for a moment, but remembering her task, she gave a tight nod of acknowledgement and headed towards the passageway to the inner chamber, the intimidating figure of Herpo the Foul looking down upon them.

She passed in front of the dark stone slab, going right and deeper into the space, pushing the door open and entering the inner chamber.

Lit sconces threw light on the table and two chairs. Hermione saw that an ancient tome was already placed; parchments to take notes upon and special quills were ready and waiting for her.

The strange muffled whispers softly sighing in the tomb-like circular room immediately caused her to feel tranquil, yet on extra alert. She shook her head to focus. "Right. Let's get to it."

As she sat down in front of the book, her eyes gazed over it, and she broke out in goose pimples *Elementum Deorc Coercere ande Coercere: Blod ande Fortia*.

It was centuries old. The edges of the thick leather cover were well worn. *The smell...* Hermione's nose scrunched in reaction to its foul odour. She took in the varying splotches and shades of dark stains and discolouration on its grimy surface. But there was something that caught her attention. *Its upper edge... The book looks as if it is... charred...the blacker, smudgy mark seems recent.*

Flint watched her carefully, slouching against the wall, not sitting. He began to chew a nail.

"Should you," asked Hermione, hesitating, "should you check it to remove any Dark charm? To remove Dark energy?"

His eyes flashed as he quietly informed her, "The Dark energy has already been removed from it." He seemed to unconsciously touch his chest as he glanced at the floor. A small protrusion, forming a small lump, could be seen in the middle under his turtleneck pullover, like a locket being worn underneath. Marcus' eyes snapped to hers as he said, "It's alright, Granger...it's safe. You can touch it. Research to your heart's content."

Remembering what Sirius had pointed out, she reposted without thinking, "The Dark energy was channelled somewhere." She stared at the object hidden under his shirt.

"What?" snapped Flint.

"Transference of Dark energy from a Dark object goes from one source into another."

Marcus blinked, looking at her queerly, and rubbed at his chest, as if something was itching, irritating the skin.

Hermione took a second take as she contemplated the lump underneath his shirt's cloth, only to gasp softly as she also registered that his hand rubbing the object hidden from sight was maimed. *Flint's hand is scarred. From a fresh wound, the skin drawn tight as if... from a fire... wounded from a burn...*

"What are you staring at, Granger?"

Hermione looked up at him; the kind of brutality he exuded when he wished to intimidate was oozing forth, full force. Hermione felt a wave of dizziness as she felt déjà vu.

Marcus and I... but not here... there! My universe... and this Marcus...he's the same. He is my Marcus!

The room was spinning, and she closed her eyes, saying, "Nothing, Flint. Nothing."

She took a moment, and opening her eyes, she suggested, "Why don't you take *Magicke Moste Evile...*"

He Summoned it as quickly as she said it.

She blinked, watching him sit down carefully, and realized that Marcus' favoured more than just his right hand and arm; in fact, he moved noticeably stiffer as if in discomfort. "Like before, could you make notes for possessed amulets, Portkeys, Time-Turners...anything that could be used to propel a wizard through time and space."

He smirked but didn't comment, and she was relieved that he sat and took a quill and parchment, even if it was to humour her, as he was scowling at the pages as they fluttered open with a wave of his hand.

She opened the book. Slowly turning the pages at first only to start skimming through them, she let out an 'Oh!' of surprise seeing the section's title *Herpo the Great's Revelations...*

It's like a medieval visual guide and outline for exsanguination techniques... She shuddered as she read, "For the purposes of capturing and containing the life force of a living being's essence." She took a deep breath as she forced herself to study in detail the graphic drawings and depictions of dissected parts of animal bodies. *And*

humans!

Finding a detailed section about "curses most vile, though a necessity for magical survival", she started to skim and scan, jotting down notes and paraphrasing sections with details.

She glanced up at Flint. He wasn't making notes but seemed mesmerized by something he was reading. *At least it's keeping him busy!*

She furtively went back to her tome, searching for key words and phrases and stopped as she read, *"Pushing magic beyond known boundaries and through torturous sacrifice, Herpo the Great invented such methods and processes for sojourning the constellations."*

Here we go... She checked the parchment, her eyes flickering over the notes she had been making. *"From exsanguination, contain and store the blood and life force within the inanimate object... Combined with the life force of the chosen sacrificed life source, one may experience transference to the calculated coordinates chosen..."*

She rubbed her forehead in consternation. *Like a celestial Portkey, sojourning the constellations, life force forcibly taken, contained within say... an inanimate object, an amulet.* She gave the lump under Flint's shirt a glance, and her chest tightened. *But the living conduit... a witch or wizard... bewitched by what means?* She let out an audible sound of disgust at the potential possibilities based on Herpo the Foul's inventions *through torturous sacrifice.*

"Everything all right, Granger? Found what you were looking for?" asked Flint softly.

She didn't look up, answering, "I'm fine, and yes, I think I have found something useful."

She continued taking notes on the parchment, *"Desanguination... and through exsanguination... The process of blood loss must occur while chanting the following Accio and containment curses over the first living object... allowing the blood loss, up to a degree sufficient to cause death..."*

Hermione stopped for a moment and double underlined "the first living object".

She reread, *"From exsanguination, contain and store the blood and life force within the inanimate object..."* Then she drew a mind map, circling this sentence and connecting it with an arrow to *"the first living object... the murdered victim... Vein or artery, the bleeding out must precede the fatal incision with meticulous care, rendering the subject to pain whilst conscious of their essence leaving their body, transferring to the chosen container, possession taking place."*

Hermione suddenly felt nauseous and felt her temples starting to throb but pushed on, noting, *"In the case of the second living object as the living conduit of magical force, it must be rendered insensible by captive hex... Thus can one's bolt of magic be intertwined, and the transference of self and conduit succeed in arriving at predetermined destination."*

"The captor's curse must soar through the living conduit, penetrating, incapacitating it... Once the possessing wizard is encased with one's living conduit, the transference procedure may take place. A conjugation of the two becoming one must occur, a joining of body, mind and life forces..."

Hermione underlined "the second living object" and "living conduit". She went back to the phrase "one's bolt of magic" *Bolt? Like lightning? The curse would be unimaginably powerful and sudden like electricity...? An Unspeakable. But the second living object...* She gulped hard, realizing, *Such as me, is kept alive, needed to be living, alive for the transference to occur... Unlike the first victim, the first living object... Exsanguination... murdered most foully...*

She read slowly, once more, *"Insert wand and pointed knife, once the first living object is incapacitated, through the skin just behind the point of the jaw and below the neck bones, severing forward the jugular vein..."* Hermione felt faint, and the vague hint of stomach acid wishing to surface began to be tasted. *I'm going to be sick!*

She sat back, needing to pause from the gruesome content, and took deep breaths. She looked at Flint, who had gone back to chewing a nail and staring at a shadowed wall.

"Did you make notes on anything that could be used to propel a wizard through time and space?" she asked, irritated, apprehensive, her mind wanting to deny that any of this horrid, evil magic had been performed on her and Sirius. *Why?* She didn't want to believe anyone she knew was capable of it, affected by it.

"How would that be relevant to Weasley's murder, Granger?" he asked softly, shocking her by his bluntness, snapping her back to this reality. He cocked his head, looking curiously at her, stating matter-of-factly, "Besides, almost any inanimate object can be turned into a Portkey."

"And a living object?" she snapped at him before she could think twice.

Marcus froze and stared at her pensively.

Something came over her, and she belligerently pushed, pointing out, "Check Dark Portkeys... not the standard bewitchment of inanimate objects but the Dark bewitchment of animate objects, any usage of a living creature, say, a wizard or witch," she shoved *Elementum Deorc Coercere ande Coarcere: Blod ande Fortia* at him, "as a conduit of magical force, transporting one to a pre-arranged destination."

And there it was. Marcus knew that she knew. He knew that she knew what he had done, how he had done it, and to what lower depths of depravity and evil murderous Dark magic he had experimented and succeeded in performing... Herself the living proof.

So he knew that she knew... that he was her Marcus.

Marcus spat the gnawed fingernail to the floor. And eerily, he calmly commented, "Really, Granger?"

She watched him, and he actually smiled at her, a small, smug smile. "Then, that's the wrong the source for the answers you're searching for." He shoved *Elementum Deorc Coercere ande Coarcere: Blod ande Fortia* back at her.

Her heart was thudding hard, but she breathed slowly and deeply. "No, it's the right source. It's quite informative. Quite detailed."

"Well, details are important." His shifty grey eyes challenged her, slamming *Magicke Moste Evile* shut. "Ask me, Granger. Ask me all of those questions flying around in that keen mind of yours."

She rose instinctively, not liking the look he was giving her and feeling she needed to clear her mind. *And I have to find Sirius at once!* Actually, I've enough notes for the day. We can go."

"So soon? You seemed to be just getting started."

Hermione grabbed the parchments she had made notes on and didn't comment but turned her back on Flint and walked quickly towards the library's door. She heard Flint's heavy steps in her wake, his breath sounding loud and rasping in the narrow passageway. She forced herself to keep moving calmly forwards, measuring each footfall as she made her way slowly to the exit. Flint was right behind her now, and she was shaking with panic, lifting her hand to push the latch of the heavy door open. Suddenly she felt him move, and her breath caught in her throat as his arm came around her shoulder and he leaned in. She clutched the papers to her chest and opened her mouth to shout for Harry...

But he merely added his weight to hers and pushed the door ajar, watching with that same sardonic smile on his face as she spun away from him and out through the opened doorway.

The relief that she felt when she saw Harry's familiar face beaming at her in the brightly lit corridor beyond almost made her knees go weak.

"That was quick," Harry said to her, clearly relieved not to have to continue his conversation with Parkinson. "Did you get what you came for?"

Hermione nodded, relief washing through her. *We must... must get to Sirius!* she thought.

"Hermione? You look a little pale..."

"I'm fine, Harry. Just need to get back to my office and clear my head a bit. And I need to talk to Sirius as soon as possible!"

Hermione heard Flint saying something indistinct to Parkinson as she hurriedly headed to the lift with Harry, but he quickly caught up with them just as they all entered the lift.

No one spoke on the way up. Only as they entered their office did Flint give a cryptic comment. "Too much information, Granger? Too much of something is just as bad as not enough, eh?"

She ignored him, hastily pulling out the objects from her cloak that she had Diminuendoed, and tightly gripping her wand, she enlarged the books *A Translation of Herpo the Great's Treatises of Fundamental Magical Truths and Constellations of the Magical Heavens* immediately.

Seeing her concentrated on work and Marcus seeming to meditate on some parchments on his desk, Harry offered, "I'll check if we're needed yet in the meeting. I'll be right back."

He left, and pretending that what had just happened in the Restricted Section wasn't bothering her, Hermione gave Marcus a fleeting glance, only to see that he was sitting at his desk, rubbing his chest again, slowly fondling the object underneath.

Ignore him! Until I can confer with Sirius! She urgently opened *Constellations of the Magical Heavens*, searching for methods and processes for sojourning the constellations.

She came across again the citation with the reference to the Herpo's treatise she had made notes from *So if the methods Herpo used were through murder, an act against nature, murdering the first living object, draining and suctioning the life force, capturing it for energy to propel the spell's force, like making a Horcrux, the wizard's soul would be torn... A murder was done to create the living force within the amulet, fed with Dark energy from evil objects, such as the books in the Restricted Section... possibly other murders... and vile acts of violation...*

Her thoughts jumped back and forth. *But why? What could make someone...him...do such horrid deeds? I don't understand... How could he? And Pansy was his accomplice? No! No witch could...* She gave Flint another quick glance underneath her lashes.

But then, she remembered Bellatrix Lestrange. A slight tremble went through her at the memory of Bellatrix's torture, and she forced herself to further scan over the text, pushing aside the imagery of an unholy union of sorts between Pansy and Marcus. *"The second living object is kept alive, sustained, fed off of like a parasite feeding off of its host... The vital component, the living conduit used as their current to transport... for the magical transference through time and space... the final incantation is Portus Constellatio."*

Sirius and I are the conduit wizard and witch, formed as a conduit by and from the murder and life force of the murdered victim... She thought about wizards and witches who had recently been reported missing in her universe. *Possibly murdered? Justin Finch-Fletchley? Susan Bones? ... Pansy Parkinson? But she worked in the Department of Mysteries, just like here...*

Hermione's frustration started to boil. *And it's not just these sickening curses of Herpo's, but the celestial coordinates of when the transference occurs must be found. Where to start?* She searched the book for any section to shed light on any clues.

"This might be quicker." It was Flint. He stood above her and motioned to the old astrolabe on her desk.

"Just rotate the alidade on the back, line up the stars with the sighting holes...I suggest you choose the family of Orion... a dubious but useful constellation of stars." He gave her a triumphant look, pointing at the altitude markings around the edge. "Read off the altitude in degrees scaled here. Well, again, I suggest the coordinates of latitude between +60° and -90° in the Orion constellation..."

"Do you?"

"Yes, I do, Granger. Just turn the rete and once the star pointer marks the location of the Orion stars, the celestial sphere shall be yours to travel or return to... These charmed astrolabes will project the heavens anywhere. Here, on our lovely office wall." Pugnaciously, he urged, "Do it. Now."

Seeing her not complying, he spat, "No? Thought you wanted to return."

"To return?" Her eyes smarted. *He's enjoying every twisted second of this!*

"Yes, return, Granger." His eyes glinted with malice as he mockingly quoted from memory like an instruction manual, "Pinpoint the constellation or coordinates you wish, the point of the celestial sphere to bewitch oneself and one's conduit, and once spelled, be propelled through time and space to one's designated coordinates."

Like a cat playing with a mouse, he started to pace around her desk and offered, "I would suggest cross-referencing your notes about living conduits with *Constellations of the Magical Heavens* and measuring the latitude and longitude before casting the Portus Constellatio spell. Wouldn't want to end up somewhere else, would you?" His features darkened as he whispered, "If you survive the transference, that is."

Hermione was momentarily speechless, her thoughts racing again.

"So while you're at it, be sure to check the right ascension at 06h 12.5m to 07h 27.5m ." Flint cocked his head at her and asked grimly, "Why aren't you writing this down, Granger?"

She didn't know where he was leading with all of this. He knew everything. She didn't know what he wanted her to say.

"You seem confused. Didn't know I was into Divination so thoroughly, Granger?"

She found her voice at last. "Actually, I had a hunch you were." She held her chin up defiantly. "It's how you know that I want to match or crossreference formulated bewitched living conduits with transference coordinates that I'm curious about. And why? Why, Flint?"

"Really?" He took a step closer towards her. "How do you think I know, Granger? Tell me. And *why?* I so want to hear the reason from your lips."

He made a movement, and thinking he was closing in on her, she cried out, "Don't touch me!

"Why not?" Then he whispered fiercely, "When you know I've touched you before."

Flint smiled an evil smile and quoted to her softly, "'For the purposes of capturing and containing the life force of a living being's essence.'"

Oddly, even though her heart was thumping wildly, she suddenly felt a coolness, a numbness as he snatched her parchment of notes from the Restricted Section and read out, "'The captive curse must soar through the living conduit, penetrating, incapacitating it... Once the possessing wizard is encased with one's living conduit, the transference procedure may take place. A conjugation of the two becoming one must occur, a joining of body, mind and life forces...'"

He huffed and threw the parchment down on the desktop. "Bravo, Granger. Well done." He glared at her hatefully. "Makes one wonder if the penetrating or incapacitating is the most pleasurable of this 'magick moste evile'..."

She snapped her wand up, even as Harry's voice was heard, calling through the half-opened door, "The Minister's meeting has already started, hurry you two!"

Hermione gripped her wand even tighter.

"What are you waiting for, Granger?" Marcus whispered menacingly, "Do it. Hex me. Or tell Potter, the Minister, crow out to the rooftops, or can it be, can it truly be that you *still* can't prove a thing?" He cocked his head at her. "Remember?" He sneered and left.

Her breath had become shallow as she ran after Marcus who'd overtaken Harry, entering Sirius' office ahead of her and him.

Right before entering, Harry looked at her, concerned. "Hermione? What is it?"

Her mind was reeling, her heart pounding. She felt flushed and as if she was going out of her mind with a mixture of anger and other overwhelming emotions. "Harry, help me! The book was charred... It must have been at Borgin and Burkes. And Marcus' hand is burnt. Tell, Sirius. He must know."

"Right." Harry was studying her excited state with worry.

"I need to speak with him, privately. Urgently! Tell him, tell Sirius that Marcus knows everything now; he's *my* Marcus!"

"Potter? Granger? We're waiting," called Sirius from within.

Harry gave her an odd look, but assured her. "I will, Hermione."

As they entered, her heart raced even more, seeing Sirius give her a neutral nod, sitting casually on the edge of his desk, apparently listening to someone who had been speaking. Flint was already seated strategically between the Minister and, unthinkable, none other than Lucius Malfoy, who seemed to have been speaking.

Flustered, Hermione sat down beside Harry near the door, shutting it with a loud slam.

Malfoy had paused and, upon seeing Hermione, looked her over from head to toe, his trademark sneer causing her blood to boil.

Hermione felt like she would explode but held her tongue, gripping her wand even tighter.

How the hell did Malfoy become Undersecretary in this upside down place? And Flint! He...he... My Flint! The bastard! I've got to tell someone before I. She gave an urgent look to Sirius. *I need you!*

Sirius' eyes had narrowed, apparently aware of her highly agitated state. He gave a sharp glance at Flint, and his voice had an impatient edge to it as he urged Malfoy to continue. "You were saying?"

"As I was saying before being interrupted," Malfoy ostentatiously paused, giving Hermione a cool stare and then proceeded, "in order to take steps to protect those of pureblood lineage against attacks, this proposal, this registration will ensure that incidents such as what's been happening in the Department of Mysteries be minimized..."

"What?" Hermione blurted out, the frustration she was feeling percolating uncontrollably upon being within arm's reach of the loathsome wizard, on top of the confrontation and full brunt of Flint's affront, unnerving her.

Malfoy's jaw muscle's clenched, his cold grey eyes giving way to the slightest glint of malice underlying his words. "My dear girl, this is not a Muggle-Born Registration..."

"I am not your *dear girl*, Malfoy." Her eyes flashed, enraged, as she looked from Malfoy to Flint.

"*Undersecretary* Malfoy, Granger," corrected Flint automatically.

The air was thick with tension. *And you...you!* It was on the tip of her tongue, taking every ounce of control not to scream out, not to incriminate Flint on the spot, revealing everything right then and there in front of everyone.

"Auror Granger, are you all right?" she heard Sirius ask.

Hermione couldn't look at him, feeling she would truly lose it if she did. Remembering his request, 'The past two days never happened: Borgin and Burkes never happened; we never happened... *Pretend* it never happened...you're good at that', she felt her eyes smart again, but took a deep breath and forced herself to nod *I have to wait! I have to wait till I can speak with Sirius first. I can't lose control now! Control yourself!*

"Please, I know she is just getting back on her feet. Correct, Black?" Smirking, Malfoy's grey eyes glinted with a suppressed emotion, though his words were cool and calm. "Auror Granger, this is merely a proposal for a voluntary sign-up of those who are of Muggle-born origins," his lips twitched slightly, "as well as half-bloods, purebloods...an invitation for full *collaboration*, full participation in a new policy. To root out discriminatory mindsets on all sides."

Hermione couldn't keep her thoughts from racing back and forth wildly. She exploded, "Like yours?" She looked around utterly exasperated. "I don't understand what's going on here, but this cannot be right in any universe!"

"Granger!" It was Shackbolt reprimanding her.

Momentarily forgetting her own dilemma and whether or not her experience was the same in this universe, she couldn't help herself and pleaded uncontrollably, "Sir, how can you sit here so calmly and listen to him after what he did, who he was...Voldemort's lieutenant?"

Only her breathing was heard, hard and loud. She felt like she was running a marathon.

But then, she was aware of Sirius slowly crossing to her, a pained look on his face as he stated, "That'll do, Granger. Let's get some fresh air, shall we?"

Hermione stood slowly, allowing herself to be guided to the door by Sirius, but looked at Malfoy as he had the audacity to say to her, "Need I remind you that the Wizengamot confirmed my being Imperioed, cursed beyond my control, Granger..."

"It's a lie!"

Malfoy's cool snapped, and he snarled at Shacklebolt, "I thought you said that she had fully recovered from Weasley's death, from her little break-down..."

"I'm right here, *Undersecretary*...you needn't talk about me as if I was not here," she ignored Sirius warning her to stop and gave Flint an accusatory look, "and I am not recovering from grief...I was attacked..."

"Hermione...Granger, that's enough! Come with me." He took her by the arm firmly and guided her out of his office and hurriedly down the hall to hers.

Entering, Hermione broke away from Sirius as he demanded, "What the hell has got into you, nearly blowing our cover...antagonizing Malfoy and Flint like that?"

They were both panting, adrenaline rushing.

She was waving her arms around, as if to catch her breath, expecting him to understand her somehow, agitated, unable to speak.

Sirius' voice softened seeing her level of distress and turmoil, seeing her pain and frustration, as he asked, "What's wrong, Hermione? *What the fuck happened in the Restricted Section?*"

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A/N: The greatest thanks to Proulxes, alpha/beta and contributor, for all of her time, patience and skill, unconditionally giving and helping me out! And thank you, Clairvoyant, for your admin time and help, also unconditionally giving. I truly appreciate it!

Consternations

Chapter 10 of 11

Hermione and Sirius must return to the Department of Mysteries. There, the unexpected happens.

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Hermione took a deep breath and then said, "It's definitely him...*my* Marcus."

Sirius froze. "What happened in the Restricted Section?"

"He knows I know." Her voice became stronger. "He knows I know how he did it...every horrid step of the process. In the Restricted Section, the book *Elementum Deorc Coercere ande Coarcere: Blod ande Fortia*...I found the curse, the steps taken. It is all about exsanguinations used for Dark curses. It's in the book, only the constellational coordinates are left..." She broke off, overwhelmed by panic, clutching at the front of his shirt.

"Shhh... Shhh, love," he urged quietly.

She was trembling, and Sirius guided her to sit down in the old wooden desk chair. Hermione tried to force herself to breathe more calmly, gripping the arms of the chair as she struggled to compose herself.

Sirius knelt before her, rubbing his hand soothingly on her arm. "Hermione, what are you talking about?" he asked quietly, his eyes searching hers.

She shot a wild look at him. "I...I just..." She couldn't speak about it. Frantically, she collected the parchments with the notes from Herpo's treatise from her desk and thrust them at Sirius. "R-read this. It's easier than me repeating the horrid...I'll look for the constellation coordinates! They're the missing link!"

Sirius started to question her further, but then stopped and sat on her desk's edge near her, reading her notes one by one. As she watched him read, his brow furrowed with concentration as he tried to make sense of her notes; she felt her heart rate steadily reduce and her panic recede. *We can do this*, she thought. *Together!*

Hermione grabbed the book *Constellations of the Magical Heavens* beside the old astrolabe and flicked through the pages until she found again the methods and processes for sojourning the constellations.

She glanced up at Sirius in between her skimming as he read through the parchments, watching his complexion redden several shades and his jaw muscles flex in tension. She waited until he seemed to have finished reading through everything and then broke the tense silence.

"Here's also a citation with reference to Herpo's treatise about..." Her voice faltered as the hard look on Sirius' face had a miserable expression, unnerving her momentarily. She gently continued, "The murdering of the first living object, draining and suctioning the life force, capturing it, and the usage of the second living victim..."

"That bastard touched you, used you," whispered Sirius, his voice revealing the pain he was feeling and containing inside. "Raped you, your body and soul? Took a part of your essence?"

Hermione rose, not allowing her mind to go there...to contemplate what exactly had been done to her, recognizing that she needed to keep Sirius on track, needed him more than ever to be rational and to keep calm, for both of them to stay as calm as possible. She was barely hanging on as it was.

She touched his arm gently and reminded him, "The same was done to you. But we both survived, didn't we?" She saw that Sirius' eyes were moist, and suddenly, they embraced and held each other tight.

His voice was thick and low as he whispered in her hair, "I'm going to kill him. Forgive me..."

"Sirius, no!"

She clutched on to him, feeling a physical strength she never knew she had as she ferociously held him in place with everything she had short of hexing him.

"Sirius! I need you! Don't...no, listen to me!" Panting, she took his face between her hands, his scruffy stubble tickled her fingers and his stormy grey eyes flashed with wild, pent up emotion that seared her to the core.

Fiercely, she whispered, "Sirius, listen to me. Please... stay calm. I need you." Uncontrollably, her eyes welled up with tears, and she pulled his head down till his forehead touched hers. Her breath and his became one. Their lips became one. Searching. Searching for emotional wounds and needing to comfort. Searching to heal each other with that kiss.

With a guttural sound, he abruptly broke from her, pleading in a tight voice, "Tell me. Tell me what to do, Hermione." His eyes burned desperately. "I have to... What do you want me to do?"

She kissed him softly on the lips and said, "Be with me. Don't lose it." She gave him a small smile as she ran her fingers through his dark hair. "Don't blow our cover, right, Head Auror Black?"

His breathing seemed to calm down, although he still looked like he would pounce on anything that moved. She explained carefully, "Just a little bit more time... and we'll have all of the concrete evidence, all of the pieces put together. Sirius, you said that in your universe, Moody was murdered." She scrunched her face trying to recall more of their initial conversations. "That you and your partner were investigating it in your Department of Mysteries?"

Sirius' face was stone-like as he whispered, "Yes."

"How?"

"No. Not for all the world will..."

"Tell me. I must know the details."

Pained, Sirius winced and looked like he needed to spit, his jaw muscles flexed, being clenched so tight. "He was... His body was mutilated. We found... pieces of him. I've seen a lot in my lifetime, but never anything like that. Like a bloody animal butchered, inch by inch."

Worse than splinching? A memory of Ron's splinched, bloody body when they were on the run from Death Eaters during the war flashed through her mind, and she understood Sirius' reluctance. She swallowed hard and took a second but then forced herself to continue, saying, "I think Mad-Eye was the initial sacrifice, the initial murder, killed for his life force, harnessed in an object, an amulet." Pansy's glittering bauble on her necklace flashed in Hermione's mind. "And you...you were the second object...the living conduit, used as the transporting source."

Sirius took her hand in his as he asked, his voice raspy and tense, "And your universe? You were the living conduit, but then who was the first victim murdered for their life energy?"

Hermione searched her memories again. "I don't...I can't remember recent murders but... several people had gone missing in the past year. Justin Finch-Fletchley, Susan Bones... and I think..." Suddenly, Hermione felt a new wave of apprehension. "Pansy! Pansy Parkinson? No, that doesn't make sense. I mean, Marcus and Pansy are *involved*...they have some kind of relationship. Whatever it is, it doesn't make sense that she would have been harmed by him."

Sirius' eyes narrowed as he gave Hermione a bittersweet smile. "I think...*I think* it does make sense, perhaps the only thing that does about them. It's a connection. Another missing link."

She frowned in disagreement. "Sirius, he wouldn't murder Pansy in any universe. Us, yes! Her, no!"

"Hermione, this bastard is capable of unspeakable things. Why should she be excluded?"

Hermione shook her head. "He's in love with her, Sirius...or whatever you want to call it. You've seen how he's protective about her; he looked utterly feral, was going to attack you that day at the Restricted Section if you'd insulted her further."

"Exactly."

Her mind was racing as fast as her heart as she spoke aloud, "But if... if say Flint did murder Parkinson in my universe, took and used me as the living conduit and, in yours, Moody was murdered and you were used, then how did the Pansy in your universe and the Marcus in mine come together?"

Neither spoke for several seconds, contemplating possibilities.

"Herpo's treaties," said Sirius bitterly, "are recordings from the darkest experimentations. An account of the vilest ways to perform magic...true perversions of our powers. You've heard of the Muggle saying, 'the ends justifies the means'?" He gave a small, humourless smile as she nodded. "My parents would have argued that such abominable actions pushed magic further... advanced it, even." Sirius clenched his teeth, falling silent.

Hermione frowned, her fingers gripping the soft material of his shirt. "There's another Muggle saying," she began quietly. Her eyes searched his. "Practice makes perfect."

He nodded. "My parents and other Dark practitioners knew that such *experiments* were not always successful, that it was necessary to experiment further *before perfection* could be attained." He shivered slightly beneath her hands. "You should have seen some of the things that went on in our cellars at home when I was a kid. If Flint and Parkinson were determined to accomplish this spell... well... they most likely would have needed to practice together... experiment multiple times."

"But that would mean others were used...murdered, murdered to fulfil the curse's requirements... like Horcruxes," she stammered, her heart thundering in her chest.

"And like Horcruxes, the wizard containing it would become unstable... highly unstable. Vile acts of violation leave their marks on one permanently," Sirius agreed.

What else do we need before revealing all to Shackbolt? "Sirius, we need one more part in order to detail everything for the Minister. Another missing link. The coordinates. It's too risky to reveal everything without this final concrete, missing information." She was centred again, able to think things through.

"Unless we have it, Flint will twist what we say somehow and use the time to escape or," she swallowed hard, "kill again! To kill you or me, Sirius...I saw how he looked at me just before I came into the meeting; it's just a matter of time. Time, which we're running out of."

"Not if I kill him first...he is not going to harm you ever again!" He had grasped her shoulders and was squeezing so tight she winced.

"No, you're better than him. He'll be incarcerated..."

"The Dementors would be too merciful for the likes of that shit..."

"Sirius, we need Flint alive; we need more answers, more proof...the celestial coordinates will have to be shown, proven...Wait! I can show you here the coordinates, and you'll see what I mean. He said these astrolabes were charmed to project the heavens, the constellations anywhere. Here, on the office wall!"

She frantically grabbed the astrolabe. "Let me just set the coordinates and..." She pushed and jiggled on the rete. But it wouldn't budge. "There's something wrong; it's jammed."

"Fuck the astrolabe, Hermione, forget the coordinates...I'll *force* any information we need out of the bastard. He'll repeat it as often as needed after I'm through with him."

Sirius instinctively made as if to leave, and Hermione grabbed his arm, reminding him to stay by explaining, "No, Sirius. Be patient, wait. Look, Flint taunted me with the information while trying to intimidate me, but he gave me what we need to prove the exact compilations. He said I needed to align the coordinates of latitude in the Orion

constellation and..." Anxious, she bit her lip as her eidetic memory strained to recall his words. "Latitude between +60° and -90°." She shoved at the rete again, straining in effort to get it to move.

"The Orion constellation?" His face was concerned, watching her struggle to get the rete to move.

Hermione's swelling frustration exploded, and she whipped her wand up, pointing it at the rete, crying, *Mobilium! Alohamora!*

Nothing happened. Hermione let out a whimper of frustration. "No! It has to work! Why isn't the confounded thing working?"

"They are usually protected with all sorts of damn charms. Where's this one from exactly?"

Hermione was holding back her tears of frustration. "The Time Room, I think. It was a special astrolabe lent to me...and now something's wrong!"

"If it's that important, let's just pop down and get another one, alright?" It was Sirius' turn to be the voice of reason. "Then we'll come right back, finish the coordinates that you're going on about and then go straight to Shackbolt with all the facts." Sirius started for the door, turning and saying, "You said the Time Room, not the Space Room?"

"Yes! Although we should check the Space Room while we're down there to see which constellations are predominant. We might have to wait until Orion is rising." She started to rush out and had another second thought, trying to think ahead. *Maybe I have to exchange it, like a library book!* Hermione grabbed the jammed astrolabe and then followed Sirius hurriedly to the lift. "The Department of Mysteries."

Hermione's thoughts were in a whirl as they descended, and suddenly it occurred to her. "Parkinson! She might be the Keeper on duty, Sirius. Are you..."

"Nah, don't worry. I'll control myself around her." His eyes narrowed as he thought about something. "But if she's definitely my Pansy, then..."

"What is it, Sirius?"

He looked unsure about something. "Hermione, there hasn't been time or opportunity to talk about it, but in these past few days, I've also been having these glimpses of images, possibly memories of *there*." He continued in a low voice, "In my universe, I was captured by Voldemort, his prisoner."

Sirius' forehead furrowed; he seemed to be struggling with remembering things. "I was a spy for Dumbledore, the Order... After being captured, I had to go along with what Voldemort offered to survive. Parkinson, she was there, during my torture, during my incarceration and *initiation*." He gnashed his teeth. "I distinctly remember her staring at me, mumbling something. But the rest is like a blur."

She waited, unsure of what else he would say, quietly understanding his difficulty.

"Except some other memories... Parkinson came to me in the dungeon vault that was my cell. She was crying, said she was a mole as well and to trust her. She touched me. We touched. We..." Sirius huffed. "I don't know if these memories were planted in my mind by her or Voldemort or if they are real..."

Hermione touched his arm to reassure him. "Sirius, whatever happened between the two of you, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter now. All that matters at this moment is that we get this final content, present everything to Shackbolt, and then, *then* we'll talk about everything else..."

Their eyes met. Then their lips. Slowly. Softly.

He broke the kiss and backed away, his eyes still troubled. "Let's get this bloody astrolabe returned, shall we?"

The lift came to a halt. The cargo doors were opened by Sirius, who motioned to the Department of Mysteries ninth floor. "The Time Room, yes?"

"Sirius, we'll find out if Pansy..."

He put a finger up to his lips and made a soft shushing sound. His eyes were sad but he smiled, whispering, "The walls have ears."

The glow of whitish light lit the black-tiled walls of the department's corridor, causing Hermione's sense of alertness to sharpen.

As they walked towards the plain black door to the Entrance Chamber, a pressure in her chest began to throb. She saw Pansy Parkinson come out of the inner Department proper and walk towards them, her amulet glistening on her cleavage.

"What do you two want?" she asked neutrally.

Sirius was giving Parkinson a strange look, and Hermione jumped in, saying, "This astrolabe isn't working properly; the rete seems to be jammed. I need to exchange it for another one."

"What did you do to it, Granger?"

"Nothing. I..."

"*Three* is the charm," purred Pansy cryptically. "Three days."

"I think you mean 'third time's a charm', and what does that have to do with anything?" snapped Hermione, suddenly irritated by Parkinson's smug smile.

"Let me explain so you'll understand; you like explanations, don't you, Granger?"

"Just get her another bloody astrolabe, Parkinson!" barked Sirius, his agitation barely able to be controlled.

Ignoring him, Pansy informed her, "These astrolabes from the Department are routinely charmed to deter someone from disappearing with them accidentally on purpose. Three days. After each third day, one will freeze up, only to unlock itself when an assigned constellation is at its zenith."

She gave Hermione a crooked smile. "This one is charmed to reopen when Canis Major is at its zenith."

"How was I to know which constellation?" huffed Hermione, also losing patience.

"Silly, Sirius, you should have known that and told the clever witch," said Pansy, cutting her off.

"Parkinson, address me properly. Don't speak to me that way again."

"Why not? I've called you by your first name before. Don't you remember?" Pansy gave him a sardonic look.

Sirius' face darkened, and Hermione knew he was about to snap as he warned through gritted teeth, "You have about ten seconds to take us to the Time Room before I *reprimand* you, Parkinson."

"Follow me, then," Parkinson said coolly as she led them back and into the circular room.

They followed Pansy to one of the multiple, handleless doors.

The Unspeakable instructed, "Stop here." And then she whispered a request to the black door.

An echoing click sound was heard, and as she opened the Time Chamber and they followed her in, she turned sharply to Hermione. "The astrolabe, Granger?" Pansy seemed to be struggling not to sneer, her extreme dislike of her and Sirius barely containable.

Sirius had become completely morose and glared at Parkinson as if he would throw a hex at any second.

"Here," answered Hermione, handing it over as she glanced around the long, rectangular room. She started to vaguely remember something, a flashback of another time and place and person in the same space with her. *Marcus!*

"I hope it's not damaged in any other way? Maybe you and Black did something else to it?" She arched a black pencilled-in eyebrow, giving her heavily painted face a strangely crazed look as she focused on Sirius.

"No, it froze," repeated Hermione pointedly. There was something about Parkinson's expression, contrasting the beautiful dancing light from the sparkling gems in the mysterious room, that snagged Hermione's attention.

The luminous space suddenly seemed to have a jarring effect; she looked around perplexed momentarily before snapping, "Maybe you should just focus on the business at hand, Parkinson?"

"Which is what, Granger?"

Pansy gave her a surprised look as Hermione continued irritably, "I need another astrolabe, and then Black and I need to go to the Space Chamber briefly!"

Pansy gave her a smug smile. "By all means, my business is merely to see that you return all Department of Mysteries property accordingly, assist you and escort you to any destination you wish. You have *carte blanche*, as always, Granger." She placed the frozen astrolabe down on a shelf and drew out another one, handing it to her. "Return in three days, remember? Not that I think you'll need it for that long. Now, if you would... and you, Head Auror Black. Guests first," she purred, gesturing to the door for them to leave.

Once they were out in the dark marbled corridor, the walls rotated, and Parkinson swiftly motioned to them to follow her again, stopping in front of one of the unmarked doors. She spoke a cryptic request, and the door opened. "The Space Chamber." She stepped back and waited for them to enter before her.

As they passed in front of the Unspeakable, Hermione saw Sirius quirk his head, reflecting her own sudden feeling that something was ~~off~~, as he said, "Wand ready, Hermione." Sharply, he snapped, "You're not needed, Parkinson. Stay here."

Pansy started to retort something, but stopped herself and merely gave Sirius a dark smirk instead.

Hermione stepped through the doorway, followed by Sirius, and stopped dead in her tracks, exclaiming, "But this isn't the Space Chamber; it's the Death..."

In a flash, hers and Sirius' wands were hexed away from them, leaving them wandless and backing up in the dimly lit room. The sound of the astrolabe thudding to the stone surface was heard.

"*Ambushed!*" Sirius was cursing under his breath.

"That's it, nice and easy, to the centre you two," instructed a male voice that caused both Sirius and Hermione to jerk their heads towards the speaker in disbelief. *Marcus!*

Flint's and Parkinson's wands were pointed straight at them, and Hermione saw that hers and Sirius' wands were gripped tightly in the Hit Wizard's other hand.

"To the Veil, the Veil," joined Pansy in a sing-song cadence, following behind Flint. She placed her hand on her partner's shoulder and stared balefully at Sirius and Hermione in such a crazed way as to give Bellatrix Lestrange a run for her money.

"Brilliant, Marcus, brilliant," Pansy cooed. "You told me to be patient, to be on guard, and finally, we've got them...just where we want them."

Flint's eyes shined with deadly determination. He pointed his wand higher at them, poised and ready to curse them in a flat second. "Like the lady said, to the dais!"

Hermione peered at the dreaded ancient, crumbling stone archway with its tattered black curtains fluttering as if by a faint wind. She began trembling as she and Sirius were forced to slowly shuffle towards the stone dais, but felt him take and squeeze her hand.

"Are you going to be man enough to tell us why, Flint? Or are you just going to be a cowardly worm, your usual self?"

A sickening leer washed over Marcus's face as he informed Sirius, "I'm going to watch you watch this meddlesome Mudblood go to her death first, and then maybe, if I'm humoured enough, if you're suffering enough, I *might* tell you."

"Oh, I see," began Sirius, licking his lips, and Hermione knew he was beginning a tactic to stall for time. "It couldn't be that I know what a sweet tart ol' Pansy here is."

"Shut it!" yelled Flint, sending a stinging hex, hitting Black straight in the chest, the impact knocking him down on the stone space to the right of the archway. Sirius made a clumsy twist, trying to get up, as if to lunge at him.

"Oh, no, you don't...not so fast, Black," he said and sent another stunning hex, hitting Sirius hard, stilling him flat. "Your death is not going to be that quick. Pansy!"

Parkinson swiftly came around and grabbed Hermione by the hair, pulling her back and placing her wand's tip against her cheek. She hissed fiercely into Hermione's ear, "One *stupid* move, Granger, and you'll watch Black burn to death in front of you!"

To add on to her utter shock, with a quick movement, Flint threw her and Sirius' wands through the Veil. There was a sudden explosion from within it, and a hot, strong breeze puffed out, then just as quickly ceased. Flint leered at her. "Won't be needing them, anymore, will you, Granger?"

Hermione ceased to struggle or to entertain thoughts of physically fighting back for the moment. Her thoughts raced on how to somehow outwit Parkinson and Flint and save her and Sirius. Her chest tightened as her heart began to race thinking about the result of any vain attempt she could try. The dread presence of the Veil was right in front of them, and she and Sirius had been rendered helpless as Pansy's wand digging into her skin painfully reminded her. She screamed in her mind as she witnessed Flint continue to inflict pain on Sirius.

Parkinson jarred her from her thoughts. "Want to see her dance, Marcus? I'll make her dance...I'll make her do whatever you want to," Pansy whispered hotly in Granger's ear while staring adoringly at Flint.

Pausing for a second, Flint's face hardened in a sad, painful guise. He spoke quietly to her, saying, "No, Pansy, just hold her tight, make sure she doesn't interfere. If you need to, stun her, although I'd prefer her to be completely aware of every fucking thing that is happening, *this* time. Not like when you were my lovely suppliant conduit, Granger, eh?"

He turned again to Sirius' prostrated form. "I'm going to play with my catch a little more *Crucio!*"

Hermione couldn't help herself and twisted and flinched as she was forced to watch Sirius as he screamed and writhed in pain from Marcus' sadistic ministrations.

As her eyes welled up in tears seeing Sirius tortured, beyond her control, she futilely begged, "Stop it, Marcus~~Why?~~"

Pansy cackled and sent a hex through Hermione's body, the sensation like her finger had been stuck in a live electrical socket, hissing, "Quiet, you!"

"Why?" Flint stopped and glared at Hermione but then stepped closer to Sirius, his wand held tight and steady. As he gazed over Sirius' twisted form, he spat out, "Pansy was incarcerated there...in your time and place...in Azkaban! But only after you tortured her for information..."

"No..." protested Sirius.

"Don't lie to me!" He slashed with his wand at Sirius' face, and it began bleeding from the sliced wound that had appeared from his temple down across his cheek. "You used her for the Ministry's filthy sake, for your filthy sake, getting all sorts of juicy info from her about the Dark Lord's *other* followers...and then you threw her away and locked her up like a bloody animal, you fucking blood-traitor!"

"It's not true... She worked for the Ministry *willingly*, Flint! She came to me. She was an informant, a mole..." gasped out Sirius.

"Shut it!" yelled Marcus, kicking Sirius hard in the ribs; the sound of cracked bones was heard from his metal-plated boot's fierce contact over Sirius' cry of pain.

Hermione saw Sirius' eyes flashing with rage, the only thing now about him moving other than his chest heaving up and down in his distress.

"And speaking of fucking, how did it feel, Granger?" jeered Flint, abruptly turning to her.

Hermione clenched her teeth, staring down at the floor.

Flint crossed over and grabbed her hair, jerking her head up to look at him. "How did it feel to fuck a follower of the Dark Lord?"

Hermione felt a wave of nausea wash over her at being confronted by the perpetrator himself about what he had done to her. But she wouldn't give him the pleasure of giving him an answer he wanted to hear. "Don't know what you're talking about, Flint!"

A gleeful leer flashed over his face. "Don't you? ... Oh, I see." He released his grip and then dallied his fingers back and forth between them. "You think I'm referring to you and me? *Us*, Granger?"

Hermione stared up into the cavernous darkness of the Death Chamber's empty ceiling, swallowing her saliva hard, willing herself not to be sick.

Flint uncharacteristically touched and caressed Hermione's face gently as he whispered, "No. No, you serviced me. You were a vital instrument...a necessary object to service me, *Investigative Auror* Granger." He licked his lips, cocked his head and twirled around to Sirius. "What, can this be possible, Black? She didn't even know who she was fucking?" He crouched down and grabbed a wad of Sirius' hair, pulling his head up. "*What* she was fucking? Well, you are a true slippery piece of work, aren't you?"

He threw his head down but suddenly sliced his wand at Sirius' outstretched left arm. *Diffindo!*

The cloth was opened; Flint grabbed Sirius' arm, forcing the seemingly unblemished forearm to be viewed by all, and poked his wand tip into the forearm. *Corporeus Revelio!*

Hermione felt her heart stop as the sign of Voldemort's Dark Mark became clearly visible on Sirius' flesh.

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Marcus must have seen the look of absolute shock on her face because he began to laugh like a lunatic.

As she stared at Sirius' arm in disbelief, she heard him rasping, "Hermione, I'm not... It's not what you think..."

Marcus abruptly stopped his hysterical laughter only to swiftly kick Sirius again in the side, yelling, "Shut it!"

As Sirius groaned and lay in immobilized pain, Marcus turned to Hermione, and a sickeningly sweet look crossed his face as he asked her, "So how does it feel, Granger? To be utterly *stupid*, totally in the dark about everything you believed in, *who* you believed in? Hmm?" He grabbed her chin, tightly squeezing it, and roared, *Answer me!*

She felt an irrational desperation come across her, crying out to the least likely person for aid, "Pansy, help us!"

This infuriated Marcus as he snapped and grabbed Hermione from Pansy's hold and threw her to the ground.

"How bloody fucking dare you ask *her* for help?" he roared, sending a binding hex, her body tied in cords.

"Before I throw your filthy body through the Veil, let me tell you, Mudblood, what happened to my Pansy *there*." He stood over her, towering her form as she looked up at him.

"While you were busy being an arse-kissing Ministry official, do you know what happened to my love, *your* Pansy?"

Through tear-filled eyes, Hermione could only blink and shake her head in true ignorance.

"That's right, you didn't know; bet you didn't care either, eh? Why would you? You were so busy being the Ministry's Mudblood poster girl!"

He looked down at her fiercely, but as he began to speak, his face ever so slowly softened. "Pansy's always been a good girl, Granger. Misunderstood by your lot, but a good girl. Loyal, clever, cunning," he turned and touched Parkinson's face lovingly, "and passionate... mind-numbingly, fucking passionate. Some might say *fanatical*."

Hermione saw out of the corner of her eye Sirius inching his way behind Marcus and Pansy.

Flint stepped back, and Hermione could see he was trembling with adrenaline; he apparently was aware of Sirius' movement for he twirled around, sending a burning, stunning hex at him again. Content he had arrested Sirius' efforts, he snapped his head back at her and continued, "She even got promoted and became an Unspeakable. Tricky work being an Unspeakable; many just simply *disappear*. And no one knows where to. No one *cares*... Just like you, Granger."

He bit his lower lip in agitation. "The Ministry placed my Pansy in the Love Chamber. Funny thing what happens to Unspeakables in the Love Chamber...they become... *neutered* after a while. They become mad, studying the mystery of love, but no longer able to express it. It becomes trapped inside, and like magic, if it can't have a release... Well, it explodes... implodes in a way...it destroys the person containing it."

"I searched for her, searched and searched." Flint suddenly had a faraway look in his eyes. "*She ceased* to exist. No trace." He snapped out of his momentary daze and snarled, "Didn't even notice, did you, Granger?"

Pansy didn't cease to exist...you murdered her, Flint! Sirius was right! She shook her head at him, unable to utter a sound. Hermione's mind and heart were racing, not knowing what to say to deter Flint from his further insane intentions.

"Don't you *remember* when I spoke to you about her?"

Swallowing the large lump that had been lodged in her throat from fear, Hermione dared to voice, "No."

She felt the impact of a pointed metal boot kick her. She screamed from the pain, crumpling and rolling over on her side. She was now lying face to face with Sirius, who stared at her, even as he raged at Flint, "You bastard! Leave her alone!"

Ignoring Sirius, Flint fiercely reminded her, "That's right; you don't remember because you couldn't've fucking cared less!"

He became still and his voice small and quiet as he informed her, "But then I found Pansy again, my true Pansy, this Pansy, here...we discovered each other, both out of dire needs, through space and time. Through blood and flesh and the life force of the less worthy, I celestially Portkeyed myself here. She from her hell, me from mine...and we met. Our coordinates blissfully crossed, and we knew...we knew we'd finally found what we were looking for!"

Hermione saw Marcus' eyes shining with unshed tears as he roared, "Here...here there is a chance, a chance for happiness! A chance for our lives, our world to be as it should!"

He began panting, recalling his past efforts. "The calculations I researched, spent my life's blood in Dark Magic to discover the ancient magical formulas to escape us to *here*...she from her dimension, me from mine! Where we could finally have a life together in a soon to be solely Pureblood world...where she could be *whole* again, *mine* again..." He suddenly crouched down and grabbed Hermione by the sides, lifting her up like a sack as if to show Sirius what he was about to do to her. "Not your fucking Ministry slag, Black!"

Flint hoisted Hermione further up to her feet, holding her tight. "And not the Ministry's bloody guinea pig!" His spittle was hitting her in the face as he cried, "But then you had to be assigned to the investigation of the *phantom intruder* in the Department of Mysteries...the bloody fucking Ministry's poster girl, the Gryffindor know-it-all!"

With one arm holding her tight around her waist, he grabbed her throat with the other hand and started to squeeze it in earnest. "You fucked it up; you *made* me use you, Granger! It was all your fault; this is all your fault...you fucked *us* up! You want to fuck us *uphere* with your bloody, non-stop rooting around! So now you're going to pay; we're going to get rid of you, once and for all. You're going to disappear just like my Pansy did!"

He started shuffling Hermione towards the Veil even as Sirius in apparent crippled and agonizing pain attempted to crawl between them and the Veil. Hermione instinctively strained back, struggling against Flint, resisting the inertia to be pushed forward with every ounce of her being.

Hermione heard Pansy cackling wildly, running over and zapping Sirius with a spell, flattening him to the ground, whispering, "Don't worry, you're next, Sirius Black. But first, enjoy and watch your little Mudblood slag as she goes to her death."

As Hermione felt her body being shoved forward to the edge of the ancient archway to eternity, the sensation of a siphoning breeze beginning to be felt, Flint crooned, "That's right; let Black's last moments be seeing his precious little Mudblood die first!"

A bolt of light soared across the room suddenly, hitting Flint square in the back. He fell over backwards away from the Veil, pulling Hermione down on top of him.

Parkinson screamed, her eyes wide like a deer caught in the headlights, and with a wild desperate look, she blindly leapt into the Veil.

In horror, Hermione watched Parkinson's body glow as if ignited on fire, and then within a blink of the eye, it turned transparent, and the ghostly form stared at her in mindless wonder and slowly floated away.

Kingsley Shacklebolt and Harry slowly emerged from the shadows, wands raised, pointed at Flint's collapsed body. As they neared, Harry dispelled the cords around her and helped her move upwards and away from Flint's unconscious body.

"Sir? Harry?" gasped Hermione, trembling as she knelt and crawled over beside Sirius, gently helping him to roll over. She slowly laid his bleeding head in her lap, lightly patting the blood away from his eyes and mouth with her sleeve.

"You can take the Auror out of the Ministry, but you can't take the Auror out of the Minister...once an Auror, always an Auror." Kingsley smiled broadly. "Or just call it my sixth sense, my *magical* sixth sense." He looked at Sirius warmly, casting cleaning and healing spells on him, and added, "Or let's just say I was listening all along and understood my old friend's tips more than he knew... and took him seriously."

"Sir?" asked Hermione, uncertain.

"Sirius gave me a head's up about Flint before Malfoy came for the meeting, although Sirius was being traced before that. But we had to wait until Flint blatantly acted against one of you."

"Sirius traced?" Hermione touched Sirius' face lovingly, and one hand feather-lightly brushed over the Dark Mark as if to wipe it away. Their eyes burning intensely into each others as she whispered, "We were used as bait?"

"Forgive me," whispered Sirius back.

"You and Sirius were being watched, being accounted for every single moment since the second you Flooed into the Ministry, Hermione," explained Harry.

"But how did you know to come exactly here?"

"We knew Flint would make his move at any second." She saw Harry swallow hard, his eyes flashed with emotion. "All of the murders of the phantom intruder happened here. Ron's...and Moody's before that, although Mad-Eye didn't go through the Veil. He was...well, what's past is past." Harry pushed his spectacles upward. "So when Flint excused himself during the meeting immediately after you two left to go be with his 'partner', we knew he would act. We knew you would be lured here... or forced here. Parkinson was no where to be found in Entrance Chamber or elsewhere in the Department proper... but the door to the Death Chamber was open. They were obviously overeager to act quickly. To force you two through the Veil. Have you disappear, like Ron."

Kingsley smiled warmly at his younger counterparts. "Yes, Harry, all that, and nothing beats a good old-fashioned tracing spell put on our dear Padfoot." He swished his wand, and a blue light emitted briefly around Sirius' form before fading. "Although, I probably should have you tagged with a permanent one, to help keep you out of trouble."

Sirius managed a cocky smile, saying, "Good luck with that."

Hermione wrapped an arm protectively over Sirius' chest; she felt the tentative touch of his fingers intertwining with hers. Nodding towards Flint's unconscious form, she asked, "What's going to happen to him?"

Shacklebolt gazed in reflection momentarily at Marcus Flint, and then his deep voice boomed, "Justice."

The Minister's response seemed to spark Sirius back to his more recognizably hot-tempered self. "But first, a little bloody interrogation is needed!"

Hermione gave Sirius a pensive look, quietly saying, "Yes, a lot of questions and answers are still to be expected and needed."

Sirius returned her an intense look. Their interlaced fingers tightened mutually. Hermione whispered to him, "And decisions need to be made."

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Resolutions

Chapter 11 of 11

Urged on by the Chief Warlock, Hermione and Sirius must make final decisions based on the information from Marcus Flint's final interrogation.

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Beneath the administrative headquarters of the Wizengamot, in a dungeon room down under Level Two's Department of Magical Law Enforcement in the Ministry of Magic, Hermione, Sirius, Harry, and Minister Shacklebolt stood around in a cave-like stone space. They watched the manacled form of Marcus Flint strapped against a flat cage-like grid that magically stood on a base over a dark circle of sullied earth.

They had been in this interrogation gaol cell for hours with what was amounting to both an inquiry and an esoteric trial of sorts on Flint. Tense and terse, Hermione felt Sirius touch her hand with his, giving her a gentle squeeze of support, as she and the others watched the Chief Warlock, Rufus Scrimgeour, interrogating and demanding an answer from the incarcerated prisoner. The inquisitor's Self-Inking Quill self-flitted and -fluttered around him, scribbling on ever-appearing parchments, recording Marcus Flint's every utterance.

"Once more, what did you do then to Parkinson, Flint? The Parkinson in *your* world? I would have you speak more details, Flint!" demanded Scrimgeour, hitting the prisoner with a Stinging Hex.

Hermione took a sharp breath as the Chief Warlock's pacing back and forth became quicker and quicker, his control seeming to unravel before her at an alarming speed.

Suddenly, Scrimgeour...who had in *this* universe acceded to Chief Warlock after holding the Head Auror position during the war...strode directly to the centre of the room, his keen yellowish eyes flashing with an intelligence and shrewdness that commanded everyone's attention and alertness at every second.

"Potter," he ordered.

Hermione watched Harry cross and stand at full attention beside Flint.

Scrimgeour shook his mane of long tawny hair as one hand snapped his wand up higher and the other produced a phial of clear, colourless potion.

"My patience has run out, Flint," informed Scrimgeour brusquely. "Potter, his head."

Hermione watched as Harry administered a spell that caused Flint's mouth to open and his head to tilt back. With grim determination, Scrimgeour crossed to the shackled accused and uncorked the bottle; she witnessed the Truth Potion, Veritaserum, being forced down the prisoner's gullet.

Flint coughed, choking on the liquid, and Harry paused. But the hardened veteran Scrimgeour's steely eyes didn't blink as he ordered, "His head, Potter. Again! No one's died of an overdose... yet."

Though his eyes met Shacklebolt's sharply, the Chief Warlock addressed everyone, "This heretic has quite an exceptional resistance level to the potion. However, this bottle is from the late Headmaster Snape's special stock for the Ministry, for very special cases."

Scrimgeour narrowed his eyes at the sputtering prisoner. "You do consider yourself very special, don't you, Flint?"

Marcus' eyes flashed with burning hatred at Scrimgeour, and Hermione turned her head as her former partner spat in the Chief Warlock's face. She had barely blinked when she saw an invisible force slap Marcus hard across the face, so hard his cheek and eye immediately began to swell, welted.

"Minister, perhaps Granger could wait outside?" asked Sirius in a low voice.

Their eyes met, even as Scrimgeour snapped, "Not necessary. Let us proceed civilly for as long as we can...that is, as long as Flint chooses."

"Fuck you, blood-traitor," hissed Marcus.

Scrimgeour seemingly ignored him, addressing the Minister, "Shacklebolt? Continued open forum from any and all present, as questions arise? He should be quite cooperative after that dosage."

The Minister nodded, tightening his grip on his drawn wand as Hermione and Sirius instinctively clutched theirs.

"Focus your mind: you murdered Pansy Parkinson from your time for her life energy? Correct, Flint?" coerced the Chief Warlock.

Marcus' face contorted, attempting to resist answering, but the potency of the Veritaserum forced him to gurgled out, "Yes."

Scrimgeour summoned the Self-Inking Quill and parchments to him and read out from one, "Abominable actions to push magic further... advanced it, even. No, that's not...where is it? Yes, here, the process of blood loss must occur while chanting the following Accio and containment curses over the first living object... allowing the blood loss, up to a degree sufficient to cause death..." The Chief Warlock mumbled to himself for a few moments. "Desanguination... and through exsanguination... From exsanguination, contain and store the blood and life force within the inanimate object... The first living object...the murdered victim." He slapped one parchment with his other hand loudly. "Ah, yes! Here we are. Once the first living object is incapacitated, through the skin just behind the point of the jaw and below the neck bones, severing forward the jugular vein...you cut her throat, Flint? Inserted your wand inside 'your' Parkinson's flesh and cast the curse to syphon her life force into your amulet?"

"YES!" roared Flint, who then began to sob, his twisted face shining from sweat and snot running down it.

"Why?" asked Hermione softly.

"Why? WHY?" blubbered Flint. "She had stopped!"

"Stopped what?"

"Stopped loving me!" Several seconds passed as Flint seemed to violently struggle with something burning inside himself, but then he calmed and began speaking quietly, fluently, as if purging himself of the information. "I came back from the other universe, ready to transfer myself here, to cast the spell... I wanted to give her one more chance, for she had stopped, don't you see?" He stared directly at Hermione with a wild look in his eyes.

"No," replied Hermione in a small voice.

"Pansy's work in the Love Chamber, her work...the Ministry destroyed her! She didn't want to know me any more...it was like... like all her emotions were *erased*." Marcus glared desperately into Hermione's eyes. She held his baleful gaze as he continued, "She felt nothing for me."

"Had she ever?" asked Sirius darkly. "The Pansy in my world had never given the Flint ~~there~~ the time of day."

Hermione could see Marcus was trembling with adrenaline as he snarled back at Sirius, "Pansy... was my life! At Hogwarts, we ~~wounded~~, experimented together..."

"This curse, Flint! Concentrate! Who discovered it first? How?" snapped Scrimgeour, cutting in.

Marcus jerked his head towards the Chief Warlock, answering, "Pansy had come across the ancient tomes of Herpo the Great in her apprenticeship post at the Ministry...she shared them with me! We discovered together his wonderful ancient spells for dimensional transporting, and we... I... No, we explored what was necessary to gather the magical power, the magical force to transfer us. At first, we suctioned energy from dark objects; child's play it was." Flint licked his lips, growing more excited. "But then, we found a better way to use living Magical creatures, syphoning their life forces."

"Which allowed you to do what exactly?" snarled Sirius.

His eyes flashing, Flint whispered fiercely, "We found we could transport ourselves into other dimensions with calculations, temporary fluctuations in time and space. In the beginning, it was like looking down upon our temporal selves. But then we progressed; we were solid, full corporeal forms in our transferred destination. But it would only last for several minutes. But Pansy became frustrated and stopped..."

"She *stopped*?" asked Hermione, needing to push him to clarify.

"Pansy closed up on me, became *disinterested*." Hermione saw Marcus' features soften slightly, and a sliver of vulnerability was glimpsed as he slowly recounted, "I saw that she was slipping away. At first, she said it was the work at the Ministry, working in the Love Room... She'd become an Unspeakable. She said she was incapable of speaking about things, her research, responding to all my questions, responding to my interests, our once shared interests... Even though she was losing interest in me, I continued to experiment alone. For I wanted to impress her, show her how powerful a wizard I was... for her."

A blank look crossed Marcus' face, and he seemed to be staring through the wall, watching something only known to him as if hypnotised. "The first time I used that Mudblood Justin Finch-Fletchley...his blood...he squealed like a pig... then he was silenced... The power that came to me from taking his life... I tried to tell Pansy, share with her the new incredible power that the life force of a wizard...even a Mudblood...not an animal or thing, brought to the curse's manifestation. But she didn't seem to be *impressed* or even to understand... She said she was tired of it all, tired of me." Marcus huffed and then shook his head as if coming up out of water. "So I needed more blood, more life force. Had to get it right, show her what we had worked on was possible, was vital to us, for us, our future together... The second time, I took the life force of the Mudblood Susan Bones." Marcus fell silent, staring again through the wall.

"But it wasn't enough? Murdering Finch-Fletchley and Bones?" pressed Shackbolt.

Marcus' mouth contorted but no sound came out, and Hermione impulsively jumped in and asked, "Something changed?"

His head snapped to her, and he seemed then to be able to answer, "Yessssss, Granger... When I told Pansy about the second Mudblood, after that, she seemed to pull away from me even further." Flint scowled at the memory, his eyes darting from left to right. "I knew she needed help...we had worked so closely on it... We were going to be infamous... and so powerful!"

Marcus struggled against his bonds...his voice straining as he continued, "I had to help her, help us, break away, start a new life, somewhere else. In a universe where our kind, purebloods...the *true* Wizardkind, should be the ruling power! So I pushed magic further than I had ever risked...I searched for a place where we could escape to..." His body suddenly became limp from his exertion.

"Here? In this universe?" demanded Scrimgeour.

"Yesssss..." His head lolled back and forth in a pathetic motion.

Hermione felt compelled to press him to answer fundamental questions. "Why couldn't you let her alone... let her go? Let her be free to live the life she had chosen, Marcus?"

His face twisted and he yelled, "I couldn't help myself!" He glared at Hermione desperately. "After she accepted the post in the Department of Mystery, I knew I would do everything...anything to be closer to her, at all cost, even if it meant leading a double-life, becoming what the new Muggle-loving regime expected...I had the talent and the will to fool them all, the insights and savvy into the Dark Arts and former Death Eater circles that no ordinary do-gooder Auror could possibly ever have."

"But still, it didn't matter; with time, she turned against you?" Sirius reminded him.

"She said she was disgusted with me. The look on her face when I told her what I'd achieved for us, ~~for~~her... I can't forget it."

"And that's when you performed the mutilating acts of exsanguinations on Parkinson, Flint?" barked Scrimgeour loudly.

"Yessss, that's when I did it..."

"But it wasn't enough?" asked Hermione softly.

"No, Granger, it wasn't enough." Marcus licked his lips and seemed to be stimulated by something only known to him. "For you see, the spell demanded that yet a third life force be forcibly taken, contained within an inanimate object, my amulet." Marcus stared Hermione straight in the eyes. "The Pansy in our world, she laughed in my face... So I slit her throat like a filthy Muggle would, suctioned her life force as it left her body into my amulet, and threw her body through the Veil."

Scrimgeour gave a quick snap of his head to Flint as Shackbolt held up his hand to the Chief Warlock and nodded to Hermione to continue questioning.

Hermione blinked hard, knowing what happened next but needing to ask, "And then what?"

"Then I hurried to meet you, Granger, so that I could be your bloody lackey to boss around, your very own Hit Wizard." Marcus huffed and smiled a smile of triumph. "I

knew you would be thoroughly tedious and pedantic as you always are...I knew you wouldn't leave until you had visited the Space Chamber yet again. I just needed to disagree with you enough to push your little contentious buttons... I had watched you, studied you...I knew you were *compulsive* that way."

"And that's when you struck Auror Granger?" pressed Shacklebolt, unable to hold back.

Marcus licked his lips again, his eyes boring into Hermione's. "Yesssss, the vital component, Granger was my living conduit needed as my current to transport me, us...a living object for the magical transference to occur through time and space..."

"The final incantation is Portus Constellatio?" demanded Scrimgeour pedantically.

"Yesssss, it produces a fucking fantastic bolt of magic to travel through the constellations." Marcus leered at Hermione. "The captive curse must soar through the living conduit, penetrating, incapacitating it. Remember, Granger? It was lovely being the possessing wizard encased with you, my living conduit." He sneered, exulted. "The transference procedure took place, the conjugation of us becoming one occurred, a joining of body, mind, and life forces."

Having been silent the entire time, Harry suddenly joined in, asking, "Why wasn't it enough? The power from objects and creatures?"

"Elementary basics, Potter!" snarled Flint. "The greater the magical source, the magical conduit, the greater possibility and security of achieving, so a..."

"Witch or wizard," growled Sirius, visibly flushed and seeming to barely contain his temper.

Flint glared at him hatefully. "Yessss, Black, witch or wizard."

The two wizards stared at each other with burning malice as Hermione surmised, "If almost any inanimate object can be turned into a Portkey, a bewitched celestial Portkey, then anyone who grasps it, encases it, possesses it, is transported to the pre-arranged destination at a given time, a predetermined destination."

Impatiently, Scrimgeour pressed for clarification, urging, "So, Flint, you bewitched Auror Granger..."

"Yesssss, my bolt of magic was intertwined with her, my living victim, and the transference of myself and my conduit created the transference to the calculated coordinates chosen." Flint began panting more and more heavily. "It was exhilarating to transfer through time and space with Granger as my celestial Portkey, my living conduit of magical force, rendered insensible by my captive hex," gasped Marcus, gazing oddly at Hermione.

He swallowed hard as he suddenly gave her an affective, affectionate expression. "It might be the Veritaserum speaking, Granger, but I enjoyed soiling myself with you a bit; curiosity has always got the better of me..." He snapped his head directly to Sirius. "After taking her for my conduit, possessing her, I understood, Black. I understood what would make a pureblood lay with a Mudblood..."

"Shut it, you fucking scum!" In a flash, Sirius had impulsively leapt and grabbed Flint's shirt front.

As both Scrimgeour and Harry pulled Sirius off of him, Flint began to laugh maniacally, licking his bleeding lip with his tongue, and jeered at Sirius, "You know, Black, I do understand what you're...*our* Pansy saw in you... You are exciting when you get so aroused."

As Scrimgeour and Harry held Sirius back, Hermione stepped in, determined to get further answers regardless of everyone's excitable states, demanding, "You murdered other innocents in our world! Parkinson, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Susan Bones to use their life forces...but why commit murder *here*? Why was Ron..."

"Pansy killed the ginger." Flint gave an evil grin to Hermione and then stared at Sirius and then Harry. "The Parkinson from Black's world who transferred here did it. Just for fun."

"Just for fun?" demanded Harry, loosening his grip on Sirius.

"No, I jest," lied Flint flippantly, glowering at Hermione momentarily, then turned his head to Harry. "It was your Granger's fault, Potter. Weasley wanted to please Granger and went down that evening alone to check the Space Room, his partner Black being the drunken sod he usually was... useless. But it was *our* Pansy, Black, that met ol' Weasley down in the Department of Mysteries. She was seemingly making her rounds, and ol' ginger boy came into her web so smoothly, asking her to help and lead him into the Space Room, and just like you, he found himself... before the Veil."

Hermione stepped in front of Sirius as if to shield him, asking, "So Ron was murdered just because of me, the ~~Hermione~~*here*, Marcus?"

"No, for necessity. Weasley knew too much. The Granger here was oh, so close to discovering and revealing all about Pansy, that Parkinson was someone quite different and yet the key, connected to the Department of Mysteries *phantom intruder*... Perhaps Pansy was even the one and the same here, yes? Weasley was Granger's confidant, the closest to her...he had to... disappear. Just as you needed to."

"Go back, Flint," jumped in Scrimgeour, narrowing his eyes shrewdly, reading over another parchment. "You said you came back from 'the other universe' to your own, ready to transfer yourself *here*, ready to cast the spell...the Portus Constellatio Spell with Auror Granger as your living conduit. Elaborate, explain in detail...your first experimental transference was here in our world or where exactly?"

"No. My first transference was *there*..." His eyes darted at Sirius hatefully. "In your world." Flint then became taciturn.

Giving the Chief Warlock a knowing look and a slight nod, Hermione asked, "You said that you had killed the Finch-Fletchley, performed the exsanguinations as prescribed by Herpo's treaties. And you did it...you successfully transferred life energy to your amulet, your dimensional vortex allowing you to propel yourself through the time and space celestial portal. The celestial body being *what*, Marcus?"

Flint gave a strange look to her and then to Sirius. "Canis Minor was at its zenith in the heavens in the Space Room. I cast the spell and I arrived. And there... ~~There~~*she* was... It was the first time I came into contact with her. Making her rounds, she found me in her world's Space Chamber. My one and only true Pansy."

Hermione continued to press her questions gently, "What happened there?"

Marcus shut his eyes tightly only to reopen them after a few seconds with a faraway look as he recounted, "It was fantastic. She was fantastic. Fucking incredible. She, like me, was seeking *escape*. To reinvent herself elsewhere. Her life, her duality had become too heavy to bear. She felt desperate enough to risk it all...but during our first time together, after only several hours, I began to fluctuate, fade...my corporeal being was being suctioned, syphoned back." He gasped as if reeling from a shock, causing Hermione and the others to involuntarily flinch, tightening their grasps on their wands.

Marcus' voice grew louder and strained, as if he were reliving the stress and effort of the spell. "In a flash, I was ricocheted back! That's when I killed the other Mudblood Bones immediately, then hurried to portal through the heavens again at the same coordinates to find Pansy there, not lose her! We had shared so much in so little time," he suddenly whispered. "But again, I grew weak, began to fade. Hurriedly, she told me to kill a third time but also to procure a conduit, a living one, keep it alive...the missing ingredient to Herpo's spell which would seal the permeating bonding and permanent state of being in the chosen constellational destination chosen. Yes, I would need a living conduit."

Marcus gave Hermione a dark look. "And then, once procured, I could meet and be with my true Pansy, my twin, in Canis Major. We would be portalled from our own space and time and then meet in the one and same universe, conjugated together forever... The Pansy there, she went first. She came here first and *established* herself..."

Marcus snapped his head away and his features darkened. "But she just had to bring Black with her... Use you as her living conduit, Black."

"Why me?" asked Sirius fiercely.

Marcus smiled a smug smile at him. "Pansy got off on you, Black. Or the *thought* of you, a notorious criminal in Azkaban...the thought of you having committed atrocious crimes, murdering all of those Muggles...she really had a strong affinity and preference for that."

"Hybristophilia?" blurted out Hermione. *Sexual arousal from thoughts of violence?*

"Yessss, Granger," hissed Flint in such a way that a chill ran down Hermione's back. "Pansy was aroused believing that her partner *opotential* partner was known to have committed a crime, such as rape, murder..."

"She was insane," whispered Sirius vehemently. "Utterly mad."

"Insane or enamoured? Is there a difference?" quibbled Marcus, smiling at Sirius complacently. "Your Pansy, well, she became *my* Pansy... She made it quite known to me immediately that she was aroused from thoughts of violence, *acts* of violence. Well, what's a bloke to do, right, Black? I had to impress her. You understand. I mean, I wasn't you. Hadn't done what you'd supposedly had done. So I had to do *something*. And I did. I did impress her. But then, I had to keep on experimenting to impress her even more... more and more and more..."

Hermione saw Sirius' jaw muscles flex with contained tension, as if he were about to strike or lunge at Marcus again, and she instinctively touched his arm as she pointed out to Flint, "Pansy didn't seem to be enamoured of Sirius...did you... Did you do something to her here? Threaten her? Bewitch her here?"

"You're such a clever Mudblood, Granger," hissed Marcus, but Hermione shook her head to all to not reprimand Flint but to let him continue revealing events.

For Flint had become glum, as if the Veritaserum was losing its potency, and Hermione wondered if he would continue or if the interrogation would be postponed further. But then he spoke again softly, admitting, "In school, my Pansy loved it when I committed an outrage against someone. She really got off on it. But *this* Pansy..." Marcus glared at Sirius. "Well, she admired you amorously a bit too much for my tolerance level, Black...she confessed she would get so wet just thinking about all of the violence you were capable of." Flint sniffed. "So, I had to *adjust* her thoughts about you, Black, when I arrived here. Had to modify her thoughts or feelings associated with you."

"But you realized that you could never erase Sirius completely, could you, Flint?" asked Hermione pointedly.

Marcus' eyes narrowed shrewdly. "What?"

"You couldn't erase Pansy's complete associations about Sirius, Flint. So you *modified* her...you erased a part of her memory, just as you did or tried to do with me?" Hermione's voice was rising uncontrollably, and she began to tremble.

Marcus looked at Hermione curiously, confessing softly, "True. I may have Obliviated a little too much, used a little too much *force* when I arrived. Pansy had seemed to like it, being rough with her and all... But she did seem of late to be a little brain damaged...her way of thinking at times more concussive than at other times... Guess she kept being too affectionate about you, Black. And I couldn't have that, could I?"

He grinned in a self-satisfied way. "For you see, it was time to get rid of you and the Gryffindor know-it-all once and for all." He mused, "Neither of us needed either of you any more."

Perhaps it was his maniacal, derisive laughter resounding in the stone space or perhaps his mocking smile at her and the others, but Hermione felt something snap inside her and felt forced to spell out the truth to him. "She would never be yours. You altered her memory, her thoughts, but you couldn't succeed in truly erasing her obsession with Sirius, Flint."

Marcus became ever so still as Hermione stepped right in front of him, face to face, pointing out, "Just like you couldn't completely erase my memories of what you did to me. What happened. True feeling, pure feeling, pure love is stronger than anything you could produce. Pure love broke the spells of your *weak* Dark magic. For you don't understand love, never did, never possessed it or Pansy, truly...It was all a feeble, cowardly deception, Flint."

Again something released deep within Hermione, a door clicked opened, and a warmth suddenly filled her head to toe, tingling throughout her, encompassing her. Giving Sirius a proud look, Hermione suddenly felt elated and excited. Her eyes flashed as she looked Marcus straight in the eyes, smiling, exulted, "You should have adhered the warnings about the Love Chamber: that behind the door of the Ever-Locked Room is the most mysterious subject of study of the department, the most powerful force ever to exist in the universe...love. A force more powerful than all Dark magic put together, more wonderful and more terrible than anything Herpo the Foul could ever imagine! Magic that you are incapable of ever understanding..."

"Shut it, you filthy Mudblood!" bellowed Marcus, ferociously trying to break free of his bewitched manacles.

Lunging in front of Hermione, Sirius thrust Flint's possessed amulet in front of him, its evil energy still alive and burning deep inside the stone like a lit coal, eternally imploding and exploding, burning deep, connected to its own life force.

Sirius grabbed Marcus' jaw and forced him to look at dubious object. "Will this still work?"

Upon seeing the enchanted amulet, Marcus began to growl expletives and thrash wildly.

Sirius jerked the prisoner's jaw roughly to him, holding it in a vice grip, demanding, "Answer me, Flint!"

"Fuck you, you mudwallower, blood-traitor!" Marcus' spit hit Sirius in the face.

Harry grabbed and held Sirius back even as Scrimgeour jumped in and demanded, "Is there enough energy to spell them back once more to their original space and time?"

A searing bolt hit Flint from Shackbolt's wand. "Answer us!"

"Yes! No!" he screamed. "I don't know... One of them, yes! Both of them...It's not within my experience or knowledge...no, as long as I'm alive!"

"Explain!" boomed Shackbolt.

Panting wildly, Flint spewed out, "When Pansy went through the Veil, her...her amulet was depleted of the life forces contained within it, just as she was... So you've lost one transference vortex." His face twisted as he jeered at Sirius, "But make Herpo proud, Black. Be true to your family's name, the Dark Lord's mark on your arm...push magic beyond its boundaries, you filthy coward!"

Scrimgeour stepped in front of Sirius towards Flint, pointing his wand between the prisoner's eyes, and coerced, "Speak about the coordinates, Flint. Details! How?"

As if a great weight was pressing against his body, Marcus gasped for air and then in a strained voice answered, "The coordinates, Canis Major at its zenith, then cast the spell Portio Constellatio!" Flint fell silent momentarily before adding in a quiet, breathless voice, "She... *your* Pansy, she gave me Canis Major in the constellation of Orion as our meeting point."

"But why was the constellation of Orion chosen?" asked Hermione calmly, even though the perpetuation of growing violent efforts was unnerving her. For she felt at any second, someone would hex Flint, silencing him permanently.

"Pansy chose it...she had always wanted him!" cried out Flint, turning his head and glowering at Sirius. "My whole life I had secretly admired you, Black... Pansy and I at Hogwarts, we had held your actions up on a pedestal, murdering all of those Muggles... Fucking brilliant, we thought you were! But then, the truth was revealed...you were a fraud... How could you do that to your own kind?"

Marcus' entire body convulsed, and then he panted, "When I first tried the spell, the constellations revealed themselves to me..." Marcus' body went into spasm again. "So beautiful, the winter triangle had appeared, shining brightly... but it was Procyon which beckoned me, the other Dog star in the constellation Canis Minor. So bloody bright it was, always preceding Sirius... I calculated my coordinates, and after procuring my first life energy, I cast the spell." He clenched his eyes tight, and Hermione saw his facial muscles spasm in some kind of exquisite pain.

Then to everyone's surprise, even in his rapidly declining state, Marcus began to laugh softly to himself in between spurting out, "I was transferred. Procyon is a binary star...my coordination brought me to its mutual parallax. It brought me to Pansy, my true Pansy, my twin."

"To Sirius' universe?" asked Hermione.

"Yessss, Granger."

Marcus glowered at Sirius. "I was the Minor, you the Major." His eyes closed and his head slunk down, and it appeared that the interrogation had come to a halt.

The room fell silent, and they all stared at the prisoner. Only the sounds of everyone's heavy breathing were heard.

However, Scrimgeour was brooding over something and still determined to get some further answers. He shot a spell at Flint, apparently reviving him, and barked, "You said Parkinson found you in the Space Room there? She, who instructed you from Black's original universe? Flint? Parkinson, who instructed you how to come here? Answer me!"

Marcus raised his head a few inches and hissed, "Yesssss... She was there and received me, told me not to fear when I started to corporeally fluctuate and began to return...it was she who told me to harvest another life energy and then return to the very same heavenly coordinates to her, and she would then tell me how to make a permanent leap. It was she who told me I needed a third life energy, but in order to not fluctuate back, I must join with a living force, a living conduit, and it must be kept alive until I decided whether I would stay or not..."

"'Three is the charm,' Pansy said...three life forces... plus one living conduit, Sirius for her, and me used by you," whispered Hermione aloud, remembering Parkinson's cryptic words to her.

Marcus tilted his head to one side, staring at Hermione. "Yesssss. For she had procured her third...that raggedy filth Moody...and was ready to transport herself." Marcus' features darkened, and he looked as if he would go unconscious, but then spoke in a low, strained voice, "Pansy told me to return, procure my third life energy, join and spell myself through my conduit and meet her in..." His face twisted and he grimaced. "Canis Major."

Shacklebolt gave an all-knowing look and pressed, "Parkinson had been here, experimented herself with the coordinates to Canis Major because of her obsession with Sirius, and she chose here? But were there any other reasons she had in choosing here as both of yours final destination, Flint?"

Marcus struggled momentarily but then managed to answer, "She said it was ripe for the taking; she'd made contact with the Undersecretary from her earlier experimental transference. She had found a true pureblood leader, one who was a supporter of the ways of Herpo the Great, a top follower of the Dark Lord, who was on the verge of taking the Ministry, and with our help in doing away with those who stood in his way, we would soon have the Wizarding world the way it was meant to be."

"But you allowed me, a Mudblood, to live?" asked Hermione.

"Yes, I allowed you to live; Pansy let Black live, not sure at first if she would stay here or not... but when I came, she...well, she decided, we decided...we knew we had found a parallel universe where... the blood-traitor Shacklebolt didn't know that there was about to be a new Minister...a new Wizarding Order! At long last, purebloods would rightfully get their own justice for being the true defenders of magickind in at least one universe!"

Sirius demanded clarification. "A new Minister? Malfoy?"

"But first, to get rid of all of you filth..." snarled Flint. "In the beginning, Pansy and I thought we still needed you two... needed you alive that is. Our living conduits. But soon, we'd mutually agreed that your services were no longer needed, as we'd found the perfect place for us."

Shacklebolt stepped closer to in front of Marcus raising his wand and spelling him to meet his gaze, asking, "The Undersecretary's plan for Muggle-born registration was to be the first step in the takeover?"

"A minor first step...but no, Black and Granger needed to be got rid of...that was to be next, agreed upon by all. Pansy had wanted to keep Black around for her personal amusement, but you were too annoying... too loyal a blood-traitor, Black. But with you soon out of the way, a *coup d'état*, assassinating a vulnerable Shacklebolt would be so easy."

"With Lucius Malfoy to replace me?" pressed Shacklebolt.

"Yes!"

"No, Flint. One Undersecretary will be got rid of. Your plans have failed. However, you've given sufficient evidence to proceed in charging and arresting him," informed Scrimgeour, his eyes narrowing shrewdly. Then the Chief Warlock cleared his throat and straightened up to his full height, announcing, "Marcus Flint, having been found guilty of unspeakable abominations against Wizardkind, the sequencing of events which led you through your atrocious experiments have been recorded, and thus, you will return now to Azkaban where the Dementor's await you, and upon signal, you shall be given over to them and receive the Dementor's Kiss, your soul extracted from your body until you are but an empty shell."

And with that sentencing, a Silencing Spell was placed upon Marcus by Scrimgeour, shielding them further from his expletives and screams as he was lowered into the dark hole of earth in the interrogation gaol cell chamber, disappearing from sight.

* H *

The air was thick with anxiousness as Hermione, Sirius and Harry stood outside the Space Chamber, waiting for Minister Shacklebolt and Chief Warlock Scrimgeour to exit it from at any second. She and Harry watched Sirius pacing back and forth like a panther, giving a wary look at the Chamber's door, so when she heard Sirius huff impatiently, she asked, "What is it, Sirius?"

Sirius hesitated before answering, "I remember how Parkinson from my universe lured me into this room... Moody had been murdered. I was pacing the corridors..."

"Like now?" Hermione placed a hand on his arm to still him.

His eyes flashing at her touch, Sirius' brow furrowed. "Parkinson told me... She told me you wanted to...the Hermiondthere was waiting for me... She wanted to speak to me in private... You wanted me..."

His memory has come back since Pansy went through the Veil, her amulet no longer affects him. thought Hermione wistfully, squeezing his arm gently in support.

"Do you remember when she first, er, bewitched you, Sirius?" asked Harry.

"It was in my dungeon cell, at Malfoy Manor... She came to me and brought me something cool to drink, something soothing, something to reduce my stress," he recalled slowly. "How convenient for her that she also worked in the Love Room, her abilities with Love potions was considered to be exceptional."

Harry seemed to be trying to lighten Sirius' mood, saying, "There's rumour that there's a fountain of Amortentia in the Love Room... I'd imagine it powerful stuff, eh?"

"Nah, Amortentia is one thing... but love," his eyes met Hermione's, "is something that no one can concoct and regulate. Even the Ministry, try as they might."

The tension between them was abruptly broken as Minister Shacklebolt, followed by Scrimgeour, came out of the Space Room and announced, "The astronomical measurements of the distance between the planets and projection of the constellation is confirmed...the celestial sphere is at the zenith of Canis Major...the coordinates between +60° and -90° in the Orion constellation. Sirius, Hermione, the celestial sphere is unsealed...your portal back to your home place and time has been revealed, spelled opened, ready for you to transport back!"

Scrimgeour gave Hermione and Sirius a shrewd and sobering look, holding out the ensorcelled amulet to them. "Black, Granger, upon casting the spell, the channel point of the celestial spheres will open; the current of the portal that allows the wizard possessing the life-force of the procured energy vortex to reach and portal one to the calculated destination will be yours for transporting." The Chief Warlock placed the amulet into Hermione's hand carefully. "As you know, the final incantation is Portus Constellatio. Be careful and use caution. Once you have decided whether only one of you will safely go or if you will risk both of you...well, that is between the two of you to decide."

"We'll be here and stand by you, whichever choice you make," added Harry, pausing to push his spectacles up, "and whoever comes out...we're here for you."

"Say what you have to say to the Minister and Potter and then..." Scrimgeour cleared his throat authoritatively and motioned curtly to the opening of the Space Room. "Then enter and make your choice. Your final choice." His eyes narrowed. "Whoever comes out, whether it is you or your counterpart, well then, that will be that. However, if the cursed amulet is still unused, it will be destroyed, and your gateway back forever lost. For Marcus Flint will receive the Dementor's Kiss momentarily after your final decision. And with that, the curse and your celestial Portkey shall be ended."

Hermione couldn't help observing, "But, sir, if not used, must the amulet be destroyed? Perhaps its elements should be studied further and used for..."

"No, Granger. It must be destroyed immediately and will be. This heresy has endangered the Wizarding world as we know and cherish it. Prevention is everything. With Flint's death, the originating perpetrator will be silenced for good. And his evil magic shall be destroyed simultaneously." Scrimgeour looked at them sharply, astute as ever. "All for the greater good, Auror Granger."

* H *

In the Space Chamber, both Hermione and Sirius stared up at the heavens between the planets. She gave a slow look around the dubious, mystical space, feeling a strange tingle course through her and cause the amulet to pulse in her palm.

The constellation Canis Major shown brightly, twinkling at them in mocking clarity, daring them to take the plunge back into the unknown.

"Once we go through, the calculations reveal that..." Hermione stopped, suddenly unsure now that the moment of decision had actually arrived. She repeated the one sure fact, "So the portal will be closed forever to us."

"Forever is a long time," commented Sirius, slowly spooning up behind her, holding her to him for what was to be the last time.

Hermione stood solid, unmoving, not responding to his touch, but not resisting him either. She slowly spoke, "We must go back in reverse... I, first, followed by you, and our parallel selves will be switched back to each one's own universe. Theoretically, that is." She felt his embrace tighten and gently reminded him, "The incantations must be synchronized to be effective, to portal us back to our respective dimension of existence..."

"To portal *you* back."

Hermione twisted around in his arms, facing Sirius.

"What?"

"I've been thinking... This amulet's life force could portal us both back, respectively, but based on what we found in Flint's premises and cross-checked calculations, it will for certain portal one of us...Shacklebolt, Scrimgeour, and you confirm that."

"But we also calculated and agreed that we could both be portalled...the life-force and Dark energy Flint was continually syphoning, Borgin's life energy, the Dark artefacts, and Merlin only knows what or who else...there should be more than enough."

"But we can't be sure. And I won't allow you to risk..." Sirius' voice broke. Hermione saw that his eyes were flashing with emotion as he said, "You need to go back...I need to stay here, be here..."

"For the other Hermione?"

"No. No, not like that." He looked at her, his pain visceral. "She is not you...there is no one like you. I have no illusions that she will hate me... loathe me more than ever."

Sirius' eyes grew sad and thoughtful. "But she will need someone who understands... the insanity she's experienced. Perhaps it will destroy her, her loss of paradise refund with Weasley alive and well, there, in your universe... and then to be thrown back here..."

He took a deep breath and repeated, "She will need someone who understands... who understands some part of her and who understands what it means to lose that one person who makes you feel whole."

"If I can help her, even from afar, behind the scenes, I will. Perhaps she'll let Harry, but... It broke her the first time around. I fear she will be pushed beyond help, but... Well, I'll help Harry to help her as best I can. "

*I thought you said that she had fully recovered from Weasley's death, from her little break-down..*Hermione remembered what Malfoy had said about her doppelgänger.

Hermione felt a twist and a sharp tug within her towards him uncontrollably. "And you, Sirius?"

He gave her a bittersweet smile, saying calmly, "Don't worry, kiddo. I was capable of withstanding long periods of emotional torture and despair in my world. I'll be able to handle whatever this one throws my way. One day at a time, wouldn't you agree?"

She took a deep breath, whispering, "Hold me."

"Will you remember me, remember this?" He gave her a gentle but firm squeeze, holding her protectively to him.

Hermione turned her head upwards and looked again up at the Canis Major constellation twinkling in the dark ominous void. "I-I don't know; no one does for sure. There are lots of theories, speculations that travellers to parallel universes might be able to share their memories, their lives with their other selves in another universe, but others say that we can't. No one truly knows for certain. But Flint seemed to be able to... even though there were various experimental stages..."

Her shoulders rose and fell as she took began to breathe deeply and uneasily. She clung to him tightly, whispering fiercely, "I don't ever want to forget this...you...ever!"

"But what if..." Sirius paused and then spoke slowly, "Again, what if we were meant... you were meant to stay right here."

Hermione's eyes grew wide with emotion. "Please, don't. Not again. Not now, here at the end."

He said firmly, "What if we were meant *not* to go back? By Flint's confessions, my counterpart self has gone to either a Hermione who'll never...", his voice broke off and then became hoarse, "or he has gone to his death." He held her even tighter. "Flint was unstable. His magic unstable, the reverse of it potentially fatal...for you! I'll never know if you returned safely... and if you return to true happiness, fulfilment."

"Fulfilment?"

Hermione searched his dark orbs, lost herself in them as her lips pressed against his. He immediately reciprocated with a volatile chemistry and intensity, causing an all-consuming energy to encompass her. She felt they were joined beyond the heat and melding of their bodies and needs. His hardness pressing against her, his clasping of her felt a vital part of her own extension...she did not want to break away.

"Hermione? I know I must let you go..." He kissed the top of her head, inhaling her fragrance, clasping her lovingly, whispering, "Remember me. Remember this."

Hermione moaned under his lips as his met hers again, and again the same painful argument twisting inside her, but this time fading quicker to the back recesses of her mind, and the present life force kissing her took precedence and dominated her reality. She felt Sirius' hands touch her as if to record every inch of her into his memory, causing her to tremble as he heatedly repeated, whispering in her ear, "I love you... Remember..."

Even as he said it, she began to feel an indescribable, overwhelming sensation and... oneness with Sirius. It was physical, emotional... beyond her senses. She'd never experienced a man wanting her, needing her, consuming her as Sirius and his energy did.

"Remember me," he was whispering. "Remember me... us... Remember. Always remember."

She couldn't let go of him. She could only clutch at and kiss him...hard and demanding, something snapped deep within her, and she could not let go. Would not let go.

Ever.

He kissed her on the neck in swirling motions until she moaned his name. "Sirius!"

Her thoughts were racing, *I'm not who I thought I was and unsure as to who I am or will be...but it must be with him... my existence, our existence... together...*

In the celestially lit room, they were moving, undulating, grappling; her back hit a hard wall surface, and their entangled bodies slid downwards, and they proceeded consummating in that esoteric chamber of mystery their final answers to each other, their destinies, and their once and for all resolute choice. Their life force crackled with energy as they brought to fruition and made their final decision.

It would be an indeterminable amount of time later, but the Space Chamber's door would open again, open to their new lives...the life they chose to now live, for their third-time's-a-charm existence.

oOoOoOo

Clasping Sirius tightly, Hermione welcomed the feel of the cool night air as it hit her exposed skin, speeding along on the back seat of his Harley Davidson. She squeezed him even tighter as the motorcycle roared into top gear. She felt a fantastic wildness and freedom as the evening stars flurried above as they sped along the A1.

The blurred forms of people and buildings flowed along as they joined the hum and hub of centre London thoroughfares.

She held onto him for life, tighter and tighter, enjoying every sensation she was experiencing.

Her body and mind thrummed with life and vibrating magic as they rode into the Borough of Islington and soon pulled up in front of number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

As Sirius turned off the motor, she slowly let go of him only to climb off from the passenger's seat behind. She had barely taken off her helmet before she felt herself swept into his arms with a wonderful, crushing kiss followed by his eager nuzzling of her neck.

His soft moustache's touching and tickling her made her squeal with delight, rising on her tiptoes as his fingers were shimmying their way lower and lower down her back to her bum. She laughed as he teased, whispering in her ear, "How's my motorcyclist-straddling sweetheart?"

She drew his head towards her lips, whispering back, "Straddling a leather seat's bliss."

She bit her lip momentarily trying to contain her pent-up emotion and then gave him a knowing smile and kiss, saying, "But straddling my husband is so much better."

Sirius gave her his best wolfish grin. "Lucky we've finally arrived home, love."

Hermione gave him a long kiss before breaking it off and looked him adoringly in the eyes, "I love you."

H

Yes, finally, they were home, at peace and living in the moment, in the here and now that they had chosen.

They would take one day at a time, participating in and defending the Wizarding world in this chosen universe, as they had always done...for a certain, dubious Undersecretary Malfoy was the first on a long list of those to be investigated amongst other wrongs to be righted as best one could. This imperfect universe was theirs to experience... perfectly together.

Hermione smiled a smile of contentment to Sirius. Their previous parallel dilemma had transformed into an unforeseen state of being and enduring strength: a happiness like none other she had ever felt nor wanted to live without. She felt equal and at peace with him, and he with her.

For they had let go of their dilemma and were graced to be able to embrace the here and now, come what may. Together.

oOoOo FIN oOoOo

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