

# Occultation

*by nagandsev*

Hermione goes to Xenophilius' art gallery opening. How could Occultation not occur?

## The Gallery

*Chapter 1 of 2*

Hermione goes to Xenophilius' art gallery opening. How could Occultation not occur?

Disclaimer: The world of Harry Potter, and all characters within it, belong to the one and only J.K. Rowling. No money is being made from this story, just pure recreation.

A/N: Written as a piece of midsummer madness fluff, sort of, and for Rhys Ifans fans. My greatest thanks to karelia for her precious time and beta work!

\* X \*

The French call it "Coup de foudre". A lightning bolt.

Xenophilius saw her from across the gallery's high-domed room. He was struck by something utterly unexpected. All other thoughts vanished from his mind. He was caught, trapped and utterly dumbfounded. He found he could not help himself and kept admiring the golden glow emanating from her. The way the light fell upon her gentle features and soft curls, framing her large brown eyes that sparkled liked the stars in the heavens, was a marvel.

\* H \*

"When are we going to get out of here?" asked Ron, rolling his eyes. Hermione heard his stomach growl and immediately understood his more than usual impatience at not wanting to linger any longer than necessary at the gallery opening.

She gave a swift look around through the crowd, taking in all the sculptures, inventions and paintings she wished she could observe and study in peace without the constant nagging to leave every other minute.

"Ron, just a few more minutes. I promised Luna we'd stop by. Her father's work being seen by her friends means a lot to her... and I'm sure to him as well. In all fairness, he's quite good. It'd be rude to leave so soon." She caught sight of an extraordinarily unusual sculpture piece across the room in a corner. There seemed to be a shimmering shield of sorts surrounding it. Whenever someone came very close to it, an instant darkness eclipsed one's view, completely concealing the art object and the person in its vicinity. She almost giggled as she saw a couple try to penetrate the darkness that someone else was already enclosed by...they were instantly repelled, bounced back as if from a rubber wall.

*What clever charm work*, thought Hermione, smiling. *Ravenclaws!* She felt compelled to get closer.

"Isn't there supposed to be, um, finger food, dished out by elves or such?" Ron gave her a grumpy look. "I mean, the invite said *food* would be served...hors d'oeuvres, right?"

"Really, *Ronald*," snapped Hermione, unable to hide her irritation any longer. "Could you just go see what's in the adjoining room...I believe refreshments are being served there, separate from the art work." She gave him her best stubborn look. "Wouldn't want to get mustard or butterbeer on things, yes?"

She saw him hesitate and said, "Look, go eat something and socialise...I think I saw Harry and Ginny go there." She touched his arm. "I'd like at least half an hour to take my time and look at things. Then, we'll leave."

His shoulders relaxed and he agreed. "Fine, I'll go and, um, mingle." He gave a wary, bored look around. "Better yet, when you've finished trying to figure out all of this loony stuff, come get me." He gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "Take your time."

Hermione watched Ron beeline for the reception room and caught sight of a grateful Harry clapping him on the shoulder and handing him a drink. She sighed heavily *Well, at least I can now enjoy things without being hurried.*

Relaxing, she meandered around the crowded room, stopping here and there to greet others briefly, but mostly she immersed herself in drinking in and appreciating each and every one of the pieces on display. She smiled to herself at some of the titles: *Passage of Celestial Wanderings, Hebridean Hallows, Runespoor Continuum* The accompanying art work was cryptic and intriguing, the colours vibrant and effervescent, the forms and strokes angular and layered. *So intricate... and complex...*

But others caused her to have a poignant reaction: *Hibiscus' Lullaby, Luna's Teardrops, Longings for Yesteryear*. These creations were abstract and mysterious forms, ovular and flowing. *They evoke a sadness and a yearning for... something.*

She looked around for what to look at next, feeling in a state of bliss, enjoying being able to reflect on Xenophilius' esoteric creations in peace *d love to discuss his works with him one day. Maybe Luna can arrange for us to get together?* She frowned, remembering that Luna told her her father still preferred seclusion, the effects of the war years still causing him to keep himself shut off from the world. "But Rolf and I are hoping that by having this art opening for him, it will help break him out of his shell a bit. Maybe even get him to go back to publishing. One step at a time," Luna had explained, beaming.

*His art work is much more impressive! It's whimsical like some of what he published but with a lot of raw emotion.* Hermione eagerly made her way over to the corner to the particular sculpture that had caught her attention earlier.

It was entitled *Concealment*.

Even though she was strongly drawn to it, she hesitated and stood back, outside of the charm's ring, and observed it from a distant viewpoint. However, she became further mesmerised the longer she gazed at the elongated curves and grooves, the selectively placed, carved openings, allowing one to peer through, into an inner space filled with smaller unusually shaped figures. *The slopes are so subtle and yet so strong, so... bold,* she thought luxuriantly, lost in the moment.

"For broadening one's tactile awareness. Elevating one's mind."

The comment snapped her out of her pleasurable contemplation. She looked around and found herself staring up into silver-grey eyes.

*Xenophilius!*

She took a second to register his stylish, albeit eccentric, apparel. *Well, he is a handsome man...he can wear anything and get away with it!*

She smiled, noting, *He's so tall and spare. As dapper as ever, like at Bill and Fleur's wedding so long ago.* She was glad Luna's father had recovered from the war so well. No after effects of his time in Azkaban or the torture from Death Eaters seemed to be lingering on and outwardly affecting him.

Xenophilius cordially pointed out, "It's a haptic creation for a fuller sensory experience. It is made to be touched."

"Oh."

She didn't know why, but she could feel her face grow warm, blushing.

"Mr Lovegood," she offered her hand in congratulations. "It's wonderful. The exhibit. So happy that you've found your niche in the visual arts and shared it with us." She gestured her hand around. "Your inventions...I don't quite understand them all, but each creation evokes some reaction in me."

"Art does tend to do that to one, doesn't it?" He raised an observant eyebrow. "And yet, it is an absolutism that at times, fleeting golden moments of our lives, such as now, one can never quite capture an intangible beauty that one is beholding before them, an extraordinary life force in all its glorious form."

Xenophilius was giving her a look of ardent admiration. Hermione felt an odd tingle pulse through her.

"Come with me, Miss Granger." Xenophilius motioned for them to go closer to the sculpture. They stepped towards it, and the charms instantly enclosed them in their own darkened little cubby hole of a space to privately view and experience the artwork.

"Impressive charms." Hermione smiled.

"A kind of child's play," quipped Xenophilius, who smiled back, "but it pleases me that you are pleased, Miss Granger. As I am one of your many admirers."

"Mr Lovegood?"

"I may prefer the cloistered world of books and art, but I keep myself informed on the goings on and your work in the Ministry, fighting for the rights of house-elves...most admirable, Miss Granger."

Hermione felt her cheeks burning red, but whether it was from his honest directness or from her own fleeting misunderstanding, thinking that he had meant he was attracted to her, caused her to stare at the sculpture, unable to say anything.

As they stood right beside the piece, so snug in the corner, she felt a sense of concentration and excitement come over her.

"Touch it," instructed Xenophilius softly.

He was so close to her. She could smell his masculine scent mixed with a light mint fragrance. Her favourite. She suddenly thought of peppermint sticks, of licking one, and for some reason, she felt herself grow flush in waves of tingling heat.

Xenophilius moved a little behind her and asked, "If you'd like, if you'd trust me, close your eyes and let me guide your hand. For the full experience."

She tilted her head back to look up at him and felt herself feel warm all over and an unknown ache burst forth in her chest. The thought of trusting him in this situation puzzled her. Made her curious. She gave in to her curiosity.

She nodded in assent, unable to speak, and as she felt his long, strong fingers tentatively take her hand and guide it to the sculpted form, she closed her eyes.

As their warm flesh, intertwined together, met cool stone, she gasped. It wasn't only the incredible sensation of seeing darkness but feeling fire and ice, the pulsation of his hand on hers, gliding slowly over curved, hard form, titillating edges, cool space, then hardness and flow of form again causing her heart to thump hard and fast. The feeling of body heat from his firm and tall form encompassing her didn't help matters. Her heart raced even more.

Placing her other hand to hold on to another part of the sculpture, she felt him nestle up against her, her back instinctively pressed into his torso, his arms wrapped

supportively around her.

"Now," he whispered in a low voice, "the abyss. Don't look. Feel. Plunge on in."

Her other hand went from stroking upwards to falling through an open space. She felt herself tilt and lost her balance, twisting, her eyes flashed open as she grabbed blindly for something concrete to hold onto.

"It's all right. I'm here. I have you. Safe and steady."

She was panting, realizing she was grasping Xenophilus as if for dear life.

She glanced at the sculpture and then looked him in the eyes, really looked at him. He held her gaze, and they both seemed to be waiting for the other to speak first.

Hermione didn't speak. But she touched. She touched him.

Her fingertips ever so lightly brushed over his forehead, his nose, high cheek bones and then over his firmly set lips down to his chin. She felt the slight stubble that led to his sideburns and then his flossy hair. *He's so beautiful... so handsome. So different...*

She stopped suddenly and took a step back, feeling slightly dizzy.

She didn't know what to say. How to excuse her actions, a part of her stubbornly not wanting to.

Xenophilus had straightened up to his full height and was watching her with a curious look.

He gestured back at the sculpture before them. "I hope it was a new experience for you. A pleasant one."

She was still at a loss of what to say. Something irrational had taken over her. She had a wild sensation of wanting to touch him again. Kiss him. Nuzzle him silly.

"It was," she heard herself saying, "A very pleasant experience."

Inexplicably, she added, "Thank you." And then she found herself slowly backing away from him, feeling she needed air. Fresh air. Immediately.

She made her way out of the charm's perimeter and through the crowd, giving a look back at Xeno, who was attempting to follow her but was being stopped every two feet by others wishing to congratulate him.

She blindly flew by the crowded reception room, the smell of spirits and delicacies wafting through the air, and out the main doors into the night.

Gulping in the coolness, she gazed upwards into the dark sky.

The stars were twinkling intensely above her.

\* H \*

## The Atelier

### Chapter 2 of 2

Hermione reflects on what happened the evening before, and with Luna's care package, she follows where her goodwill and curiosity is taking her—Xenophilus' atelier.

□

A/N: Some more midwinter madness fluff, full of some Hermione and Xeno love. My greatest thanks to the lovely Savva, for her artwork and support in all things Xenophilus; she made the photo above and was kind enough to gift me with it. And my greatest gratitude to Proulxes for her beta support and encouragement to write, as well as my eternal thanks to baylor713 and Clairvoyant for their admin expertise!

Disclaimer: The wonderful J.K. Rowling owns everything...the Harry Potter fandom/Potterverse fandom. I do not own the Harry Potter fandom, nor the characters in it. I do not make any money from the writing of this story.

\* X \*

Xenophilus looked longingly for Hermione up and down the busy street in the cool night air. He momentarily paused, staring up at the dark sky with the stars twinkling intensely above him. He had surprised her; she had surprised him. They had both surprised themselves... disquietingly so.

The occultation had revealed something concealed.

She had touched him in a way that no other woman had since his deceased wife. That was so long ago, he had almost forgotten how it felt. Not quite the same feeling as the eternal love he felt for Pandora...that would never change. He carried that love in his heart and soul. It was as much a part of him as the air he breathed. A part of his innate essence.

He took a sharp intake of breath. For the existence and ability to have the possibility of or, in truth, just as powerful a feeling for another witch, and yet somehow different, stunned him. This was utterly unexpected.

And so it was that he found he could not forget Hermione's touch, her eyes so gentle yet sparkling, burning with curiosity. A curiosity he reciprocated. A curiosity he wished to find the answers to...for them to find the answers together.

He stared again at the celestial heavens with their mocking moonbeams and seductive starlight. It was not the first time the mystery of the universe filled him with awe and inspired him to seek the truth.

For he felt as if Divination, some untamed, unknown energy, was calling him. He could only give over to it.

\* H \*

Sitting at her desk in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, Hermione could not concentrate.

She stared at her pile of parchments on her desk and frowned slightly. Her daily report had been finished a half an hour ago, but she found herself distracted, reflecting on the previous night's events more and more.

She sighed and tried to focus on what still remained to be done *My efforts with S.P.E.W. are going quite well, but I still need to go by Grimmauld Place to interview Kreacher one more time for the documentary archive I'm in charge of.*

*Kreacher's testament to his life and times with the Black family, and now with "Master Potter", is going slowly but surely..*She sighed again. *I should have asked Harry last night but...*

Yet again, her thoughts flew back to the evening before. As much as she tried not to, she remembered Xenophilius *What got into me? ... That sculpture... The Concealment...*

Then the specific sense memory of touching Xeno caused a slight tremble to go through her. *Oh, good Lord...*

She remembered how...after running out of the unplotable Wizarding gallery...she reached the busy Muggle thoroughfare nearby and stopped, only to gaze at the stars staring down at her so intensely. So deep in contemplating their unusual brightness, she hadn't heard Ginny giggling and Ron and Harry calling out to her, snapping her out of her reflection.

"Oi! Hermione!" It was Ron grinning at her. "It was that bad, eh? You had to run out?"

Ginny punched her brother's arm playfully. "Ron, don't be mean."

"Me, mean? But it's the bloody truth!"

"Well, I think ol' Xeno has some pretty interesting pieces in there." Ginny hooked arms with Harry. "I don't know about you, but some of them caused me to get, um, excited." She waggled her eyebrows at Harry teasingly but then turned sharply, saying, "What about you, Hermione?"

Hermione's mouth dropped open slightly, flustered, and before she could think of some comment, Ron groaned, "Hey, your brother's here, do you mind? Coming here was bad enough without thinking that Lovegood's stuff is a bit on the pervy side...thanks a lot, Gin."

"Nah, it's true, Ron. You should have given his work a chance. Some of it's very stimulating," teased Harry, causing Ginny to giggle as her brother's face turned even more red.

"His art work is not pervy, Ron," snapped Hermione. "Harry, don't encourage his blindness about..."

"My what?" Ron gave her a grumpy look.

Hermione touched his arm, clarifying, "I meant... that that is the purpose of art, Ronald...to stimulate, create. It's a good thing, an innate part of us, *anatural* thing. Well, theoretically, that is."

She and Ron stared at each other stubbornly as Harry and Ginny started laughing.

"Thanks, you two! You're really helping Ron understand..."

Ron cut her off. "I don't need to understand any of that rubbish Lovegood glued together in there."

"What?" Hermione closed her eyes for a second and took a deep breath, feeling Ron and she had reached yet another impasse, one that she felt all too keenly more and more. Her temples started throbbing, and she was debating whether to push her point or drop it altogether.

Suddenly wanting to make an early evening of it, she forced herself to change the subject. "Look, I have an early morning. Let's go on to Ginny's favourite Muggle pub, shall we? I can't stay long."

Ron's mulish look softened as he offered, "I thought you might like to stay over at, um, Grimmauld Place tonight?"

"No," she answered a little too quickly. "I must get up early; reports are due."

Ron couldn't mask his disappointment, but Hermione was unable to say anything else, feeling at an uncomfortable standstill with him.

"You two can work out the rest of your night's plans once we get to The Nag's Head pub...let's get going!" urged Ginny impatiently, tugging Harry along with her as she made towards the nearest alleyway.

Ron and Hermione gave each other a stiff-necked look and followed them, Disapparating, and were immediately emerging from another alley in Covent Garden beside the White Lion pub.

Directly across from it was The Nag's Head that Ginny had fallen in love with, so they squiggled their way into the crowded pub, and Hermione was relieved that, after the others were on their second pint, she was able to excuse herself relatively easy.

Pausing from throwing darts momentarily, Ron had given her a quick peck on the cheek and mumbled something about talking about things between them.

She had given him a noncommittal reply and left.

\* H \*

Reflecting on her and Ron's relationship caused Hermione to let out a deep, long sigh.

Suddenly, a lyrical voice snapped her out of her reflections of the evening before.

She turned to the person and was both relieved and simultaneously excited. *Luna!*

Luna's protuberant eyes were shining with intent as she beelined towards her carrying a lumpy object wrapped in brown parchment. "Oh, Hermione, so glad that you're still here. Rolf and I have just been summoned...Fwoopers have been detected in Dorset county! Isn't that wonderful? But we have to leave immediately before black market merchants get there first."

Luna paused as if to catch her breath. "Please, could you deliver this to my father? There are highly delicate contents inside, so it is best if they're hand delivered." She smiled a hopeful smile, beaming. "Perhaps after work?"

Before Hermione could answer, Luna handed her the large clumsy packet as she pointed out, "The number of Fwoopers gone missing from the Magical Menagerie's

licensed stock has risen alarmingly. It's their quills the Snatchers want."

Luna gave Hermione an all-knowing look. "The Fwoopers feathers are in high, elitist demand and unthinkable amounts of Galleons are paid to those who will procure them."

Fluttering out as breezily as she had entered, Luna stopped in the doorway momentarily before exiting, saying, "As you know, the art gallery's address is Arch 64, Camden Town, but Daddy's atelier attached to it is also unplottable, so the local Muggles won't disturb him: Arch 63½, the Catacombs. Oh, yes...to lower the concealment charm just say Dukuwaqa Dorset."

\* H \*

Hermione exited from the Chalk Farm tube station with Luna's packet held tightly in her arms. She continued to stroll slowly south near the train tracks*During the daytime, the neighbourhood looks so different...*

As she reached Arch 65, she gave a look at the ceramic art gallery, Painted Earth, and took a deep breath.*Xeno is near!* She shut her eyes momentarily, sensing magic nearby, and a tingling went through her. *What do I say to him? Do I just hand this to him and leave? Do I apologize for touching him last night? Do I act like nothing happened?*

She bit her lower lip contemplating on what to say, or not, as she walked past Arch 64, where the uncharted Open Gallery was hidden behind charms against Muggles, and stopped. *Here I am...*

As she paused before continuing, she berated herself.*What's wrong with you? You know a part of you wants to see him... discuss his art work... discuss what happened last night...*

She sighed heavily, doubting herself. She hadn't refused Luna's request to drop off the package to Xenophilus; indeed, she hadn't even questioned why she felt she had to travel Muggle-style on the underground to Camden Town. *I could Apparate anywhere, and no one here would give me a second blink.*

*And Luna did say the contents were delicate...* She felt instinctively overprotective about the package, and truth be told, she had enjoyed the extra time it took taking the tube and walking to muse over what could be inside it. *Knowing Luna... anything!* Smiling, she let her pondering over the contents distract her from thinking about who she had to actually give it to.

But now, as she stood before the undetectable entrance to Xenophilus' atelier, she questioned herself yet again.*What am I doing?*

Her heart thudded in unknown anticipation, and her body thrummed with an energy she couldn't remember ever feeling as she raised her wand discreetly and whispered, "Dukuwaqa Dorset."

She gasped softly as a high-bricked wall and archway entrance appeared before her. She took a deep breath and went through it, following an old cobbled path to a dark-bricked dwelling. She found herself entering an external alcove and made her way to a paneled double door. She raised the knocker and pounded it a few times and waited.

She could hear Bach's *Cello Suites* playing loudly from inside. She huffed. *He probably can't hear the knocker...* She tried the handle and started to pull out her wand when suddenly a wispy Patronus-like figure of a rabbit appeared and asked, "Who calls?"

Taken back momentarily, Hermione slowly answered, "Hermione. Hermione Granger."

The apparition disappeared and within seconds the door opened, as if of its own will. As she slowly stepped in, she heard, "Miss Granger, please enter...come through to the main atelier."

It was Xenophilus' voice, and Hermione followed it, entering into a large studio.

She gasped softly and stopped in her tracks, speechless. Whether it was due to the large size of the atelier, the multiple eclectic areas, or catching sight of Xeno in action, shirtless with a kiln's burning light highlighting his sinewy, muscular form, smudged with dirt and clay and glistening from sweat, she couldn't say at that exact moment.

She just watched as he swerved and turned, thrust, thrust again, and then closed off the fire to the kiln.

He was panting from the exertion as he crossed to her, saying, "Forgive me, Miss Granger. You've quite caught me in the heat of things."

Hermione realized that her mouth had dropped open and eventually mustered her wits enough to say the obvious. "Luna asked me to drop this package off to you."

"Ah, yes, she and Scamander are off again on another one of their naturalist, magizoological projects. Wonderful!" He gestured to a sitting area of sorts in the corner past the kiln, consisting of an L-shaped sofa bed tucked in the corner and other large, lumpy seating objects, beanbag chairs in various sizes, placed around different sized tables here and there. "Please, have a seat, and I'll be right with you."

She blinked at him, taking in his sweaty, taut torso smudged with dried clay and other marks that sparked an impulse in her to reach out and wipe them off him. She was unable to not notice the soft tufts of hair his lean muscular chest had all the way down to and beyond his naval, forming an eye-catching treasure trail.

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

An awkward silence ensued, but then Xenophilus cordially excused himself. "I'll just clean myself up a bit. Please, sit. Please make yourself comfortable. Tea, yes?"

Hermione nodded and watched him go off into a back room. She slowly turned around and made her way over to the sitting area, taking in the smells and sights of the atelier.

She placed Luna's package down on an unusual, avant-garde-looking coffee table in front of the L-shaped sofa bed and sat on its edge. From this spot, she could see that the other side of the spacious room was curved and loosely divided into different work areas for different disciplines of art.

Directly across from her was an area full of canvases for oil painting and rolls of coarse parchment for sketching. There were different studio easels: radial, desk, and a French one. This area flowed into a space with different sculptures made of different materials...some from what looked like papier-mâché to clay ones to a few select works in chiselled stone. Each unique piece was at a different stage of completion. The impression of the work studio suddenly became a bit overwhelming until Hermione realised, *He's put all of his imagination and passion for inventions and writing into the visual arts...*

Hermione trembled slightly as one piece caught her eye in particular. It seemed to be an earlier version of the Concealment sculpture that had so captivated her the night before in the gallery.

She started to rise to cross over to it, but just then, Xenophilus entered with a large tray laden with an oversized teapot, cups and saucers, and napkins.

As she sat back down, she noted that he had thrown on a loose cotton tunic top and felt a slight tingle as she saw that the strings tying the tunic's front were unravelled a wee bit, revealing his form. She felt a warm thrum of energy course through her as he placed the tray down and started to undo Luna's package. *Oh, good Lord, can he tell*

that I'm attracted to him?

"Ah!" He exclaimed in admiration. "Just what we need. Dirigible Plum and pomegranate muffins and some very delicate phials of Gurdyroot extraction, I believe." He paused and held one phial towards a lit sconce, sniffed it, and then held it up again as if appreciating a rare gem. "I believe it is Plimpy oil."

He smiled warmly at Hermione. "It's good that they were packaged and handled so carefully. One repels the other. The Gurdyroot extraction and Plimpy oil, that is." His smile broadened in appreciation. "My utmost gratitude to you for bringing these by, Miss Granger."

He crossed over to the other side of the room in what seemed to be the painting area of the studio and opened the top drawer of a work cabinet full of paints and brushes.

Hermione could see containers of multiple paint thinners and what seemed to be other solvents with brushes and stirring sticks soaking in them; her nose scrunched as she detected the smell of turpentine and linseed oils wafting out, but there were other scents and containers she couldn't immediately make out. She watched how Xenophilus gently placed the different phials in selected areas, and then, giving her a kind smile, he crossed over and turned his full attention to his guest.

"I believe Luna told me once that you liked mint tea?" he asked, pouring a cup full.

As the fragrance of freshly crushed and boiled mint steamed out and pushed aside the pleasantly musky scents of oils, sweet clay and other intriguing smells, Hermione could only nod in pleasure.

She gave him a small smile as he placed the tea attentively in front of her and genteely served the homemade pastries.

The muffins looked delicious, but she hesitated, even though her tummy rumbled at the sight of them, reminding her that she hadn't eaten since morning. She realised she had never actually tasted Dirigible Plums. She suddenly recalled the disgusting Gurdyroot infusion beverage Lovegood had served her, Ron and Harry all those years ago.

He apparently saw her apprehension and gently pointed out, "The muffins should have a citrusy but pleasantly sweet taste to them."

"Thank you, I'll have one." She felt her face blush warm as he handed her an extra saucer.

"Of course the *punica granatum*'s taste differs, depending on the variety or cultivar of the individual pomegranate and its ripeness." He gave her a gentle smile as he sat on the sofa bed, joining her and pouring himself tea.

The whirl and hum of magically stirring brushes, wheels and cogs, and churns here and there registered soothingly along with the Bach cello suites playing. These sounds created a lulling, synchronized rhythm, and along with the warmth from the kiln and the pleasant fragrances wafting in the air, they all combined to have an incredibly relaxing effect on Hermione.

She sipped the delicious tea and easily let slip out, "Mr Lovegood, I must apologise."

He raised his eyebrows in speculation. "Whatever for?"

"Last night." She noticed that Xenophilus became still. *Does he truly not remember? Or is he merely being polite? Or has he utterly forgotten?* Last night... when I touched your face..."

Xenophilus straightened up a bit; she saw him carefully think and then decide about something, answering, "There's nothing to apologise for. It's only natural that the body responds to touch something or responds to being touched. We were created for it."

"Well, yes." She felt as if he were holding something back, covering up his true feelings by spouting pragmatic platitudes. Hoping to make him speak more personally with her, she confided teasingly, "But I don't usually go around touching just anyone's face."

He seemed to appreciate her comment because his face relaxed into a grin, as if quixotically amused. But when he spoke, he seemed keen on keeping an impersonal tone about things. "As I said last night, the Concealment piece was made to broaden one's tactile awareness, to elevate one's mind."

Xenophilus watched her blow on her tea before sipping it and seemed momentarily to lose his thought, but then rallied to make his point. "A haptic creation for a fuller sensory experience..." his Ravenclaw sharp mind quoted.

But Hermione's eidetic memory finished his sentence as she remembered in a flash and said, "It is made to be touched."

Xenophilus gulped and then cleared his throat slightly, saying, "Exactly."

*Is he blushing?* The tables seemed to be turned, and Hermione was tingling from head to toe at the realisation that he was attracted to her but trying to distract her from noticing it too keenly.

"Do you paint, Miss Granger? Make pottery? Sketch? Silhouette cutting?"

She gave him a broad grin, feeling giddy from this realisation that the attraction was mutual. She almost giggled as she replied, "No, nothing like that, nothing at all. Although, I do admire the few but brilliant works of Joanna Koerten."

Hermione's forehead furrowed in thought. "And I once saw an exhibit of Adele Schopenhauer's work with my parents..."

"Ah yes, Luise Adelaide Lavinia...my Pandora loved her Muggle fairy tales, poetry, and her work as a papercut artist. She was quite inquisitive that way. My Pandora. Loved all things, Muggle and Wizard alike."

"Luna's mother?"

Xenophilus held Hermione's gaze, seeming to have some internal conflict with himself, something painful, vivid, but then it passed, and he replied, "Yes."

Hermione understood then that he still carried the pain of his past loss deeply. "I'm sorry for your loss... but it's wonderful how Luna must be so very much like Pandora. Luna said her mother was an exceptional witch. Brilliant. Quite brilliant. As is she."

"Yes." Xenophilus blinked hard. "Yes. She was." He shook his head slightly as if coming out of a daze. "And Luna is. Thank you, Miss Granger, for your kind remarks."

"Not so much kind as they are true." She gave him a warm smile and felt that a hurdle of sorts had been overcome *that why he is so hesitant? His pain of the loss of her is even now so very real to him?*

Seeing how he was so delicate about Pandora still, she gently changed the subject. "You're making pottery?"

He snapped to attention. "Actually, it's a commission for several ceramic pieces." He pointed his finger in the air. "Which reminds me..." He crossed over and stoked the fires underneath the kiln. "I must allow the pieces to bake for roughly 18 hours."

As he attended to the hearth, Hermione rose and slowly meandered towards the unfinished version of the Concealment piece. "May I touch it?" Like the finished work in the gallery last evening, she felt drawn towards this one as well.

Xenophilius looked over and saw which piece she was referring to. He raised his eyebrows speculatively for a few seconds and then cautioned, "Be careful with some of the edges; they'll cut you. They are still in their raw and jagged form."

Xenophilius Accioed his wand and sent a spell at the fires. "Nothing like a little charm work to keep the heat consistent."

After ensuring that the heat was being kept at the same level, he observed Hermione's movements and mesmerised attention to the sculpture. He gave her a curious look. "Everyone loves experiencing the artistic, given the chance."

He watched her in silence for a few seconds more before offering, "You must explore and create artwork for yourself, Miss Granger. I welcome you to challenge yourself and contribute your own special touch, to explore the three-dimensional sensation of fully immersing yourself with another form, in another form and movement..."

Listening to Xenophilius, she found herself caressing the unfinished Concealment piece, carefully outlining the jagged, sharp angles and uneven form *It's not yet evolved and been given softer edges and deeper grooves...* *Hmm, three-dimensional sensation*, she thought and then said aloud, "Like making love?"

It had seemingly come out of nowhere. And Hermione couldn't immediately register what she had actually said. Then as she realised it, she couldn't believe that ~~that~~ *he* had actually said it.

She looked over at Xenophilius and saw that his face was flushed. And although his eyes had a deep sadness to them, they flashed with mutual understanding as he forced a gentle, acknowledging smile and nodded, replying softly, "Why, yes, Miss Granger. Exactly."

He took a step towards her. "It is like making love."

\* H \*