

The Valiant Never

by R J Lupins Kat

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****Reviews are much appreciated****

Prologue: Through the Love of a Child

Chapter 1 of 36

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Through the Love of a Child

Dreams are but the grace notes of great actions.

Donovan checked the stray tear roughly with the back of hand. It wouldn't do for his mum to catch him crying like his little sister. It was all right for Katie – she was barely two. And a girl. But seven-year-old boys did not cry. No, they didn't. Not even when their best friend had gone away. Forever.

That's what his mum had said. Forever. Captain wasn't ever coming back. Ever. But he was right here, though, and Donovan couldn't quite grasp why. Why'd Mum and Daddy wrap him in an old bath towel – his face, too – and put him in a hole in the back garden beneath the Yew tree? He was so still, his black tail limp.

Donovan watched as his daddy refilled the hole Captain lay in with dirt and sod. How could Captain breathe with all that dirt on him? He, Donovan, could only count to twenty beneath the covers before it grew too hot for him. And Captain had no light – he was afraid of the dark, just like Donovan. And storms. Donovan looked up at the rain clouds edging in. Who was going to protect him out here from the rain?

Donovan felt his mum's hands drape his chest from behind. "He's in a better place, Sweetie," she said lowly, her voice tight. *A better place?* thought Donovan. His room was a better place than out here. His room where Captain would curl next to him at night, a wall-light keeping the monsters of the dark away.

Another tear spilled from his eye. He didn't bother to check it.

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Donovan lay beneath his bedclothes, fits of agitation erupting from his small body. His dreams were restless, his physical form following his mind.

Darkness enveloped him, but he could see forms, shapes, and knew the sounds were coming from just through that heavy wooden door before him. Voices – grown-ups yelling, a dog barking frantically. Donovan heaved the door open and rushed in, knowing what he'd find.

It was a playhouse lit with wall candles, and the stage was down below him. But the actors didn't all stay on the stage; they were all about in the seats, yelling, throwing

balls of fire at each other. They didn't look English; *they must be desert people*, he thought, their dressing gowns like those of the Arab sheiks. But his consideration for them disappeared when he looked upon the stage below. *Captain?* His heart paused in mid-beat. Had Captain returned to him?

Donovan called to his dog, but the great black beast did not, or could not, hear him. He was growling and barking madly at a woman there on the stage with him. She, too, was throwing fire and colored lights from a lean torch at him. *It didn't seem a game*, thought Donovan. Not the way Captain was growling at her. It wasn't the way he played with Donovan.

Captain lunged at the woman, but she caught him with one of her colored lights and threw him backwards toward the stage curtain. It looked just like when he flew back when the car hit him after he'd chased his toy ball into the lane.

No! Donovan ran to his dog. He wasn't going to let him go away again. He was going to bring him back home.

Captain hit the ground just as he parted the stage curtain. Donovan could see it was black behind the curtain. Captain was afraid of the dark. So was Donovan.

But it didn't matter; he wanted his best friend back.

He scrambled onto the stage, running for the stage curtain beneath which stuck out the tip of a furry black tail and a single padded foot, still and limp. Donovan hesitated, too afraid to stick his head behind the curtain for all manner of monster could be lurking there. But his best friend was scared, too, and Donovan had to help him.

He reached his thin arms through the curtain, as far as he could go without his face touching the cloth, and felt about. Coarse fur tickled his fingers and he grabbed tightly, his fingers grasping the furry flesh with but one single, determined purpose – to bring his friend back.

Donovan braced his foot against a stone wall at the curtain's side and pulled with all his might. He pulled, begging Captain to help him. He pulled, tears flowing for the love of his dog. He pulled, determined above all reason that Captain was not leaving him. He pulled.

And the curtain parted, and Captain slipped back through with a jerk, back to Donovan.

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Donovan woke to his mum's calls for breakfast. He crawled out of bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes with a yawn, the shaggy black fur falling from his fingers without notice.

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Eddie Toilswell hated the night shift. There was no one about to pass the time, and the quiet of the offices gave him the willies after a bit. One never knew what was kept up in some of the rooms, and he hated clearing up others' spots of mess they'd left, breaking the rules.

Of course, Grayson Beard owed him a pint after Eddie's custodial duties of this past evening. Being night security did have its advantages, and racking up favors was one of them. This time it was Grayson's peccadillo upon Level Four that was going to wind Grayson in Azkaban for smuggling contraband and land Eddie in St. Mungo's with a serious bite. The man was getting as bad as Weasley with his Muggle toys still on display, though he'd been promoted.

But Eddie didn't log in the finding of one large, mangy mutt flopped before Grayson's open door. No, the haggard creature looked death warmed over – it wouldn't surprise Eddie if it was close to it, illegal cross-breeding of magical creatures being what it was – and Eddie wasn't too keen on either being bitten while it ran loose in his patrolled corridors, or filling out the quadruple paperwork now necessary for anything 'out of the ordinary'.

So instead, Eddie took this as an opportunity for Grayson to owe him. With a flick of his wand, he'd levitated the creature to the Visitor's Entrance, programmed the booth and sent the bag of fur and bones to the streets of London. Better the Muggle dog catcher require a Memory Charm than Eddie need a new post for yet another 'out of the ordinary' report. Besides, the blokes on Level Three needed the work, now that You-Know-Who had disappeared again, leaving matters quiet. But then, the last time he had returned, it was here, late at night. The next day Eddie had started working the overnight shift.

Yes, Grayson owed him a pint.

Chapter 1: Fringes of Reality

Chapter 2 of 36

Drunken Brit-speak highlights the arrival of a familiar face... though he's not quite who he seems. Then there's Hermione's dreams - dominated by surrealism and... "him"...

****Reviews are much appreciated****

Chapter 1: Fringes of Reality

"You're barking, I tell you. *Fairie Lights Fare... Flare... Fuh-fair...*" He staggered forward, his concentration fully on the word his whisky-laced mouth refused to form. His knee regretted the change of focus, a bruise flowering from its chance meeting with the letter box.

"A-faire, mate; *Fairie Lights Affair*," offered his companion, only slightly less foxed. "'Twas the cornerstone of their best work." He steadied himself against the brick façade of The Rose & Guild, the pub having finally forced their leave at three o'clock in the morning. A faint streetlamp illuminated his friend's face enough to show the grimace of disgust, a sneering 'huh' his only remark.

"You never were a great fan of Witchhunt, Kent. Jus' jealous, I 'spose," he continued, a drunken air of haughtiness forcing him to straighten his tall, lean pose and continue his concentrated effort to walk upright. "Just 'cause *you* didn't get asked to join 'em..."

Kent snorted. "If you're gonna start that again, Nigel, I'm App'in outta here," Kent said, his slurred words clear enough. He'd heard enough about how the in-demand new band had vied for Nigel's guitar work. Bloody traitor.

"Bloody traitor," Kent added as soon as the words had crossed his fuzzy mind.

It was Nigel's turn to snort. "You're too bloody *pissed* to Apparate," he taunted, though he himself was hardly better. "And traitor? The band's been dead for years. Couldahadittall," he slobbered, "but a bloody 'nip in the ear... Goodnight, Hobgoblins..."

He grasped the corner of the building, using the wall to steady his turn into the alley. "Gotta leak the lizard, mate."

Kent steadied himself against the opposing wall to the alley, his bleary eyes squinting at the sooty trash bins London's finest kept filled. While Nigel attended to business in hand, Kent shuffled his shorter, pudgy frame deeper between the buildings, curious at the mound of Muggle take-away containers spread about on the pavement. Perhaps a stray bottle or two from the pub...?

A girlish squeak erupted within the alley's confined silence, causing Nigel to start.

"Nige! Nige!" cried Kent, anxiety evident in his stage-whisper. "Nige, come're!"

Recovering his form and particulars, Nigel hesitantly joined his mate, the latter staring down in horrific amazement at the lump of rags about.

"Bloody hell, mate; it's just some manky ole' knickers! Ya take the life outta me with that call," he chastised, a sudden sense of sobriety awakened in him.

"Nah, mate, look here," Kent reiterated hurriedly, leaning on the bin for support as he nudged the pile with his booted toe. The rags weakly groaned.

"For the love of... Who ya suppose that is?" Nigel asked in nervous awe.

"Looks right peaky, that one. Nearly fell over 'im, his robes covering his head. Let's have a shufti," he added, once again relying on his toe to do the dirty work and edge the material off the person's face. It was too dark to discern his features, but the shadowing of facial hair suggested their discovery was male.

Nigel recalled himself and slipped out his wand, glancing about to ensure their privacy. *Lumos*," he muttered, slowly kneeling down to light the figure. The unconscious man was pale and scruffy, his long black hair straggly, his features gaunt. Kent nudged the head some more with his toe, bringing the face into full wand light.

"Blind me, Kent!" Nigel cried, reeling up so fast he lost balance and landed backwards, falling on his posterior. "It's Stubby Boardman!"

-o-o-o-

Ethereal pale light diffused within the heavy mist, giving illumination to the figure drifting nearer. Only the adjacent shorelines remained clear, their evergreen lush against the tangible, translucent white of the lake's vapors. The wooden vessel's passenger stood serenely upon the bow, a richly blue cloak shadowing her genteel features. She was exotic, of heavenly nature. Yet she was powerful.

The soft lap on the shore was the only break in the silence of the morn, the only verbal cue of the mistress' approach. Yet the figure did not appear to notice her, standing apprehensively upon the grassy sand, entranced by the unfamiliar sight, yet utterly aware of every sound and movement about her.

*It was then she felt him. His presence. His essence. Behind her **just** behind her. **Him**. She dare not move lest he fade into the very mists she stood within. The damp breeze kissed her flesh, carrying his scent. Her attention heightened to absolute awareness, his aura commanding her every sense, the lady of the lake forsaken to the Firmament. Wisps of his breath caressed her skin, tittering across her ear. He was near. So near the fine hairs upon her neck flitted at his soft exhale. Heat radiated from him, sweet and damp, enveloping her with confirmation of his embodiment. He was real; he was here.*

*She could not turn, could not breathe but the shallowest of breaths. Every nerve was sensitive to the slightest fluttering of displaced air. Her eyes drifted half closed, a strain upon her so tight she felt faint. He was drawing yet nearer, his fingers grazing the slight divot beneath her earlobe. A rippling shiver danced down her body. He was going to touch her, turn her, show his image, tell her fate, reveal her soul's desire. Reveal **himself**.*

*Emotional restraint gave way to unbidden tears, the energy within too powerful to keep in check. Fingers barely brushed her chin, his soundless whispers played upon her lips. The lightest pressure pulled her face toward her shoulder, toward him, her eyes drifting open, and she knew she **knew***

"Hermione? Hermione? Hull lo?" A well-manicured, ringed finger waved before her, snapping her reverie. *Damn it.*

Her internal swearing was born of both the loss of his identity and the fact that she'd been daydreaming again. The third time that day, in fact, over that ~~that~~ *stream*. It was getting rather annoying, actually.

Hermione J. Granger scowled briefly at herself and turned to the elegant hand, its owner smiling indulgently at her.

"Sorry, Mr. Bailey. I was just admiring the view. It's quite lovely, don't you think?" she added, hoping he'd not delve further into her behavior. It was not like her to become so distracted, and she was afraid he'd regret his decision to bring her along. She was supposed to be his aide, after all, not a holiday-maker taking in the sights.

"It's all right, Hermione. 'Tis a right lovely sight, to be sure." The debonair gentleman clad in navy dress robes allowed his eyes to travel back to the sight before him, wistful in expression. The rich foliage before them trailed thickly into the inlet of the Atlantic. "Of all the lands I've transversed in my years of service, I must say that Eire has always held a special cove in my heart. Reminds me of when I was a lad, a fresh young wizard out to conquer the world..."

His reminiscent monologue traveled a tour of distant lands and witches fair, all the while Hermione's mind drifted yet again.

*Who was that upon the lake, the lady so entrancing, so charismatic? And that man behind herself ~~she~~ **knew** it was a man who exactly was he? And why did he make her feel so... so **intense**? A part of her way down deep in a place she'd never admit to wished she'd followed Divination just hair longer. She'd love to interpret this particular dream.*

No, no she wouldn't, she reminded herself firmly. Divination was woolly at best, and certainly not to be relied upon for any sort of wise counsel. It was just her subconscious working overtime, making up for the tediousness of the past few weeks. By incorporating the landscapes of the locations she'd been subject to this past fortnight and a half, her mind was attempting to rectify the boredom of reality with the excitement of expectations.

Acting as an intern aide for a Ministry International Diplomat for the summer was, to Hermione's way of thinking, a perfect manner in which to spend her holiday from university. She had just completed her second year as a Political Science major, her intent to enter international relations within the Magical community upon graduation. The Good side her side needed all the help it could receive. What with Voldemort not quite gone...

An involuntary shudder passed through her. She did not care to relive *those* memories. An occasional nightmare reminded her enough of the trials at the end of her seventh year at Hogwarts. She'd never seen first hand the dark wizard who'd brought such terror, such upheaval, such hatred to Man- and Wizard-kind. Not until then.

She shuddered again. She didn't bear reminding.

"Thus if you can acquire appropriate dress robes for the occasion, I believe it would be a grand experience for you." Mortimer Bailey had switched subjects on her, and she hesitated in an effort to recover.

"Dress robes I have, Mr. Bailey," she offered, hoping for a guide of direction from him. He didn't fail her.

"Subtle and conservative, Hermione," he lectured with a parental smile. "It is a charity formal, not a Bonfire Night gala. There will be refreshment of the intoxicating nature, as well as music, art, and a silent auction. All proceeds, of course, go to Saint Mungo's."

"Of course," Hermione conceded quietly, still hoping for more information so she would not have to admit she'd been distracted. Again. "Will your wife be attending as well?"

He chuckled. "Melva? Oh yes; she is very much in her element at charity functions. We will subscribe to the affair as patrons of a cause; however, I will also need to act my part as an ambassador of goodwill, as many foreign dignitaries will be in attendance. Thus you come in, my dear," he explained courteously. He was not unkind, but Hermione could feel his tendency toward self-importance and condescension, however unintentional it may be.

"Yes, sir," she replied, checking her abrupt desire to say that yes, she knew her position, that that was her whole reason for spending her holiday working for him rather than attending summer classes and speeding along her education. For all the good it seemed to be doing for her, that is. For weeks she'd been little more than a glorified errand girl, learning little of diplomacy and more than her share of tea service sets. This was *not* what she'd had in mind.

"Excellent, my dear. Now I'd best return. Chairman O'Shea will be ready to conclude our meeting for today, and we've a dinner to prepare for this evening." He looked at her with a hint of concern. "You will be focused for our soirée tonight, yes?" So he *had* noticed.

"Yes, sir." She blushed at being caught and rushed an explanation. "I'm sorry; I didn't sleep well last night," she added in all honesty, "and I'm rather weary. I'm sure a healthy nap will bring me back to par, sir."

"I'm sure it will," he agreed indulgently. "If you'll excuse me, I'll leave you to your musings." He glanced back over his shoulder to the gathering in the distance beneath the Irish colored tent. "Chairman O'Shea appears refreshed. Until this evening, Hermione," he concluded, a tip of his head toward her an echo of his propriety.

She watched him go, his manner a mantra of assuredness and control. She had to give him that he knew his affectation for his role of diplomat. She supposed there was something she would take from this mind-numbing position. Perhaps this upcoming charity she didn't even know when it was would be a generous break in the monotony.

Hermione looked back over the water encircled by the land of Kerry. It truly *was* beautiful, she admitted. But she could not appreciate its grace for the haunting memory of a shrouded loch and a fleeting figment of... *longing*.

Chapter 2: Conversations Left Unsaid

Chapter 3 of 36

What we say can have significant impact on our lives. What we don't say can have even more...

Reviews are much appreciated

Chapter 2: Conversations Left Unsaid

"Have you tried the scalloped Grindylow, Sir Jameson? It's quite the thing," Mortimer Bailey said between bites, his laden fork already poised just steps from his half-full mouth.

"My dear sir, I cannot move past this delightful Yorkshire Pudding. Who'd have ever thought titchy bits of Satsuma could compliment such a dish? Not I, surely." Any further comment was cut short as his own lips wrapped about his silver, crested spoon. Hermione rolled her eyes. Their evening meal had begun with unabashed praising of the courses served. It then moved on to Quidditch, but returned to proper black pudding cooking techniques and mulling wine. It did hesitate for the briefest of moments on the fair treatment of house-elves (at which Hermione immediately honed into the discussion), but with one satisfied moan of culinary pleasure, had again fallen back to dining delicacies.

She toyed with her own meal, staring unseeingly at the runner beans between her tines.

"'Tis grand, sure," their host Chairman O'Shea interrupted with a smile, "but have ye indeed set upon these most enchanting apples? To be sure I've never set my eyes upon such beauty," he added, reverently holding aloft a large, polished deep-green apple. It was all Hermione could do not to snap to the party that it was only a bleeding *apple*, not some sanctified relic. What happened to the murmurs of treatises of trade between Romania and Ireland? The snippets of debate she'd heard in the entry hall over British-American educational exchange? Where were the *intellectual* discussions?

"Indeed I have, Chairman," Bailey answered with an excited brush to his voice. He was obviously delighted to share his experience. "Upon my visit to Glastonbury Abbey years ago, a priest offered a nosh of simple fare, but I recall vividly the beauty and succulent flavor of the apples he offered. Like none I'd ever encountered, I tell you. It seems they were a gift from the Mistress of Avalon..."

Hermione ground her teeth. Her mentor was obviously warming to his subject, and she could dismiss any hopes of meaningful conversation before pudding.

"Merlin himself frequented the Isle of the Blessed, where his protégé Arthur was interred. It is, as a matter of course, unplottable. The High Priestess there protects its location both for its unsurpassable fruit and artifacts of our history."

"Artifacts?" Diplomat MacCaine prodded. Hermione's attention rose slightly. At least it was *history*, even if it did border on food. Ron would love this.

"Oh yes," Bailey continued, his fare forgotten as his voice hushed as though imparting juicy gossip. He leaned in over the table, encouraging his fellow diners do the same. "It is rumored that the very wand used to defeat Grindelwald is displayed upon the garden altar there. It was never used again after that battle, and was donated as a gift of history to Merlin's great-something granddaughter. She was named after his wife Nimüe, I hear. But 'tis all speculation, of course," he qualified, his voice returning to normal as he reclined once again in his chair.

"Grindelwald. Now there was Dark Wizard if ever I'd seen one," commented Lady Bain, Ambassador for Northern Irish International Commerce. "Was just a wee lass when he came into the picture. Dark times, they were."

"Those were nothin' to the reigns of You-Know-Who," O'Shea said, his words a slight tremble. Murmurs of agreement rounded the table.

"Yes, but he's gone now, isn't he?" McCaine's aide asked from Hermione's end of the table.

"Not quite," Lady Bain answered. "He's only gone *again*. Rufus Scrimgeour won't discuss it, but the Ministry hasn't let up on security and intelligence."

"No one rightly knows what happened that night two years ago," O'Shea said. "The *Prophet* had gone on about You-Know-Who showing up personal-like in Muggle London then disappearin' again in the Ministry. There was a grand fight there again, just like two years before. And once again Harry Potter was in the strife of it. Only he and his companions know the tale, and they've said nary a word."

Hermione's skin prickled. She didn't like where this conversation was headed, but she knew she couldn't change its course. Her only hope was slip out of range.

Hoping for inconspicuousness, she set down her fork gently and subtly edged back her chair. An exit lay directly behind her, not twenty feet. If she could only...

"Harry Potter?" Bailey inquired. "Why, my Hermione is best friends with the young man."

No, no. Please, no, Mr. Bailey. Please don't. Don't ask. Please...

"Receiving owls all the time from him. They were at school together, if I recall. In fact, it seems she was there with him on the night in question." He turned and looked down the long table at her, his voice raised. "What-say, Hermione? What really happened that night? Did You-Know-Who really die?"

Hermione's eyes were wide, the fear coursing through her apparent on her face. *This* is what she wanted to avoid. *This* is what she absolutely did *not* want to discuss. And *this* is what everyone else wanted from her.

Silence enveloped the stately dining room. All eyes bore upon her form, curious and eager. Bile rose in her throat. The nightmarish memories began to cloud her mind and vision. She could not do this again. She *would not* do this not for Bailey, not for a room full of diplomats, not for anybody.

Casting aside all pretense of stealth, Hermione rose abruptly, knocking back her high-back chair, turned and fled the room without a word. Calls followed her departure, but she ignored them, just as she ignored the guards at the front entrance. She was through the massive oak doors and down the curved garden steps before her blindness was complete. She paused limply, drained, and squeezed her eyes shut, allowing the saltwater to flee and restore her vision.

Why did he have to bring it up? Why? He knew she didn't like to discuss that event. After learning her relationship with The Chosen One, he'd plagued her with questions about that night for days. Respectful though she was, she had emphatically refused its discussion. And he had let it go, accepting her decision. Until now.

He didn't understand. None of them did. They weren't there. They didn't see what she saw. They didn't face what she and her friends had faced. For her it was worse than the first fight in the Ministry in her fifth year. It was worse even than the attack on Hogwarts. Dumbledore's death was horrid, but she hadn't witnessed it. And she'd never witnessed *him*.

"Ms. Granger?" A voice from behind startled her. She quickly brushed the tears from her face and composed herself.

"Yes?" she replied, her back remaining to her intruder. She concentrated on clearing the croak from her voice.

"Are you going to be all right?" His voice was young, sympathetic, friendly. She turned, finding herself facing a young wizard, not much older than she if at all. She'd seen him before, his dark features and short black hair distinctive in the Irish location. His voice was London, his face India. His black eyes reflected his tentative smile.

Her lips returned the gesture in reassurance.

"Yes. I'll be fine, Mr.... er, I'm sorry. I don't know your name," she admitted, her sorrow temporarily forgotten in her lack of preparedness.

"Raj. Raj MacGregor." He held out his right hand in offering. Hermione clasped it distractedly, her face quizzical.

"MacGregor? But..." Her eyes blatantly took in his appearance. He laughed.

"I know; I get that all the time. I take after my mum. She was from a small village outside Calcutta. My dad's from Glasgow originally."

"Oh. But you've not a Scots accent," she reasoned, a brow quirking in thought. He released her hand as he answered, his smile still light and genuine.

"We moved about as I was growing up. I had a governess after Mum died." His voice softened as though a pain he'd long since hidden had resurfaced briefly.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, sincerely so. She wondered at what had happened to leave him motherless at a young enough age to require a governess, and why he so had one rather than attending Hogwarts or another school of sorcery.

"It was long ago and " Whatever he was going to say was cut short by the calls from the front door. Mr. Bailey and Chairman O'Shea were calling to her, asking after her state. Though Hermione was sure they were genuinely concerned, she suddenly found herself with no desire to be in their company, questions and looks of pity, confusion or blatant curiosity thrown at her. She needed space.

"I'll be all right, sirs," she called back to them, hoping she sounded stronger than she felt. "I just need a bit of time, if you don't mind." Their assent was implied with their slight nods and retreating forms. Hermione sighed. "Thank you, Raj, for your concern. But I'll be fine, just as I said."

She turned and began to walk away aimlessly, the pebbled garden path giving gently beneath her feet.

"Would you mind my company?" Raj asked after her. He sounded hopeful, as though permission granted would be a rare joy. She paused, turning her head but slightly.

"If you wish."

His long stride caught quickly up to her, and she continued on, her gaze following the path as her mind wavered betwixt painful memories and current concerns.

They walked in companionable silence for a while, the fading light giving way to dusk, the dusk slipping into nightfall. Ground torches along the path lit themselves, guiding the pair through the landscaped grounds.

"Why did you move about so much?" Hermione inquired after a time. Her eyes remained on her surroundings and her step never faltered.

His answer was immediate, as though he'd been expecting the question.

"After my mum died so suddenly, my dad devoted all his time to his work. He's a map maker; we've traveled all across Britain, the Continent..." He heard her unvoiced question, and replied after a pause, "She was killed by one of his Death Eaters, just before his first downfall. I barely knew her."

Hermione stopped suddenly, her surprise evident. She wasn't expecting his answer at all, but even less so its content. Raj stopped after a couple lonely strides and turned to face her.

"Don't," he said, raising his palm to her. "Don't say it. It doesn't make my loss worse than others' just because she was murdered by his followers. Many lost more, often more brutally. Your friend Harry he lost both his parents, and nearly himself. And, it seems, he's been marked as a personal vendetta as well."

"He has," Hermione supplied immediately, reluctant though she was to discuss Harry's business. But she felt she owed it to him to set the record straight. "And he's lost not only his parents, but the closest he's ever had to a father figure in both Dumbledore and Sirius. And Sirius never even had a chance at life." Raj nodded, a look of empathy

upon his face. Then his brow furrowed darkly, his jaw set.

"One day, Ms. Granger, Lord Voldemort will get his comeuppance. I promise you." With that he turned abruptly and set off back down the path.

Hermione watched him fade into the darkness, disconcertion flooding her thoughts. She'd seen determined, cold fury in his eyes, heard it in his voice, and not the slightest hesitation in using Voldemort's name. So her only question had become: who was Raj MacGregor? *Really?*

Chapter 3: Misconceptions & Other Half-Truths

Chapter 4 of 36

Memories plague us all; only the most trusting share everything. Hermione's not that trusting. Neither is Raj. And that is what worries her. Greatly.

****Reviews are much appreciated****

Chapter 3: Misconceptions & Other Half-Truths

A dreamless sleeping potion would have been the logical course to have taken. But logic was not her entire make-up, and sometimes emotion overruled intelligence.

She had gone to her bed exhausted. Yet as she had closed her eyes, Hermione's mind had desperately sought her previous night's dream. She wanted no, *needed* to see it again, to look for clues and hidden meanings, catch what on first visit she'd missed.

Her quest had proven elusive. Instead, snippets of her concerns and deeply repressed thoughts had resurfaced, intermingled, and whispered feverishly in her mind. Slumber had fled.

The constellations quivered now against their rich onyx velvet, silently instructing the Centaurs and astrologists of the night. Hermione could only gaze unseeingly, her mind replaying her conversation with Raj MacGregor hours before. *"And Sirius never even had a chance at life... never had a chance... a chance..."* Sirius. Of all the riddles and memories and speak of her day, it was her brief reference to Sirius that her mind could not let go.

Four years since his fate to the Veil, and she had had only passing thoughts of him, usually in relation to Harry, or perhaps to her middle years at Hogwarts, when his presence was involved in her daily life in some form or other. But as the years passed, Sirius Black became little more than a name of her past, a friendly acquaintance, and she never found herself dwelling upon him in the wee hours of the night. Like tonight.

A soft rustle outside her door broke her self-study. What legitimate business could anyone have outside her room at three in the morning? Nothing came to mind.

Hermione soundlessly slipped off the window seat, treading carefully to her nightstand where her wand lay. It didn't do to be caught defenseless, even with Voldemort's re-disappearance. He still had followers. And even without them, there were just too many people not to be trusted. Her fingers silently gripped the vine wood, gently pulling it off the stand. The familiar gnaw of fear gripped her insides, and she held her breath momentarily to ease the seizing pain.

The still of the night remained unbroken, but her senses keen drove her to settle the matter. It was maddeningly slow, her trek across the room, but her determination was one of self-preservation. The difference between life and death in battle was often marked by patience. Or the lack thereof.

Tunnel vision focused her eyes upon the nearing door, oblivious to all else. Her bare feet tread in sliding shifts of weight across the hardwood and Persian rug. Left, right. Left, right. No creaking boards it's imperative. Controlled, steady breathing. Wouldn't do to pass out now.

All too soon, the paneled oak stood directly before her. Wand hand steady, a counter and offensive spell each formed upon her lips, she stretched out her hand to the brass door handle.

It was cold, like death. A shiver of premonition swept her body, and her breath stilled. *Would they be cowardly hiding behind their masks?*

Her grip tightened. The knob began to turn.

Would it be a single Avada Kedavra? Or a stream of curses under which she'd break apart, shattered like a Ming vase?

The latch released with a soft *click*.

It wouldn't be the pale, snakelike figure, if it was him at all. No, that figure was no longer.

The well-oiled hinges protested only mutely.

He wouldn't do her personally. Like Regulus, it'd be a toady, out to score points with him.

Faint oil-flame broke through the parting of woods. She shrunk further into the shadows as she widened the breach.

Would Sirius have cared any more for the details of her death than he had for his own brother's? Or would he have simply said she was a soft, stupid idiot, too?

A quick, deep breath shuddered into her lungs. It was time.

*Why did it **always** have to come back to Sirius?*

She threw open the door.

-o-o-o-

"Hurry on, mate!" His half-whisper was anxious as he repetitiously glanced back toward the door. Ron Weasley knew they had little time for poetic license and reminded his best friend of that very point. "Just write it like you said. Hermione's clever; she'll suss it out!"

Harry Potter squinted at the ragged parchment, desperately willing the untidy scrawl to form the perfect code. High chance of interception demanded his words be chosen carefully, but still he had to make the message clear. A flashing look up at their unlikely savoir confirmed their limit for time. They were coming.

Harry nodded curtly then returned to his missive. He quickly scratched another line then reached to the floor, scooping up a handful of sand and tossing it across the parchment. Rising, he shook off the granules and rolled it tight. Securing it to the stolen tawny, he wedged his hands through the rough-hewn opening in the stone wall and released the owl. He sent a silent prayer with it.

"All right, let's go!" Ron pleaded, his voice hoarse from misuse.

"Right," Harry responded, roughly stowing his quill and ink in his rucksack. It was a leap of faith, and one he'd never have believed himself taking. But desperate times...

Commotion from beyond the inner walls snapped him back to the task at hand. They were closer. Much closer.

Harry took a cursory glance about the oppressive chamber, verifying he'd missed nothing. If this didn't work, if it botched up completely... It didn't do to dwell on the what-ifs. They now had no choice. They were out of time.

A deep breath, his mouth set grim, he tipped his head to his companions. Tossing his rucksack to his shoulder, he pulled out his wand and turned to their guide. "As you will..."

-o-o-o-

Clang cling... Clang cling... Distant church bells echoed in her brain. Awareness returned to her slowly, a groggy aftertaste remaining in her head. She opened her eyes to mere slits, taking in the bright morning sun. Wider, they encased the sight of her room. *Dear Lord...*

Hermione groaned as she uncurled herself from the cushioned window seat, her muscles aptly bitching about every adjustment. Her wand dropped to the hardwood with a *clank*; she'd lost the battle with sleep with her defense in hand. *Really bright there, Hermione*, she chastised herself. *One involuntary twitch and you could have awoken to iridescent flippers and a Karkaroff goatee.*

She snorted at the thought, stretching the kinks out of her body. *At least she hadn't his fate*, she considered dryly. Karkaroff, while headmaster of a Balkan Wizarding school, was not the wizard he portrayed. He had lasted only a year before the Death Eaters had located and duly punished him for his cowardice. But the ever-cautious Gryffindor had not shared his lot last night; Death Eaters had not cornered and tortured her. She looked to the center of the rug. No, that was not her destiny of last evening.

A bouquet. A small bouquet of enchanted mixed flowers in a basket, complete with a half-dozen shimmering faeries circling about, nipping in between stalks and petals. That had been her war-faring rustle last night. Prepared for the battle of her life, she'd thrown open the door to find the corridor empty, the floral gift at her entryway. Leary of a trap, she'd spent the better part of two hours magically inspecting the arrangement from afar, only to decide its presence was, truly, innocent and sincere. The attached card had explained all:

My dear Ms. Granger,

Please excuse my abrupt and deplorable behavior of last evening. It was due only

to my own clouded thoughts and in no way was reflecting of your good company. Please

accept these in heartfelt apology. I look forward to our next encounter.

Yours in Admiration,

Raj MacGregor

A quirk of a smile tugged at Hermione's lips; whatever or whoever Raj MacGregor was, he was a thoughtful gentleman. Ron could take lessons.

Placing the bouquet upon the mantel, she noticed the clock. Seven after nine. The first council meeting of the day was at ten, so she had just enough time to bathe, dress and grab a quick breakfast before meeting up with Bailey. Perhaps today she'd learn something new. Like how not to fall asleep on her feet.

-o-

The chipolatas too spicy, Hermione abandoned them for her prerequisite toast and jam, leveling her chin out over her plate to catch the crumbs of each nibble. The *Daily Prophet* stood just past said plate, balanced precariously with one hand upon its spine. Hermione alternately chewed her toast and her lower lip, neither quelling the increasing unease deep within her belly.

Dark Mark Returns

Irish pub site of renewed violence

By: Farrell Porpington

The symbol of our greatest fears has once again returned to Western European wizards. Last evening the long-defunct Mark of Terror was displayed over The Crow's Roost, a family-owned public house in the coastal town of Waterford, County Waterford, Ireland. Two confirmed dead, one missing.

Her breath simply ceased in mid-inhale. So she wasn't quite so out of line last night, now was she? A trickle of glacial serum washed through her veins. Waterford wasn't far. Not far a'tall.

Spasm of inhalation. Though her mind was in shock, her body demanded basic functions of life. *Okay, calm down.* Her ever-rational mind fought to quell her involuntary shudders of fear. *They weren't here. They aren't after you, and even if they were (which they're not), they wouldn't know where you were. Or even if they did (which they don't), you're in a high-security location full of international key-figure wizards. And even if they could breach the security here (which they can't), you know how to defend yourself more than adequately. And if you can't (which you can), you can... er... you can*

"Confundus Charm?" The room-level voice broke through Hermione's aquarium mindset like a sledgehammer. She turned seated, blinking rapidly to clear her eyes. "Or malicious Skeeter gossip?" Raj nodded once toward the paper in Hermione's hand.

"W- what?" she stammered, momentarily disoriented.

Raj waved dismissively at the paper. "The *Prophet*. You were staring at it, or rather, *toward* it. I just wondered if it was that compelling a story or if you'd been befuddled." He took in her pallor and the hint of fear in her eyes. His demeanor changed instantly to concern.

"Are you all right, Hermione?" he asked softly, kneeling close to her and staring about her face.

"Er, yes. Yes, I'll be fine," she said, recovering her sensibilities. Her voice grew stronger as she spoke, though she chose to keep their conversation private. "I was just reading the headline. Death Eaters in Waterford last night. They set the Dark Mark above a pub; at least two are dead. It's starting again," she added in a forlorn whisper.

"Rubbish," Raj answered, his tone slightly annoyed. He stood again, offering his hand to Hermione.

"*Rubbish?*" she asked, irritated at his condescending dismissal. What did *he* know, anyway? He'd not seen what she had; he didn't know what the wizarding world would face again, perhaps very soon if the events of last evening were any indication.

She blatantly ignored his hand and stood up defiantly, her petite height no less demonstrative in its anger. "I'll have you know that I *personally* witnessed the events prior to *his* disappearance last time, and I can tell you he damn well isn't dead. You and all these others," she gestured encompassing to the room, "bury your heads in the sand, choosing to believe this time he's truly gone. Well, he isn't. He's only biding time until he's back to his power. And then we'll *all* have hell to pay." Her jaw was set, her eyes glaring, daring him to call her on it.

Raj stepped even closer to her, his scowling eyes only inches from hers. His words were gritted whispers.

"*Rubbish*, in that it is *not* starting again," he began. He held up his hand in the narrow gap between them, warding off her verbal protest. "For it never **stopped**."

A full moment passed before Hermione could regain her wits. *What did he just say?* she asked herself. Her lips parted but remained formless, wordless.

"Come on. Let's have a walk," he suggested slightly more graciously, grabbing her by the hand. Without waiting her reply, he led her purposefully from the room, thankfully unnoticed by the dozen or so still lingering over their kedgerees, kippers, and scones.

In only a few minutes' time, Hermione found herself retracing her steps of the previous evening, the garden path less despairing in the late morning light. She noticed as they walked along the pebbled course that Raj had yet to release her hand. It felt heated, strong, powerful. A flitting of warmth passed through her, one having nothing to do with the increasing summer sun. How long had it been since a man had held her hand? She hadn't seen Ron in months. And even then... No, she wouldn't belittle his gentle affections. Ron cared for her, she knew. He would defend her to those who would scoff at her, those who would demean her. And the fondness was entirely mutual. She had grown up caring for him, interested in him, befriending him. But this search, this *expedition* of his and Harry's had taken its toll on their relationship. She couldn't deny to herself any longer how lukewarm his messages to her had become, and how temperate their time spent together had grown since the boys *men*, she corrected herself had left nearly a year ago.

"Now you're contemplative." Raj's baritone broke into her thoughts, kindly reminding her she was not alone. She glanced about her, refusing to chance-meet his eyes. A slight blush crossed her cheeks; she *had* been contemplative, and it had started with his touch.

"There's much to contemplate," she parried, buying time as she frantically sought a topic. Well, one other than that which she actually *was* contemplating. Credible lying had never been her forte.

"Yes."

Well, that was conversational, she mentally quipped. This was ridiculous. It was forced chat at best, and she hadn't a clue as to why he had even brought her out here. They both had a meeting in fifteen minutes, and she hardly needed anything else to set her nerves tight, the *Daily Prophet* having already done a cracking job. Death Eaters back on the prowl, it all starting again

That's it. That's what she wanted to know.

"Raj," she ventured amiably, "back in the dining hall, you said it had *'never stopped'*. What exactly did you mean by that? I mean, most everyone thinks Voldemort's gone now, but you spoke so surely, like you know something I don't, that no one does."

He was silent for a long moment, and she chanced a sidelong glance. He was staring straight ahead, as though merely scouting his path across the garden foliage. His expression was passive, contemplative in itself. When he spoke, his tone was flat, non-committing.

"It's obvious. Just as Lady Bain stated at dinner last evening, the Ministry hasn't lapsed on intelligence and security measures. After your little tête-à-tête in the Ministry two years past, no official Ministry release was made. Their stance has simply been to continue investigation. No, if he was gone, Scrimgeour would have publicized it unceasingly for his own benefit.

"Lord Voldemort isn't finished; he doesn't simply give up and bow out. He has plans to fulfill first."

Hermione stopped dead, her hand pulling from Raj's as he stepped further. He turned, his face unreadable. She was staring at him in wonder, surprise, all washed in fear.

"Plans? What plans? And just how do you know that?"

A fleeting moment of indecision crossed his face, quickly replaced by a casual stance. His words were slow, careful, measured, as though it was imperative he remain merely a courier of public information.

"History repeats itself, Hermione, more often than not. Through the ages, evil seeks the immortality of power. Conviction of that nature does not simply fade away." He gazed at her steadily. "It only stands to reason that he has not ceased in his plans; his ultimate plan being to control the wizarding world." He sounded as though he would continue, but instead remained silent, waiting for her to speak.

"So you're saying you know this simply by logical guesswork?" Her words held the slightest disbelieving edge.

"Yes."

Liar. His convictions on this matter told a different story, one that included some other source or reasoning, something much more definite than historical tendencies. But she couldn't very well call him on it, now could she? No, she had no proof or crumb of anything substantial. Just... a feeling.

Hermione mentally shook herself. *A feeling?* Miss Logic and Text Reference was having too many of those as of late, and worse, she was beginning to *believe* in them as well. Dreams, feelings, obsessive memories of dead men... it was all so foreign to her, so *not* Hermione. Oh, how she wished Dumbledore was here. He had never failed to offer an explanation, an understanding.

"We had best be returning. Council begins in eight minutes. Lord Chamberlain and Bailey will wonder where we've off to," Raj said, gently turning and prodding Hermione back along toward the gray stone manor, his hand resting on her shoulder blade. It remained there as they walked quickly, burning the skin beneath her navy robes. Her muscles still ached, and his touch only increased their tension.

"I forgot to thank you," she said, suddenly recalling the source of her soreness. "For the flowers, that is," she clarified. "They're quite beautiful."

"As are the lady to whom they were intended," he replied courteously, opening the mullion-paned garden door for her. She blushed, unprepared for his complimentary reply. She said nothing.

Through the flurry of activity, they made their way to the front of the manor, the meeting scheduled above floors. Rounding the bend in the curving staircase, they were

forced to slow their steps to a stop in the midst of the gathering queue. Hermione steadfastly kept her gaze averted from her escort, peering instead over the railing at the entrance hall, the varied pages and staff scurrying to begin preparations for Elevenses and luncheon.

"Codswallop," an elderly wizard reprimanded. He was standing just before Hermione, his graying handlebar mustache and royal blue robes complimentary in the austere of the surrounding white marble. He was apparently speaking with two colleagues: one, a dark-haired witch who reminded Hermione greatly of Professor McGonagall, and Sir McCaine of Belfast. "The Muggle leaders didn't listen to Merlin, himself. What makes you think they'll lend an ear to Scrimgeour? The man has no tact."

"Indeed," McCaine said. "If Albus Dumbledore were still alive "

"But he's not," the stern witch interrupted. She turned to the handlebar. "And Blair's not Pendragon, Kale "

"No one's *that* stubborn," muttered Raj beside Hermione. She glanced sharply at him, but his eyes were focused on the trio before them.

"he'll listen. He won't be happy, but he'll listen. A third party with Rufus wouldn't hurt, either. Someone to..."

But the rest was lost to the noise and shuffle as the council members moved hastily forward toward the open doors at the landing. Hermione felt Raj's hand return to her middle back, guiding her through the mass of subdued robes. He was close enough for her words to reach him within the din.

"Would you care to tell me what that was all about?"

"Ministry relations with the Muggle Prime Minister," Raj stated flatly. His pose was suddenly professional and aloof. Hermione bristled.

"No. I mean your little 'stubborn' remark," she hissed. For some reason she was irritated at his flashing change of mood.

His jaw was again set, belying the aggravation he attempted to hide in his voice. "Arthur Pendragon was the single most stubborn Muggle leader in all of Britain. He had the greatest sorcerer as chancellor, yet he chose to ignore what he didn't want to hear."

"I don't understand," she said, her irritation fading in lieu of genuine curiosity. "Why would Merlin interfere so with the Muggle world? Witchcraft was still feared and misunderstood back then. What did Merlin hope to accomplish?"

"Many things, Hermione. His vision for Britain, were it seen through..." He sighed, the hidden anger still below the surface. "Suffice it to say Arthur's penance for his obstinacy was paid dearly by both Muggle- and Wizard-kind. His closest companions could not reason with him."

"How do you know that? Nothing I've read has ever given such account, and I've researched Merlin well. Nowhere have I found such personal accounts of disagreements between Merlin and the king."

They crowded through the Council chamber doors and Raj followed Hermione to her requisite stool against the wall behind Bailey. He paused to answer her question, for the first time looking at her as he spoke.

"My multi-great grandfather knew Merlin. They were not close, but he was privy to arguments between Pendragon and Merlin. His journal passed down to me. And even Merlin could not control the evil of the world alone." He turned to leave, but of its own accord Hermione's hand caught his robe sleeve. He turned back, waiting.

"Who was your ancestor?" A tingling passed through her as she asked, a sense of expectancy hovering for his answer.

"No one. Just the bastard son of a witch."

The charcoal material pulled from her fingers as MacGregor withdrew without another word.

Chapter 4: Sleight of Sight

Chapter 5 of 36

What we see isn't always, well... what we see. And what Hermione thinks she sees is impossible. So says her intellect.
But her heart, however...

****Reviews are much appreciated****

Chapter 4: Sleight of Sight

Left eye closed, right eye squinting; mouth skewered, tongue bitten. If she tilted her head just so to the left... she could almost see it.

Hermione pulled and stretched the knit-work before her, pleading with it to take proper shape and actually *look* like the woolen hat it was meant to be. She sighed heavily, her frustration waning into despair. Eventually, resignation would begin to take over, curing her of her perhaps misplaced sense of personal pride. Which was more important, she asked herself: that she craft it by hand, or that it look and function as its intention?

An agitated half-moan broke from deep in her throat. Damn it, she *would* do it by hand, her *own* hand, *without* the aid of magic. It was a matter of self-respect, after all. She'd just have to start over. Again.

Unraveling the plush yarn, Hermione periodically snatched it from Crookshanks' paws and rolled it into a ball, studying the knitting instructions all the while. Her mother was so much better at this, but her aid was hours away as both elder Grangers were in the office until late this evening. Considering her current state of creation, Hermione wondered if it was not best to hold off until help arrived. Ginny would find more purpose for her gift were it not resembling a shifty, Angora-laced, cud-chewer's urinary pouch. But in the least, Hermione did have several months to get it right. One would think that a year of knitting hats for house-elves would have perfected her technique. Alas... Exhibit A: Hairy Goat's Bladder.

A shadow crossed her outstretched legs, and a soft flutter broke the stillness of the Grangers' back garden. She glanced up to find a huge barn owl banking just past the apple tree, his new glide path directed toward her. Squinting against the sun, she caught his silhouette just as he passed overhead, releasing a brown paper-wrapped parcel. The package landed just past her sunning toes, dropping with a muted thud into the freshly mown grass.

Hermione moved to retrieve the package, curious who could have sent it. No one knew she was spending her few days off visiting her parents. She hadn't even told Ginny, as it was a last minute decision. Council sessions in Kerry had ended a fortnight ago; since then only with Bailey did she converse regularly.

The parcel weighed heavily in her outstretched hands, suggesting printed matter lay bound inside. Cautiously she released the twine, ever suspicious of unexpected deliveries. Her concerns born of nearly ten years' dark wizard fighting etched such wariness permanently within her. It was by no accident or mere luck she had survived the Death Eater attacks of years past. She wasn't about to relax her guard now.

Fingers deftly pulling away the wrapping, Hermione audibly gasped at the contents. It was a book a very large, very old book with only a slip of parchment peeking from between the first pages.

Merlin's Quest for Camelot: A Study in Wizard Counsel of Muggle Affairs

By Tabitha Castlegarde

Raj. There was no question from whom it came. And she *had* mentioned to him she'd pop by her parents' for a spot before the International Confederation of Wizards Summit next week. But to send her an obviously expensive antique book? First the flowers, now this. What was Raj MacGregor's game? Surely he didn't, well, *fancy* her. *Did he?* A thrilling sensation passed through her at the idea. Well, of course she wouldn't *encourage* it. She was practically engaged, after all. Had she mentioned that to Raj? Come to think of it, she wasn't so sure she'd even *mentioned* Ron Weasley at all. An innocent overlook, necessary out of a desire for privacy. Yes, that was it.

Besides, most likely he was really just being friendly. She wasn't a beauty, and she knew it well. Oh, she looked right fit enough to pass in those rare instances where fashionable cosmetics and dress robes were

"Cor love a duck!" she swore aloud. "Dress robes! I forgot new dress robes!" Springing up, her text and materials fell momentarily forgotten to the ground.

Crookshanks merely scowled at Hermione's dashing about, his ginger tail snapping at each pass she made over his prone body. His batting trinket withdrawn, his mistress' bare ankles became substitute target practice, much to her annoyance.

"Crookshanks! I haven't time for your mercenary tactics," she said, disengaging his claws from her flesh. "I've got to get to Madam Malkin's before she closes. The do tomorrow night is important." Gathering her book and remnants of DIY, the frazzled witch hurried inside, her incorrigible half-Kneazle keeping step.

Ten minutes and a scrawled note later, Hermione Apparated to Diagon Alley, just outside the back entrance to the Leaky Cauldron. It was early afternoon, and she had just enough time to collect some gold from Gringotts and make her way to Madam Malkin's for a rush job. She'd forgotten all about tomorrow night's charity gala until Bailey's mention yesterday prior to her departure. Unfortunately, when she had pulled out her dress robes from the cupboard, she found she had overestimated their storage life and underestimated her growth. In truth, she'd not grown much since her fourth year at Hogwarts, but she had filled out some in the intervening five years. And who knew moths found dress robes a magical delicacy?

Shops all along the high street were surprisingly busy for a summer Friday. The kids were not yet to school for another six weeks; the patrons were predominately adult witches and wizards. *So many faces*, Hermione thought. And so many of them held resemblance of those she knew at school, yet older. Well, of course they were older, but it seemed more a matter of experience and life rather than years, as it had not been that many since her Hogwarts days.

Passing Quality Quidditch Supplies, a streak of gray hair and yellow eyes caught Hermione's sight Madam Hooch. The flying instructor was haggling over a prototype racing broom on display. She chuckled. It was good to see some things never changed. She shuffled through the crowd, reaching the towering wizards' bank a few minutes later. Her gaze traveled further down the street, falling on the dilapidating shop that once was Ollivander's. A rough-hewn board lay across the cracked display window:

"Coming Soon: *Paints Preserve Us* Portrait Studio." Sadly, some things did change.

Ginger darted past her, pulling her eyes and thoughts from the old wand Shoppe. Hermione spun around, but the gangly wizard proved to be an errand boy for the apothecary, his outer robes proclaiming his venue. She sighed softly; she never realized just how much she missed her friends. Er, friend and *boyfriend*, she corrected herself. Every bespectacled dark-haired wizard warranted a second glance from her, an illogical spot of hope expecting each time to reveal Harry's flashing green eyes. But each time she was met with painful disappointment, expected though it may be. Regaining herself, she turned and alighted the steps to the golden doors of Gringotts, a polite nod to the security goblin as she entered.

Proceeding down the great marbled hall, she sought out an unoccupied window. It seemed as though half of Britain's magic folk were transacting financial business. Bodies pressed past, robes flashed. Snippets of conversations echoed, blending in her ears.

"new vault for my grandson," a diminutive witch in sunny yellow robes was requesting.

"wife's withdrawing faster than I can" complained a lanky, middle-aged wizard in dingy white. His grumbling found a smirk on her face. She continued, her step slightly lighter.

A tall, black-haired wizard in hunter on her right spoke in low tones, but as she passed his words carried. "man, that's right. Creature, yes..."

Hermione caught herself on a golden stanchion, preventing her demise to the floor. She wheeled around, eyes wide. *Kreacher?* His profile was intimately familiar, his long black hair edging his aristocratic cheekbones, yet his robes were aged and faded. Black stubble shadowed his refined chin but for the thin scar nicked to the left jaw; nobility draped his graceful stance. Bloody hell if he didn't look like

The wizard must have felt her stare, as he turned just enough to meet her eyes. Blue. His irises. Not gray. Hermione released her seized breath. *How silly*, she reproached herself. Of course it wasn't. Yet, still... She gathered herself, an embarrassed smile her apology, and made as though she had merely slipped on the marble. Turning, her flustered self made its way down the line, seeking an unengaged goblin on the end.

Honestly, Hermione, she chastised herself, *if you continue this little preoccupation with Sirius, I'll have deduced you've truly gone mad* Admittedly, however, the resemblance was striking from the profile. Even face-on he favored Sirius, but to a much lesser degree. *But I'm looking for him to be*, she considered. Her loneliness was compounding daily, and she grabbed at any comforting familiarity she could find. She needed a holiday, she realized. Time off with friends. She vowed she would flog or owl Ginny next week, after the Summit. It was imperative for her emotional health.

Concluding her business, Hermione rushed out of the bank and two doors down to Madam Malkin's, Galleons jingling in her canvas handbag. The shop was occupied, two elderly witches seated near the counter, deep in gossipy discussion. The jingle of the bell above the door triggered a haggard, "With you in a moment," from the back rooms. Mentally sighing at her untimely wait, she took an oak bench perpendicular to her fellow patrons.

"I'm telling you, Zelda, it's a trifle suspicious, Romulus taking all these overnight business trips." The broad-boned witch in jade paisley squinted her eyes to stress her view. "Couldn't just Apparate home after work like an ordinary wizard. Oh, *no*... had to stop off at the pub, you know. And wouldn't chance it after that; not sure where he'd end up, splinched and hurtin'."

Her small, grandmotherly companion nodded in concerned agreement, her shocking pink robes detracting from her matronly appearance. Her bony hand reached automatically into the brown paper sack that sat between the two, her eyes never leaving the other. "Sketchy, that one," she replied, placing a sherbet lemon in her mouth. Hermione smiled; Dumbledore would have approved.

"Always figured him a bloke who couldn't pass a pint," she continued in a pleasantly soft voice. She reached for another candy.

"Right you are, Zelda. Right you are. When I met him, I told myself, 'Millie, you know not to go on about the drink. He's a closer, that one.' And seems I was right. But there's more than Guinness involved here, all I'm sayin'."

Millie opened her mouth to continue, herself popping in a candy, when suddenly Zelda turned to face Hermione directly.

"Hello, dear," she cooed gently. Surprisingly, it wasn't the creepy greeting Dolores Umbridge had reduced a cooed *dear* to. Instead, it was friendly and innocent, an energetic spirit hiding beneath the weathered exterior. "Sherbet lemon?" she offered, her outstretched hand offering the bag opening to Hermione. The latter didn't miss the brief perturbed scowl Millie threw Zelda. Apparently, neither did Zelda.

"Not your cup of tea, dearie," Millie quickly qualified, pulling Zelda's hand back as unobtrusively as possible. "Girl your age would prefer the wizard sweets, I'm sure."

"Actually, I love Muggle candy," Hermione said, slightly affronted at Millie's impudence. She turned to Zelda, the small witch smiling encouragingly. Spite suggested she take a proffered confection, but she wouldn't start a feud between two friends over simple personal pride. "But I just ate. Thank you for the offer, though."

Zelda dipped her head in acknowledgement and the two returned to their gossip, Millie's hand possessively grasping the bag. Hermione turned her attention to the room, her foot tapping quietly beneath her robes. Impatience was her weakness as of late. She looked around at the displays of fabric, some shimmering of their own accord, other bolts fading into shades of their original colors. Trinkets dangled off wall scones; accessories draped the counter. Not much into fashion, Hermione soon became bored again and returned her attention, by default, to the women before her.

Millie's monotone drabble, Zelda's amiable replies and their nearly static postures began to lull Hermione into a daze, her overactive mind wandering off to play. Images took shape, unbidden: a library, old, tainted. Musty shelves inundated with dusty volumes; slimmer guides lying atop thick tomes, wedged against the shelf above. Faded light bearing dust mites aloft gave form to the single-ringed hand, drifting along the spines as though in search of a peculiar title. Faded gold leaf etched upon heavy cloth. *Cebarando Dragônes...*

Wait. Her organic eyes focused suddenly, their attention rapt. She had almost missed it, but for the odd angle at which she sat from her subject. The scene before her had not changed, yet... Lowered into the bag, sweet retrieved... Zelda's hands captured Hermione's attention. Something wasn't quite... *right.* She observed closely, attempting to identify the anomaly.

Wrist flexed, raised to mouth, sweet ingested, hand lowered to lap, elbow raised, other hand shifted... Hold it. Right there. Elbow raised? Hermione leaned slightly forward, watching the procedure again, intently, unsure. A few minutes dragged painfully by, Millie going on about her indiscrete beau. *Come on, come on,* she silently pleaded. After what seemed an eternity, Zelda moved again for another candy. Yes, yes, Hermione prodded. Yes, a dip into the bag, flexed wrist

There! That's it! Hermione's eyes grew wide. She was nicking extra bits of candy from Millie's precious stash. Two, not one, sherbet lemons found their way into her picking palm. Withdrawn from the bag, she flexed her wrist inwardly, dropping her spare into her robe sleeve. Original candy in mouth, her hand dropped subtly to her lap, her elbow rising to jog the candy out into a pool on her lap, covered discreetly by her free hand and loose robe. Stifled giggles lodged in Hermione's throat. She tried desperately not to release them, silently shaking with the effort.

A snort betrayed her, and she covered it with a pseudo coughing fit. My, her acting was improving today, she observed. She looked up to find both woman throwing glances at her; Millie's eyes reproachful, Zelda's smiling mischievously. This only brought Hermione further amusement, and she had to stand and walk around in order to gain self control.

She strolled about the shop, ever-so-subtly repeating the motions she had witnessed from Zelda. The sleight of hand was well-versed; she never would have noticed had she not caught such an odd angle of sight.

The entry bell called with a brisk *cling-cling* as the front door opened again, admitting a tall, lanky wizard, his bright ginger hair long and unkempt. Hermione watched his entrance with only vague interest, her logic telling her to stop looking for familiarity. He turned, and she shrieked with girlish glee.

"Fred!" She called excitedly to him, running to embrace her friend.

"Hermione!" He wrapped his arms about her affectionately. "What are you doing about? Last I heard you were in Ireland."

She drew back to face him, her smile ever widening. "That was last week. I've a few days holiday before returning to the Ministry, so I'm visiting my parents. What of you? What brings you here? Time to change in these obnoxious tents you call robes?" she added with a chuckle.

Fred flaunted his glowing purple robes, copious amounts of shimmering material interspersed with charmed designs: exploding candies, pygmy puffs chasing bats, cauldrons melting and reforming. His cheeky grin answered her fully.

"Never, my dear Hermione. Clothing is our cracking advertisement, next to word of mouth.

"No, George and I ordered some new robes for Ginny," he continued. "She's been feeling a bit, well, *frumpy* lately. Thought we might cheer her a bit, take her out to dinner, with new robes and all."

"Poor Ginny," Hermione said, her smile falling. "And with Harry gone, it's all the more difficult, I'm sure. I planned to owl her next week after the Summit. Do you think she'd feel up to going out of a night next week?"

"Brilliant idea. Exactly what she needs to pep her up. She'd enjoy your company more than ours."

"Mr. Weasley... I've your order ready," Madam Malkin called, her young patron exiting the back rooms with her and joining the Sweet Sisters, as Hermione had dubbed them.

"That's my cue, Granger," Fred said with a last hug. "The shop's a bonus; we've more orders than we can fill. If you need an extra post, stop by; discounts on all merchandise to employees. A right sight more fun than Ministry work, I'd wager," he added with a grin and wink.

Fred concluded his transaction with the seamstress, said his goodbyes and departed, Hermione watching his leave wistfully. It was good to see someone she knew well. She even missed his and George's questionable read: illegal antics, she was so dejected.

"Steady on, m'dear," Zelda said sweetly next to Hermione. Her approach had been unnoticed by the preoccupied witch. She took Hermione's hand in both hers in a grandmotherly gesture. "Your young man will settle his wild ways and return to you," she comforted. *Zelda thought she and Fred were together? Whatever gave her that idea?* "True love requires patience; but he'll be worth it. In the end, he'll come round."

Before she could sputter an explanation, the elder witch squeezed her hands tightly and turned to leave, calling to her companions at the door. "My, Millie, isn't our Cassie most enchanting? So becoming in her new robes."

"*Aunt Zelda...*" the pre-teen's tone pleaded. Her voice trailed to faded mumbles as the door closed behind them.

How bizarre, thought Hermione. A tad barmy, that matron. Honestly. She *and Fred?* They were so blatantly just friends. Such imagination. Had she never been close with a guy friend before? Or was Hermione's enthusiasm over seeing a friendly face too over the top? Did she come across as greeting a lover? No, surely not.

Dropping her hands as she turned to meet Madam Malkin, she realized she absentmindedly clutched a dainty, pale pink handkerchief. Wrapped within a handful of sherbet

lemon.

That witch was *good*.

-o-o-o-

Faerie lights flickered amongst the ground foliage and conifer limbs, offering festive elegance to the estate grounds. Dusk had settled only minutes before; evening was claiming its inheritance quickly. Hermione watched the wait staff scurry about like white mice, correcting and adding last minute touches. House-elves had retreated to the kitchens, their talents now reserved for the cuisine.

The clipboard she held bore the elite guest roster as they arrived. Bailey's purpose for her this evening was multi-fold: keep track of those attending, act as a liaison between himself and his peers, represent his office with diplomacy and grandeur, and attend him as needed. Oh, and enjoy the event, he had added. Uh-huh.

Her Kelly green tea-length gown and matching fitted robes tugged against her intimately. Self-conscious was an understatement, but she could not fault Madam Malkin's deft wand stitching. The creation was a miracle considering the time and monetary constraints, but the seamstress appreciated a challenge.

"Bugger it all, Nige! That bird's a bleedin' mess!" Hermione started, turning from her stone balcony refuge to peer through the growing shadows. Two figures emerged from the bend of the manor, each toting guitars in gig bags.

"Cor, Kent; don't get your bloody knickers in a wad. I'm not bangin' 'er... yet." A rough snigger accompanied his revelation. As they drew closer, apparently headed to the far end of the grounds where the makeshift stage stood, Hermione could make out their Goth-punk look. Black leather, chains, painted faces... must be the Hobgoblins. A reunion show, the evening's program touted. After twenty years of silence, the 'goblins had returned to reclaim musical domination.

"Listen, mate. You start pissing around with that fanny and a stonker ain't all you'll be gettin'. Right nutters, that one. Blew off a bloke's ear, she did, when he couldn't..."

Strained though her ears were, she missed the rest. The short, stocky musician mumbled to his companion, the lanky latter merely grunting in amused surprise. All she caught as they passed by was Kent reiterating, "Put it paid to, Nige, else you're as good as..." More mumble. **Bloody hell.** *If you're going to gossip loud enough so everyone **must** hear, don't specially drop your voice at the few **winteresting** parts,* Hermione inwardly fussed.

Fellow troubadours met the sex gods halfway to the stage. One new face was average height, blue flowing hair and dressed in a chain mail shirt. "Best wish for dry skies tonight," Hermione quipped. The other simply appeared as Sid Vicious from this distance. Hippie Muggle parents taught her something, at least.

She half-heartedly watched their departure to the stage for sound-check, then focused on the new arrivals from the arbor entrance to her left. The charity gala had officially begun.

-o-

Ivy draped the stone wall like a cloak of darkness, its breaks rays of burnt gray in the torchlight. The crescent moon shadowed those paintings that slipped behind the moss' and vines' clinging shrouds. Those remaining clear hung in proud display, their silent bid boxes hovering, a slight hum of anticipation encompassing their contents.

Murmurs of intrigue escaped the gilded frames as the subjects withdrew to their cliques, excited by the evening's coming events. The renown bestowed upon the painting auctioned highest was an honor indeed, and each coveted it greatly.

Hermione moved about with genteel steps, studying each scene with mild interest. In the last two hours, the crowd had multiplied, the music had soared, the scents of roast and perfume and human heat had swelled. The mixture stifled her, and she sought refuge in the bower, the din muffled in its confines. As she neared each magical pallet, the subject returned long enough for her admiration. Satisfied she'd seen her fill, they once again visited, knowing intrinsically she was not there to bid.

"The band and I are gonna nip out for a breather. Grab a pint of best or cider; you'll need the pep." The lead vocalist was hoarse and heavy-breathed through the garlanded lattice, but Hermione thought his voice familiar. *Oh, get over it, Hermione; you think **everyone's** familiar nowadays. Holiday, m'girl, holiday...*

With the band silent, conversations prevailed the night scene. Soon the hobnobbing would include the gallery as it had the last musical interlude. Her solitude was endangered. She'd had enough pompousness to last her entire summer holiday, thank you very much. Though a fair number were pleasant enough in their manners, their mannerisms bespoke only political campaigning. Was anybody allowed their own opinion anymore? Is this what a post in the Ministry meant for Hermione's future?

Growing mingled voices brought her back to the now, and she returned back toward the beginning of the collection near the large entryway.

Nearing her exit on her right, a flicker of movement from her left caught her peripheral eye. A painting she had missed, undoubtedly. She paused, turning to face it properly.

Blood drained from her face, her breathing hitched. A shiver sluiced down her. *It couldn't be...*

-o-

Stubby Boardman nursed his shandy, his gaze steady on the witch meters before him. He took in only briefly her stylish yet practical dress, focusing instead on her brown coiffure tight against her, falling in loose curls about her back. It wasn't that she was stunning; his interest lay much deeper more importantly than attraction. No; she seemed... *familiar.* But the sensation lay on the outer fringes of his mind, and he could not recall just why she did.

Not surprisingly, damn it. He ran his free hand through his short, spiked black hair, its gel giving way to the sweat of his performance. He couldn't recall a single bloody personal detail prior to a month ago, when he'd awoken from a supposed drunken stupor to his band mates' care and hospitality. They'd called him "Stubby," and had pressed on how twenty years was a damn sight of time to go without seeing your best mates. They'd remarked on his wasted appearance, touting the evils of living solely on the hair of the dog. Embalmed in firewhisky, they'd said. But there was hope for them all; the Hobgoblins would return. Putting the band back together... It was a mission from Merlin.

They had it all worked out rehearsals, wardrobe, promotions. They'd even fattened him from death rail to merely slender, courtesy of Blue's mum. Cleaned, shaved, trimmed. Even a refresher on the lyrics of all their songs (damned drink). A scheme worthy of Churchill, but for one issue...

He didn't know who the hell he was.

Never did he let on this bit of information. Instinct told him to let it ride; his mind would return of its own accord. And it had... some. It wasn't what he knew to be true, but what he knew wasn't. He wasn't Stubby Boardman, former (and current) lead vocalist of the Hobgoblins. He wasn't the traveler of a world concert tour, trashing the pubs and hanging out a 10-story Muggle building by his foot (though that *did* hold a grain of familiarity). He was....

He didn't know who the hell he was.

Nigel and Kent flanked each side, Blue before him to his left, all in inebriated chatter. The hangers-on obstructed his view, but only momentarily. That witch in green was the first sense of recognition he'd felt in four weeks. He had to get a better look. He had to get closer.

-o-

Hermione felt faint. It simply couldn't be.

The image drew her unconsciously, her feet obeying its silent command. Her eyes could not find the logic, ever search though they may. But if it was before her, here, then maybe... perhaps... an answer could be... found.

The Mystic of the Mists read its inscription. Ethereal described her, her richly blue cloak wrapped about her in comfort and disguise. The loch's ripples lapped the primitive oaken vessel, rocking its cargo gently. Through the flowing, fine mist, the lady of untold power gazed beseechingly at Hermione, beckoning her yet nearer.

The loch, the grainy shore, the damp breeze... elusive dreams brought before her in tangent recall. Hermione shivered. She could feel it. Closing her eyes...

She could feel *him*.

Fine hairs bristled in eager foretaste. He was here. He was near. He was approaching, hesitantly but with purpose, his intent her very being.

A ripple of something beyond anticipation riddled her nerves. Her breath slowed, stilled. Oh, God. It was time. His identity was hers. Just turn around.

Intensity taut her like a recurve bow. She forced her eyes apart, trustingly calling to the lady of the lake. Her response was only of conviction without guidance. A steeling breath in, she fought the unseen forces and turned her head slowly over her left shoulder, and there...

Was no one. Directly behind her, anyway. In the slight distance a fawning crowd gathered about three of the band, Sid Vicious being conspicuously absent of said fawnage. Her heart plummeted. Desperate confusion racked her; tears gathered in disappointment. She didn't understand. Her dream. It was here. It had to be. And she had *just felt him*; she truly had.

But that sense of his presence was gone. She glanced hopefully, painfully back down the way of the gallery, seeking his intent gaze. Nothing. Just an old official and his escort, admiring the portraits. A pleading look to the lady of the lake returned only the same, a wistful smile gracing her lips, lips that declined to offer revelation of her secrets. Dejection began to set in, overwhelming emotion sacrificed to the altar of reality. If she was wise a'tall, she'd

There. Again she felt him. Closer yet. But no, she'd felt him before, yet he'd not been there. Was he a ghost? A non-corporeal spirit? Or was it truly all in her head? She was working on a co-ed room with Lockhart, is what she was doing.

But it was growing, his presence. Ignoring the illogical wasn't an option; he pulled her to him by his very gaze. *Breathe, Hermione. Just breathe. It's all in your head. You've had a trying two days. Not all is as it seems. All the sightings of the dead, of the absent, just tricks of the eyes. Just ignore*

The touch was light, but quite solid. Fingertips brushed her shoulder, tugging slightly with gentle pressure. Tunnel vision set in. The din obscured all legible sound. At his flesh's insistence, she turned full body, peering up into his face and...

Promptly fainted.

Chapter 5: Encore Presentations

Chapter 6 of 36

Repeat viewings bring turmoil to Hermione, especially when least expected. And as for Stubby - something about that witch is crucial to his life... past and future. And it was time to find out why.

****Reviews are much appreciated****

Chapter 5: Encore Presentations

Suspended. Her body felt suspended, draped above the ground, heavy. Indistinguishable chatter and movements crescendoed suddenly in her ears as consciousness returned.

"Hermione?" The voice was concerned, hushed, near. "Hermione, milady?"

Hermione shifted, allowing her head to loll against solid body. Her eyes pried apart, taking in the crimson material. A face loomed into view as her guardian adjusted, setting her weight upon her own feet, though his arms remained about her in precaution. Blinking, Hermione focused upon his eyes, surprise and confusion furrowing her brow.

"What are you doing here?" she asked with a hint of accusation. He seemed unruffled.

"My job." His own brow creased in suspicious concern. "What was *this* all about?"

This was obviously her momentary lapse in coherent mobility. Embarrassed defensiveness demanded ruffled sniping.

"*This* is doing *my* job, Raj. You knew Bailey was attending and that I'd assist." She straightened her pose, gathering strength from indignation. "And you never answered my question. What were you doing, sneaking up on me like that? It was a horrible thing to do, not to mention rude."

He considered her for a moment, cocking his head slightly as he took in her frazzled demeanor. She was expecting someone else, perhaps? Or had something happened? He allowed the silence to lengthen, debating as how best to proceed. The nervous flicker of her eyes decided for him.

"Forgive me," he finally answered, his tone placating as though she was an anxious royal. "It was not my intent to startle you." He smiled humbly, his doleful eyes enticing a hinted smile from her.

"I was merely entranced by your appearance. You are a vision of discreet charm..." He brought her hand to his lips, delicately depositing the kiss while his eyes remained upon hers. "Subtle in your beauty yet striking all the same." His hold lingered, fingers gently squeezing in intimate suggestion.

Lips parted in blushing surprise, Hermione stared, unable to conjure a reply. His smile was friendly, but tinted in something more. She couldn't quite place the form. Amusement? Mischievousness? No, neither. But close. Something more... personal.

Flirtation. He was flirting with her. The realization struck her suddenly, and this time she gaped blatantly, heat rising in her cheeks. He merely widened his smile, his white teeth stark against his tanned skin. Black eyes regarded her with humor as he released her hand. Abruptly she turned from him and moved back to the beckoning painting. From one enchantment to another, it seemed. Somehow she felt the two-dimensional one the less dangerous. She wasn't afraid of Raj, just of her reaction to him and his... suggestions. If he didn't act like that, she would be quite comfortable with him, remaining simply curious about him, his past, his knowledge. But his overtures were disquieting. She sighed. Ron had been gone too long. She was lonely, nothing more.

Her thoughts returned to the present as her eyes focused on the lady again. She reached out, lightly running her fingers down the carved, guild frame. "Who *are* you?" she whispered to the painting. The lady dropped her hood fully and returned Hermione's gaze intently. A gentle smile played at her lips.

"I am your gift."

-o-

"**Blue**," he admonished through gritted teeth, "will you *move*, please?" Stubby swatted in agitation at the drummer before him, shooing him and his giggling, draping fans out of his line of sight. Damn it; she had been turning toward him, a chance to see her properly, and Blue had gotten in the way. Well, run him over, more like. Intoxicated laughter had the drummer stumbling forward moments earlier, drink sloshing dangerously over the goblet's rim. In self-preservation Stubby had ducked, Blue's flailing arms just missing crucial cranial features. Nigel'd set him upright but by the time Stubby had recovered his own feet, his attempts to see the mysterious witch were thwarted by Blue's weaving and animated friends. Finally clearing his view, his frustration mounted. Now she was looking back down the rest of the gallery. What was she looking for? Her date? He'd not noticed anyone with her before. He had to get closer. There was just *something* about her.

Disengaging himself from the gathering was easy; the middle-aged aristocratic groupies doted on Nigel and Blue, a few hanging on Kent's every poetic word. Stubby maneuvered about the ever-growing crowd, his focus purely on the witch standing solitaire, her back to him once again. He rubbed his eyes, the sweat and stage paint collecting in their creases. He was weary yet startlingly alert. The alcohol, the heat, the performance it all drew from him. But his spirit was refreshed in this renewed hope. Perhaps *she* knew who he was, and would end this cruel mystery.

Just steps away now, deep red robes arrived to block his view. *Bloody hell* his luck was off tonight. He side-stepped a distance to his left, skirting the philanthropic wealthy amassing to view the wares. Unfortunately they moved with him. Looking ahead, Pumpkin Lady there in orange and gray velvet robes was the bend round which he had to sidle to get back on track. He approached. She was not cooperative. The crowd about her kept him penned in, dependent upon her to *not* continue moving back into his makeshift path. Thus, that's just what she did do.

No amount of subtle prodding of elbow to fleshy back moved her forward, and Stubby was getting desperate. His wand was not on him, and he didn't trust to magic himself out of this, anyway. Discreetness was called for, and a *Levicorpus* would draw just a *hair* too much attention, he considered. Glancing about for implements of use, his eyes settled on his shandy. A devilish grin broke on his face; his quest had been answered.

The droplets caught against the faerie lights, glistening on ruddy pink skin. The corpulent neck twitched, a gloved hand swatted behind. *Flick, flick*. Stubby's fingers were agile, the lager-lemonade mix shooting from them with gusto. Like birdshot they spread about upon Lady Pumpkin's bare neck, the heavier globules breaking tension, running in streaks down into her dress robes. *Flick, flick*. She flinched, her shoulder blades jerking in response to the runaways down her spine. Realizing it wasn't quite enough, Stubby blew lightly on her neck, the wet areas catching the faux breeze.

Her hand slapped back, encountered unfamiliar liquid, and she stumbled forward into her group, craning her head upward in a twist in search of aviary subjects. The hole was created and Stubby made for it before it closed again. Darting through, he came out a good ten meters from his subject, though at least she was in clear, full view now. And what a view it was.

A tall, dark wizard in blood red was holding her limp body. Had she fainted? Concerned, he started forward. But then she was standing, still in her protector's arms. He wasn't closed enough to hear their words, but her expression was annoyed. A lover's quarrel? Somehow he didn't think so. When the wizard took her hand in gallant gesture, Stubby was sure they were not yet so close.

He remained still, watching. His subject suddenly jerked about and walked to a painting, her back rigid against her visitor. She seemed focused upon the portrait, caressing it, and he wondered if she was merely interested in purchasing it, or if she had a connection to it.

Now what made him think of that?

"Stubbs, mate. C'mon; break's over." Kent tugged Stubby's arm, pulling him back into the here and now. It was back to business; he hadn't time for stalking.

-o-

"Brilliant, this one, from our *Witches' Brew* album," Sid Vicious monologued from the stage. A slow, seductive beat drove from the drummer and bassist, hypnotizing lower bodies to sway in time. The lead guitar cut in, highlighting the rhythm. "Perhaps you've heard of it. It's called 'Creature of Habit' and it goes something like this..." Screams of elation suggested that yes, indeed, they *had* heard of it.

Hermione shook her head. Were these truly key figures and leaders in the wizarding world? Or were they school-age fanatics at a rock concert? Honestly; some decorum was in order. It was a formal charity gala, after all.

A minute later, however, Hermione had to agree the tune was catchy. It was like a slow Muggle blues song, the same I-IV-V riff sauntering through the air, and she found herself relaxing in an involuntary swing. Problem was, it was within Raj's arms.

When the band had returned, Raj had pulled her from the painting, suggesting a dance. Her thoughts elsewhere, she had agreed without consideration and soon enough found herself in the tall wizard's firm hold. He was a gentleman, she acknowledged, though she still felt uneasy with him. Then again, she still had failed to point out her current relationship's existence to him. Guilt, perhaps? There just did not seem an opportune time to bring it up, and to simply burst out with the information would be tactless.

Several attempts at conversation were demolished, the music too loud for anything less than screaming. So Hermione resigned herself to finishing the dance in silence, her mind drifting with the surprisingly soothing croon of Sid Vicious. Eyes closed involuntarily and scenes of her life flashed to her mind's eye, echoing...

Barking laugh, deep, robust. Matching giggles from the surrounding females, tears flowing in mirth at the anecdote. Remus smiling in spite of himself; Harry's head falling to the kitchen table in doubled-over laughter. Ron curled in fetal position near the hearth, breath coming in gasps. The storyteller's piercing gray eyes dancing, his words sing-song in their recapitulation. A voice rasping yet soothing...

What? Hermione's eyes broke open suddenly. Disoriented, it took a moment to discern her position relative to the stage. Locating it, she stared vehemently at the vocalist. He was tall, slender... trimmed, spiky black hair laying over in drenched locks upon a refined brow. Why did his voice suddenly sound so much like Siri...

"May I cut in?"

Hermione's head whipped around as she started. *Sod off the caffeine, Hermione* she scolded herself. Gulps of warm air brought her physical reaction under control as Raj studied her with a critical eye. Their intruder missed the looks, instead staring balefully at Raj. The young witch was the teenage daughter of Lord Chamberlain, and obviously infatuated with Mr. MacGregor.

Finding her tongue, Hermione recovered gracefully. "Um, yes. Yes, that would be lovely." She smiled in a friendly gesture, moving from Raj's embrace. She gently nudged the young woman into his arms, encouraging her to take her place. Barely throwing an apologetic glance to Raj, Hermione swept off to the perimeters of the dance area, choosing the outskirts furthest from both the band and crowd. A passing server paused before her, allowing her choice of a wine. Needing all the strength and settling alcohol could bring her, she accepted a merlot gratefully, murmuring her thanks.

The etched glass rim contorted the scene's edges before her as she steadily sipped the liquid courage. She was going mad, wasn't she? Seeing him in the bank, on the stage, recalling him in vivid detail and asking his opinion of her in the middle of a possibly dire situation... She was obsessing over a man long since dead these many years. What was this sudden ailment that has left Sirius Black in her every waking fiber? His spiritual presence was only shadowed by *him*... him and that place, that painting.

Yes; she was definitely going mad.

"Hermione? Hermione Granger?" came an excited hush next to her. "It is you!"

Hermione bit her lip in a plea for patience, closing her eyes in a moment of resignation. How many more surprises could she manage tonight? At this point she decided she could withstand anything short of Voldemort personally returning. Steeling within, she turned.

"Susan?" she questioned in genuine surprise. "Susan Bones?" The young witch laughed, nodding heartily.

"Yes, it's me! Well, it's Creevey now, you know," she explained with pride. "Colin and I married two years back this November. He's here on assignment, photographing for *the Quibbler*. Luna was able to secure him a post. It's not much, primarily sightings and such, but..." She trailed off, seeming to deflate in the admission.

"That's wonderful," Hermione answered with gusto. The last she wished was for her old schoolmate to feel ashamed. She was simply happy to see a familiar, friendly, *in-the-flesh* face. "I remember him being a talent with a camera at school. It's a step to a wonderful career, I'd wager. And congratulations on your marriage; I didn't know."

The young woman blushed in the moonlight. "We eloped. With everything going on, You-Know-Who showing up and Oh! I'm sorry!" she apologized abruptly, throwing a hand to her pursed lips. Her eyes widened in the horror she perceived she'd created.

A wave washed over Hermione, breaking her elation. But only momentarily. The masque fell into place and she smiled softly, understandingly. "That's all right, Susan. Really. I understand what you mean, though," she continued, a smooth segue away from the subject broached. She cherished speaking of the second Ministry battle even less now than she had in Ireland. "A proper wedding is a bother to plan. And the end result is the same. You're happily married, and that is all that matters."

Relief spread over Susan's face, her obvious discomfort ebbing. "Well said. And yes, I *am* happy. I never could have imagined back at Hogwarts getting with Colin, but a night out with mutual friends and one thing led on to another... So here we are." She shrugged, a whimsical smile playing at her lips. "What of you? Husband? Family? We all imagined you and Ron Weasley would be married by now, you working for the Ministry of Magic or some such, Ron running off with Harry Potter to save the world..." She laughed, taking a sip of her wine while awaiting Hermione's response.

Odd silence hung about them; Hermione chewed her bottom lip. Was she truly that predictable? Susan had obviously meant it as a joke, but the accuracy was too much.

"Er, well..."

Realizing her faux pas, Susan blanched, profuse apology spilling from her embarrassment. "Oh God, I'm sorry, Hermione. Really, I had no idea. I didn't mean, well -"

"Hermione, dear." God save the dignitary. Hermione was never so happy to hear Bailey's cheerful voice. "Apologies, m'dear, but I'm afraid I am in need of your excellent services." He turned to Susan, a slight bow to his head. "Forgive the interruption, but duty calls, eh?"

Awkward goodbyes said, duty called Hermione to Bailey's side in a political discussion across the grounds and into a study. The brandy flowing, the delicate transfer of conversational power alluring, her only mental occupation lay in how true-to-preconceived-form her life was turning into. Was she that easy to read? Were her actions simply follow-up to everyone else's expectations? If she was really in love with Ron, why hadn't they gotten married? Or at least engaged to be? Actually, they'd never even discussed it. As for her career... Eye-opening have these past weeks been, sly palm shakes and pseudo charisma. The more she saw, the less she conformed. But then, as of late was not indicative of her accurate nature. Barmy dreams, illusory sightings and a nervous disposition were not Hermione-like. What was happening to her?

Mechanical functioning got her through the evening, her words to Bailey and the rest rote and unimaginative. The last handshake and whispered assurance found Hermione exiting the grand manor onto nearly deserted grounds. It was late. The guests had mostly retired; the band had left the stage; the painting had been claimed. What was left?

Sighing heavily, she ran her hands upon her face. The weariness would not leave.

"Superb work this evening, m'dear." Bailey had followed her out. He sounded chipper; his meeting had gone exceptionally well. Withdrawing her hands, she stared out at the gardens, visually following the house-elves as they tidied. Another sigh broke involuntarily.

"You sound tired," he said, worry evident in his words. She could feel the steady stare of his round eyes, the fatherly attention he was now bestowing. As though he'd come to a sudden conclusion, his tone brightened. "You've had a busy fortnight. We're well ahead at the Ministry, and as I was considering a little holiday m'self, why don't you skive off a few extra days, hmm? In fact," he added, puffing out a bit, "ease off until next Monday. Start a fresh week. Sound all right?"

Pondering the trouble she'd bring herself should she answer, *Of course I want some bleeding time off, you nancy berk*, she nipped her inner cheek then turned to him, her face impassive.

"Yes, sir; that would be lovely."

-o-o-o-

"Are you sure you're up to this?"

"Flippin' A!" Layers of frustration and restlessness broke in the younger witch's response. "Honestly, Hermione, if I don't get some new scenery in decent company soon, I'm going to hex every bloody one of them! Mum's ready to drive me nuts. *Ginevra, do sit down, off your feet. Ginevra, don't eat that. Sweetheart, you shouldn't be out nighttime carousing in Muggle London.*" Ginny's akimbo stance mirrored the Molly Weasley vocal imitation, her scowl admitting her irritation.

Hermione could only stifle her giggles, earning a reproachful glare from Sweetheart Ginevra. "Sorry, Ginny. You just paint a picture, is all. Besides, I'm not chastising you; I just want to be sure you feel up to this tonight. We can go anywhere, really. A mate at uni once suggested this place, and I thought it might be nice to go somewhere Muggle, where you won't be known."

"Great Merlin's beard, Hermione. At this point, I'd be on for a tour of Filch's office," she admitted with a snort. "It's beginning to drizzle again, and I'm cold and hungry." She shrugged deeper into her heavy parka. "Now, shall we grace this humble abode with our presence?"

Agreeing, the two stepped through the blackened glass door and into the pub, unprepared for its swashbuckling atmosphere. Hermione eyed the room skeptically, narrowing her vision as she took in the distressed mahogany bar opposite the door, the dim lighting suggesting an unsavory clientele.

"*Right*," said Ginny, her own inspection revealed upon her pale face. A deep breath spoke her turn of outlook. "Well, it's dry, warm and dead quiet. And I can smell a hot

meal without the side order of blasted mollycoddling instructions. Come on; let's find seat." With that she stepped on in, weaving through tables displaying half-eaten meals and greasy pint glasses awash in Guinness.

Choiceless, Hermione followed suit. She reached Ginny's pick of tables just as her friend was shedding her woolen coat, draping it upon a wonky slat-backed chair. She seated herself, propping her feet in the adjoining chair and settling back to view the room. "There, that's better."

Imitating her method of staking claim by outerwear, Hermione settled next to her. The Wednesday night crowd was closing on nil, and she honestly wondered if that was a positive trait or not. She'd promised Ginny an evening out, but that scheme had included the company of the outside world. However, the pub's appearance suggested that perhaps they were lucky in their choice of an off-night.

Hermione toyed with the cork beer mat, its emblem of a rose-strewn crest faded and worn. Attention drawn from the image, she looked up at the three-dimensional rendition above the mirrored backdrop of the bar. Catching her glance, a stocky bloke came round the bar, his apron streaked in a multitude of stains. Gathering the crockery and glasses in one stout hand, a damp dishtowel followed in the other in a quick sweep across the table they'd passed moments before. Items still in hand, he approached the girls in their corner table, a weary smile touching his expression.

"What'll ye have, ladies?" Polite, yes, though blatantly worn.

Ginny pursed her lips in thought as though a child being granted choice of a single toy. "I'd like to have a rum Mudslide "

"Ginny!"

"but *instead* I'll just have a plain lemonade," she stated in volume, casting a dark glance at her best mate. "And an order of fish and chips, plenty of vinegar."

Negating a written tally, the barkeep turned to Hermione. "And you, miss?"

"Um, I'll have a plain lemonade, as well. And a shepherds' pie, please." As questionable as the pub appeared, she *was* hungry. "Oh, and a Horlicks, if you don't mind."

With a curt nod, the barkeep retreated to kitchen, leaving the women to ponder their evening.

"Horlicks? Ready for a kip, are you?" Ginny looked questionably at her friend.

"No, just something to relax me. I've had a trying week."

"Well, just don't go to sleep before we've ventured further than here. Too rare are my escapades away from home." Lines of tension remained visible on Ginny's face, the poor light barely diminishing them. Hermione knew her words were only too true, and she felt guilty for her selfish thoughts.

"I've got to go to the loo," Ginny suddenly stated, rising from the table.

"What, again?" Hermione questioned, rolling her eyes. The resulting dirty glare answered her.

"Listen, Hermione. You ask me that when *you're* five months pregnant, and I'll feel you're justified an answer." She dropped a hand to her swollen belly, well hidden beneath the draping blue button-down. "Until then, my bladder answers to no one." A smirk crossed her features before she turned and set off, maneuvering between the strewn chairs with agile grace.

Deposited drinks before her gave Hermione something to occupy her hands as she swept the room again with a critical gaze. White tufts stuck out from beneath a battered cap; the old bloke in an oil-stained boiler suit, his mate bedecked in a grimy Macintosh near the bar before her. A solitary weathered old woman sat at the bar in the far corner, nursing an amber liquid in a malt glass. To Hermione's right, along the wall and past the door, the shadowed corner concealed another three figures donned in leather jackets and a hoodie. The only guest noise in the room came from them, their voices raised in laughter, subdued in naughty tales.

Peculiar prickling danced down her body, and Hermione realized the feeling came from that corner. She stared from behind her mug, distinguishing the source of her unease. There. The punter in the oversized dark hoodie. He was watching her fixedly, lounged back into the corner. His mates chattered animatedly on either side while he sat impassively, intensely, the lone wall sconce reflecting unmoving eyes. The dim light left him featureless but for the black locks and facial scruff. She was unnerved.

Chivvy along, Ginny, Hermione begged. Unsavory men leering at her wasn't what she had had in mind. *Note to self*, she thought. *Punch James Collins at start of term for recommending this place.*

-o-

God in Heaven above, he must have been a martyr in his amnesic past. The Fates were smiling upon him for sure. A Muggle public house in London, a mid-week night, a low-class joint, and in *she* walks.

After the show Saturday evening, he'd searched meticulously for her, even following her crimson-robed companion, but she had disappeared. No amount of inconspicuous questioning had revealed her identity, either. And so he'd stropped all week, miserable in his failed venture. But redemption had arrived, and attractively so in well-fitting jeans.

Stubby rose from the table. He wasn't going to lose her this time.

Chapter 6: To Fear the Unknown

Chapter 7 of 36

From a darkened corner he watched, observed, considered. By the Fates' graces, she was here. She was his key, his link to his life. And he intended to learn why, up close and personally.

Reviews are much appreciated

The redhead was going to be an issue. Impeccably poor timing with a leech-bound disposition to boot. Her return from the loo had halted progress toward his prey, and he stood momentarily undecided.

"Where *you* goin'?" Kent called suspiciously just behind.

"Spend a penny," Stubby shot back over his shoulder, eyes never leaving the far table. Nothing for it, now. He'd have to bide his time, catch her alone. Strategies built and fell in his head as he wandered off in the opposite direction, fulfilling his cover story. After four straight whiskies, he really could stand a trip to the loo.

-o-

Bugger it all. If only they hadn't ordered dinner already.

Hermione's eyes followed the departure of the hoodie man, relief easing her breath. He unnerved her. His stares, so concrete in the dusky pub... She couldn't shake the feeling he'd targeted her somehow, and though her wand gave her an obvious advantage, she didn't want to test that theory. A clean exit in his absence, her instinct begged.

But they'd already ordered.

"If you fancy a trip to the ladies," Ginny announced as she fell into her chair, "I'd suggest a quick *Scourgify* before you do anything personal. Don't believe they've quite mastered the art of soap and water as a pair, yet. Ah, our drinks," she noted without pause, pulling a sour face as she sipped the cloudy beverage.

"Just in time, too. Give me another quarter hour and I'll be back to *Scourgifying*." She chuckled in spite of herself. "What's with you?" Hermione's preoccupation resounded in their deserted corner.

Hermione caught herself, dragging her attention back to her company. "Nothing. Just idle thought, really. Sorry," she added with chagrin. "So... what does Harry have to say? He and Ron flaking about as usual?" The attempt at levity was met by a thoughtful frown.

"I haven't heard from Harry in some time. Over three weeks, to be precise. That's not like him." Pursed lips mirrored her strain. "I'm a bit concerned well, I'm *always* concerned but usually he's owed me by now."

"Maybe where they are, it's not safe to owl you." Optimistic hope lined her voice and words.

"That's what I'm afraid of." The tight reply choked on real fear. Silence fell again, no encouragement forthcoming. Unsafe to owl, unsafe to bodily well-being, only more so. *Bright going there, Hermione.* Both hands wrapped about her lemonade glass, thumbs methodically rubbing at the lip-shaped smudge below the rim. No safe, engaging subject sprang to mind. Pub grub would forestall forced conversation, but it wasn't yet ready. Hermione had never before so longed for the now-missing aptitude of house-elves. They would have to wait. In silence. Uncomfortable silence.

"Now there's a right sight," Ginny commented, her right brow cocking in mild curiosity.

Head snapping around toward the door, Hermione followed the interrogating gaze. Tarts, both of them. Hanging desperately onto the other, giggling at nothing discernable, the sloshed pair stumbled ungracefully into the sparse pub. One a platinum blond, cut pageboy; the other a purple infusion on black in frizzy long curls. Unnatural colored leather minis, peek-a-boo lace tops and occasional glimpses of wildlife knickers brought a high-brow stare from the stillborn patrons. Even the two hoodlums in the corner had stopped their vocal sparring for a shufti.

"Attain the highest rank of scarlet women, don't they?" Hermione remarked dryly. "Even by Ron's *expert* standards." Ginny choked, bitter citrus spraying as she fought to settle her glass upright on the scarred table.

"Don't *do* that," she chastised in a strained whisper. An innocent expression met her watering eyes.

"Do what?"

Ginny was spared answering by the entertainment the Tweedle Twins offered upon reaching the bar. For a full minute, the entire room was enthralled in morbid fascination. Fishnet stockings upon the stool... the bar... still encasing the knee as the knobby joint floundered about for purchase. Indigo girl was prowling, attempting to curl up amongst the Guinness and whisky bottles. Sickle-head aided her friend, shouldering her bum to boost her atop the oaken counter. The sight would leave the young witches scarred for life, Hermione decided.

Defeat admitted after four mutually entangled mishaps to the gritty floor, the booster set her fishnet friend upright upon the stool, ordered from the barkeep and methodically toddled away to her left, the aged music machine calling to her. Support in standing was granted by the convex glass case, and her splayed hands and ample cleavage made use of the generosity, imprinting their images against the warm glow from within. Studying selections, she pulled a coin from her dislodged red heel and, after several failed attempts, dropped it into the slot with a resounding *clunk*. Burgundy talons punched haphazardly at the selections box.

National treasures boomed in bluesy grit throughout the maudlin room. Keith's stringed melodic phrases reverberated against the faded, mute-yellow plaster walls. Mick called out in invitation, vocalizing the actions he suggested, the sultry sliding echoing in both sound and words. *Harlem Shuffle*-ing he demanded; London floundering he got.

Amusement danced in Ginny's eyes, and Hermione would not break the rare spell of happiness for anything, even to broach the subject of her former preoccupation. Said subject was now returning from his venture. He paused in the far shadows, observing the scene of leather-and-lace marionettes flamingo stepping about the tables, unstable arms stretched out in erring balance. Someone was going to break their bleeding neck.

His head movement suggested he had turned his attention to herself, and Hermione shied away, turning to instead engage Ginny. If she ignored him, he would eventually leave her be. Wouldn't he?

"It could be worse..." she commented over Bill's bass line. Ginny kept her eyes on the women, tilting her head toward Hermione in an effort to hear. "She could have chosen Milli Vanilli."

That did it. Ginny whipped around, an incredulous look upon her freckled face. "*Who*?" Hermione chuckled, a dry, witty reply tickling her tongue. But it remained unspoken.

"Would either of you ladies care to dance?" Hand outstretched in gallant supplication, charm riding valiantly on his carefully spoken request, a tall, very lean man in dark leather stood waiting patiently before Ginny. Tawny-streaked blond locks tipped his shoulders, falling boyishly about a long, not-unattractive face. He glanced at Hermione, but returned focus on Ginny. A relaxed pause ensued, but only for a moment. "Promise I'm light on me feet," he added wryly. "Name's Nigel." A smile broke.

"Ginny." Astounding her companion to soundless mouth-gaping, Mrs. Potter elegantly placed her slim fingers into his open palm in acceptance. Leaning quickly over her own shoulder to Hermione's ear, she whispered, "First notion of funny business, slap a Bat Bogey on him for me, will you?" A Cheshire grin brightened her face as she pulled away, stood, and followed Nigel to the open area of tongue and groove.

Perplexed facialities crossed her, and she stared after the couple. Well, she honestly couldn't fault Ginny for wanting a bit of fun. Rare enough was a quiet evening away from reminders of Harry's prolonged absence. A night out with dinner and dancing... the detailed facts around such shall be ignored in lieu of the bigger picture. She was smiling, laughing. It was all that mattered.

"Mind a step or two, miss?"

Aaah! Startled jump and spin, blink rapidly, bright, quick *squeak* escaping. Dear all that is magical and myth! He'd snuck up on her, and she'd rather not he had. Military-buzz brown hair tightly framed a full, muscular face. Bulldog stocky, his leather-draped shoulders blocked her view of the corner, but she knew the creepy one was returned. And most likely... watching.

"Er, no... thank you." A barbell-pierced eyebrow cocked, whether in dismay or concentration it did not matter. She was leery of him, this ruffian mate of the hoodie man. Without a by-your-leave, the brute flipped a chair about by its back, settling astride the scarred pine seat and leaning forward on the backrest. Taken aback, Hermione's words tumbled out, barely audible over the strains of the Muggle band.

"I mean, er, I'm not much for dancing." His imposing invasion intangibly pushed her back from him, her spine straightening to lean away. Her eyes darted quickly toward the unseen presence in the far shadows, calculating just how much *he* had to do with his mate being here, cornering her. Witch or not, she was feeling quite uneasy, more so by the ever-passing minute. "Never was," her addendum nervously touted. "In fact, I've two left feet and am horribly clumsy." She was talking rapidly now, glances increasingly frenzied.

Narrow eyes studied her. He was silent. She fidgeted. Edgier, increasingly frantic internally, instinctually warned. Below the table her hand surreptitiously located vine wood, edged it into proper palm placement, gripped with adrenaline. Then he stunned her.

"Oh, I see what's what, how it is. Don't play coy with me, either, lit'l miss," he forestalled, showing his palm to her. "It's Stubbs, is it? Got your fancy, does he?"

Momentarily shocked, she forgot to be nervous. "*Stubbs?*" What the living hell was he talking about? Certainly not what she was expecting.

"Yeah, Stubbs," he confirmed as though obvious, jerking his head back to his lonely table. "I see ya makin' eyes at 'im. But don't go getting' any pretty ideas 'bout 'im. Sure, he's the looker of the group. Won't deny it. But since he got back, he's a bit halfway round the twist, if ya know what I mean. Not sayin' it was the drink, mind you, but he had to relearn every song of ours like he'd never even heard 'em, he did. An' right state he was in, too, when Nige an' I found 'im. Right nesh, he was. Still ain't quite sorted, yet, but he's singin' all right, I 'spose."

Confusion radiated from Hermione's face. Throughout his yakking, all she discerned was that his shadowy friend there in the corner was a mental case. Right good job there, if she wasn't already concerned over him. Her guest's face suddenly lit up in apparent understanding, as though this new information he was about to impart was the key to his acceptance.

"Ah, sorry! Didn't mention we was musicians, did I?" His smile grew; Muggle birds fell all over themselves for rock stars.

"Er, no." No ease or comfort came from that revelation, and Hermione only wished he would depart, preferably taking his creepy friend with him. Shifting unnoticeably to her right, she spotted said fiend's figure in his usual position... staring right back at her.

Eyebrow-ring man began chatting again where had she heard that voice before? but Hermione tuned him out, her mind actively searching for a plausible escape. Suddenly his voice rose in volume; the Rolling Stones had ceased their jam session and the pub was relatively tranquil again. Even the newcomers had settled down at the bar, half draped upon the countertop.

"Oh look, Hermione," Ginny called as she resumed her seat breathlessly. "Our meal's arrived."

Blessed be thy cook, Hermione thought, relieved for the second time that night as the barkeep arrived. Hermione offered the bank notes as Nigel bid his dance partner adieu, snagging his mate on his outro. A small reprieve, but one granting answers, hopefully. She tucked into her pie, hungrier now that she had to plan.

-o-

"*You bloody wanker.*"

Kent had no more than touched his bum to the conifer when Stubby's greeting split through the air in a hiss.

"Sorry?" Moody, sure, but Stubbs was becoming a right psychotic nutter tonight, Kent observed. The younger man's brooding eyes glared, rattling a shiver down Kent's spine.

"What'd you say to her?" His tone was accusatory. Kent was right baffled.

"Who, the looker back there?" He indicated the opposing table with a slicing look. Stubby didn't answer. Not verbally, at least. His silent scowl spoke eloquently enough.

The Page Three Girls had caught his immediate notice when he'd stepped back into the main room, but even their antics and livened atmosphere had only held him moments. *She* was alone, Nigel frolicking with her girlfriend on the makeshift dance floor. *That* had his full attention.

Feet moving in tandem with his pulse, four steps unconsciously edged toward her. But again, it was not to be. Kent the arse had made for her like a bee to honey. And all he could do was wait.

"Chattin' 'er up is all. Layin' on a bit o' that Devonshire charm, like, displayin' me best qualities an' feelin' 'er out for "

"What's her name?" Stubby aggressively interrupted. Aged predatory plans meant little to him at present. He leaned forward upon the table, stretching across to eye Kent closely. The bassist shrank back, wary.

"Er, Helen, I think. Yeah, that's right; Helen. Heard her friend call 'er that. She di'n't say much 'erself. Jus' that she di'n't like to dance or somethin'." His lips stilled as Stubby relaxed back into his chair, leaning back on two legs, himself quiet, contriving. His sulk had returned, but with a glint of passionate power just below. Boardman was too interested in the chit. It wouldn't do to tell him she'd been eyein' him as well. Don't want to get him started again. Kent had learned these past few days: when Stubbs was in a nark, leave him be. 'Twas safer for his own personal well-being, it was.

"So, Nige... want another round?"

Stubby balanced his chair, his head resting on the corner wall. Helen... It didn't speak to him, didn't nudge visions of his life before the Boardman Show. But he couldn't shake she was a part of that life, that unknown past that scared him so.

They were eating. They would leave soon. The friend was carrying; she wouldn't pub crawl this evening. They'd leave soon, and he'd insure he caught her for word before she did so. The night was young, he reminded himself as the whisky burned down his prized throat. He could wait.

-o-

"What say we pop over to an ice cream shop for afters?" Hermione queried, her fingers crossed in silent pleading beneath the table. Their meal had been reduced to scraps, their drinks refreshed and sipped back down again. Throughout all, she'd not missed the veritable burn of his gaze. A nagging sense told her his patience dwindled, his intent soared.

"Sounds lovely, actually." Audible breath released in reply, but was drowned in a muffled *Für Elise* exalting itself from Hermione's jeans' pocket.

Mobile to her ear, she strained to catch her mum's words. Continuous garble forced her to excuse herself to Ginny for a moment, the reception inside the building too poor for signal.

"I'll just run to the loo while you're at it. Meet you back in here when you're done," the redhead suggested. Hermione nodded, shrugged into her subdued long coat and maneuvered her way to the exit, still trying to keep her mum on the line. A blast of chilled night air caught her bare face as she stepped through the door, nodding in thanks to the large bloke holding it open for her, he and his mates entering as she passed.

"Come again?" she asked into the mouthpiece. London was wide awake, the streets crowded with merrymakers' taunts and promises and calls of drunken glee. Drawing her warmth closer to stay the biting wind, Hermione stepped further down the façade brick, rounding the corner to the narrow alley of trash bins, litter and grime. Now she could hear.

Her mum continued; Hermione paced further, eyes searching blindly down the walls, the crevices, the filth. She'd left her wand in her chair, where she'd placed it next to her for easy access while she ate, just in case. *Damn.*

"Now there's no need for you to come straight home," her mum was saying. "I just wanted to warn you so you wouldn't be surprised when you came in and guests were kipped out, all right? Darlene is an old friend, and her nephew is quite the gentleman, round your age, actually." Motherly meddling purred that tune, and Hermione was having none of it. But she remained silent. Perhaps she'd just precipitate the not-so-subtle set-up suggestion, and rather evade it altogether.

"Er, Mum, I think I'll be staying with Ginny tonight. She's lonely for girl-company, really, and we've hardly chatted for ages. We've just had dinner and we're off for ice cream."

Step over the puddle laced in iridescent oil, strains of the streetlamp and partial moon catching foreign objects too questionable to ponder. Tilt head to the wind, cradling the mobile, straining to make out each word from its counterpart. The disappointment her mum would have to deal with; she was not coming home tonight only to be shoved toward some nice honest bloke in the morning whose aunt played marbles with her own mum in fifth form. Just wasn't going to happen. She had enough to deal with in her life at present, thank you very much.

"Love you as well, Mum," she ended, and rang off with a snap of the phone, dropping it back into her pocket, her hands seeking shelter in her coat crevices. She'd get back in to Ginny then they'd leave this suspect area and return to civilization. Once inside a well-lit, respectable shop, she'd fill in her friend this latest scheme.

Turning, she

Bam!

A brick wall had just moved in front of her. Thrown back, the wall grabbed hold of her shoulders, curtailing her fall. She stumbled to the side, looking up to orientate herself.

That was no brick wall. Creepy hoodie man stood before her, his hood shadowing his face still, but the grimace of his set mouth was perfectly visible in scruffy three-day stubble. She stumbled further back, this time her back finding the pub wall legitimate. He closed in, fingers tightening through her woolen protection, digging painfully into her shoulders. She was thoroughly pinned. Why didn't she consider he might follow her out? She knew *knew* he was watching her, intent upon her. Why didn't she listen to herself? *Hermione, you dolt! And you're too deep into the alley for some passer-by to be of help. Damn!*

And her wand was inside. *Double-damn!*

Think, Hermione. Think. There must be a way out of this...

"I've been observing you all night," a hoarse croak broke through her formulating theorem. *No shit, Sherlock. What's your next clue, Watson?* she mentally quipped. Well, there was something to be said for attitude, even in a dire moment such as this. Stilling her trembling form she'd blame the cold she forced a hostile gaze at her opponent. And yes, he was an opponent. She would *not* go down without a fight.

Stubby studied the woman before him, her stance warning enough that she was no victim. However, he knew her wand lay inside, having noticed it as she stood to leave, talking into one of those blasted Muggle contraptions. Alone, wandless his best opportunity to chat her up. He needed to know.

"Sorry for the circumstances, but the need for privacy was most urgent." Her scowling smirk suggested she thought his wording ironic. "I'm not going to hurt you; I just need to talk to you." The eyes narrowed further. She didn't buy it at all.

Proceeding cautiously, Stubby chose his words carefully, trying to both put her at ease yet hold her attention to a matter most important. Important to him, at least. "Understand, *please...* I need to "

Finding her moment, palms shoved with full body weight against his chest. He gripped tighter with a step backwards. She struggled... violently. He pushed her hard against the wall, attempting to force her stillness. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he noted she had not yet screamed. No one would likely hear her, it was true, but no attempt, either. She was far too angry to be scared. Somehow, it fit her.

Lunging, she caught him off guard and off balance, and he overcorrected by throwing himself and her into the wall. A hollow *thump* resounded as her head knocked against the brick, and he let up his grip in concern. No fool, her hands flew to his neck to force him back, instead catching his cotton hood. It fell.

Her eyes caught sight in the stream of orange streetlamp glow. Struggling ceased. She stilled. Eyes widened impossibly. Sharp intake of damp smog, held. Then dry, gulping swallow, shallow breaths. Within the dim alley, her paleness was evident.

Liquid pewter focused through the minimal luminosity, a fathomless expression in their almond shaped encasements. *No. It can't be No. Impossible. You're No. He saw you, they saw you... fall... No.*

No, I said!

Head shaking side to side, her eyes fixated on the specter before her... hand to mouth, draping the slack-jawed opening. Arm protectively wrapping torso. Back against the wall, sliding slowly, raggedly down to the ground, nausea washing over, belly tightening, threatening her last meal.

Stubby watched in horrific amazement, letting her slip down out of his grip, his arms falling limply to his sides. This was no act. She was traumatized by the sight of his face. She knew him; that was definite. But the man she saw drove unequivocal fear through her. A man **unknown** to him.

He didn't know if she realized she was speaking aloud her chants of refusal. Hand loosely cupping mouth in protection, her words wound their way from behind the palm, encircling him. These were words of recognition, reflections of who he was. He bathed in them.

Tears spilled from lost little girl eyes, and one finalized word fell brokenly from her lips.

"Sirius."

"Stubbs, let's go! We gotta get outta here!" Shouts accompanied by fast footfalls broke the moment for him, and he turned to see Kent and Nigel making for him as fast as the pissed lads could manage, half stumbling through the obstacle course that was the alley. Bin lids rang out in their meetings, dislodging from their cans as Kent plowed through a pair in his flee. Nigel's tall, lean frame cleared them.

A fist clamped onto his hoodie and dragged him in a running stupor further into the alleyway. It was Nigel. Kent, huffing in breathless condition, had fallen back, hands on thighs, gasping. He glanced back to the mouth of the break fretfully, then back to his companions. "Nige!"

Fumbling to a stop, his hold on Stubby true, Nigel turned to his mate, his tagalong snapping back from the reversal, nearly colliding with the guitarist.

"We're far enough! Let's App here! Before they make it out!"

In apparent agreement, Nigel called back roughly, "Our flat!"

And before he had a chance to question, Stubby found himself Side-Along Apparating, his last sight a crumpled young witch in the foul of lower Muggle London, in the cold and rain, frightened near death.

Of him.

Chapter 7: Of Logic & Intuition

Chapter 8 of 36

Sirius Black. He was alive; she'd seen him, touched him. But how? And the man himself... Flashes of memory and recall danced on the fringes of his mind, telling him of a man he just might be.

Reviews are much appreciated

Chapter 7: Of Logic & Intuition

Apparated. They had *Apparated*. Hermione stared almost unseeingly at the sordid alleyway, at the glaringly empty positions from which they had departed. Departed... disappeared... vanished... *Apparated*.

Wizards.

They were wizards, damn it! Wizards who could have been Death Eaters. Wizards who could have been laying a trap for Harry. Wizards who could have *Avada Kedavra'd* her ass without anyone the wiser, with one who looked like

No. She couldn't *wouldn't* think about that. Not right now. The acosting was enough to go on with at the moment. *Silly girl. So careless of you; so stupid of you.* Harshlest critic unto herself, she berated and condemned, analyzing every possible scenario that *could have happened*. And no slack was cut this evening, momentarily stepping away from any implications the reminiscent identity of her stalker brought about. *You know better, Hermione. It could have been Ginny. Your carelessness could have cost her the baby... even her own life. You were only lucky*

"Hermione!" Ginny skirted the awry dust bins, kneeling before the dazed witch. Quick words poured in a mass of questions, commands, explanations. Hermione could only decipher portions, her mind still reeling from the events of the past few minutes.

"What happened... all right?... must go now... thugs... nasty brawl... got your wand... at The Burrow... quickly now, stand up..." Jerked forward by her lapels, hands to wet, gritty concrete, tiny chunks biting into tender palms. She clambered to her feet, still only half-comprehending. Hands gripped her arm tightly. Then...

Blackness, squeezing, compressing, swirling...

-o-

Ghostly representation reflected against the glass pane in The Burrow's kitchen door, pitch night the mirroring backdrop. Hermione's image returned to her, and she stared through it without focus, her mind traveling a path different from that of her eyes. It had taken all of a minute to share her tale with Ginny, the latter now checking the kettle for the third time, its contents still lukewarm. She'd left out only one small detail.

"So this man who's actually a wizard told you he needed to talk to you, but never said about what. Then those cowardly mates of his came out and he just left with them, no explanation, right?"

"Yes." No emotion. Flickers of two low, stout ivory candles lapped gently at the cavernous room, casting her preoccupied features into a maze of crevice and relief. The following silence was broken only by a mildly curious *'huh'* from Ginny as she trod about, acquiring the makings for tea. Hermione remained seated at the head of the worn, scrubbed oak table. Fatigue fought with adrenaline, emotional and physical weariness draining both strength and natural reserve. Conflict resounded between her instinctive need to say it and her logic refusing acceptance. Instinct triumphed.

"It was Sirius." Little more than a whisper, but her companion heard.

"What?" Ginny's response was one of an otherwise occupied mind. She was searching the dim cabinets for honey and something she was not quite certain she craved. "Of course it was serious, Hermione. Never said it wasn't. Could have been anyone, really. I'm just glad you're all right."

A long pause; a deep breath of courage. Eyes staring still, never leaving their vacant form. Louder this time, more force, more conviction. "No, Ginny. It was *Sirius*. Sirius **Black**." Whispering the last, the air changed in the otherwise cozy room. Ginny's scrimmaging in the upper cabinets ceased. All was still.

-o-

Drizzle nipped with tiny cold bites. Eyes half closed against the shivering breeze, Stubby Boardman shifted deeper into the recess of the brick wall, the damp wrought iron of the fire escape distinctly uncomfortable against his denim-clad bum. Well past midnight, his eyes sought solace from the inky night that lay beyond the overcast sky. All around, building lights and headlamps cast a glow against the clouds, reflecting in burnt orange and mottled pinks. Turning to his left, he could almost shut out the bright lamplight escaping the window of his flat; if only the same could be said for the endless chatter as well.

"So Kent here decides since the Muggle bird blew him off, he'd chat up one o' them slags. Nigel's debriefing to Blue flowed through the open glass, slightly muffled yet sharp in its resonance against the unadorned walls. Stubby's jaw tightened. If it wasn't for their blasted antics, he'd have educated himself a bit more tonight.

"She di'n't blow me off, Nige! Was just too taken with Stubbs, is all. An' who can compete with the likes o' 'im, eh?" Kent's retort both startled Stubby and irritated him further. She was interested in him? And Kent failed to tell him. Intentionally.

Bastard.

"Kent, mate, you're such a nancy. Anyway, Blue, out the front door she goes on one o' them Muggle communicatin' gadgets, and her girlfriend whom, I might add, was quite taken with **me**," Stubby could hear the smirk in Nigel's voice, "heads off to the loo. Stubbs takes off after the chit out the door, and that's when dear ole Kent gets it in his head to play for these pub crawlers, not even noticin' the three great blokes comin' in, headin' straight for them girls."

"How's I to know they was their boyfriends? I jus' thought they's intrest'd as well, an' I wasn't jus' handin' 'em over, if you please." Nigel's incredulous laugh said it all.

"Oh no, Kent wouldn't **think** of it. So fists get involved one o' them Muggle duels and I was ready to leave him on his tod. He'd right earned it. But a couple old wankers got into it, an' chairs were flyin' without magic, mind you. Couldn't risk using wands 'cause then we'd have to Memory Charm 'em all, so I yanked Kent out, and we grabbed Stubbs out in the alley and App'd out."

Words blended as all three spoke at once, each trying to be heard over the other. Stubby's head stifled in frustration, alcohol, stress. *No more*, his whole self pleaded. The Black Market wand twitched in his hand, but he stilled it.

No, he wasn't going to use a Silencing Spell to grant his solitude. For the time being, he wanted nothing to do with magic. He wanted nothing to do with a lot of things, actually. He wanted peace... inner peace. That was simply not to be. Not tonight, in any case. Tension ached his very thoughts, the struggle for association and answers prodding his intellect, toying with it, sticking its proverbial tongue out to him, crying, "Hah! You can't catch me!" Nimble would his near-memory take flight, a wood sprite darting to and fro in the dark forest of his mind. He simply could not capture it.

But at least he had something.

That witch knew him. Of that he was sure.

Idly the polished wood swung in his limp hand, its handle bumping upon the raised knee on which the wrist lay. Line of sight traveled from the tip down to the terra cotta slab before him, its potted plant absent from neglect. Remains took the form of potting soil splayed in great doses upon the slab, a few tendrils of what must have once been vine shriveled across one end. Former girlfriends did not return for flora, he absently considered.

Drawn by its handler's boredom, the wand tip found the damp texture of the decaying matter, etching meaningless lines, circles, squiggles. As he thought vaguely upon the evening's events, the random marks became letters. *s...e...r...i...o...u...s*. He paused, studying his work. It lay flat against the dull reflections of the environment. She had said several things to him: *no; impossible; it can't be; they saw you fall* But her most revered speech lay in her last word to him: *Serious*.

A critical eye considered the letters. They meant nothing. In truth, they didn't look quite... *right*. They were, however, close to something. Odd tingling darted up his spine, and without awareness of just what he was going to write, his fingers transferred the implement to unspoiled dirt below the word. Like an artist realizing brush strokes individually, he compared the previous word to what intuition urged him to create. Staring, shifting angle, focusing, correcting... *s...* That was absolute. But as his movements began an '*e*', an unknown sense nudged his hand straight. *i...* Yes, yes that was it. Irrepressible anticipation grew within him, fear shadowing just behind.

...r...i... The '*o*' became a blotch, matting as errant leaf matter embedded itself in the mark. Agitated, he roughly finished the word, intent to go back and correct whatever was not right with it. Quickly...*u...s...* Frustrated huff and readjustment of position. A searing side scowl to the open window and the disrupting voices beyond. He turned back, ready to disseminate.

sirius

Frozen. He was frozen in a curious enlightenment. The anger bled from him in a rush; fascination took its place. He knew that word it was *familiar* to him. Very familiar.

The Dog Star, something whispered within. Yes, the Dog Star. *Canis Major*.

Flashes strobed before his mind's eye, too quick to properly catch, but enough to give credibility to his intuition: Viewing the constellation above in a rush, loping through underbrush; studying its position against other stars through a brass telescope atop a great tower; glimpses of it through high-placed barred windows, cold and dismal; evading its light within mountain caverns; watching its movements as time passed from an old attic, musty and dull. These were more than simple images; they were *memories*.

Excitement bubbled within. *Memories*. Real memories.

The drizzle turned to droplets, smearing the letters of realization. He tested the word upon his lips, tasting, savoring its easy casting, its smooth form. "Sirius." Slowly it fell in breathless whisper. "Sirius..." Drawn out, louder, stronger. "*Sirius*"

"Black."

Stubby jumped, reeling about toward the window, wand aloft. Through the pounding in his ears, the adrenaline-driven breaths, he strained to make out the words uttered in the sitting room beyond.

"With golden studs, charmed to light up in varying shades of blue according to the speed and rhythm at which I play." Blue. Discussing his new kit.

Tension slowly drained in acceptance of the new dialogue. Stubby's grip relaxed, shoulders slumped, breath released. But what had brought about his immediate reaction? What had they been discussing just moments before? Shutting his eyes to the outside world, Stubby thought back. Nothing came to mind. After their resurrection of the pub brawl, the first words he could recall noticing were Blue's. He himself had been repeating the star's name, Sirius, when Blue's voice broke his thoughts. *Black*. Just *Sirius*, then *Black*. Sirius... *Black*. *Sirius*

"**Black**." Cracked, quiet, unbelieving. His own voice sounded foreign as he finished the thought in hushed realization. **Sirius Black**.

His real name.

-o-o-o-

The nausea had subsided. In truth, there was little left to throw up. The inconceivability of it all had left Hermione praying to the porcelain god half the night at The Burrow, Ginny attempting vigilantly to calm her, offering cool wash cloths and soothing, gentle pats. She had already become maternal.

Now Hermione stared uneasily at the serpentine-graced door before her. When in doubt, consult text information, her motto had always been. Ironically, the ideal first choice of libraries was also the least desirable, considering.

"We've not done more than a clean to the library," Ginny stated as she *swished* her wand across the massive oak, muttering a password. "There was always too much else to be going on with, and while Harry's off, he didn't want me alone." Another snapping *flick* and the latch released, giving way to the younger woman's nudge.

Trepidation roiled her stomach further, threatening a repeat performance of only hours before. She'd not returned to this place since... since he'd fallen. Bile rose acidly, burning her throat; she forced it down. Deep breath of fortification, mind over matter forced leg muscles to respond, carrying her across the threshold and back into the entrance hall of the one place she never meant to return: number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

-o-

"Still nothing, eh?" Ginny settled the silver tea service upon the lamp table, the Black Family crest rattling upon the tray.

Hermione sat straight, a deep sigh escaping in weary frustration, thumb and forefinger pinching at her nose bridge, rubbing her eyes. Blearily though they were, in focus before her lay numerous volumes of aged writing and questionable content. Hours of research had revealed nothing of interest.

"No. Not a bloody thing." Pulling her attention from the Dark Arts book club, she turned to watch Ginny pour tea for them, a tin of biscuits appearing from between the containers.

"Are you *sure* it was actually Sirius?" Not for the first time had Ginny asked this. But Hermione could not blame her; it was insane, impossible. And yet, she found no other answer.

"Yes. Positive. His hair was short, his face a bit fuller, but it was him." An amazing thing, her calmness at this statement. Somewhere in the past three hours of sorting and study, she had come to terms with the fact that she had seen him, that he was real, and that he was flesh and blood alive. She just couldn't understand *how*.

Handing her best friend a steaming cup of Irish Breakfast, Ginny broached the nagging question of her morning.

"Is it possible..." she began, unsure of the older witch's emotional balance. The latter waited quietly, sight seeking a random wood grain, a smudge upon an aged parchment. "Well... is it possible someone could have used Polyjuice Potion? Found old hairs of his, perhaps from his time in Azkaban. No one but an Order member could have gotten into here, but... Well, except for Kreacher, you know..."

Hesitation, then coffee to lake water, brown to blue, their eyes connected. "No." Little more than a whisper, but conviction lay behind the statement. "Please don't ask how I know; I don't... but I do."

Accepting the Taoist mantra, Ginny nodded slightly and continued being mother, offering condiments and biscuits. Peacefully they sat, breaking their fast with the hot, soothing liquid and Scottish shortbread, each in her own thoughts. Several full minutes passed in this manner, the only sound the rhythmic tick of the grandfather clock Harry and Ginny had received as a wedding present more than a year past. Unexpectedly, Hermione's thoughts broke into speech.

"He wasn't trying to harm me. He was..." Ginny looked up quickly, expectantly. Hermione remained in her own plane of existence. "He was... *frightened*." She glanced up at Ginny. "He was frightened, Ginny. And confused. I could see it in his eyes... *Sirius'* eyes."

A moment passed, Ginny unsure of her suggestion. Finally, she relented. "Are you sure you won't go to McGonagall, or perhaps Lupin, with this?"

Shaking her head assuredly, Hermione declined. "No. I won't put this on them, especially as I've no idea what I'd even say. Honestly Ginny, they'd think I'd gone quite mad. Can you just see their faces when I'd say, 'Oh, by the way, I was out pubbing with Ginny last evening in Muggle London when I was assaulted by our dear, *dead* friend, Sirius Black. He's looking quite well these days, you know.'"

"I can see your point. Sorry."

"Oh, and I've been obsessing over him for over a fortnight, and even saw him in Gringotts the other day, as well.' Yes, I'm sure that'd go over quite well." Sarcasm tainted her words, and immediately she felt contrite for taking out her difficulty on another. "Sorry, Ginny. I just don't "

"Hold it." Piqued interest displayed on the redhead's face. "What do you mean you saw him in Gringotts the other day?"

A quarter of an hour later, the tea was chilled and the story was told.

"All right," Ginny hypothesized, "let's say it was Sirius. Well then, who were the two blokes with him? What were they doing in a Muggle pub? Following us? No, they couldn't have done. They were there before we were."

"Dunno. The one who tried to chat me up, I've seen him before. Don't recall where, though." Concentrating on the elusive connection, she toyed with the silver teaspoon, forcing its face through the lukewarm tea still halfway up the silver-lined bone china cup. "Maybe if we can corner them, we can figure out what's what. Until then, I suppose I can keep searching through these," her hand encompassed the library's well-stocked shelves, "but at present nothing seems to be recorded on how to bring the dead back to life, or retrieve a soul from beyond the Veil."

"Too bad Hogwarts doesn't keep Dark Arts literature. And I've little idea beyond Durmstrang or a Dark Wizard's personal library where else we could find anything. Except, perhaps..." Enlightenment crossed her features as she stared wide-eyed at Hermione. "Flourish and Blotts?"

A rare smile grew, accompanied by the first glimmer of real hope. "Brilliant."

"Excellent," Mrs. Potter concluded. Gathering the dishes, she made a quick tidy of the table as Hermione glanced once more through the tomes littering the area before returning the uninformative ones to their rightful shelves. "What say we pop in the Leaky Cauldron for a spot of brunch, then make our way through the bookstore's offerings?"

"All for it," the weary witch agreed, "but I've got to clean up a bit first. I hate to return to Mum and Dad's, as Mum's friend's most likely still there. I'm not much in the mood for matchmaking this morning."

Ginny snorted, causing a grin from Hermione. "What I don't understand is why your mum insists on trying and setting you up with someone. She knows you're with Ron, right?"

"Oh yes," came the reply over the four-volume stack in her arms. "She knows, all right. But she doesn't think it's going to work."

"Why, because he's gone?"

"No; because he's Ron."

-o-

Dampness hung in the air, bathing his skin in a coat of chilled sheen. Not yet full dawn, the ethereal bluish-white gave only indistinct shape to his surroundings. Stubby pulled himself up from the park bench, joints protesting each elongated move.

No, not Stubby. *Sirius*, he corrected himself. Sirius Black. That is who he was, is. Though just who the hell Sirius Black was remained as vague and formless as the mist-veiled skyline. That witch had been petrified with fear when she saw his face the previous night. She was angry, fighting, until she peered upon his face. Then she broke.

Was he some raving, murderous lunatic? Could he be a hit-wizard, working for a Dark Arts organization, with her as his intended target? Unlikely, perhaps, but he *did* know

her, and she had been truly haunted by his presence. A former lover, abandoned and heartbroken? He shook his head; intuitively he knew she wasn't his type. Hell, she didn't appear to be *old enough* to be his type.

A rough, cold hand passed over his unshaven face, threading through his trim locks. The gnawing in his midsection reminded him he'd not eaten since early evening, before they'd graced the Rose and Guild with their presence. After his revelation of identity, he had left the flat and his mates in a mad dash, desperate to locate something anything of who he was. Gut feeling drove him to transverse the streets of London, searching for a place, a reminder, of his former self. Sometime in the wee hours his feet brought him to King's Cross, and he stood just outside the gates, allowing the structure to speak to him. Only the image of scarlet steel and white vapor brushed past, and after twenty minutes, he knew that was all he'd glean from the place. And so he'd wandered until fatigue robbed his newfound calling. Green painted slats became his perch for a few hours, their un-giving charity welcomed by his exhaustion.

Foraging in his denim pockets, several British notes appeared. A light breakfast now plausible, Sirius ventured out of the park, testing various limbs as he went. Locating a vendor, he purchased a coffee and several scones, wolfing down one while his boots scuffed along the pavement. An inexplicable need coursed through him now, energy refreshed from a short kip, caffeine and sustenance. He was going somewhere. Not just anywhere, but somewhere particular to him. It lay nearby, he was sure.

Turns that made no sense, backtracking, circles, alleyways, reversals, indecision... they all plagued him, like the scent of a trail gone tepid in the night. But each crossroad that delayed him would eventually give up its answer, and direction would once again be afforded him. And so he drove on, negligent of his actual position, indifferent of his crowding workforce neighbors, off to their day's employment. Hours passed, yet he felt only more encouraged. Significance was near, and like a dog nearing home from a wayward holiday, his excitement grew.

Residential now. Still London, but gritty, filthy even. The hit-wizard theory was gaining credibility with each step deeper into the neighborhood. Uneasy, yet... Rubbish bins littered the walk; unkempt gardens guarded by indifferent hounds on cheap chains reeked of fetid scraps. A wailing baby was quickly muffled further down the lane. No other evidence of human life. It was no longer early, the late morning suggestive of some activity. It was summer break; children would not yet be at school. Yet they were not here, either.

His steps slowed. Pausing, he turned to his right, studying a dilapidated two-story with a broken gate. Beneath the grime a faint "13" emerged. He looked about. Yes. Yes, this was his destination. This abomination of a neighborhood was connected to him. He wasn't pleased about it.

Looking to his left, he critiqued the house number eleven, he noted with its rancid cabbages upon the stoop, the paint peeling from its shutters, the front grass dry and patchy. There was something missing, he realized. Glancing betwixt the houses, he saw that a number had been skipped. Glancing across the street, the houses numbered much higher up, both odd and even. He turned back and stared. Twelve was missing. And twelve was something he thought he knew.

Eyes closed in concentration, he attempted to visualize what connection he could possibly have with this place, and why number twelve was more important than eleven or thirteen. *What street was he on?* he questioned himself. That's right; Grimmauld. What a horrendous, depressing name. The Grim. Death.

He shook off the imagery, opening his eyes to again survey the sight before him. Thirteen Grimmauld meant little to him, but for a compass point. The same for Eleven Grimmauld. So what was calling for him? What was he searching for? A place that did not exist? Twelve Grimmauld Place seemed to have been forgo

No more than he had thought it, he saw it. Emerging from between the abodes before him, shoving aside their rickety structures, number twelve, Grimmauld Place formed. Niggling the back of his mind, **unplottable** repeated softly. There. That's where answers lay. Swift glance about revealed the uninhabited grounds still barren. Cautious yet quickly, he crossed the walk and ascended the newly repaired stone steps.

The black door showed signs of previous neglect, its fresh paint masking grooves and scratches. The silver knocker, however, gleamed its serpentine figure. Adrenaline swept through him with a force of painful anticipation. All else faded to the background. The door before him, and what lay beyond, would tell the tale he'd paid the story master dearly for.

Reverently, forgetting his wand, he reached out. Not to the knocker, but to the handle. Mouth dry, breath shallow, he gripped the silver apparatus, and turned.

That's when he heard the scream.

Chapter 8: Bring Forth the Past

Chapter 9 of 36

Sirius Black wasn't her only mystery these days; Raj MacGregor was an anomaly, and one Hermione knew too little about for comfort. But good or bad, he just may be her best source for answers. Or more questions...

****Reviews are much appreciated****

Chapter 8: Bring Forth the Past

It was not the ill-fitting garments that made her breath catch. Her hand upon the front door's handle, Hermione's skin flushed with an icy chill. A shiver alone suggested motion and life, her form deathly still, her eyes glazed in sightless stare.

"All right, I've everything," came Ginny's breathless voice from behind. "When we get out the door, give me a moment to recast a few wards; then we'll Apparate to that alley next to Third Hand." When Hermione made no reply or move, "C'mon, let's **go**," she hissed. "That Silencing Spell on Mother Black from this morning won't hold much longer."

Trepidation brushed aside, Hermione broke from her unnamed trance of worry, released the catch and carefully opened the door.

There was nothing.

An odd sense of surprise ran through her, with it a tinge of disappointment. What was she anticipating? Order members did not use the old house anymore, its permanent occupants residing only part time now themselves. So then... Shaking off the indefinable, the threshold was crossed, and she waited momentarily for Ginny to step through as well and cast her new charms.

The street was nearly empty, her edgy glances about determined. Muffled baby cries escaped a bit further down the lane; across the street a domestic scuffle of swearing and grappling mixed in a dark blur. Lazily trotting down the walk, a scrawny wolfhound passed the witches without acknowledgement. *Stop torturing yourself, Hermione.*

Events past are only a precursor to madness, you know. Mad-Eye is your next stop on the Paranoia Underground...

"All right, let's go." The voice from behind was impatient. Another surveillance revealed nothing out of the ordinary. Had she actually expected... well... for Sirius to show up? Heat flushing her cheeks answered the unspoken question. Yes... yes, she had.

As she spun with the three D's engrained, realization snapped: And she'd *wanted* him to do so.

-o-

Bloody hell, he was out of shape.

Heaving breaths strained his lungs, growing humidity suffocating his attempts for oxygen. Triceps burned in exertion, forcing their limp hanging at his sides. Sirius squinted through saltwater-blurred eyes. Pansy hoodlums graced the Muggle world just as predominantly as the Wizarding one, he decided. The prone figure before him groaned, a cracking voice sputtering epithets into the brittle grass. Nasty bastard thought he'd play tug-o-war with his girlfriend, a fourteen-month-old lass the rope de jour. Tell-tale sharp fumes absent, apparently another form of chemical imbalance had driven the gamey git tortuously mad.

Fingers flexed, shoulders stretched, tenderly he touched bruised knuckles. Recapitulation of the past few minutes played visually about his head in sequence.

Only the girlfriend's screams had alerted Sirius to the insanity across the street. Harry wasn't the only one with a "Saving People Thing," as Sirius' hand had left the door handle, his long, lean legs in ground-eating stride before coherent thought broke through. Securing the wailing child's freedom to her mother, he had targeted the brute. Unending minutes had passed, bone splintering beneath focused strikes, innate desire for violence coursing through him, driving him

Wait. Who the hell was **Harry**?

-o-

Toast and wild huckleberry jam settled uneasily as Hermione crossed the barrier into Diagon Alley. Her last trip here only days prior had resulted in numerous "sightings" that had set the stage for questioning her own sanity. Considering the episode last evening, her experience in Gringotts was even more unnerving.

Borrowed robes and shirt were shifted agitatedly, and Ginny took immediate notice with apologetic tones.

"Sorry, Hermione. My prenatal clothes are at Mum and Dad's, and most everything left at Grimmauld is from Hogwarts years. The rest of my clothes I set fire to one evening. Was in a right moody fit, I s'pose." Contriteness laced her words, a smattering of blush rose across her pale, freckled skin. The shorter, curvier woman laughed in spite of her friend's bizarre revelations.

"No, the dungarees are fine, Ginny. I appreciate the loan, really. It's just," she readjusted the left breast of the robe again. Her voice fell in decibel and timbre. "This poster's a bit much, and... *heavy*." Gravity per se was not an issue, and both knew. Intangible forces outside physics burdened the parchment's bearer. No more was said about the aging *Wanted* poster of Sirius that had remained hanging in a dark recess of the pub until Hermione nonchalantly requested it. A bit of memorabilia, she'd explained. Tom hadn't refused her.

The Thursday noon crowd had not yet invaded the shops, a steady stream of patrons skirting the pair as they approached the magical realm of reference and narratives. Acrid scents denoting aged inks and richly oiled leathers both assaulted and caressed the senses upon entry. Eyes momentarily closed in pleasure, an old feeling reminiscent of early days in Hogwarts' library swept Hermione's concerns away. Floating, flowing, relaxing into the world of script and knowledge... fingers trailing upon the rows of ancient texts, a forest-leather tome edged in gold, *Cebarando Dragônes*

"Shall we try upstairs?" Ginny's suggestion broke the vision's façade. Reluctantly the older witch returned to reality, drifting up the hardwood stairs in Mrs. Potter's wake.

Though hardly their alma mater's collection, the shelves oozed with volumes, each tempting perusing patrons, promising wealth through knowledge, intrigue, comfort and clarity. Candy was less a stronghold on a child than the written word on Ms. Granger. Unsure a starting point, the ladies split each shelving unit. Ginny procured several promising bindings from the back wall end and settled against the varnished bead board, fingering their talisman leaves. Hermione leveled her gaze upon the open end, top down, snagging anything resembling proper quarry.

Speaking only when relevancy was encountered, prolonged silence followed their search for the next two hours. Dogged focus was difficult for the elder witch; abundant facts, figures, concepts beckoned her with each passing page. Digression was her enemy, she reminded herself sternly. Another time, perhaps.

"Interesting bit here, I s'pose," Ginny remarked, her eyes lifting from a particularly hefty composition. Weariness elongated their blue irises, suggesting their time here should be curtailed in the near future.

Hermione re-shelved the pointless tome before her and joined her mate at the back, seating herself upon the lemon-oiled wood. A quick duck recovered the title: *Reflections of the Past*, by David Thyme.

"It's not much help, but listen to this:

Another favored form to return the Dead's presence to the here and now has been the magical portrait. Typically captured whilst the subject is still corporeal with a pulse, the essence of the being is blended into the paints, offering a shadow of the living being to promote their personality and knowledge when direct interaction is not feasible or possible, such as after death. Little more than an imprint, the magical portrait does offer a semblance of the departed, while offering a measure of comfort to those still of this world."

Sudden pause fell in the reciting, the reader's eyes hooded in their calculated watch of a passer-by at the balcony end of the row. Once assured of their complete departure, she continued, voice subdued.

"A master painter can ingrain enough of the subject to provide knowledge and understanding as would be offered by the living self. However, the degree of such is limited. Even the Master Portraiture Artist Agatha Pallet whose works include The Soothsayer, The Ice Queen and Albus Dumbledore admits to boundaries in preserving the soul via tints and shades."

Ginny broke off, a vaguely hopeful expression beseeching approval. Hermione tightened her facial muscles, resembling thoughtful consideration. It was interesting, and it was somewhat related to what they were seeking, but it really didn't help. Gray eyes and whisky-laced breath assaulted her last evening, not oil colors. Resignation escaped in a deep sigh, sadly daunting after the efforts thus far.

"Didn't figure it'd help," Ginny admitted. "But it was worth a try, anyway. Learned something at least, yeah?" No answer was granted time as she quickly rose, returned the text and resumed her search. Hermione ran her hands over her face and eyes, wishing the bleariness from them. How he'd returned was right now the only direction she had to go in. She had no proof of his existence. No one else who knew him had seen him; she now even questioned her own vision. Proof nil, a source proving possibility was her only hope.

Rising slowly to the muffled pops and cracks of arthritic-bound joints, she stiffly returned to her own section of the aisle, silently beseeching the powers that be. There had to be *something* of help. *Somewhere*.

"How is it I'm neither surprised nor troubled to find you here, researching during your holiday?"

Whiplash invited, Hermione's spin-about left her dizzy and unsteady. Wide eyes latched onto the surprisingly formidable figure so very close to her. Her breath quickened. A scowl of concern marred Raj MacGregor's features.

"Caught with your fingers in the biscuit tin, Ms. Granger?" His low tone more confused than accusatory, he studied her without rancor, patiently awaiting her defense. Her pose did not suggest a mere explanation. Silence followed.

"She was helping me, Mr., er..."

"MacGregor." A gentle smile graced his lips, his handsome features growing less intimidating in their suggestion of friendliness. His attention remained on Ginny long enough to bow slightly in respect, greeting her fully. "Raj MacGregor, ma'am. Hermione and I have shared several excursions into the boredom of diplomatic council sessions." Dark eyes returned to the first witch, piercing in their scrutiny. "I am afraid I have caught her off her guard. My humblest apologies." Another bow, this one deeper, slower.

That was not by chance, Hermione realized as he stood straight again. "*Returning the Dead*, Hermione?" Title dipped to nearly face the floor, the book was gripped tightly in her hands as though it would take flight on its own. His low bow allowed him to neatly catch the front cover words.

"Planning to recruit Inferi, are we?" Blanching told her story more acutely than words. It was apparent to Raj at that point that she neither intended such, nor had she even considered the inference her choice of books made. Relief swept him; she was hiding something, but he did not believe it was an evil secret. At least, not to him.

"We're doing a bit of personal research," Ginny offered to break the suffocating silence. "Simply having a run-in with a lack of available information." The cast glare Hermione sent her was ignored. In truth, what did they have to lose? No specifics would be offered; any general interest knowledge could be helpful, though. Unable to read Hermione's body language, Ginny knew enough to know she was not quite that leery or frightened of him. It was time to test the waters, if the other wouldn't.

"Mr. MacGregor, what do you know about returning to life after death?"

"Ginny!" That had startled the speechless back to the verbally capable. Mrs. Potter turned to her friend.

"What?" she asked innocently. The returning scowl triggered her reserved words into motion. "Well, it's not like we've had much luck on our own, no? Might could use a little help."

Raj quickly took in the exchanged dark looks. Important it may be, but Hermione's reluctance to share information piqued Raj's interest in several ways. He chanced it.

"It depends upon the method and manner of returning to life, Ms...."

Ginny turned with a polite smile, a furrow still on her brow for her mate. "Potter. Ginny Potter."

Interesting, Raj considered. The Lady Potter and the heir apparent, if his keen sight remained unerring.

"And it's an odd case, you see. A relative of mine was murdered a number of years ago in a rather odd manner. In fact, he just, well, disappeared. But under the circumstances, we knew the disappearance was death itself. However, recently I think I've seen him about. Not a look-alike, mind you, but he himself. It's complicated," she hastily added at his puzzled expression. He seemed prepared to question, then closed his mouth. Serious contemplation replaced confusion, and he rubbed his darkly shadowed jaw in thought.

Though hesitant, Hermione's stance suggested she was, indeed, interested in his answer. He weighed his options, feeling for gut instinct in how much to offer, how much to reveal. His colleague was a marvel, a fair lass with power, influence, intelligence. She seemed to trust him, but one could never be overly cautious, considering the state of things. He had his own agenda, and a hindrance would not be tolerated. Carefully he spoke, knowing he could at least offer something of value, even without an explanation.

"I may have a reference that could be of service to you." A breath held exhaled. "Mind you, it is not a guarantee, as you've not even specified what it is you seek." The quick catch of breath told him he'd caught Hermione unaware. He decided to relieve her tension, freeing her from concern he would pry.

"I assume you wish to know how your relative could have returned from the dead, though to my knowledge it is impossible in today's world. However, if you are interested, I could loan you the text." His eyes left one witch's for another's, visually enforcing his next words. "It is very old, and very valuable. I would wish not to part long from it, as it is irreplaceable." His meaning was clear. By the expressions on the ladies' faces, so was theirs.

-o-

The flat was sparse in furniture, but cluttered in artifacts. Below floors the Muggle antique shop's bell jingled at each collector's entrance or exit, breaking the solitude of the desolate sitting room.

Hermione walked about, an uneasy feeling returning. Raj was in another room, searching out the proffered tome of knowledge. She wasn't sure how much she could trust him she could have strangled Ginny for speaking out of turn about their business to him but in the long run, they'd told him little; he'd asked no further questions. Flooding to his flat unnerved her a bit, but she recalled she did have her wand, as well as Ginny with hers. Caution was simply required.

History buff would accurately describe Raj at first glance of his home. Trinkets not unlike those gracing the late Albus Dumbledore's Headmaster's office were strewn about, a certain order to their chaotic placement. However, little appeared to be anything less than aged. While Ginny paced about the other side of the room, lingering over the only two photos displayed, Hermione found fascinating the simple presentation upon a corner section of otherwise ignored wall.

Sconce candlelight reflected against the tartan plaid draped elegantly upon the Muggle-white sheetrock. Suspended against it, the gleam of Damascus folding endeared her attention. Yet the straight double-edge proclaimed not the Middle Eastern art, but the broadsword styling of Western Europe. Closer inspection revealed the nearly foot-long grip wrapped in black linen, the heavy brass-like hilt engraved in elegantly scripted foreign characters. Hermione murmured, attempting to make out the unfamiliar letters. Celtic, perhaps? She squinted, drew nearer, studied... turned it could be upside-down, you know tried to imagine a reversal, such as a mirror...

"Ond 'r enilla farchog i mewn 'r byd shall arlunia hon eginyn chan 'r carega"

Startled, she jumped back and around, clutching her wand nervously. Raj kept merely a meter between them, his face impassive as his eyes darted but once to the brandished vine wood. Her response and his lack thereof only disconcerted her further. Abashed, she lowered her wand. Peripherally, Ginny's appearance induced a bit more relaxation through her. Tension ebbed from her body as the moments of stillness continued to pass.

Raj remained unreadable.

Hermione found her voice, breaking the solitude. "W-what?" Self-disgust rode hand-in-hand with the quaver her voice submitted. She should have had a real drink last night, she considered. One now wouldn't be a poor judgment, either.

"Ond 'r enilla farchog i mewn 'r byd shall arlunia hon eginyn chan 'r carega" he repeated flatly. "Welsh."

"What does it mean?" Ginny questioned, nearing the sword with a comforting closeness to Hermione's left.

MacGregor paused, staring, considering his words. Hermione'd seen that look before from him; it reminded her why the fine hairs on her neck rose in his presence. "Simply a statement of ownership, nothing more." His tone suggested an end to that line of questioning, but Ginny either missed or ignored it.

"Who owned it?" Strangely, the elder witch found herself curious as well. She had a sneaking suspicion.

"A *chyndad* of mine, from many years ago." Glazed, faraway sight impressed the guests of their host's thoughts. Returning to himself, he elaborated minimally. "*Daid* held it for many years before passing it along to his unimaginable and widely unknown lineage... conceived mere hours before his death."

Hermione frowned. "*Daid*?"

"Grandfather. Yes," he added, taking in her thoughtful display, "the same whose journal I inherited." Raj cleared his throat. "Here, this may be of some use."

He thrust forth a faded work, heavy and loosely bound. In her fear and shock, Hermione had missed the book held closely to Raj's fit form. Accepting its weight, she peered inquisitively upon its calligraphic cover.

"***Ancient Artes of Majik***, by Shahi." Pages gently flipped, a brow raised. "It looks quite old. I've never seen a book look so... forlorn."

"Another family heirloom," Raj explained quietly. "From a time of great expectation, fallen to the reality of humanity's failures." Dark sadness cast briefly upon his face. Then, intense, forced gaiety.

"Ladies, it has been a pleasure, but I've a meeting in ten minutes with the Minister of Finance..."

Apologies fell profusely from feminine lips; their masculine counterpart assuring all was well, he just had to be conscious of the time. Gratitude profound, humble acceptance, respectful goodbyes. Quarter of an hour spent wisely, perhaps, then the young witches again found their placement in the Leaky Cauldron.

"Fancy an ice cream?" Leave it to the pregnant one for an immediate return to food for thought.

Fortescue's had reopened, a young cousin of the defunct proprietor reviving its services. Outside the shop the wrought iron dinettes offered touristic views of the Alley, granting shade from the midsummer sun yet welcoming gentle tickles of intermittent breezes.

"Sorry; loo call," Ginny announced halfway through their twin hot fudge sundaes. Abstaining comment, Hermione acknowledged her notice and departure with a brief nod, occupying her mouth with another spoonful and continuing her scrutiny of the borrowed treatise.

Purity remains the greatest source of Level One love, within which intent and malice share not a breath. It is only through this that true Life Returned may be granted, and only in phases allowing both body and soul to return as one. If separation or deterioration has rendered either without the parameters of functionality, Life cannot be restored. Will without greed, heart without defense, love without malice such a rare mixture is necessary. Need and focus must be complete.

Should all combine in a tranquil state, the ancient steps may be followed

Damn it! Missed her mouth, it did, and decorated her robes. Hermione shot back, swearing beneath her breath as linen cloth attempted recovery of the stray cream and topping from her left breast. Crinkling beneath her cleaning hand momentarily confused her, and she delved into her inside pocket to remind herself what she had stowed.

Sirius. In the hullabaloo of the day, she'd forgotten his poster. Folded such that only the barest of his full, animated face showed, she stared in fascination. *Had she really seen him?* she questioned herself for not the first time. Had it only been her obsessive, overworked mind playing mental tricks? Sooth, no one else had noticed him. If it was really him, wouldn't there have been some sort of uprising by this point, someone to call out they'd seen **the** Sirius Black an innocent man, the **only** man to have escaped Azkaban while still under Dementor guard? Surely so. Besides, even Dumbledore, Harry had once said, explained that no amount of magic could bring the dead back to life. And wasn't that reinforced by their lack of information found today? This reference from ages gone by, even if accurate, even if conceivable, suggested a nearly impossible scenario required to bring forth into light the deceased.

Visually she followed the lines, the contours of the late Marauder's face. Young, little more than her own years, but so aged through horrendous experience. Insane, they'd said. Perhaps he was. But would she not be as well, had it been Harry and Ginny, betrayed to Voldemort by Ron or... She shook her head, unable to further envision. Under no degree could she place herself in his mind; only could she accept that she understood his madness, its validity, its depth.

Returning to the image before her, aristocratic cheekbones shone through smudges of dirt, asphalt, results of the traitor Pettigrew's demonstrative exit into exile. His eyes... anguished, crazed, numbly beseeching anyone to claim it all merely a nightmare, haunted by knowledge proclaiming

"I think I like the short fringe better, but that crazed look's dead sexy, too."

All that is holy, if people don't stop sneaking up on her... Hermione's only rational thought after her startled seated-jump back was one of basic agitation. Chelsea Chamberlain's lively eyes followed the photograph as Hermione pulled it toward herself in an effort of obscurity. Futile it was, however, as the teen smiled knowingly and stepped around from behind the annoyed witch, seating herself with a pulled chair from the next table. No mannered greeting evidently was required.

"Don't blame ya there, mate. I'd hide it, too, 'twas mine. Got it autographed, too, didn't ya?" Eyes sparkled in anticipation, and Chelsea beamed as she made to lean over the table for a closer examination of the poster. Hermione's brows furrowed; was this girl *mental*? The fact that she recognized the poster from four years back... she hadn't even started Hogwarts when Sirius was killed. Movement caught her eye to her right. Ginny had just returned and was standing beside her chair, intent on the teen's words. A quick glance to each other confirmed each questioned the delusional aspects of the girl's mind.

"Autographed?" Hermione countered in what she hoped was an innocent, casual voice.

"Oh, come off it. I saw you starin' at him the other night. Don't blame ya, neither." Chelsea's grin broadened. "Mind you, he's a bit old for my taste must be in his thirties but you just can't forget thighs like that. I mean, bad boy black, leather... Mmmm, tasty."

Amazed horror shot between the elder women. Hermione mouthed, "Bad boy Black?" to Ginny, unsure she could find her voice even if the girl had not been present. An obsession for Sirius was one thing for Hermione she'd known him, and it wasn't *that* kind of obsession. But Chelsea's fanatic lust over an accused dark wizard / murderer, long since dead... Ms. Granger was feeling the dessert return in bile-trade. Lightheaded, dizzy...

"Always had a weakness for the musician type, I did," the teenager continued, unaware her words caused such havoc upon her audience. "Could've done without the face paint, but Mum says it wouldn't have been the 'goblins without it. She was a right fan back when they first got set, but that was **ages** ago. Now she just listens to that ole Celestina What's-Her-Face." A glance to her watch, then, "Bollocks! Got to fly; Dad's waitin' at Madam Malkin's. Mum's makin' him buy me new dress robes for the Samhein Festival in Dublin and Yule Ball the Ministry's puttin' on.

"Nice seein' ya again, Ms. Granger," she added in quick pace with her rise. "Maybe we'll spot ya at the Ball, eh? Ya *must* go; that hot bloke Raj'll be there, Dad *assures* me." With that, she departed in a flurry of giggles.

Left gawking unseemingly, Hermione's brows shot up in question at her friend, the latter slowly taking her chair. "Musician type?" Ginny finally broke.

Sirius' image continued his spastic movements, Hermione staring critically at his form. "Yes, she seemed to think he's some musician we've seen together, face painted and..." Realization smacked her dead on. The forthcoming gasp revealed in mere whispering squeak. Connection made, credulous expressions crossed her face as she shared newfound knowledge just above faintest whispers. "I know where I've seen him and his mates before."

"Where?" Ginny's question was hard, direct. Too much made too little sense here.

"The Gala Saturday night. They were the band. *Everybody* saw them. They talked to fans and played and..." Voice trailing off, a last understanding jerked the light switch within. A sly, genuine smile grew as she stared for Ginny's reaction.

"And Colin Creevey shot the pictures."

-o-

Earl Grey, tasteless, burned his throat. At least it was hot and wet, he considered, finishing the last of his scones. The flat was deserted, and Sirius found solitude desirable after his only semi-productive morning, and cold, damp night. Though he'd learned his name and had released weeks of tension through abrasive physical combat, locating an important, unplotable domestic was a source of further aggravation. Try as he might, the wards would not drop. An hour of loitering before the unseen building grew suspicious to the few Muggles milling about; giving it up as a bad job was his only choice for the day.

Aches crept into his head and neck. Knotted muscles sought his free hand's massaging grip, the effort of simply *remembering* monumental. All he wished now was a soft bed and continued silence something he found as a rock star almost fairytale. No more screaming fans, nosy reporters, greedy industry execs, or paparazzi. **Please.**

The door banged open just as he was depositing his crumbs in the bin, his cup in the sink.

"Stubbs, mate!" called Kent, winded in excitement. Blue and Nigel followed, ecstatic grins plastered. "Wait! You hear! Our last gig did the trick, it did."

Sighing deeply, Sirius kept his mouth shut, not particularly interested, but knowing he'd have no peace until Kent said his own piece.

"Get changed," Nigel took up. "Bloke's on his way over. Goin' to do a story on us, mate; front page. *The Quibbler's* telling the world: the Hobgoblins are back!"

Damn it.

Chapter 9: Troublesome Discoveries

Chapter 10 of 36

Not all answers are appreciated; not if they demand a change in plans, beliefs, a future. The man in her dreams; her future husband; others' identity of the man she believed to be Sirius... was anything what Hermione expected?

Reviews are much appreciated

Chapter 9: Troublesome Discoveries

The realm of magic can blow the mind, its infinite possibilities crossing the perimeters of definition. But the phenomenon of the mind can thoroughly blow magic away.

It had returned. Again.

The dream.

Dense vapor hung in the crisp air, dampening tendrils against her icy cheeks, a biting breeze striking shivers through her. All about, the shore, the lake, the boat... all remained as she remembered. From without her body, she saw the hand reach toward her quivering chin, could feel its warmth near a clenched jaw. It was him. Again. His presence flooded all perception of awareness, of rationality. His scent carried upon the current, teasing. Breathing grew labored.

Physical nearness too intense overrode all other stimuli. This time as calloused fingers gently tugged, a voice accompanied the movement. Barely audible, the words called from behind, "All is well, milady."

Hermione woke with a violent start. Panting, air came quickly, harshly to her lungs. Her head swam, hyperventilation threatening a cold faint. Predawn illumination revealed in bluish hue the childhood room of Ginevra Molly Weasley Potter.

Deep sigh. Steady on, now. She was safe, in bed, in the care of the Weasley clan.

Stilling her tremors, she relaxed fatigued muscles, reviewing the imagery of but moments before. The voice was new. Never before had she heard aught save the laps of gentle loch kissing the sandy loam of shoreline. Repetitively the words sounded in her head. Timbre and quality meshed within memory... she knew the voice, but... but...

It was Raj.

-o-

Guilt washed reluctantly over the bedeviled witch. Time off both studies and work, and she had spent little of it with her parents. Her mum's call echoed up the stairway, reminding that reservations had been made, and to be tardy would forfeit them. Mrs. Granger had taken the Friday off work expressly to spend with her only child; the effort was not lost on the latter. But it took all her inner strength to push aside the pressing concerns within: an appointment had been made to chat up Colin, and the opportunity to locate Sirius er, his look-alike, she mentally corrected and grant herself peace of mind by proving the sham left her solely attentive on this one thing. But dinner reservations had been made, an itinerary of shopping and mother/daughter time immediately following. But she only wanted to hunt down this mysterious 'Sirius.' But her mum and dad rarely saw her nowadays, and she was their only child. **But...**

Thus, the guilt.

Forty minutes further into her life, Hermione stiffened her posture in answer to her mother's critiquing gaze. The roast lamb was dry, the vegetable mix tasteless. Picking listlessly at them was as much idle doodling as attempts at nourishment. Recollections plagued her mind, aborting all efforts at dinner conversation.

Raj. Just who the hell **was** he? She felt neither threatened by him, nor comforted. But he unnerved her. Hidden were his schemes, designs of a nature not apparent. Vague answers, incomplete explanations, carefully weighed words. Flirtatious in a medieval sort of way, his chivalrous manner both charming and disquieting. Handsome, yes, but supposedly so was the Devil himself. Yet... he did not exude evil; he simply personified some intangible force that must be respected a force with which to be reckoned. To be leery of him was wise, she decided. He could be working for anyone... even himself. It was the last option that bore the most danger.

"David's awfully clever; he's designed numerous gardens, even for grand country estates in the North Country." Mrs. Granger's animation was bright with a tad too cheery façade. Another bite, and her roll on her old friend Darlene's nephew continued, much to Hermione's disconcertion.

"Right gentlemanly; handsome, too. Reminded me a bit of that American rock star, what's-his-name. Long hair well, short now band named after him... I think he was in a film or two, as well." She paused, waiting for input. When it did not come, "Right. Anyway, he loves children got a young niece and nephew he adores. Dotes on them, he does. Even takes them on the job when he can. Mind you, they're only six or so, but he keeps them well occupied while he works. He'll make an excellent father someday." Nothing. Another bite, sip of soft drink. Another try.

"Saw your graduation picture, the one I took of course. Wouldn't do to have a moving photograph to scare him off." Light, forced chuckle. "He thought you were simply beautiful. Still single, you know. Man like that won't be long without fanfare. You might could meet him for a drink, as he's in London quite often. Perhaps after work. I wouldn't suggest telling him you're a witch right off, you know, but he's an open-minded sort, he is. And he *did* say you were quite a looker..."

Hermione scowled at her potatoes. She honestly did not need this now. Still scrutinizing the tubers, less-than-congenial retorts issued from her set mouth.

"Mum, I already have a boyfriend, as you well know. I'd appreciate it if you would cease trying to match-make me as though I was a dried-up spinster." Her free hand shot up, halting Mother Granger's response. This time the scowl met the matron's eyes in direct defense. "For whatever reason you have against Ron, you've made like he doesn't even exist. Well, he does. And he's my boyfriend of several years, eventually to be my *husband*."

"You think so?" her mother challenged.

The scowl deepened, eyes narrowed. Rising with a ringing toss of her fork, Hermione gathered her bag without losing eye contact. "Yes. I've no doubt. Now, if you'll excuse me, I promised to meet Ginny and help her with baby preparations. Thanks for the lunch," she added coolly.

Clonking echoed against stucco walls and tiled floor into the airy, high-ceilinged room, announcing to one and all the determined departure of a young woman in khakis and dress flats, her bushy brown tresses caught up in a French braid. Any onlooker would have thought her a budding professional ending a poor business luncheon. None would have ever guessed the truth: a brilliant witch who'd just glaringly lied to her own mother. About everything.

-o-

Her tears had abated by the time she reached the Leaky Cauldron. Hours walking the streets of London had allowed ample time to purge body and soul of turbulent emotions, and expunge the evidence in turn. The lie insinuating her and Ginny's plans for that afternoon had rolled easily off Hermione's tongue, but had done nil in actually keeping the woman busy throughout the empty hours following her lash-out. In reality, Ginny had had a medical appointment for the afternoon. The women were not supposed to meet until five, nearly an hour hence. Colin had cleared his schedule for a half-five appointment as a personal favor. Thirty minutes. Enough time to formulate a plan of action should the evidence prove damning.

Maudlin thoughts plagued alongside firewhisky and butterbeer. The other bald-faced lie of the day gnawed in terrier fashion, unwilling to be dispelled by either anxiety for the approaching interview, or the liquid courage present to face said meeting. Contrary to bravado words, she was not without doubt of future matrimony to the youngest Weasley son. More than kilometers, waters and national borders created distance between them. As of late, the steady banked fire had flickered to little more than embers, lapping occasionally only with strong efforts to fan their flames. It was disheartening, even more so in light of all else threatening her life's plan.

Was nothing in fruition as it was intended to be?

"Aggie! How wonderful to see you this afternoon." Tom's exuberant salutation woke Hermione from her self-obsession. Just approaching the bar, a stout, weathered witch let slip a half-smile in return, requesting a gillywater. "How goes the new shop?"

"Gave a right tear in me knickers hanging those molting monstrosities you call artwork, Tom," she replied with mock gruff. "*Knew* I should have used a Levitating Charm, but they're so difficult to align properly, particularly without assistance. Seems I recall *someone* offering to help set up, but he must not could've been fagged."

Blushes crept up from Tom's collar, averted eyes and boyish grin admitting his guilt. Peeking back at the object of his affection, he countered, "Was just going to stop by tomorrow afternoon, once business died down. That way I could offer my services wholly and without interruption."

The hopeful look pacified Aggie, a smirk and eyebrow suggesting he wasn't getting off quite that easily, though. Tagging her order, she turned to leave, tossing back a cheeky, "You should stand for election, Tom. Talk enough cobblers to flog anything." Her retort earned a besotted sigh. Hermione grimaced. Even old Tom had an encouraging love life. All she had was an almost-but-not-quite.

Wait. *Hold up there, lassie*, she chastised herself. Just when had she decided it was a complete no-go? When did Ron suddenly become not enough? For what purpose was she already emotionally turning from a pleasant, established affair? What more than she had with Ron could she want out of a relationship?

That feeling you get with him.

Damned know-it-all conscience.

-o-

Trinkets and contraptions whirled, buzzed, beeped and clicked. A cracker tin held more room than this ill-fitted closet of sundry, Hermione mused silently. Shifting uncomfortably in the wicker-back, a quick glance was tossed to Ginny, seated similarly just two inches away.

"Almost as cramped as Dad's old office," she muttered, eyes dancing about the brightly lit box.

Hermione held back a snort. It was difficult to imagine a working office more compact than Colin Creevey's, but she herself had never beheld the broom cupboard Arthur Weasley had shared in those days gone by of Muggle Artifacts. Still, reconsidering, the drying photographs hanging on clothespins throughout made for limited headroom, even for one as petite as herself. Glimpses revealed vague formations in growling poses; subterfuge enacted in shadowy cloaks, Galleons changing hands; blue flames circling a black foyer curved in non-descript doors

"Ah, now. Here we are." Cheery words escaped from behind the stack of photographic material entering through the paneled passageway, Colin's hands balancing the precious darkroom discoveries with unprecedented expertise. A step to clear the already-closing door, and the orderly pile fell to rest upon... more piles.

"Right, then. This is the full batch of all the photographs I took at the Gala Saturday evening. Do you know exactly what you're looking for? I can help you, if you do." Eager anticipation drew his kind eyes wide, a look reminiscent of his early Hogwarts years. He had yet to lose his adoration of Harry Potter.

He'd do anything to assist the legendary hero's young wife and mother-to-be.

"I still can't believe Harry's going to be a father," he added, before either woman could speak. Gazing upon Ginny with reverence, an almost wistful sound came forth. "The Boy Who Lived will be the Dad Who, er, well..." His smile faltered in embarrassment, his lack of wit troubling him.

"Er, Colin," Hermione interrupted, hesitant to reveal too much. "We're searching for photos taken early in the evening, preferably before the Gala actually began. Do you think you could help us?"

The opportunity to aid the Woman Who Married the Boy Who Lived and friend overcame Colin's self-consciousness. Rightly he perked up at this invitation, setting forth to

distribute animated glossies and flip through a packet himself. Amidst timing alarms *dinging* and interoffice memorandum owls swooping, the trio set forth their search. Colin would separate the preparation photos from the evening, allowing the women to sort the prior first. With luck, pre-party captures *would* exist, allowing free view of unadulterated faces.

But it was not to be. Painted minstrels graced what few collages included the entertainment. Twenty agonizing minutes later, the best close-up of the band was an intoxicated spree during a scheduled break. Unfortunately, Sid Vicious a.k.a. Sirius-look-alike kept ducking over from repeated shoves by the blue-haired drummer. Hermione displayed this view to Ginny with a half-heart.

"Bit pissed, I do believe, but that's him with the short black hair." She pointed distinctly to gelled locks dripping in sweat. Little could be identified on the leather-clad performer, but dutifully Ginny peered in consideration, attempting to notice *something* of Sirius-like nature. A moment later she sighed.

"Sorry, Hermione. I just don't see it. I mean, he's lithe and about the right height, but he won't stay put for me to get a proper look. He keeps turning to those blokes in the background, arguing."

Following the redhead's finger of reference, Hermione swore under her breath. "Honestly. If Chamberlain and Sir McCaine could for once leave their office politics at the office, we'd all be better off." To herself she wondered if their continuing bicker was the source for Raj's unpredictable temper. His work with Chamberlain left him exposed once too often to hostile feelings over trade agreements between England and Northern Ireland.

"Well, there's nothing for it, I suppose." Turning to the eager photographer, she politely inquired if she could keep the photograph, just in case.

"Certainly," his bright answer came. "Anything for you, Ms. Granger." As she stowed the paper image, Creevey added inquisitively, "If you're looking for views of the band in particular, we've better shots from the interview yesterday, taken at their flat."

Even tedious *tick-tocks* ceased for but a moment.

"Sorry?" Little more than a whisper it came, crossed between vexation for the wasted time and anxiety for the moment of truth. Hermione's bowed head slowly drew up from her leather case, eyes wide, throat suddenly dry. Half swallow. Blink. Half effort throat clearing.

"Would you mind..." The request could not be completed, stuck somewhere in her throat as it was. Colin, however, needed no further words.

"Right-so," he called, dislodging himself from the tangle of notes, drying lines and clumsy swivel chair. Out the paneled door once more, and Hermione froze in thought and body, refusing to face a silent Ginny. Butterbeer and firewhisky soured in her stomach; the time had come to discern her level of sanity, her level of paranoia, or simply her level of eyesight deterioration.

If she had breathed once while Colin was gone, it was misjudged, for exhalation upon his return brought with it a bout of whirling lightheadedness. Familiar hands steadied her threatening sway. Ginny's concern was tangible.

"Here we are." A bundle was passed forth to the pale witch. Unable to release the desk's edge to which she clung, Mrs. Potter's free hand accepted the write-up. In moments the steadying hand dropped to share the burden of the Quibbler article, mere pages though it may be. Again only employed mutterings could be heard in the cupboard-sized room. Hermione could not bring herself to look anyplace but forward, an unseeing line of vision blurring the patterns of oak tongue and groove. Jaw tightened, breathing shallow, she awaited the verdict.

Slowly, softly, nervously the phrase slipped from Ginny Potter's lips.

"You're... you're right." Hermione's head turned to face her companion, a fit of flush draining her face of color. Eyes meeting, inquiring brows to frighteningly furrowed ones, the unspoken question was confirmed. Little more than on a hair's breath Fate but did seal her Soul. "It's him. It's *Sirius*."

-o-

Sirius Black ran calloused palms down his whiskery face, separating at his chin and diverting to his neck where they remained in settle. Deep breath, released. Pissed off would be the polite interpretation of his current mood, a side order of weary agitation to round it off. Knackered from too little sleep fitful dreams gracing his eyes with more streetlamp time than eyelid his humor was not such to appreciate the early copy of *the Quibbler* left on the kitchen bar for his benefit. Front page, lower half. Gracing the mass newsprint just below the headlined lead on powerfully magical items being hidden as Muggle Artifacts in the Ministry, spread the lengthy article, ***The Hobgoblins: Resurrected from the Dead.***

An article he hadn't wanted written, a large photograph of which he'd adamantly refused to be a part, and damn it but if the nosy reporter hadn't cornered a few words from his mouth as he'd attempted inconspicuousness. It had failed. Miserably. And that photographer... Conner? Cole? Colin? He'd looked oddly at Sirius his first meeting, then shrugged it off and managed to roam about the sitting room during the chat, taking candid shots Sirius couldn't manage to duck completely out of. Though mostly only profile clips, his photographic self occasionally turned three-quarters, enough to establish a right decent view.

Exactly what he'd wished to avoid.

Until he was sure of just who and what he was, and what life he'd led before waking in this flat, the wizard did not want his likeness plastered about the Wizarding world. Gut instinct demanded with speculative cause a low profile. That was just his intention. Glancing back at the paper, a low growl emitted from deep inside. However, that, apparently, wasn't everyone *else's* intention.

Sirius Black gritted his teeth. And now there was Sunday night to contend with.

Shit.

-o-

The 'goblins had regrouped, returned to their power with a fresh energy lacking their final year of performing, when last they took the stage nearly twenty years prior. Or so the article had said. It also had claimed the chemistry between the artists was renewed. Even more impressive were the lead vocals, revitalized in range and emotion, better than ever before. A show revamped, worthy of notice by old fans, new fans and critics alike. They were even going to attempt the unthinkable: two evenings hence they were going undercover, opening for a Muggle rock band in Wimbledon Stadium.

Clean performance, clean cut, clean record. The Hobgoblins were reclaiming their title of legends, the print stated. Their photo of make-up free faces dispelled rumors they'd relied upon the paint last week to hide aging lines that'd turn away the young 'goblin newbies. On the contrary, the boys had aged well, particularly the raven-haired aristo in gray knit pullover, bashfully ducking out of sight. The lasses would fall for him in groves, more so now than ever.

Bloody wanker.

Stubby Boardman crumpled the paper with vengeance, hurling it violently across the room.

Chapter 10: Calculated Risks

Chapter 11 of 36

Rock 'n Roll fantasy meets sleuth-athon, and Hermione Granger's determined to confront the man she KNOWS to be Sirius Black. But is he ready to confront her, when he doubts exposing his identity is in his best interest? Everything's a risk, some more calculated than others.

Reviews are much appreciated

Chapter 10: Calculated Risks

The boy was mid-year primary school; the girl not even. They held close to the man before her. The dark blond ringlets topping a sunshine pinafore danced from behind his dark trouser leg, ruffles darting out with the intermittent breeze. Sea green irises hedged from just behind the chocolate cotton. More daring, wide blue eyes stared in wondrous awe through black fringe, near but not touching said trouser leg. And that trouser leg...

All right, so her mother wasn't exaggerating describing David. Dirty blond locks fell in boyish manner about a lean facial structure and lopsided smile. Introductions accomplished, crystal blue eyes squinted in humor as he took in Mrs. Granger's thinly veiled set-up, its thin veil a smattering of excuses and supposed mix-up of dates. *Oh, was it next Sunday this historical home's Open House was scheduled? I'm so very sorry; I thought it was today. I had forgotten that you still had work to do on the Elizabethan gardens, David. Oh, do let me go find Mrs. Winston to confirm her home tour. Won't be but a moment...*

No Guild actor need fear, however; her transparent performance rated laughable had Hermione been in a laughing mood. She wasn't. Out of a sense of guilt and contrition, she'd agreed to come with her mum on a round of historical homes, all supposedly open to the public this very day. She should have known.

Left to their own devices, the witch searched for something worthy to fill the silence of the damp summer morn.

"Sorry about that. Mum can be rather thick about things." Eyes cast about, seeking another half-intelligible word or two. Ooh, how she despised being thrown into this position. Unconsciously her face tightened in dark planning, determination directing her later course of action against her infuriating mother. A light chuckle distracted devious designs.

"Don't fret; happens more than I care to mention." No conceit laced his Devonshire words; they were simply statement of fact, reinforcement in reassuring the young lady her mother's meddling was nothing to worry over. He smiled graciously, lightheartedly.

Small talk ensued, awkward and uncomfortable as such scenes can be. The children remained bashful and silent as their uncle resumed his knees and his work within the half-walled planter. Eagerly he gardened, the jostling swinging a thin golden chain about his neck, catching the morning rays in winks of glisten. Conversation continued from his kneeling state, a lively play of expression gracing the interaction. Physical in his voice, his hands gestured throughout without consideration, the soil-caked trowel sending particles hither and dither. Eased by such dirty humor, Hermione relaxed. It was just chat, after all.

"Lacy, my sister, never understood Clapton or Page, so when her boyfriends gifted her albums, I'd nip into her room and nick 'em, play 'em all night while she was out, then slip 'em back before curfew." Never breaking stride, David grasped a patch of offending weed and lightly tugged it free. He handed it cross-bodied to the boy, now digging about the soil with his own smaller trowel, his sister playing with the pebbles of the walk nearby. Obvious affection softened his voice. "Here, Poppet. Please dispose properly." Dutifully, the serious young boy transferred his payload to a canvas bag beside him.

"Never was the wiser, or so I thought," the self-assured man of nature continued. Self-deprecating was his half-grin, reminiscent his longing gaze. Momentarily his hands stilled. "Years later, after she married, she gave me the 33's. Knew I was in love with 'em, she did." Caressing movements returned to his fingers, their nimble flicks potting the new, unnamed stalked foliage in the recently abandoned tract. "There's just something so yearning about

"Oh, damn it!" Following his scorched gaze, Hermione's attention flew to the man's hands. Their botanical charges lay broken in clean lines, a light grasp upon their severed limbs. The sharp-edged trowel must have sliced the delicate stalks in mid-gesture. "Sorry, Hermione," he threw over his shoulder, a quick glance about to ensure he hadn't scared the children with his swear. Both remained as before, intent to themselves. Sighing dejectedly, he rose, explaining. "It's just these are difficult to procure, and I don't believe I've any to spare." He bit his lip in thought. "But perhaps I miscalculated." An air of hope followed the two as they traipsed several meters down the line to his cache of burlap bundles. David's voice and face lowered as the estate manager passed slowly by with a hard stare, his uniform indicative of the position. No need to raise an alarm if all could be repaired without notice.

Diligently the pair searched the plants, comparing notes and examining every sift of exposed soil. Sadly, no additional matching item could be found. "Nothing for it, I suppose," the defeated prognosis came. "Mayhap I can locate a private greenhouse..." A weary slump to his long gait, Hermione hesitantly followed David back to the scene of the accidental botanical homicide. Along the way she debated whether or not to conjure a matching plant and 'amazingly' stumble across it, when a second exclamation fouled the air. She was sure the kids heard *that* one.

"I don't fu flippin' believe it!" Wits recovered enough to narrowly censor language, David fell to his knees before the half-wall, head bent. Bewildered mumbling commenced. Her view obscured by his lean back, the young witch jogged to gain his side. Staring down, she blinked. Twice. Thrice. *Oh, bloody hell...*

Head bouncing up in apprehension, she cast around, about... *where?* Eyes alighted. There. Scarlet and black uniform, gold deplumes stately in place. Just down the path, staring. Swift turnabout, strong paces crunching gravel in his exit. A strong desire swept through Hermione to give chase, but no logical reasoning could she offer her companion. Calming breathing, her gaze returned down to David, his long fingers gently stroking the rare plant's stalks. The perfectly **healed** stalks.

Bloody hell...

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"Maybe he heard you, saw the broken plants and wasn't too chuffed their highly-paid gardener botched it up on something so rare. He was, after all, the estate manager. It's his job's worth to be upset." A tug on the blend fabric, ginger head cocking to the side in study. "And they couldn't afford to wait for a Muggle to find a new plant, if they really were setting for public viewing. I don't believe he was there stalking you.

"What I don't understand is why a wizard would be acting as estate manager to a Muggle family, regardless their lineage or prestige. There had to be another wizard there; you just didn't see them." Though disturbing, Ginny's logic was sound, as opposed to her deftly moving fingers. Hermione winced as the errant needle pricked thigh flesh for the seventh time in as many minutes.

"Couldn't you charm the needle, rather than do it by hand?" the elder witch suggested, trying to withhold pleading from her voice. The bent coppery head shook negatively three feet below, randomly obscuring the world labels of the battered travel trunk on which Hermione stood.

"You wouldn't want me to do that. I'm no better than you at domestics; we'd need a Medi-witch before I was done." *Wince.* Score another. Sharp, pointy steel 8; young witch flesh 0.

"Why don't we have your mum do it, then? She's aces at hemming skirts." Hope fled again as Ginny's movements again said 'no.'

"It's Sunday, Hermione. She's her hands full with Percy."

"Oh," her reply came softly. She'd forgotten it was Sunday. But she had never forgotten Mrs. Weasley's Sunday duty, every Sunday, since two years before. Sobering the remembrance was. Right in the thick of things, and she'd walked out well enough, physically at least. But Percy...

Stop dwelling, Hermione. Over again we've gone; everything must play out now of its own time. You did all you could. She gave a mental shake and grasped onto the first inane topic to flash its notice. "Why are we even bothering with this skirt? I've something a bit more befitting me tucked away in my overnight bag."

"Befitting you, maybe, but not befitting a Muggle rock concert. I did some study on them yes, Hermione, I *can* do research just the same as you," her interruption came, forestalling any speculative words. A flashing glance up to the brunet, then back to the ever-shrinking hemline. "And anyway, what *you'd* wear wouldn't fit in. And you have to fit in like a Muggle fan. Remember what Colin said: there will be Aurors everywhere, and at the first hint of magic, you'll be arrested. Not even so much as an *Alohamora*, mind you. So leave the wand with me. It'd be less tempting if you'd have to go for wandless magic."

Bitten lip forced her to withhold comment. Now was not the time to fuss with the *What do you mean what I'd wear?* retort building in her throat. A long, sure-to-be-stressful night lay ahead; best to keep all her wits about her. Nary a full-fledged plan had she formed for the evening before her. Bits and pieces were settled between Ginny and herself, but many how-to's were left to play out by ear. Laminated Press Pass, a groupie look, and a thorough Muggle upbringing background. The rest... wait and see.

"I do wish I was going with you," Ginny sighed, straightening. She pulled taut the black material to critique its lines. "Something seems off about the whole thing; I just don't trust it all. But I can't afford to be around so many pushing, scatty people." A protective hand settled on her abdomen. She stepped back, dropping the skirt and catching Hermione's eye with a steady look. "Just... be careful. Mind your back. And don't... don't do anything rash."

A half-chuckle of incredibility broke. "*Rash?* Honestly... What would I, Hermione Granger, *possibly* do that could be considered rash?"

Famous last words.

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Fingers long, slender, pink-tipped. Graceful. Manicured nails, clear, clean, smooth. But the reverse... Calloused palms showing wear, rough patches denoting a hardness that seeped deeper than three layers of skin. Were these the hands of a killer? Knuckles bruised a fading, sickly yellow-gray, marred from their violent venture days before. Was this an indication of his true nature? Dismissing the circumstances of saving the innocent, the destructive actions... they came too easily, without thought. There must be cause for such instinct.

Sirius Black studied his hands lain before him, detailing each crease and shadow. Digits capable of rendering an Unforgivable, perhaps? When that the wretched cried for mercy, was he merciful? Calculatingly cold might his response have been, instead? Or perhaps... indifferent? Now there. There was the cruelest of them all: to feel nothing. Vivid recollection of the witch in the London alley assured him his fate was not one of indifference. Unless what tragedy robbed his memory just as well reshaped him from within, he was not indifferent. Pity he felt for her, concern his presence had caused such anguish. Did this too mean he was not without compassion?

Sirius flexed stiff tendons, envisioning the grip of yew or holly, avarice green blinding in its absolute destruction. Every new clue suggested this dark self, his past returning in jagged portions. He was not a saint; that much he knew beyond question. Sinner was he, but the question remained: just how much so?

"The Ministry's so tight tonight, you couldn't tug a needle out of their bum with a lorry." Heralding Nigel's return, his words drew snickers before the dressing room door fully closed. With Muggle security just outside, they would have to watch their words; the Statute of Secrecy was a nasty rule to break. "So much as an *Alohamora* out of anyone, and it's off to Azkaban with ya." A tongue-teeth *click* and wink accompanied the declaration.

Though no movement betrayed him, Sirius' attention had immediately snapped back to the here and now with Nigel's comment. Luck must have blessed him last week, a Ministry-sponsored gala and all, but now that he knew his identity, edginess crept in on the coattails of concern. High security meant talented undercover Aurors. Aurors trained to spot criminals, murderers... men of wicked means. Men like him.

Two days had passed. Two days since he'd seen it seen the image that had confirmed his apprehensive suspicions. Needing to feed a restlessness that currently dominated his psyche, Sirius had left the flat Friday after reading that damning article. Apparation had brought him to Diagon Alley, and after hours of mindless wandering, to the Leaky Cauldron, a stiff mix of firewhisky and wizard talk beckoning. There, under the guise of a hooded cloak, he'd kept to the shadows, intent on the bar. In transit, he had passed behind a quietly sobbing witch face down upon her table, a bottle of the sterner stuff beside her. But in her hand, clenched with certainty, lay partially exposed a worn, faded Wanted poster.

Of him.

He'd fled, of course. Unsure of anything, time and solitude were necessary to think. He'd not seen the charges, but one didn't get man-hunted for wangling.

"Go on, let 'em lock me up," Kent proclaimed, tossing back the catered fruit chunks with relish. "Azkaban don't scare me none, anyone. Bloody wankers are sauced up if they think boggarts'll hold a *real* wizard in. Not been the same since the Dementors defected."

What? Sirius' bent head jerked up to stare at Kent's reflection. Silver hue brought sharp contrast to the bassist's mirrored image, a smug expression ripe with melon juice draping his box chin. Boggarts in charge? Dementors defecting? No jest revealed itself in the metallic glass. When had this occurred? The lack of reaction from the others milling about suggested it a long-standing status, but to Sirius it was news. Nothing could enforce imprisonment like a Dementor, its cold, rattling presence, veins chilled in horror, defeat... His eyes closed in memory, an aching of empty chasms deep within, cringing in hopelessness, piercing in travesty's remembrance... Dreary stone, damp with sea water, moldy, musty, the rusted bars dank and rough...

Oh God. His eyes flashed open, peering fearfully into themselves. He'd been there, hadn't he? He'd been to Azkaban Prison. Under the Dementors. For a very, *very* long time.

What had he *done*?

"Oi, Stubbs!" Breaking thought, Sirius raised his sight to the glass likeness Nigel presented. "By the way, mate, your new best friend out there," he tossed his head to the door behind him, "says to tell you not to fret over your toys, as he'll keep a good watch over 'em for ya."

"New best friend?" Blue's for-the-evening girlfriend inquired.

"Yeah; the massive bloke guardin' the door. Body art in full sleeves. Took a right liking to Stubbs, here, didn't he?"

Kent chimed in, a groupie's massaging hands causing his words to be mumbled into his chest. "That's right. Already done invited 'im to tea at 'is mum's, he did. Soon as we'd arrived. Tatt'ed Muggle's right taken with our Stubby." Lecherous, knowing grins and chuckles accompanied his tale from all around, the magic folk roadies three in all joining in on the innuendo. Sirius merely rolled his eyes, his concerns much greater than a rock star wannabe hounding after him. "Dodgy lookin' bloke, though. If he turns out a footpad, the Ministry'll say nary a word when we string 'im up by his pudgy piggies, long as it's after the show."

Laughter increased, but Sirius' thoughts had faltered on one word: footpad. It wasn't thievery that tickled his mind, but the word itself. Yet, it wasn't quite right. Something... something close, another memory, something personal.

"Course, it'd only be courteous of us to give 'im a last request. A last meal with ole Stubbs, here, eh? As the main course?" Roars and cackles this time, breaking Sirius' verbiage analysis. He scowled.

Knocking preempted his silent reply, and he lowered his gesturing hand as the door swung in just enough, allowing a massive blond head to shirk through, smile in a glance at Sirius, then whisper to Blue nearby. Rumbblings had ceased during the confab, and remained so when the head recoiled out.

"Pork-boy says Origami Legion's ready for sound check. Want to go see how the other half lives?" Blue smiled his charismatic invitation; total agreements readily chorused in acceptance. All save Sirius, that is. Choosing to stay behind, he leaned back to view the newly-experienced Kentucky Bourbon missteps each associate displayed. Two full minutes it took before an orderly exit engaged. Ribbing murmurs of, "Wants some alone time with Bangers, I wager," and corridor scurry faded as the door swung shut yet again, locking with a final *click*.

Screaming silence filled the stark-white tiled cage, throbbing his eardrums for attention. He was alone. Finally. Too much needed to be considered, thought out. Magic-free meant a by-hand creation for disguise. Brilliant response from their clean-faced photo had endeared Blue, Nigel and Kent to decide the same for tonight. Muggle attire without magical transformation, as well. He sighed. Creative options were called upon, and by Merlin he was going to wit himself into remaining un-incarcerated. By no means could he accept a return stint had he broken out previously? *No; impossible* in Azkaban, Dementor-free or not. Especially as he could not recall just *why* he'd been there in the first place, or why he'd been hunted later.

Concentrating on the implements before him, his mind began to race, seeking physical misrepresentation without rousing suspicion. The boys didn't want full face paint, so... Slender colored grease pencils caught his gaze; images rapidly formed. Self-study in the mirror confirmed the endeavor practical, plausible, perfect.

Excellent.

Choosing dark brown, Sirius leaned over the table, inches from the glass, and set to work.

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Bless Colin Creevey and his hero-worshiping ways. Blinding florescent light shimmied off the laminated lanyard about her neck. **Press Pass**, it read in bold, block letters. Grateful was Hermione for Colin's intervention, as without the legitimate pass (damned Auror forgery experts), she'd have never gotten this far.

Of course, 'this far' may as well have been a kilometer, she considered upon noting ponderous forms looming meters away about the prized gateway. Behind that institution-green steel door, the miraculously reanimated body of Sirius Black dwelled, and she had every intention of witnessing it first hand. Well, as soon as she discovered the trick to by-passing the guard-dragon filling the archway to salvation. Golden cropped locks atop a portly red face; fleshy, rotund frame draped in tight tent-sized dungarees and bright yellow **Backstage Security** tee; cultural tattoos running the full of his arms... Shivers danced down her body, nerves growing taut in anticipation, the magnitude of the magic-free subterfuge required reminding her that it wasn't going to be a piece of treacle tart.

A tug on her cropped biker jacket drew her up, the black leather now impeding progress. "Right; you're on your own from here on out," Colin whispered from behind, his breath soft and warm and reminiscent of an excitable, adoring first year. "Sorry, Hermione, but I've a job to do. You should be all right; just keep the pass visible, don't draw attention to yourself, and don't under any circumstances use any magic."

Like darkness, solitude descended. True to his calling, Colin had abandoned her for photo opportunities. Organized chaos bustled all about, stage hands and venue management traipsing through the wide corridor, yet interaction was not with her. Pressing deeper into the concrete brick, a shadowed niche of pillar and wall, she concentrated. Plan 'A' was to integrate into his dressing room (catching him alone, of course) and confront the man she knew to be the Godfather of the Chosen One. Somehow, Muggle security had been overlooked in generating Plan 'A.'

Plucking courage, Hermione drew a fortifying breath and prepared to simply waltz up to the bruising bully, flash her press badge, and request an audience with the band. Yes, that was it. Straight to the point, no nasty confrontation, wholly legal... well, *acquisition* of said pass wasn't exactly, but that was not the point, now was it? And without magic, the prospect of dealing with sneering men gave little encouragement to success. Why, right there, the business casual bloke approaching him... speaking politely... *good, good...* smiling... *yes...* gesturing to the door...

Ooh. *Not good.* Hermione visibly cringed. In the process of Attila's physical rebuke and relocation of said polite gentleman, the latter's credentials caught in a flutter of movement. **Press Pass**.

Damn it.

All right, so Plan 'A' needed revision. Think, think... Simple. Distraction. Lead the Hun away from the door, slip in unnoticed, and *voilà!* Now, what sort of distraction would actually tempt him away

Giggles and heel-clicks and squeals of immaturity sashayed by in group form. The roll of her eyes was instinctual, yet Hermione forced her attention to follow, reading the guard's lustfully sneering reaction. Ill though the consideration made her, it was an option, and one to which she might have to resort. Perhaps if she paid a little trixie to entertain him, she could slip by, nip into the room, and

Another bloke approaching... But this one seemed familiar to the guard and only offered information, turned and left. Attila turned toward the door, digging his massive sausage fingers roughly into his pocket and pulled out a metal ring and... Damn. No less than a dozen keys. Lovely. Just absolutely, bloody lovely. Revision two.

Chrome with the blue façade. Slipped in, fit, clicked, slipped out, unlocking prize door number one. The witch sighed, taking in this new development. With it locked, perhaps they weren't even in there. Perhaps the guard was just poking his head in to assure himself no one had nicked anything

Laughter. Inebriated laughter, chortling through the head-width opening created for Attila's message delivery. At least it wasn't empty, but that also meant Sirius wasn't alone. One more hurdle. And that lock. And no *Alohamora*. And a cast of bloody thousands stalking the corridors in hopes of notice, to be shagged senseless by evening's completion.

Revision number *three*.

Aggrieved, Hermione stared down her target, treating the cocky guard as a particularly problematic Defense Against the Dark Arts practical. Never her top subject, a hands-on exam in such course calling for wholly Muggle resources could be a chance to think outside the confines of wands and incantations. She was, after all, Muggle-born. Logic took over, breaking down the situation in proper dissection: statement of goal, definition of problem, theory of remedy, steps of action.

The goal was direct: reach Sirius, preferably alone. The problem: very large, nasty bully security guard stood between Hermione and the door to her goal. And a locked door, whose key resided in the Hun's trouser pocket. And too many people congregating within the room, making interrogation a difficult prospect. That didn't help. But the locked door was the pressing issue; by his appearance, retrieving the key would not quite be like taking sweets from a baby

Bingo.

Images crossed and re-crossed, forming Plan 'A' Appendix. Or would that be Complimentary Plan 'B'? Regardless, it would have to work, as she didn't have a back-up plan and couldn't risk Azkaban herself. Breaking Hogwarts' rules with the boys was one thing; a Ministry record was another. Of course, there was the illegal B&E at the Ministry her fifth year, but that

Carousing sniggers and guffaws broached her musings; the door had opened, releasing Page-Three Girls, possible roadies and... yes. Peeking around the pillar for a better view, she recognized Kent and Nigel from the pub, from the Gala, from the photos. In finality the door swung shut, the din died away as the entourage scurried forth further down the corridor. Without Sirius.

If he remained behind, she had him alone. If he did not, at least the room was most likely empty, and they would return at some point. Watch check suggested less than two hours before they took the stage. She could wait. That gave her plenty of time to decide how best to approach Attila

"Oi, you! Saucy little wench. Yeah, you." Someone, somewhere, wished her to suffer tonight. Of that she was quite positive. Slow blink for courage, deep breath so as not to pass out... *Think, think, think, Hermione!* She stepped out from her niche, greeting the rude salutation young Master Hun offered. "What're **you** doing down here?"

Accusatory tones grated, and a faint wince flashed through Hermione before she reached his offending presence in three strides.

"Hallo; I'm Hermione Granger," her hand striking out, "and I'm here from "

"I know where you're from; I can read!" his belligerent self proclaimed, eyes darting to her Press Pass. The accompanying sneer held, transforming to lechery as the gaze fell down her crimson spandex tank top and ultra-mini. Hermione reddened. The creep.

"Bloody reporter," he added, his eyes returning to glare at hers. "Band ain't giving interviews, so's you can just leave, unless you've," his leer washed over her again, "**other** talents besides writing."

Grit teeth made for little conversation, so Hermione forced her jaw apart, a sickly sweet smile Umbridge would've been proud of replacing the angry grimace.

"The band?" her innocent voice asked. "Oh nooooo; I'm from the University. I'm doing a paper on, er, fantastic lengths people will go through to associate with celebrity status. I'm actually here to interview **you**." *Brilliant, Hermione*, she told herself sarcastically. Oh, like he'll fall for that one.

Eyebrows creased in what could only be described as Crabbe consternation, apparently deciding which of her limbs to tear off first, or whether her attire was conducive to entertainment before said limb departure.

"Really?" The hopeful note nipped a bit of guilt, but the cause was beyond conscience. Eyebrows raised in interest, a smile broke out on that pudgy face. She changed her mind: Goyle gullibility.

"Yes. In fact, I'd like to ask you about all the oddities you've witnessed, the things Mu people will go through to meet the musicians, and such." Heat crept up her face; she would have to watch her words carefully. The lying was fairly easy; it was the next bit that roiled her stomach.

Fluttering her eyes and bashfully weaving and twisting away from him, Hermione flirted as no self-respecting intellectual would. Giggles and eye-bats and dancing her fingers about his massive arms. Oh, the lengths she would go to for Sirius Black. While the blond ox rambled on about lacy knickers and groupies who'd posted themselves in crates to the dressing rooms, the young witch offered "ooh's" and "ah's" in all the right places, all the time thinking frantically on how to bring about her plan.

"Oh, foo," she interrupted him, a huge pout protruding from her painted lips. Saccharin had nothing on her upward gaze into his eyes, her hips swaying in cutesy nervousness. At the proffered "What's wrong?" she highly counted upon, she brought lip-biting into the routine to suggest hesitation.

"I'm awfully thirsty and it seems I forgot to bring any money. I've no pockets in this," she raised her jacketed arms to prove her point. Drool formed at the creases in his lips. "And I left my bag at school. You wouldn't happen to have any coins I could borrow, would you?" He'd better bite, she thought, else the gig was up. She couldn't handle any more of his touchy-feely liberties. Bile was rising and she was making herself ill.

Trying one more time when he looked a bit hesitant, "I'd *beawfully* grateful." Girly, pleading whisper. Wide, innocent eyes.

That did it. As she knew he would, he began cleaning out his denim pockets, having to pull out the items wedged on top in the skin-tight trousers. Coins would lie at the bottom loosely, well below the topical bits of metal. Good; he started with the right pocket. Piling his items on her outstretched hands, he tugged free the contents with much concentration...

Switchblade. Packet of gum. Packet of Johnnies (she chose not to speculate). Keys.

Keys.

He shoved his porky fingers deeper, his eyes staring for several moments at the ceiling for some divine assistance, and with the headiness of accomplishment, fished out several ten pence.

"You are so sweeeeet," she gushed, taking the coins, imparting his goods in return. A bit more giddy talk, and she excused herself just around the corner to the vending machine.

"Colin! Just the man I was looking for," she squealed, lowering her voice lest the wrong attention be attracted. Quickly she explained her need, and upon his agreement, returned down the now nearly-deserted corridor.

"They didn't have my flavor," she pouted, returning his coins and ignoring the strange look that'd come over Colin's face at her over-the-top-flirtatious act. Her left hand over her heart in pleading gesture, she ran her right over Attila's chest and purred. "But before I forget, I'd like to get your photograph. It'll be included in my report presentation," she added, a beguiling smile the only necessary nudge to her request. It was enough.

Thankfully.

The cheerleader façade dropped the moment Colin led Attila round the corner, claiming the light was significantly better in an unoccupied room down a different corridor. Hurriedly she reached the door, giving the corridor her back should anyone else walk by. Dropping her left arm with a slight shake, metal shimmied down her jacket sleeve, depositing directly into her palm. *Thank you, Zelda, wherever your crafty heart and hands are tonight.*

Key fitted, lock released, knob turned. Withdrawing the instrument, she bent to pitch it discreetly on the floor so the guard could eventually find it. A quick glance about showed she was still alone, but voices carried down the corridor, indicating impending inopportune disturbance. She didn't want to burst in, just in case he **was** still in there, or worse, wasn't alone. But she couldn't be caught out here, either, and it was her only chance.

"Big D's watching the newbies down here in Green Room Five." Echoes growing nearer made her decision for her. Deep breath, dart in, swing around with the door, shut it gently, quietly. Lock it. Release breath.

Hermione gave a mental shake and turned, prepared to hunt down a hiding place. She looked up and

Squeaked.

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Deer in the wandlight. But yet, not fear. Not this time. The reflection greeting him as his eyes adjusted focus from his own face to the scene behind him gave Sirius a right start. He had to be hallucinating. There was no other possibility. Not the one person in all of Britain, the only one with which he felt some sort of connection, within this

murky existence he currently lived. She, of all people, waltzed right into his dressing room with him alone, past multitudes of Aurors and Muggle security... It couldn't be real.

Lowering the pencil gently, he slowly ever so slowly stood and turned, never leaving eye to mirror contact until his body had twisted about. Then...

"Sirius." Little more than a whisper, her lips working without breath. Though she'd entered his lair he'd dare say without anyone's permission her reaction spoke volumes. She'd not been as prepared to see him as she must have thought. Perhaps... perhaps she wasn't there to see him; instead one of the other guys was her interest.

Sirius distractedly noticed her Press Pass, and briefly wondered if she was there to get the story of his capture. A capture, perhaps, she instigated herself, leading Aurors right to him. Peripherally stolen glances confirmed her solitary presence, however, and if she felt him dangerous, she would not have ventured in alone. Unless...

He could think of nothing that would coerce her into dressing the part of wanton groupie and risk her life and limb to get past that great Muggle arse outside. Where was he, anyway?

Drawn from his inner thoughts, he realized she was speaking again trying to, at least breaking the nearly full minute of straight-on silent staring. A nervous lick of her lips, her jaw trembling, her eyes glazed in watery fashion.

"Y-you... you're..." Deep, steady breath. His eyes narrowed. She shook more. Deep swallow. "You're... you're Sirius Black." It was a statement. At first. "Aren't you?"

Sirius wasn't sure how to answer. A positive could find him in Azkaban straight up. But it could also find him his history, his life. Either answer could well lead or leave him in a prison, one with bars, one without, both tormenting his mind.

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For all her talk, all her Gryffindor bravery, Hermione was shaking in true fear. Not in getting caught; not in mortal peril from a powerful, full grown wizard locked in alone with her; not in failing her goal. No; she trembled in fear of the man before her speaking but one horrific word: no.

Though she had researched and planned and schemed, Hermione had not truly been prepared for the sudden face to face meeting. Void of paint, his shadowed jaw darkened his appearance by more than color. Unreadable eyes, black locks falling down, their tips mingling with long eyelashes. Tribal tattoos sketched just below one eye, incomplete. Tall, somber, confident. His presence flesh and blood, by God! was overwhelming. She wanted to cry, to scream, to run both to and from him. She wanted to touch him, prove to her logic he was real, not a phantom, not a well-cast look-alike. She wanted him to answer. She wanted to know that by whatever means granted, she was wrong the entire world was wrong and Sirius Black **had** returned from the dead. She wanted

"Yes."

Chapter 11: Bound & Determined

Chapter 12 of 36

Sirius didn't have time for questions; it was survival of the fittest. Hermione didn't have time for games; it was war. But in the end, it was codependence.

Reviews are much appreciated

Chapter 11: Bound & Determined

...Rapture invades mine heart; thou cannot conceive this beautiful malady. Describe it, I cannot. Such treasured gift bestowed upon this humble servant, I deserve not. Mine father, thou dost know to be the most true, most noble, most brave, yet though nigh he came to this grace, he hath fallen by the ill-fated glance of one so weak in desire. This weakness betrayed them three.

Mine mother's deception brought forth mine breath... for but this one purpose now fulfilled.

It is here, now, before me. He hath led me here. Reverent its cause, eternity it offers. The world hath sought it, yet to me alone reveals itself, its powers, its truths. Blessings upon all who doth share this fate I have but only moments before witnessed. It is all that is true in this world and the next; no greater vision could any mortal thus behold. I shan't accept more greatness exists. I guard it with mine life, as will all those who doth follow after me.

By yet the generosity of His goodness, this great knowledge is not His final kindness to me. Before dawn, I shall leave this world. Yet He hath granteth me these moments prior the sun's rise to recall that which brought failure this quest to mine father; for me, a life's denial, now in its stead a reward above the purest Ecstasy.

Evangeline.

Voices rose in approach, and the binding cover threw shut, the Translation Charm broken with a flick. Hurriedly, frantically, ancient script relocated out of plain sight. Muttered swears interlaced with frenzied spells. Deception grew imperative, a masque of deeds performed moments before.

Satisfied all traces were destroyed, a deep breath, a calming thought, and a rejoining followed.

-o-

Silence hung in a heavy veil, shrouding all but the pulsing of life deep within. Bated breath held on each side, the repercussions of that one word anticipated in tandem. Yes.

Yes.

It draped the silence, permeating all senses.

Yes.

Confirmation to both sides that neither was errant in their tentative identification.

Yes.

A tint, coloring all considerations from this point onward. Silent challenge to the woman, daring her action on this single word. Muted pleading to the man to prove his corporeal existence. Consequences be damned; the truth granted freedom, an absolution of the past days, weeks.

Yes.

Sirius Black... is... alive. Hermione's cerebral senses flailed, desperately grasping at the wholly inconceivable notion. He *was* Sirius. He'd said so himself. No one in his right mind would confess such an outrageous claim were he not truly said man, particularly considering said man's past. Exonerated though the black sheep Black was, the Ministry would still have issues with him. So he wasn't lying *couldn't* be lying and she was staring dumbstruck at a four-years-dead man. Her grip on the door latch behind tightened; her body shivered in pent emotion.

Before her he warily stood, tall, tan, healthy. Better than the recovering escapee of her fifth year, actually. No older. Younger, fresher was his aspect. Not a regression in age, per se, but a bloom to well-being, a reneging of struggle and worries. Niggling her consciousness was just what sort of regime it took to fill out like that from the gaunt, haunted man she'd known years ago. More the question, what sort of *time* did it take to achieve this prime state? How long had he been *returned*, playing the part of rock star sex god? Leaving everyone to believe he was gone, dead. The vision of incredulous miracle blurred before her, her memories dropping by, instead, reminding her of the four years since Sirius' *disappearance*.

Harry'd been inconsolable. Never letting on, he'd hid it well. Well, that is, until the Department of Mysteries had loomed before them again. Molly Weasley had felt shame for her treatment of the cousin of whom she'd adamantly disapproved. The Order had felt the blow, knowing yet another one of their own had fallen. She herself had felt guilt over her less-than-ambivalent attitude toward a man who'd lost his youth, his hope, his life in the middle of a cold northern sea. And Remus... oh, poor Remus. His one true friend left, a brother taken from him by more than prison walls for twelve years... reunited so briefly, only for Sirius to die without cause.

Well, perhaps not quite. Hermione's eyes narrowed in thought, her brows knitting in growing agitation.

Sirius was alive, well; walking this earth, breathing its air. Obviously. The proof stood before her in well-worn blue denim and gray knit pullover. He was alive... fit... healthy. Just how long had he been so? Just how long had he left his loved ones to mourn unnecessarily, cruelly allowing their grief to color their every waking decision. Of the lot, Harry and Remus had suffered the most. Yet others had cared. And grieved. And he'd *let* them.

The **bastard**.

-o-

Sirius waited expectantly, uneasy. They were going to jump out at any moment, the Aurors, drawn forth by her slightest prearranged motion a signal to claim he'd been found, identified, caught unarmed.

They didn't come.

Instead, he found himself studying the young witch before him. Familiar still, yet he could not make the connection. Intriguing though she was, his guard could not slip. Incarceration came from that. So did death. Or death of memory...

"...You can do better than that!" *Taunting laughter.*

The flash of recalled jeering snapped with the instance of a lightning strike. And it had been his voice. His laughter.

The storyline he felt to be memory was fleeting, and again he stood stark still before the subject of his latest stalking. But her face had changed. Contorting her expression were pursed lips, furrowed brows, narrowed eyes. Thinking, planning, choosing her words to share the story of his capture?

Hesitantly her steps broke from the doorframe, her tread slow, deliberate, direct. Studying him, was she? She stopped a half step before him, raised her chin and stared at him, her expression unreadable. Gently, reverently she reached out with her right hand, the limb trembling with the effort, placing it a hair's width from his cheek. Body heat radiated from her relaxed fingertips, their unsteadiness bringing barest contact fleetingly. With gossamer touch the tips confirmed his reality. Breaths held, his eyes locked on her taut features, hers unwavering from their point of contact.

Fingers fell, and Sirius leaned slightly away, wariness remaining. The next instant he never saw coming.

Crack!

What the bloody hell? Realization hit him an exhalation later as his panoramic view blurred by. She'd slapped him! The hit actually *slapped* him.

Still rooted to the ground, Sirius paused for bearings and shock, then swung his head back around. Just in time for

Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump!

If the slap had surprised him, then the following actions bewildered and bemused him. At first. But damn it if Sirius Black was going to nonchalantly stand about for a half-pint witch to pummel his chest, her nearly incoherent screams into his pullover clarifying into swears of un-gentlewomanly-like conduct, reverberating throughout the concrete walled room.

"You bloody **bastard!** ...thought you dead, you arse... realize the God forsaken pain you caused... how the hell *could* you..."

Tightening his pectorals against the assault, quick hands secured her wrists from below in mid-flail. Without thought, he immediately yanked both roughly down to her sides, then back up again behind her leather-clad back. Knit met leather at lower to upper chest points as his movement drew her forcefully to him with a jerk. So tight was his hold, so high up her back, that she was raised to tiptoes to prevent her arms breaking. It was then her verbal attack abruptly ceased.

-o-

Hermione's breath came in hitches, the intense pain her shoulders denounced forestalled most but the inherently survivalist actions. Saline built from emotional turmoil mixed at outer eye corners with fresh solution, graciously provided by the verge of ligament snapping onto which her body'd been placed. Neck strained in order to meet his face nearly a foot above, every muscle from scapula upward protested vehemently.

Through bleary eyes she made out his expression: incredulous, annoyed, confusion, fear. What the hell did *he* have to fear? He was the one holding all the proverbial cards at the moment. Forming a level glare as best she could, she grit her teeth to keep from breaking down, hoping the message conveyed said *violent displeasure* and not *extreme discomfort*.

Straining joints and tendons made up only half of said discomfort. Tense, eternal moments passed, and loathed to admit it though she was, Sirius' proximity unnerved her. Vulnerable in such an awkward position, physical harm was not what she feared. Uncharacteristically, she could not help but note with extreme awareness the solid structure his slender chest offered. Trim, but deceptively powerful, and her slight form pinned aggressively, intimately against it. Each angry, labored breath forced the issue more prominently in her mind.

Get a grip, Hermione, she chastised. This is Sirius we're talking about here. Wild, impulsive, irrational, immature, father-type figure who **damn**, but those eyes are beautiful

Shit! Hermione abruptly squeezed her eyes shut, desperate to close out her illogical thoughts. She bit her lower lip in confusion and pain. What the hell was going on with her? Past the fact that those indecent thoughts were connected with *Sirius Black* of all people, the complete absurdity of their timing was insane, the current situation **not** being conducive to impure images of the man now arresting her.

Bang, bang, bang! Heavy steel rattling from behind broke her inner turmoil, eyes flashing open in surprise. Sirius was no longer staring down at her with those delicate almond *stop it, woman!* Deep breath... Point being, his attention was drawn to the pounding on the door, the muffled howls of the security swine emitting through, requesting proof all was well with Mister Boardman. Apparently, all was well enough.

Reassuring response given, Sirius' gaze returned to her. His expression had changed; indecision fluttered across his features as his mouth began, closed, and began again.

"Are you quite finished, yet?" Calm vexation was evident. On his tight face, in his voice... *Not* what she had expected from him. Indignation returned her faculties, all traces of intimate awareness vanished.

"Am I *what?*" Her voice rose. She leaned in to him, further closing the gap between their faces, intent to air her ire.

"Listen, if you chuck the fit and quieten down, I'll "

"You'll *what*, you pureblooded, arrogant son-of-a"

" *That's* it," he interrupted, pissed off his new dominate emotion. Startlingly, his grip tightened even more.

" like some bleeding game to you "

" your problem? Lashing on me like "

Volume increased and tempers escalated with each passing syllable, until ears ached with the decibels of unadulterated screaming.

" cruel and heartless, acting ignorant "

" gone mental. If I did something "

" horrible, though if you'd only "

" please, I beg of you, just *tell* me who I "

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

"*What the bloody fuck do you want?*" came the pained roar. Calloused fingers bit deeper into her wrists as his frustration toward the interruptive door broke control. Again his attention was directed otherwise, and Hermione found herself suddenly speechless. The resulting silence echoed dangerously.

"Open the bleedin' door, Stubbs," a gruff male voice called. She'd heard it before. "Brilliant wanker out here done lost the golden-ass key."

Sirius' head lolled back and around, his eyes rolling in exasperation. Heavy sighing escaped his throat in annoyance as he stole pleading glances heavenward. Hermione watched the tightening and twitching of strong jaw muscles.

"*Fuck...*" The whispered epitaph drew out long and suffering. Slight whining tinged the muttered swearing that followed. Suddenly his head popped back up and his eyes darted about, searching hectically. Coming to rest on Hermione, they studied her face intently, brows knit. Quizzical at first, he seemed to come to a quick decision and thankfully released her arms. Unfortunately, it was only a release from the abusive pinning up her back, as his grip never abandoned her left arm. Hermione soon realized why.

Keeping tight hold, Sirius drug her several steps in each direction as he procured odds and sods items: silken performance scarves, sofa cushion, concert souvenir bag, wrought dressing chair... Curiosity overtook the desire to speak, leaving Hermione silently perplexed as the undead Black relocated the chair in the middle of the room. He paused and faced her once again.

"I've no time to play games with you, minx, so here's the plan," he directed succinctly as he swung her around to face the door, he himself directly aft. Fumbling for something, his breath came heavily.

"You're going to wait patiently for my return," his hiss commanded. Silk appeared from behind in a band, dropping from above her head. "Belt it up; no signaling Aurors, causing a ruckus..." Bewildered suppleness fled once the material touched her lips. Panicked tension took over, and struggling commenced heartily as the scarf broke apart her lips in violent fashion, digging angrily into the corners of her mouth. He was gagging her!

-o-

Arms flailed, body squirmed, dropped, dodged... But he was prepared. Pole-bending around her, he faced her, grasped her arms and wrenched them down before her. The dance of domination began in earnest across the floor, and Sirius had had enough. With talent from an unknown source, his fingers deftly wound a second scarf about her wrists, binding them securely. Reaping her legs from beneath her, he took her first to her knees, then to her stomach. *Umph!* came her expelled breath. He ignored it, intent on the task before him. His own knee now digging in her back, a third binding secured her ankles.

"Boardman, ya great duff-arse!" Kent again, damn it. Rattling at the doorknob emphasized his distress. "Chivvy it, will ya? We're on in a quarter!"

Low growls erupted from deep within, frustration taking hold. Biting his inner cheek for control, a snapped, "Hang on!" broke from his kneeling position, his body coiled with the tension he couldn't vent in his words. Quickly to his feet, he rotated to face her head and yanked her upright from behind. The final luxurious strap found its home around her torso and mid-arms. *Now* she was secure.

Later he would question the sanity of his actions, but mental status never entered thought in the hoisting of the petite feminine form. First atop the spindly-legged chair, dangerously rocking from the full-body flailing. Then the dislodging of the ceiling tile, sliding it above its neighbors, forcing the violently squirming woman through the panel opening feet first, up into the darkness, flopping her gently as possible onto the cross beams. Thankfully, she froze, a panicked reaction to the absurdity of the plan, obviously. Perhaps only that prevented her from thrashing through the foam-esque panels.

Next came the sofa cushion for her head, he explained and the glow stick he'd noticed Nigel toying with earlier from the souvenir bag. Even his agitation and desperate need to control the situation did not imperviate him to simple comfort needs such as muscular support and a light source.

"Look, I don't like having to do this "

Bang, bang, bang, bang! "For pity's sake, Stubbs," Nigel interrupted, "clothe the damn bird an' 'amora the door!"

Deep breath... sigh... grumble of frustration. Disregard. Sirius turned back to his involuntary guest. "I can't afford to chance you'll alert the Ministry I'm here. Sorry it's down to this, but I've no where else to hide you without magic. Just play nice, and I'll get you out as soon as I return." At her incredulous expression peering down upon him, he added, softening, "I promise, love. We'll even discuss your displeasure, then, all right? Now stay still and quiet. Take a kip if you've a mind."

With that the panel slid into place, the chair was dismantled, relocated, and Sirius approached the door.

"What the dragon's bleeding teeth were you *doing* in here?" Blue was the first through the freshly released entry. Suffering words notwithstanding, none of the troupe converging appeared too upset with the wait. Flirtation and inebriation dominated their senses.

Sirius offered the drummer an insolent stare, chin tucked, brow slightly cocked. He replied flatly. "*Housekeeping.*"

-o-

Surrealism is an art, apparently, and one with which the company of Sirius Black is guaranteed an experience. Were someone to have even *suggested* this scenario now playing out, Hermione would have considered them mental. Only in storybooks and Hollywood would something this asinine take place. And for this reason alone, the Muggle-born witch of logic and facts remained statuesque, speechless even unto herself.

This was *insane*.

Long minutes passed, and neither did she make a sound nor movement. Abstractly she listened to the activities below, distantly fascinated by obscure subjects, rowdy comments, and tales obscene. Rarely did Sirius' voice rise to meet her hungry ears, and she realized with morbid fascination she was waiting for him to give himself away, admit his death, express his brilliant prank, call her down from her musty perch. But he did not. Only the mutterings and movements of preparation sounded, and still she waited.

Until they left.

The door shut with an ominous finality, and Hermione snapped out of her trance with the faraway *click*, muffled through the tiles below. Eerily quiet, she knew she was alone. It was time to rectify this horrid mess her over-ambitious scheme had concocted. Sirius Black or not, that man was not the man she knew. Trust him she did not; wait patiently for his return, she would not. Escaping her confinement was first priority; doing so without alerting anyone was a close second. Remaining free of broken bones came in a distant third.

Nowhere to hide or leave but the one doorway below meant the room from which she came was not an option. The burly bloke with the sneer would be Fluffy to that exit, and now more than ever she did not want to run into him. With no use of magic, either, she would have to depend on Muggle upbringing and cleverness to free her of this nasty spot of trouble. What would Harry do?

First, the body binding had to go. She couldn't move otherwise, and move she must. Wiggling gently so as to not break through the ceiling, Hermione exhaled fully and began to pull her leather jacket up her waist using fingertip grabs. Slowly the material shifted out from under the torso-wrapping scarf, giving it a looser fit. Undeterminable minutes later, she'd succeeded her task and was able to shimmy her arms free. At least she had movement, and with that, the gag yanked down. Good Lord, swallowing properly never felt so good.

Ignoring the cushion her head had rested upon, the glow stick was seized and carefully her body was twisted about to face in the direction opposite the back entrance in which she'd come earlier. Parallel to the corridor to the best of recollection the route to take lay directly before her. If the construction of the remodeled venue lay as she believed, fifty yards or so should bring her to an empty room of sorts. Perhaps another dressing room, or even a cupboard of equipment. How she would get safely down at that point was a matter best left to the moment.

Phosphorescent green rebounded within the confines of above ceiling. Dull, low-contrasts defined support beams, electrical cables, old insulation patches and items best left unidentified. The light was not far-reaching, and required squinting and logical fill-in-the-blank to mentally reconstruct the environment. Held aloft, the stick revealed heavy I-beams following her intended path. Not an arm's length to her left, the steel support beam lay half a meter above the tiles, offering a feasible, safe way to cross to freedom.

Agonizing minutes later, Hermione had inched to the beam, leaving fluffs of tile material snowing upon the floor below. Sweat born of fear beaded and dripped, blurring her vision. Leather clad arms cleared her view. Miscalculation of weight-shifting would leave her a broken mass on the make-up counter and foo-foo cushioned stools. She tensed. Sirius Black had best hope for a miraculous repeat performance returning from the dead, as she was going to *kill* him for this.

Children's dance classes gave her just the leverage she needed, and with glow stick in teeth, oh-so-carefully Hermione balanced on her knees, grasped the beam's top ignoring what gnawing or stinging creatures may reside there and pulled herself upon its solidity. Stick back to hand, she gave in to the build-up of shameful curses filling her brain, wagging her tongue. *Damn him for this. Just damn him.*

Some time after, a mental note was made: leather does not slide well on rust-gathered steel. Edging along on her belly had afforded her a unique perspective of life as a flobberworm, and a proper appreciation for upright walking. Coefficient of friction aside, however, she had made a fair piece in what seemed less than an hour. She couldn't be sure, though, as she could neither see much of her surroundings nor her watch face. But the large mass of heating ductwork one slide before her... *that* she saw.

Four swears and one formulated homicidal scheme later, Hermione had managed to backtrack er, *backslide* enough to maneuver onto a second beam, this new one running forty-five degrees to her right and offering less width on which to balance. The nightmare was worsening.

Minutes further... Contriving yet a second method of engineered death, the task of un-snagging her ankle bindings gave renewed strength to creativity of torture. A delicate task, Hermione had to go about her movements carefully in order to remain aloft.

"So, what; you're best mates now, are you? Havin' him over for tea an' biscuits and the like, are we?"

"Shut it." Hermione knew that bullying voice. Creepy security git. *Lovely.*

Simultaneous flushes pinpointed her position to above the Gents'. Odds were, if she kept going straight another few meters, she'd be over the Ladies' a much more appropriate place over which to drop out the ceiling. And during the show, it *should* be abandoned. She was still what was considered backstage. Wasn't she?

Water running suggested hand cleansing, and she stilled in order to prevent undue attention.

"Takin' a fancy to him, eh, Dee? Right looker, 'imself, if you swing that way." Snickering.

"Sod off, nancy boy. Boardman's my ticket to the posh. Right up an' coming, he is, and I mean to take post as his bodyguard. Pullin' girls an' gettin' paid for it. Whatever he wants, I'll do it. I'll make myself indisposable."

"*Indispensable.*"

"What-fuckin'-ever." Hazy green reflected Hermione's eye roll, her sigh stifled. *Thick berk.*

Towel dispenser rolling... "Smashing conversation it'll be, too, when you have him 'round for tea an' have to explain why you still live with your mum and dad."

"Bite it, tosser. I come 'n go as I please. Don't pay for nothin'. Mum's a clean freak, so's my laundry's done, I've a nosh-up anytime I want..." Further description faded as it followed the men out the door. Hermione sighed deeply. If only *her* problems were so slight.

Returning attention to the snag, another few wiggles and the distinct *krrrrk* of ripping fabric broke the silence. Relief swept through her, the slight jerk of freedom calming her fears. One more obstacle down; infinite more to go.

Resuming her trek, only one body slide progressed before the *thump* of the door below sounded again. She paused to wait out the visitor, considering it better safe than sorry on attracting attention. Opposing footsteps suggested there were two.

"I want him watched." Hushed and definitive the words commanded. Immediately curious, Hermione forgot her predicament and listened with intent. This was not a conversation of light matters. Steps rambled around, stall doors squeaked in protest. The first voice continued, lower, tense.

"MacGregor was in Waterford for that little escapade. Question him. We shall suffer no breach."

Raj?

"What about the girl? She knows." Faintly French, this man sounded little more than a teenager. Clipped words suggested training of complete obedience.

"She won't speak of it. She's too much to lose. Besides, it does not appear she knows everything. Nevertheless, I've already taken precautions, in light of recent events."

"Sir?"

"Word has reached my ears that the power to overcome shall only reveal itself the first day of the seventh month. Our time is limited. We must act quickly, inform the others, before it is too late."

"But where, sir? How? If we can't "

Clank. The noise was slight and distant, but deafening in the ceramic tile room below, the silence amplifying its resonance. "Shhh, Philippe." This time worry laced the Northern Brit accent. Pausing in speech and movement, the men's presence would have been overlooked had Hermione not already known their existence. Her breath fell to shallow flow, both to hide her own vicinity and best catch any further tales. Fear crept in as the moments passed without sound. Had they heard her? Were they right now peering up into the ceiling, debating a non-magical means to capture her? Unless they were Aurors, in which case they could use their wands. Surely she would pose a threat, having obviously eavesdropped upon an intended-to-be private matter. And she wasn't sure, either, as to just what that matter entailed, and if it boded well or ill for her own self-preservation.

"*Que sera, sera...*" Almost she missed it, the first man's hesitant phrase terribly low. Holding breath completely, Hermione waited, but no more syllables of information revealed themselves. Shortly thereafter footsteps clicked to the door, their owners departing in the *swoosh* of the spring-taut hinges.

A full minute passed before Hermione dared continue her journey. Rather, it took a full minute for her to break from analyzing the cryptic exchange. Recalling her current situation, she swept aside the mystery and focused back on making it out of this tomb of faux asbestos.

No more than three yards had passed beneath when the roar of screams and trampling tread reached her in a rush. Louder, closer, driving, engulfing.

The show was out of doors. Surely she could not be that close to the crowds. No; something was wrong. Definitely.

Indefinable din assaulted her ears from below. What the hell was going on? Readjusting to lean down, to make out the noises

Off balance slip desperate flailing crashing through falling...

A certain resignation wrapped Hermione in an otherworldly security blanket on the way down. Absently, she noted with vague interest the way florescent white reflected off satin eggshell brick. Colorful shapes mimicked human forms, blurring in the downward motion her eyes followed. Muffled through shock, voices of the masses washed over her, through her, to her. Time slowed, and her eyes closed in preparation of impact with the concrete floor.

Oddly enough, Muggle concrete had grown firm but giving. Warm. Caressing.

Caressing?

Instinctive reaction threw open her eyes. Frantic was the vast crowd around her, grabbing, screaming, attacking. It was into this body of human flesh she had dropped. That body, more specifically, that was the reincarnation of Sirius Black.

Shit.

Shock was less evident in his eyes than, remarkably, relief. Not waiting for explanation, his arms tightened about her waist, hoisting her vertically just inches from the ground. Ducking his head, he shouldered his way through the mob, heading what Hermione realized was back down the corridor, back the way she'd just come.

Jostling moments passed before Hermione understood the situation. Security shoved all around them, parting the torrential sea of people. Celebrating was not their moment. Nor was merely exiting the show. Obsession marked with adrenaline. Blood lust and energy. Demanding and panic.

Rioting.

They were attacking the band, overflowing the limited bodies of security. Glimpses of Sirius' arms showed ripped remnants of a silk button-down, blood trailing the three-across lines of fingernail scratches. Whether from excessive adoration, potent inebriation or pissed emotion Hermione could not tell. But the corridor had turned into a tsunami of fans, intent on devouring everything in their path. Unfortunately, within that path included Sirius and herself.

An odd sense of abstract observation held Hermione mentally in check. Hysterics at this point wouldn't do, anyway. Instead, mild interest replaced fear and concern. This detachment allowed the scene to play out around her, invoking only curiosity. Not to heart did she take the jarring run, the arresting hands, the whirlwind of voices and faces and corridors and lights and...

Sudden redirection startled Hermione back into reality. Casual observation time was over; she was living this nightmare. And this nightmare had arrested her escort, abruptly jerking him out of the crowd and shoving him into an alcove on their right. No, not an alcove... a room.

Equilibrium returned in time to distinguish her surroundings. Deprived of her glow stick, only the sliver opening granted a light source to see by. That hint of illumination from the mob-strewn corridor cast a vertical line across their bodies to the wall opposite the door... a whole three feet apart. A janitorial cupboard.

"I'll refrain from asking why you're bound, Hermione," an amiable voice said nearby. There was an unshed laugh hidden in that vaguely familiar voice. "But I'd wager you're both looking for safe, swift passage out of here." Non-committal grunting sounded from Sirius behind her. Though his hold remained secure, she felt his arms loosen enough to allow her slight slide downward. Feet solidly floor-bound, awareness hit that her feet were free. The rip she heard and felt earlier must have ventured through deeper than she'd thought, the fall only completing the break.

"Good to know years of interning the national floral competitions weren't all for naught," he reminisced, previously held humor slipping out in a soft chuckle.

"David?" Incredulously, Hermione identified their knight in shining armor.

The laugh was deep and long this time. "Yes, Hermione. Long time, no see, eh? Didn't figure you for an Origami Legion fan, really. You just don't seem "

" Don't mean to be the killjoy," Sirius interrupted, "but you were saying something about an exit...?"

"Right."

She didn't ask a quarter later where he'd obtained the road crew jackets, nor the short-brimmed sports caps she and Sirius were now hiding within. Instead, Hermione concentrated on following the denim-clad David out onto the nearly abandoned loading docks. The disguise had allowed them through the out-of-control crowd without mishap; only thankfulness could she muster now.

"Listen; I'm sorry about before, about the tying up and the ceiling and all." Sirius continued looking ahead, he himself focused on their guide. His words were hushed, meant for her ears alone.

This was not a discussion for their present place and time. They needed to get out of here and Apparate, before someone recognized them. Or worse... "It's all right. No harm done." Not entirely true, but again, circumstances were not conducive to an all-out rant. Besides, an unsolicited apology from Sirius Black was not something she'd ever seen; it was unique enough to do for now.

"I'm glad you're all right. I was worried I wouldn't be able to get to you before the fans got to me." Strangely enough, he sounded sincere, only glancing at her face as he turned to help her down the three-meter drop onto the lorry drive. He chuckled. "Not sure how you managed it, but your progress above the ceiling was remarkable. You seem quite the determined and clever witch, lady. I'm impressed." He moved on, following David across the car park to the outskirts of the property.

Hermione stared at his retreating back. *Seem quite the clever witch? Lady?* This from a man who'd spent an entire summer locked up with her and Lupin constantly going on about books and ideas... A man who'd heard his best friend refer repeatedly to and about her as one of the brightest witches. There was no knowing grin accompanying his words now, nothing to suggest his intentional understatement. No; he was being straightforward in his assessment, a lacing of surprise accompanying his compliment.

He didn't know who the hell she was, did he?

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Author's Note: "You can do better than that!" is a direct quote from JK Rowling's 'Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.'

Chapter 12: Tangents Unrelated

Chapter 13 of 36

Uneasy questions, startling revelations, and strangers intervening wake Sirius and Hermione up, forcing tentative trust between them. His two words explained more than a week of frenzied hunting, and Hermione begins to realize he's not the bastard she'd believed...

Reviews are much appreciated

Author's Note: Inspector Lynley is the wonderfully aristocratic creation of Elizabeth George. I'm borrowing him for a bit.

I won't even begin to attempt to describe this chapter, as the title is self-imitating at best. But this chapter has relevance hidden in its anarchic chaos.

Reviews are the meade for a parched writer's soul...

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Chapter 12: Tangents Unrelated

Multifaceted granules slipped free their faux Waterford encasement, trailing across the navy blue fabric in faint spots of white. Reflexively the glass tipped upright again, settling its contents, only to flick the opposite direction this time. Hermione studied the controlling fingers, fingers that danced the salt within its etched glass. Lolling in circles on the dispenser's bottom edge, puckering the tablecloth in tight twists... abruptly flailing free from the confines of gravity in somersaulting dexterity.

Long, slender fingers. Sculpted and elegant. Refined with aristocratic breeding, ancient bloodlines. Intently strong, she knew from experience. Burning, she knew as well.

Nimble.

Nervous.

Sirius Black sat across the wrought iron dinette from her, his parlor chair tipped on its back legs, eyes downcast to his fingers. Fingers fidgeting, yet graceful. Fingers incessantly moving, darting about, yet in musical time. Fingers... nervous.

Unsure the cause of his anxiety, Hermione merely allowed the silence between them to stretch. A silence intercepted solely by the bittersweet strains of resigned longing, the lonely violinist mingling the evening air with Hungarian folk. Minor notes wavering in long, stretched calls, flavor of the Old Country pining for some unnamed majik.

Twenty minutes they had spent wandering in random search for an anonymous meal. By unspoken, mutual consent, conversation was limited in quantity and subject. Only directional advice was mentioned, the occasional suggestion of culinary style briefly slipping in. Off the beaten path, their sidewalk dining hall offered necessary seclusion, privacy required while, well... while Hermione figured out just what the bloody hell to do next.

"So..." Crass outcries could not have startled Sirius more. Visibly he seemed little bothered, but Hermione had spent far too long with the man during a particularly enduring summer, years ago. Noted was the sudden stiffening of body, the now-tense twitching of those quick fingers. Though he appeared to remain impassive, she knew his attention was solely hers. She continued.

"Why Stubby?"

Sweeping lashes flickered; he lifted his gaze to hers slowly, and eyed her warily. Uncertainty flashed across narrowed eyes, eyes encompassed by mud-puddle markings of ancestral origin. Startled, possibly, but cautiously curious as well. Hermione knew this was not the question he had expected. In truth, it was not the one she had intended to pose, either. How and when were the most pressing; even the why of secrecy and distance. But it was his choice of aliases that'd slipped her querying lips. Just as well, perhaps. For answers to pressing matters, she wasn't sure she was quite ready. Not here. Not yet. Not while her arms still tingled from his dire touch hours before...

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Seven minutes they had remained seated, silent, waiting. A harried busser had said their server would be by to take their orders in a moment. Sirius mentally pleaded that moment would be now.

She'd asked him a question. Not one he had expected. Not one he was prepared to answer. Not that he was prepared, really, to answer *any* question at this point. He didn't trust her, still. Aurors could, at any moment, surround, stun and apprehend him. But they had not, yet, and he wondered why.

Slowly he raised his line of sight to her dusk-shadowed features, the single candle before them flickering its ever-changing tangerine in broad brushstrokes against shades of the deepest grays. Her expression was unreadable; his, he knew, was inexplicable. How could she explain him, when he himself could not?

Peripherally he took in the activity closest. Loving couples dining in each other's admiration to his right; minis and lorries traipsing the two-lane to his left. A pair of business suits approached between the tables, thoroughly focused on their conversation of weather and news. They passed alongside without a glance, settling at the dinette directly behind him. What he would give for their tardy server to interrupt conveniently now.

Several heartbeats passed, giving such a plea up as a bad job. No one was going to save him this, and he needed to answer. Truth would be the best course of action, he decided, however vague and incomplete it may be. Carefully weighed and measured, his words fell hoarsely. Impressively, his flippant *Why not?* was not among them.

"At the beginning, it was my only option. Not until recently has a certain *alternative* become viable." Honest, yes. Privileged information? Er, no.

Flame shifted, catching her visual study of him. She was processing his statement, neither accepting nor denying its validity. Unnerved though he was, he'd be damned if he admitted it. Meeting her stare, he allowed his mind to wander, seeking refuge from the intensity of the moment.

"Ninety-percent chance drizzle tonight, eh, McGuffin?" the bloke directly behind Sirius razzed his mate.

"The weather's a might finicky, Ted. Mother Nature's allowed to change her mind, like any other cheeky female. Not my fault the front moved north."

"Sure it's just a fluke, Jim? And not a Desmond in meteorological studies?" A choked laugh followed.

"Stick to the news, Ted," his good-natured gruff replied. His timbre lightened. "And not to change this stimulating subject, but where's our waiter?"

Sirius, himself, wondered the same, but couldn't or wouldn't break eye contact to locate his truant savoir. Ted mumbled something about going to look for him, his chair scraping the sidewalk as he rose. But Sirius' intent lay directly before him; the as-of-yet unidentified witch draped in a tour jacket over her risqué apparel had yet to reply.

"And *what* exactly," she began slowly, "would you say "

CRASH!

Heads whipped about to the source his and his escort's included only to be greeted by a scene of what must have been their server, kneeling mere feet behind his companion. Head ducked in shame, he clambered about, righting the mess he'd sprawled across the walk. Lengthy black hair drawn back in a queue, his unintelligible mumbling and rough gathering of beverage and utensil matter suggested food service was not his preferred career. *Too slow on the uptake, brother*, Sirius telepathically scoffed to the server. *Could have used you three minutes back, you know.* But the waiter apparently did not feel Sirius' scowl on him, relegated only to clearing his display.

The violinist never missed a note.

Behind him, Sirius caught Ted's return to his own seat, clearly aware as well that it would be another ten before their service. Before him, his former captive regained her composure and her thoughts, directing the latter back on him. This time, however, she hesitated, rethinking her question.

"Who else knows?" she finally offered. His gaze tightened, physically remarking he had no idea what she was talking about.

"About you," she clarified, taking his optical allusion.

Further tipping his chair, Sirius allowed his gaze to drop again. He peered studiously at his fingers anew, their tips once more locating the feel of chiseled imitation crystal. How much could he trust her? He still didn't know who the hell she was, and something about her left him uneasy. Behind him the conversation took a turn of interest, and he could not help but shamelessly listen... listen to others' dialogue while he himself fumbled for his own.

"...getting the news, tonight, instead of dining with me," Jim was saying. "That rock and roll show was a sell-all, you know? I'm surprised you're not circling the stadium for a piece."

"Don't have to, Jim." Amusement laced his words. A chuckled, knowing sigh escaped in dramatic flair. "I'll hear all about it at breakfast. My daughter's working the show, so I'm sure Annie and I'll catch every *morsel* of gossip in the morn."

"Working the candy stand, is she?"

"Nah; security."

A telly news program? Just what he bloody well needed, his face plastered across London 4. That explained how Ted's voice sounded familiar. Oh, yes, he was well versed in that Muggle contraption known as a *television*. Too many times had James drug him belligerently, mind you to a Muggle public house in his ever-failing pursuit of

Wait. **James?**

Weight over-shifted, his chair's forelegs resumed their affair with the ground in a dull *thud*. Jarred from his respite, Sirius felt compelled to return his attention to the matter at hand. Banishing the troublesome recollections to the back of his mind, he instead concentrated on the knowing woman before him. Chin tucked, his eyes rose again to meet hers. Slow, deliberate *blink*. Languidly he held a burning stare. For a moment, her composure faltered. But only for a moment.

And now, she waited.

"That I'm aware of? No one." Grimacing his answer, he considered his words as he spoke. Not a pleasant realization, come to think of it. No one knew who he really was; at least, no one **that he knew of**. Unnerving even more so was his amended revelation...

"No one, that is, except you."

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Damn it! Of all the places and times... Opportunity had smiled on him surprisingly again. Why'd *he* have to show up and ruin everything?

Not that all had gone according to plan this evening. Or any of it, truth be told. Though his arrival to the stadium had left sufficient time to put his scheme into action, it was not to be. Silly Muggles. Lacking restraint or intelligent thought, they were. Obsessing... over the wrong man at that. Then he'd nearly been late for work. Again. Another tardy and it would've been his job's worth. So when it was apparent his chance was lost, he'd Apparated to the café.

Only to find *him* there.

That was all it had taken for Stubby Boardman to lose his composure... and his grip on the serving tray.

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Déjà vu sliced through her veins, running them cold then hot. Facially she stumbled, but recovery sluiced through the shock in nearly an instant.

Scrutiny that intense had Hermione breaking into a cold sweat. She'd felt that flash of *something* before, and then it wasn't triggered by Sirius' gaze.

Or *was* it?

Nausea immediately swept through, but she held off the impending faint, desperate to remain calm and in control. Sirius had just answered her; it was a response she'd not quite counted upon.

Recollection reminded her that he had not recognized her back at the loading dock. And as such, she was sure he did not trust her. Written upon his face was his leerness, his hesitation in supplying her with fact or figure one. In that she could not blame him, but how to ease his fears without admitting her identity... which, by now, she was loath to do. After all, a girl had her pride. If he couldn't recognize her after only four years' time...

"*Auror Inspector Lynley*," she breathed, surprised. The Ministry Auror had approached from nowhere behind Sirius. Sudden stillness fell; even the table over ceased conversation. Stiffing, his presence invaded their party of two.

For the second time that evening, said dead-man-turned-rock-legend's body stiffened, fleeting wisps of fear fleeing his lowered eyes. Nonchalantly, his left hand rose to meet his further-drooping forehead, averting his features from the hawk-eyed newcomer to his left. Accusations of Auror-retrieval had dominated their first conversation, such that it was. Perhaps he thought she would turn him in? But honestly, turn him in for what...?

"Ms. Granger," came the cultured baritone. Formal inclination of his handsome head bespoke old manners, though nary a hinted smile formed. A man of no nonsense, he performed his duties well, even if reserved and standoffish were His Grace.

Avoiding a glance to Sirius, her eyes remained fixed on the Auror in Muggle attire of dress trousers and linen overcoat. "What brings you by this, er, area?" Careful to avoid wizard-speak, Hermione's hedge drew a cocked brow from Lynley.

"Had an appointment nearby. Saw you, though; thought I would offer my condolences."

"*Condolences?*" Night of un-expectancies this had become. Hermione's quizzical expression little affected Al Lynley. His face told nothing. If he was surprised by her confusion, impassiveness hid it well.

"Yes. About your office being burglarized the other day." Before her incredulous *What?* fell from her gaping jaw, Lynley had turned his attention to Sirius in suspicion. "What is with your companion?"

Momentarily suspended was her official question; until such time as she had her own answers, no one could know about Sirius.

"He's a bit knackered," she rushed, silently begging Lynley's eyes back to her. "Too much Guinness for the heat, you understand," she added, hoping for a credible sympathetic role. Slightest release of tension reflected in Black's taut shoulders. Her response must have been rooted to this anxiety. Not lost might his gesture have been on the Auror, however. Hesitant in dismissal, Lynley glanced critically once more over Sirius. Cool assessment, calculating. Complete. Satisfied or else not willing to pursue the matter he eventually turned back to Hermione, neutral in display.

"Oh," she started, recalling the words moments prior. "You were saying? About my office?" Concern this time was not an act. Neither was her confusion.

"The burglary. Thursday night, Friday morning... You didn't know?"

"Er, no, I didn't." Fumbling her speech, Hermione could only glance about unseeingly, shock evident in subsequent response. "I've been on holiday all week. I haven't even spoken to Mr. Bailey in all that time..."

"He should have notified you, but perhaps he wished to wait until you returned tomorrow. I assume you will be returning to work in the morning, yes?" Calm, decisive as always.

"Er, yes. Yes, I will." Astounded pause gave way to critical deduction, logic overtaking the unexpected. "Wait; you said *burglarized*. What was stolen?"

"We're not sure anything was, though evidence points that the vandalism was with merit. Someone was searching something out, and believed you were in possession of it. But we will go over that in detail tomorrow. Stop by my office first thing." He glanced above her head, peered, then stated back to her, "Until tomorrow, Ms. Granger."

Swiftly he darted past, intent his new destination, deeper into the shadows of the gathered evening. Following his exit visually, she stared until all signs of him disappeared. Burglarized? Her office? But why? Who'd want something of hers, and what would that something be that was worth the risk of being caught in illegal entry in the Ministry office of a diplomat? Well, a diplomat's *aid*, but still...

Shards of shale met her eyes when she turned back. Sirius. For the moment she'd forgotten about him, the oddity of suspect intentions distracting her. Restrained interest shimmered against the candlelight. Leaning in, chin to palm, closer, expectant. Something akin to a cautious smile tightened around his mouth. Under other circumstances she'd say it was a quirky expression begging freedom. But such was not this night, and rugged jaw lines jutted in another emotion all together.

Tearing her sight from his lips, Hermione renewed her concentration on his expression altogether. He seemed to have reached some kind of conclusion, one bearing weight upon herself. A flicker of intrigue by brow endorsed that sense.

"Granger..." Little more than whispered, the surname fell heavy and slow, drawn out as molasses in late autumn. *Sirius always had a way with women*, she comforted herself against the immediate shiver her spine tasted. Legislation against such debauchery should be deigned immediately. *Honestly...*

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Remaining silent of his true identity to the Auror earned Ms. Granger points, to be sure. Sirius smiled to himself. *Ms. Granger*. Familial, reminiscent. A too-long denied flavor melted in his mouth, a hunger now partially satisfied. He had a name, and he savored its feel gently, thoroughly, through weathered lips. Flustered though she appeared, safe assumption was that she would not call back the Auror to divulge his secret. Perhaps, just maybe, he could...

Trust her.

Little choice was left if he didn't. She knew who he was more of his life than even he himself knew and there was no one else to whom he could confide. Arrogant independence streaked through his veins, suggesting the man he once was; that man he did not recall. But good sense must overwhelm heroic stubbornness, sometimes, and Sirius was under-informed enough to realize this was one of those occasions.

Looking to the bright side, he figured that she'd already had the chance to expose him. The best she could do now was tell him just who the bloody hell he was, and why couldn't he remember. The worst.... Well, apparently he'd once already escaped Azkaban. Indeed he could surely do it again. If only he recalled just *how*...

"What are *you* staring at?" She tried to sound put off, but it came across nervous. Made her uncomfortable, did he? Really, now; what could he possibly do to make her nervous?

Shifting uneasily, she dusted imaginary lint from her jacket, viewing the satin sheen rather than his inquisitive stare. "Honestly, the service here is beyond incompetent. We should go. Particularly before anyone sees you." Flicked glance to him, then returned to her hands. "You're a rock star," explanation began. "The groupies'll be pouncing the moment they've caught sight. Muggle groupies, at that," she added, as though shirt shredding was somehow worse *without* pointy-stick involvement.

He shrugged. A slight, "Fine," crossed his vocal chords, and he stood as she, preparing to follow this book of knowledge on his life. Now, to find out whether it was a multi-volume collector's set, or a study-guide summary.

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Humidity thickened as evening grew deeper into the hour. Jim's promised rain might yet show face, Sirius mused, flickers of heat lightning strobing the distant horizon.

Reason neither presented itself, nor was necessary for their destination-free wandering of lesser traveled paths this London night. Companionable silence was sufficient during the first fifteen random, leisurely blocks. Sirius sensed Ms. Granger's concerns weighing her. Leaving her to them only gave him ample time to quietly peruse his own. It was only once he'd noticed the dilapidated, abandoned warehouses near the docks did he question her intentions.

"Where are we going?"

Startled, she jumped with a squeak, turning to face him with hands on hips and harried exasperation. Scolding him as though they were not standing round a suspect lot in the dregs of the city, the witch snapped her words.

"Sirius Black, you need not know the where-to's of every little thing, or the why-for's, for that matter. Just because you're off the hook for not recognizing me after only four years, doesn't mean you can go back to being your self-assured, self-centered self!" Pausing for breath, she scowled again. "And wipe those blasted markings off your face!" Angrily she pulled at his shirttail, offering its services as cosmetic-remover. Spit and shine, it was.

"But I was thinking, if you must know." Calmer now. "I've a lot of that to do anymore, what with your unexplained arrival and all." Huff; sigh of ebbing frustration, trailing to worry. Her glare shifted about, finally taking in their new location. Bitten lip told more her reaction than the words she choked back. "And if you must know, I'm taking you to Ginny's. I can't just let you leave off; not when I've actually found you, proven you're, well... *you*. I just need to think what to tell Ginny, and what to do with you once we arrive."

Trust or not, he felt it best to let her speak on, rather than ask who Ginny was. He had a feeling he ought to already know.

Mistaking his silence for irritation, she added in annoyance, "And no, Sirius; I have no intention of you running into Molly while we're there. I couldn't even *begin* to fathom what I would say to her, not to mention, she of all people couldn't pretend complete ignorance around anyone else once she knew. No, I'll not subject either of us to that. Just you, me, and Ginny right now, all right?"

Assuming his continued silence as acquiescence, she turned her head again in thought, musing under her breath about Silencing Charms and laundering work robes. Sirius could only watch in cautious amusement, confused. Abruptly, decision befell her and she turned to him, intent.

"Come on; we'll go to the Burrow and get with Ginny. Perhaps between the two of us we can create some sort of scheme. Some way to reintroduce you, assuming we ever figure out how you came to be here a'tall." Her eyes shifted again in thought, and she mumbled more to herself than him. "If only Ron were here; he's loads better at strategy..."

Subconsciously her right arm wrapped about his left, a quick verification of twisting about to ensure no unexpected witnesses. "We'll Side-Along, just in case you get any ideas." Didn't trust him, now did she? Sirius wasn't sure whether to be amused or irked. He settled on the former.

She gathered her limbs for the turn, tossing back to him without looking, "Oh, and what did you mean earlier when you said 'At the beginning'? At the beginning of what?" Her feet moved, the turn began...

"My memory."

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Great Caesar's ghost... A damn miracle it was they weren't *splined*! Hermione stumbled to the grassy earth, hands patting along herself for proof positive all was intact. Distraction that severe should have left them quartered one here and three by the docks. Luckily, his answer had registered late enough in her brain for near-destination arrival, sloppy though it may have been.

Turning back to see that deadly diversion standing collected in the silver pool of waxing lunar, Hermione peered through the haze. "Did I hear you correctly? Did you just... say... suggest... admit..." Deep breath, incredulousness overtaking caution. "Are you telling me that you don't remember a bloody damn thing about your life's history?" The last came out in a flurried shriek, born of hysterics mating with pissed off, bad night.

Shadowed features left him unreadable, but all caution had slipped away in this newest of revelations. Scrambling to her feet, Hermione squared off to him, facing full-on. She wasn't sure why she was suddenly so angry, as amnesia would explain a great deal. If he couldn't remember anything, then he would be blameless for not contacting them sooner, for not interrupting the grief Harry and Remus had and still suffered.

And maybe that was it. Maybe she *wanted* to blame him. She *wanted* to be angry with him. **Needed** to be justified in her reproach. Because though this was definitely Sirius, this wasn't the same Sirius she'd known in her third, fourth, fifth years. No; because *that* Sirius wouldn't

"Aaagghh!" *Whoosh thump!* Too busy spitting turf from her mouth, Hermione noticed little more than reverberating organs within her petite frame, courtesy of the bone-jarring dive she'd just been forced into. Precious seconds passed as mind cleared, pieces fit, and the puzzle displayed before her was... confusing as ever. Sirius' grip on her arm loosened as he drew it back, positioning to raise his own torso from its prone placement before her. Muttered swearing drifted, denouncing Sirius' role in this new appreciation for a flobberworm's point of view.

"Just where the *fuck* did you bring us?" he hissed. Head positioning denoted his attention mostly elsewhere somewhere past her right shoulder, more precisely.

Nasty retorts formed on her tongue, but were cut off by threatening taunts screaming from behind. Said jeers were reinforced in crimson and emerald streams whipping past. Ah, so *that's* why he tossed her to the ground like yesterday's rubbish. All right; so he did have a point. Glancing around in the faded moonlight and sudden heavy fog,

Hermione could make out nothing familiar. Actually, she could make out nothing at all. Just where *did* she bring them? And without wands, no less. *Damn it!*

Berating herself for incompetence, then dismissing it as fault of *his* for being distracting, was all going to have to wait. The flashes were coming more rapidly now and from multiple directions, scorching some structure nearby, mere inches above Sirius' head. Belly crawling now, Hermione followed Sirius' lead without request or question.

Muffled, dull explosions broke all around; voices carried in command and answer. Closing ranks, heavy, rapid footfalls...

Anticipation mixed with fear, and breath came strangled as Hermione kept Sirius' dark form before her, tasting the dew-laden grass and acrid smoke. She could make out only his shape now, the air so thick even her own hand was unidentifiable. But formless black blotches around them grew, hinting. Appearing through the mists came solidity: a low-rise building. Sirius drew up in a crouch, reaching back without sight to grasp her arm in assistance. She took it, all former attitude dissipating in the new concern. He pulled her upright.

Leaning into his side, she matched his cautious, easy steps along the wall, seeking a breach for entry. In times fight or flight, the most inappropriate sensations do cross one's mind... like how woodsy and rugged his scent came... like freshly cut grass and leather-bound parchment...

He stood. They'd reached a corner. Breaths passed, hers mostly into his ear. His hand came up, brushing her back to clear his auditory path as he peered, wary, around the edge...

Distinct, tipped pressure dug into soft, frail tissue below her chin. No denying the press of a wand in menace, its feel unique and foreboding. Edging her chin higher, her eyes searched frantically for escape. Silhouettes just before her suggested a similar fate beheld Sirius. Neither flinched.

"Well, well," drawled a confident half-whisper by her ear. Those words may as well have been shouted, their effect piercing in dread. Dry swallows convulsed in quick succession, scratching her throat. "What have we here?"

Chapter 13: Foreign Correspondence

Chapter 14 of 36

Hidden weapons, familiar faces and word from afar... just what is going on? Realization hits Hermione that perhaps not is as it was four years ago. At least, not where Sirius is concerned...

****Reviews are much appreciated****

To Isis Uf thank you for allowing me to borrow your phrase. For all those curious, I note it at the end of the chapter, so as to not ruin the humor before you read it in text.

Reviews are loved and always appreciated!

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Chapter 13: Foreign Correspondence

Moon-glow faded behind cumulus clouds above, depriving vision even as the unnatural mist dissipated. Instead of hazy white, the world around was black, menacing. Rain droplets began to fall. Hermione drew shaky breaths, stilling her traitorous trembling. Too dark for clarity, only tall, shapeless figures void of identity filled her limited vision. Two directly before the lanky, taller one being Sirius and one just behind and left. Turning about for properly attempted viewing was not an option; hardwood biting tender flesh below her jaw reminded her her situation.

"Visitors, it seems," a similar, lowered voice near Sirius replied. Familiar was its tone beneath heavy insinuations. "*Uninvited* visitors. What-say we hoist their blackguard hearts atop the nearest chimney top? Calling card for all who follow..."

"Better yet," chimed the brothering voice beside her, "disembowel them and strew the pieces along the verge. Best do it quick, ere Lady Grand arrives. Throw a right wobbler, she would. Wants her fair share of the entertainment." Descriptions such as those did not bode well for them, Hermione figured. If only they could manage around the building, away from their captors, and Apparate out before "Lady Grand" made her appearance. Why did Bellatrix LeStrange come to mind, eh?

"Too late," the disappointed first voice flatly sounded. And indeed he was right, if the bright sun of light rapidly approaching was any indication. Nearing the group, the *Lumos*'d wood cast brief illumination on the crowd of four, granting Hermione only the briefest glance of Sirius... and the pale hand securing him at wand-point. Then she saw nothing, so bright its luminance upon arrival. Eyes squinted in protection, body grown rigid in fear.

Bauble of light, bringer of destruction to life and limb, the intruding glow bit aggressively into her sight. It hovered eye-level, shifting to the left, rising toward Sirius...

"Sweet Mother of Merlin..."

Whispered in nominal breath, feminine dulcets drifted lightly across the stillness, awe embedded throughout incredibility. Wand light shifted again, protruded toward herself. Pausing, the invisible figure seemed to study Hermione, conclusions evidently in limbo. Finally, the disembodied voice found purchase, carrying their fate, no doubt, in heavy, echoing words.

"It *can't* be... it just... you..." Pause of several heartbeats. "You were *right*, Hermione."

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Hot chocolate steamed before him, aged ceramic heating his iced hands. Blackwatch tartan draped his damp body, staving off the chill. Briskly popping flames drew out the dampness that enveloped him, wrinkling skin beneath soaked attire clammy and soft. Sirius took another cautious sip, *pitter-patter* ambience kindly lulling his senses to drone. Nearing warmth, his body began to relax, the tension of the evening seeping out in immeasurable quantities. He now desired only sleep. Not even the informative conversation around and about him quelled his longing for complete rest.

Promised rain pelted the window panes of this hodge-podge abode, swelling and receding as the storm chose. Rather than drive his anxiety, Sirius found the natural tempest comforting. The four bodies gathered round him only oddly enough increased the effect. He knew these people, though he could not recall them. A sense, a feeling, tugged his survivalist instincts to trust his surroundings, to take advantage of this rare security. No Aurors here, waiting to collect him. Only... welcoming peace.

Amazement, shock, and even bewilderment, but still... peace.

Affection.

Hermione he'd learned her Christian name only a half hour prior sat nearest him, gazing was that *protectively*? at him, a furrow lining between her brows. Her own wrap of hand-knit maroon draped her small form in shapeless warmth. She still had said little since their 'capture' earlier, after she'd Apparated them just behind a broom shed on the estate outskirts. Frantic whispers passed between her and the young witch beside her. Sirius recognized her as the same who'd accompanied Ms. Granger to the Rose and Guild only days before. She, too, continued to gawk, occasionally shaking her ginger head in disbelief.

Further round the half circle to the fire, the twins sat directly across from him, eyeing him in mixed qualities. Incredulous joy. Suspicion. Thoughtfulness. Anger. Surprise. Curiosity.

"You were only lucky that the baby kicked," the other witch introduced as Ginny was stating matter-of-factly. "Threw my aim right off. Considerably."

"I'm just glad you realized it was us before any real damage occurred. What were you doing, attacking first? You knew I was returning." Hermione's exasperation lay riddled with residue fear.

Ginny hesitated, casting furtive glances at the brothers. Simultaneous shrugs replied her unspoken inquiry. Apologetic pleading her eyes revealed, and one nearest the fire spoke in her stead.

"Shortly after you left, Errol arrived with a message from Mum, telling Gin she and Dad were having an evening out. Dodgy bit was, he was in a right state. More so than usual. Feathers missing, wing sprained; wouldn't let Gin touch him. Or us, either, after she Flooded us. Finally, he passed out from exhaustion."

The second twin picked up the story. "Yeah, but that wasn't until after she heard strange noises about the perimeter. Took it upon herself to have a shufti, but couldn't locate anyone. So she Flooded George and I "

" to find out what was going on, so with a little help "

" from our trusted inventory "

" we arrived to stake out the place when "

" a bit of unpleasantness visited as well." They stopped, hesitancy obvious in their faces. Sirius's interest piqued, he waited, knowing the true cause for the attack lay in the next words. It was the girl who elaborated.

Turning back to Hermione, she licked her lips nervously, playing for time. Eyes drifting to the fire, conclusion fought its way to verbal freedom.

"Lucius Malfoy."

Hermione blanched. "*What?*" Harsh, desperate, thin. "But he he's *dead*. I saw him *die!*"

Gut reaction shot through Sirius. Images of white-blond arrogance in malicious taunts. Screams and warfare Flooded his ears; strobing flashes cracked through his mind in painful recall. Explanatory conversation and worn family faded into background. Werewolves, Dark Marks, wedding, Christening, smoldering ashes... Azkaban.

Dementors, shrieking portraits, Hippogriffs, Ministry mysteries, white masks, black robes, filthy threats, angry hexes, *Unforgivables*...

The Veil.

Something within broke. Polar chill swept his body; trembling in memory, tears in recollection, breathless in remembrance. Not the shattered mug between his palms, nor the burning frothed liquid reclaimed his conscious bearings. Faster they came, visuals and tunes of auditory stimuli, growing, clashing, snapping in, breaking out. Louder the voices of the Past drowned, emotions of Then silenced him. Eyes clenched, head tucked, fetal, to the ground... images too fast to comprehend, rapid, splitting, popping, striking ... sounds encompassing, filling, shouting, screaming, every word of every day and every night of every one of his life's thirty-six years

Blackness.

-o-

In repose, he was *their* Sirius. Not hers, Ginny's, the twins'... Far too peaceful, relaxed for the man held captive by his own reckless need for freedom, the man she'd known years ago. No; this was the vision belonging to a man secure in his friends, his promising future, himself. This was the Sirius of long ago, the dear friend of Lily and James, of Remus and, yes, even Peter, before his misstep across the line of loyalty and faith.

Hermione studied him openly, no one about to openly chastise her curiosity. Ginny was clearing their dishes, pacifying her newly-arrived parents with a tale of girlish gossip and little time for friends to spend together. A Silencing Charm on her bedroom ensured privacy in their discussions; additional enchantments prevented unwelcome intrusion. All necessary, Hermione reasoned, for the beautiful phantom of a man sleeping deeply in the narrow bed across from her.

Late into the night they four had spoken, Hermione's tale from the beginning sans dreamscapes explanation enough to the twins for their cooperation. Fred had levitated Sirius above stairs after his rather startling collapse, placing him in Ginny's room. She could always beg off to complete privacy and odd hours due her condition. Ensuring it merely exhaustion not that they'd had any choice, as medical help was not an option Ginny had returned her mum's texts on Wizarding first aid and they'd sat around, staring, alternating between belief and denial. Finally, George admitted there was little else they could do until morning, until Sirius awoke. Weasley wares were expected in the morning; Hermione herself had to return to work, once again borrowing Ginny's spares.

Tomorrow, Ginny would wait here, watching, tending the specter of flesh and life. Sudden developments would warrant a Patronus; otherwise, business as usual must continue. They were not ready to share him with the world yet; too many questions lay unanswered, their solvability resting solely within this godfather's soul.

Wisps of sighs escaped parched lips, and tension from the past weeks drained, leaving her weak, tired. Freshly showered, she pulled her eyes from his still form, slid deep beneath the duvet Ginny would soon share, and doused the lamp. Wrapped in darkness of night, comfort of familial love, natural conviction, Hermione fell quickly to slumber.

That night, no dream haunted.

-o-o-o-

Does mental absence count as infidelity? If you do not think about your boyfriend absent boyfriend, off to save the world every other moment (or every other day, even), does it smack of treason of the heart? And if so, to what Circle of Hell would this entry-level betrayal be banished, should said boyfriend realize the depths of his momentary non-existence in aforementioned girlfriend's consideration?

"Thus, the additional security measures." Awareness snapped presently, Hermione suddenly taking in Al Lynley's monologue. Day-drifting again, damn it. She really needed to stop that nasty trait recently habituated. Now she attempted focus on the subject at hand, ready for 'yes, sir' at just the right time. It didn't take long.

"Should you notice anything missing at a later date," Lynley concluded, rising stately from his desk. "Notify me immediately."

"Yes, sir." Programmed response, just in time. Rising as well, Hermione followed him to his office door, smiling pleasantly while recalling any questions possibly overlooked. But nothing crossed thoughts and firmly she was shuffled out, finding herself once again in the main corridor of Auror cubicles, *Wanted* posters strewn about. Once upon a time, not so long ago, Sirius' face stared back from such a parchment.

Sirius. Such was the man she'd been considering this morning after she'd been paraded quickly into the Auror's office, primarily to discuss the previous week's display to her own work area. No change had occurred by daybreak where Sirius was concerned, and as planned, all involved agreed to leave him to his rest. Only peripherally did he occupy her mind now, instead her obsession with her mysterious dream invader took over. For the first time in weeks, not even the briefest image of *him* had appeared to her in sleep. It was oddly disappointing.

But Mister Black had resumed high up in her thoughts, unfortunately, when, on her way to Lynley's, Nymphadora Tonks-Lupin abruptly caught her for a brief word. Curious, Hermione had slipped to the break room for a moment's privy with the young Auror.

"Is everything all right with you and Ron?" she had begun, eyeing Hermione carefully for a reaction. "I mean, he's been gone a lot, I know. Sometimes that kind of thing makes a woman, well, consider other options, you know." Brows had furrowed in concern and tact.

"Honestly, I don't know what you mean," Hermione had replied after a moment's pause. And in truth, she hadn't. Not until Tonks had followed up.

Lemon-yellow brows had perked in conscious study, hesitating as obvious consideration passed through expressions. Finally, seemingly agreeing the younger witch was confused and not merely acting, she had explained her suspicion succinctly.

"You were seen last night. In the company of another man. Romantic circumstances."

Shit. Sirius.

For a moment, she had considered lying, but lies told too often find themselves discovered. She had opted for a change of focus.

"By whom?" Indignation attempted, but failed. "Lynley?"

"Nope. Lynley's too straight; right pro, that one. Gossip's not his duck. Didn't know he even knew, either."

"Then who..."

"Not important," Tonks had countered reflexively. "But only a few of us know, and won't be spreading it around, either. Just wanted to say, you know, if you needed a woman to talk to about it..." She had trailed off, looking abashed. "Just all I'm saying is, I know what it's like to have the man you love gone for stretches at a time, especially on dangerous treks. Worry eatin' at you, you'd do most anything to distract yourself."

Hermione would have answered, but laughter and job chat had entered the room, and Tonks had given a supportive half-smile and left, claiming duty. And Hermione had found herself in Lynley's office, mentally chastising herself for what she knew the previous evening's arrangement had appeared. And the worst part of it: not once had she thought of Ron.

What kind of girlfriend was she?

-o-

Tidying the shambles her work area had been reduced to took Hermione more than an hour. Meticulous effort ensured the proper placement of all files and notes, each bit of correspondence placed in accordance with its sender, date, subject, status. Bailey had said little more than parental platitudes, several well-placed condemnations of the perpetrators, and a by-the-by asking how her holiday off had gone. Hermione had too much else to be going on with to concern herself with his lack of interest in the matter.

Nothing appeared missing, she noted in completion of task. And Bailey's materials had not been touched. Someone was interested in hers, and hers alone. But nothing she possessed was of any critical importance. If indeed it was, then she failed to take notice what.

"Oh, Hermione, dear..." Out came Bailey's full, round face from his private quarters' doorway. Mentally, she sighed. Plastered smile to face, turn, quirked eyebrows to denote he had her attention; she didn't trust speaking at this point of aggravation.

"If you've a moment, would you please collect a tea service, some biscuits, perhaps? Those tangy shortbreads with the sweet frost would be lovely." Dreamy expressions crossed his innocent features, leaving Hermione caught between exasperation and humor. She settled for neither.

"Yes, sir." Disciplined response won through. Back to tea services. What grand educational experiences she was harvesting, even while located in the Ministry itself. *Next year, she planned, an internship with the Muggle Ministry will more than suffice. After all, it's a Muggle school I attend. Why not?*

Appeased to a degree, the disgusted witch ran her errand, returning ten minutes later with service in hand. Upon her knock, entry was granted, and Hermione stepped into the office where Bailey was entertaining an older, stern-appearing witch in emerald green robes. Dismissed of her presence, the two officials for she assumed the familiar woman was one continued their discussion as the intern played mother.

"I really don't see how my presence would help, Madam St. Cyr." *St. Cyr? If she is French, he should address her as 'Madame St. Cyr,'* Hermione mentally corrected. Bailey was usually on top of etiquette, if nothing else. "Surely if Sir McCaine wishes to open trade discussion with Egypt again, he has enough clout to be going on with. There were his previous interactions with that Canadian chap what a bugger mite he was and each time he came out atop, when everyone else was sent off. And then there was his trade agreement with South Africa what a choice deal, with the everlasting adoration of the Council Leaders. Though his dealings with the Chinese connections were inspired, right-so. And now a small transaction in Sarras? A British diplomat need not be present to ease non-existent tensions."

Two lumps sugar, lengthy pour of milk...

"I'm quite well aware of Sir McCaine's résumé, Mortimer." *Clank!* Immediately Hermione righted the slipped tea cup, composing herself from astonishment. Faux pas ignored, she stared heavily beneath lowered lashes, studying the formidable woman seated across from Bailey's desk. Her trim Scots accent lent credibility to Bailey's use of title, for though her name was French, she obviously was not. No, immediately it clicked: this was the same woman whom Hermione had followed up the packed staircase in Kerry weeks before. This time, however, her resemblance to Professor McGonagall was even more deeply entrenched.

Personality, it appeared, was another shared trait beyond physical, as Madam St. Cyr scowled in irritation at Bailey, patience apparently exhausted.

"The Committee for British International Trade is backing McCaine full-on; we only wish you to arrange a proper session, so that we may/so work in an opportunity as well for England. Unlike Northern Ireland, we *do not* have pleasant circumstances with the Egyptians. Not after that fiasco years back over the importation and excise taxing of carpets!" Frustration lay apparent in her gritted words. Settling back, a deep breath allowed her a moment's collection of thought.

"Mortimer, you are our peacekeeper. We need you to intervene, set the Egyptians at ease so that groundwork may be laid for future trade. There is *significant* development in Security Curses and Codes in northern Africa, and we would do well to get in their good graces straight away."

"Perhaps the Undersecretary of Finance would be more appropriate, Madam St. Cyr. He has made several goodwill expeditions to Egypt, as well as France and Scotland, over the past couple of years. Most assuredly he has numerous connections already." Bailey's tone was bordering on pleading. Hermione knew her boss well. Bailey had

done enough traveling for the time being, as with the Summit now over she'd missed it the previous week he had promised his wife to be available after work each day for the rest of the summer. Marta's list of home chores for her husband had grown beyond that of a borrowed house-elf.

Hermione dabbled around upon the tray, taking her time setting out the poured English Breakfast and almond biscuits. St. Cyr's expression grew pinched. "Chamberlain has done enough, Mr. Bailey. As well, this is a matter of some delicacy, and he is not known for his discretion. This shall not be discussed out of this room, either. Understand me on that.

"The Egyptians must be approached by you, with all indications to all involved on both sides that it was your consideration and idea, and that Northern Ireland and Sir McCaine were only a last moment addition. In fact, he will be involved very little. That will lend credibility that Britain is offering the olive branch, not flying in on McCaine's robe-tails."

Abruptly noticing Hermione and the repast, St. Cyr paused her tirade, glancing appraisingly over the young witch. Approval must have been concluded, for she smiled lightly in acceptance of the proffered tea, liberally dousing it in sugar and offering a nod of thanks as she sipped the steaming beverage. Bailey, himself only just noticing, took opportunity where it lay and heartily drowned his rebuttal in sweet and light, almond shortbread chasing.

Significant developments in Security Curses and Codes? Obviously, Madam St. Cyr felt strongly a need for acquiring such new abilities and knowledge. CBIT suspected situations that no one else knew, Hermione was sure. What was so important as to necessitate privy, need-to-know status? What were they all hiding?

Deep, resounding breath of finality broke the heavy silence of the room, and St. Cyr stood suddenly, cup and saucer rattling sharply upon delivery to the desktop.

"Consider my words carefully, Mortimer. There is more reliant upon this endeavor than you can scarcely imagine." Three brisk steps to the door, before turning in encoire, "Your cooperative response is expected within the week."

Bailey simply stared open-mouthed at the empty space his doorway framed. Hermione wondered if he had ever, in all his days of diplomacy, been spoken to in such an irreproachable, blunt manner. Nearly sorry for him, she grimaced at his weak fortitude. Yes, Madam St. Cyr left no room for argument, but Bailey's inability to even keep level with her... Further disappointment in a man already too soft for the Granger Scale.

Dismissed by lack of attention, Hermione gathered the remnants of the tea and exited to her outer reception. Questions plagued as she whisked the service to the nearest break room, questions of the Ministry keeping secrets again, attempting to deal with greater issues while holding the public at bay, in the dark.

"*Hermione*," chipper resonance came. Breaking from consequential thoughts, Hermione started, raising her gaze above the Floor to find Arthur Weasley grinning. A smile creased her stoic features.

"Mr. Weasley; wonderful to see you. How have you been? And Mrs. Weasley?" Comfort was unexpectedly running into her second father, a man for whom great affection bloomed within. Tension soothed from her, granting unaffected ease ample entry.

"Sporting on, each day a new revelation." His own grin widened. "Haven't seen you in ages. Even here, you're oft as not off with Bailey or some such. Didn't even know you were over last night until Ginny mentioned it. Oh, speaking of which, she Flooded me earlier. Wanted me to pass on a message to you. Rather cryptic, it is," he added with a chuckle.

"Really? What was it?" Hermione could only guess it had something to do with Sirius, but could not fathom how she'd pass it along via Arthur, or why she would not Floo or owl Hermione directly.

"She said, 'Tell Hermione that I've moved our project over to our place, if she'd like to pop in and check on it after work.' Right jolly mood she was in for a change, too. What've you girls got up to, now?" Parental amusement shone in his azure eyes. Hermione could only recover from surprise at the message's meaning could Sirius be up and talkative? and return his playful attitude.

"Oh, you know us girls. Always one-upping the twins."

Genuine laughter reverberated off the corridor walls, head shaking in humor. "None of you shall ever fully grow up, shall you? It's good to know my old age will be filled with Itching Floo Powder and Bat Bogeys."

"Er, right." Mind reeling with all the possibilities Ginny's relay could mean, Hermione found herself at a loss to carry the conversation. Thankfully, she need not have worried, as Arthur checked his watch with exclamation, citing he had fallen behind. A quick request that she come by for dinner soon, and he left with barely a *bye-now*.

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Sirius ran his fingertip across the top binding of aged, red dragon-hide. *Purest of the Purebloods* reeked slightly of mildew, its faded cover creased from numerous reads. Disgusted, he re-shelved the tome amid various similarities, each touting virtues of power, blood, control.

The Black library had always acted as haven to the misled, the conceited fanatics. Yet, for the moment, Sirius could not hate with his usual depth the room or its home without. No; not when he was thankful in the least that he remembered it. Truly, this time, and with detail. Yes, details still remained a bit fuzzy, and gaps gulfed his mind in riddled torrents, but in all, the puzzle lay picturesque inside his thoughts.

At least he could recall *why* he'd hated this place, this *life*, so much.

Harry and Ginny had restored a number of areas of the house, and little by little he could see their personalities and touch alter the air of each room. Less and less was it a grandiose mausoleum, paying tribute to Dark Arts and Darker Lords. Weasley familial comfort, Potter whimsy; Prewett affection and Evans wisdom... all kissed the former House of Black. Sadistic humor twisted Sirius' whiskered mouth into a challenged smile. He and his kind Gryffindor goodness had won out, and wouldn't he like to have seen his mother's expression over the permanence and procreation of 'blood traitors' filling this hall of ages.

His smile fell a mark. Blood traitor. That was all he had been to her, never mind past that. Why couldn't his mother ever have taken the time to listen, to understand, to at least *accept* agree or not Sirius for who he was? Still her oldest, still her son, still her admirer. At least, as a young child he had been. Eager for his parents' attention and approval... Sirius shook his head in sad resignation. For a woman who had played up so much the importance of blood, she hadn't tolerated her own's differing philosophies. And for generations, that was all this house had seen. But this generation was going to herald a new concept within these hallowed chambers.

Love.

Dull thudding of the front knocker broke Sirius from his dour musings. *That must be Hermione*. Ginny had notified her father to pass along that he well, their 'project' she'd called him had been moved to the still-unplottable, secret Grimmauld Place. Even now, as he could hear the door's movements, he was sure his goddaughter-in-law was filling the young witch in on all the discoveries of the day. Mainly, that

"You remember? *Everything?*" Incredulous joy, almost fearing hope, sprang from her entry. Just steps into the doorway, she stopped, awaiting his answer. Ginny paused behind, watching the greeting with cautious interest.

"Not everything," he replied, though his expression mirrored optimism. "Spotches, mostly. But enough. I remember Remus' star student, if that gains me any points." Trademark boyish grin split his face into remembrance of days gone by. Hermione's face melted, awash in relief and tinged in pink from embarrassment. Yes, he could now recall the bookworm's tendencies toward academic achievement. It seemed some things never changed.

"Stand and chat, if you've a mind, but I myself will have a seat, thank you." Ginny's statement eased the oddity of the moment, and three weary folk found refuge upon the settee and chaise.

Briefly summarized, events of Sirius' revelation the previous night and subsequent follow-up this morning dominated the immediate conversation. Interspersed throughout were questions of specifics: what happened in the Veil (he didn't know), how did he cross back through the Veil (he didn't know), other than temporary amnesia, were there other side effects from his encounter with said cursed fabric (again, he didn't know).

"I'm dealing with the fact I've lost four years of my life to this bloody archway. Drapery, my arse." Sirius added bitterly, a momentary sullen frown marring his handsome face. Lost in thought, he mentally recounted the primary changes of which he knew, attempting to glance over those of ill.

"Fred mentioned this morning my name'd been cleared." Uncharacteristically, he pegged onto the one good bit of change he could think of. A wry smile followed. "That's something, eh?"

Apologetic creases formed, bespeaking Hermione's thoughts better than words. She never could hide her emotions well. Only that she not lapse into platitudes was his one inner request. Too much had happened, and too much was not being told to him, yet. Ginny had said that it was best if they let him in on matters bit by bit, allow him a chance to come to terms with things first. Fear nagged his gut over what was being held in check.

"Well, that, and..." Hermione began, looking unsure. *Here comes the 'make the best out of a bad Quidditch match' speech*. Sirius thought dishearteningly. He'd prayed for something better from the bookworm, from the woman who by all Ginny's accounts had discovered Stubby was actually him, had persevered to prove to one and all he was alive, back, real. She was responsible for his return to friends, his return to himself.

"... and you've learned to sing quite well."

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"...and you've learned to sing quite well..." Bloody hell. Why didn't she just put a Silencing Charm on herself and be done with it? A clanger dropped any harder would have sent her straight to the nursery. What Sirius must have thought when she'd said that. Facially he'd frozen, before a barked laugh coursed through the room. The man had just remembered who he was, after being *dead* for four years! And all the wit she could manage, all the comfort, had been childish complimentary observation to his voice. What a blithering idiot! When had she lost the ability to converse like an intelligent adult? *When you caught those overcast irises mutely pleading you for some sort of saving grace, fixating you beyond proper thought.*

Oh, **shut up**... Damn conscience was vexing her last nerve.

Eyes rolling in self-loathing accompanied her climb up the dormitory stairwell. She'd not been home in more than a week, and a change of clothing her own, this time was in order. Perhaps even a check of her Muggle post. And to sleep in her own bed...

Though it was summer holiday, the campus was still in use, many students taking on internships like herself, or suffering through courses in order to graduate early. Her own internship had been set up carefully, with uni administration listing her program as under the British Ministry. In turn, the British PM accepted the fact Hermione was actually working for the Ministry of Magic, and informed any Muggle official who asked, that she was working on more obscure diplomatic relations issues. It was the truth, really.

Cleared as still enrolled, Hermione thus kept her en suite dormitory room. Unfortunately, that included keeping her roommate Shauna, as well. It wasn't that she didn't like the blonde. She was read in drama and art history at uni, making her an interesting verbal partner. But it would have been nice to have the summer holiday free to magick her chores away for a change.

"About bloody time you got home," Shauna greeted from her lounged sprawl on her unmade bed. Barely glancing up from the newest *Hello!* she continued, either ignoring or missing Hermione's scowl as she closed the door. "Your mum's rang constantly for the past two days. Driving me mental."

Okay, so Hermione couldn't hold Shauna in contempt for her words; her mum *would* drive someone mental, fanatically checking up on her only child. *Honestly...*

"Sorry," she offered, tending her own bed with her overnight bag packed a week ago. Sorting laundry and sundry, she allowed her mind to return to the man she'd left not half an hour past.

Sirius had indeed looked healthier, though troubled. Who could blame him, though, with all he had to contend with once his true identity returned to him? And with the knowledge of his amnesia, Hermione had forgiven his discrepancies of manners, his distrust, his wariness. But something of him gnawed relentlessly at her, some change in personality or persona. But nothing other than his return in health could she see that was distinctly different. All personality oddities were completely explained, and lessened as the hours passed and his memory returned more fully.

Was there something different about him, these four years into his future? Or perhaps.... No, she didn't want to admit it, but truth could leave bitter aftertaste if left too long unaccepted. If he had not truly changed in that time, could the differences simply be...

That she had?

"Oh, bollocks and bother!" Shauna's miffed tones grated. Hermione turned to see the leggy actress bounding to the casement window, entertainment paper rolled in threat. It took only a moment for Hermione to decipher her roommate's actions: on the outer sill perched a weathered tawny, feathers ruffled and molting as though he'd had a long, difficult flight. *Oh, no*, Hermione realized. *He must have a letter for me.*

"Bloody bird's shown up a dozen times in the past few days, pecking the bleedin' *hell* out of the windows!" Unhooking the catch, Shauna rolled out the glass for a clear shot with her paper. "Nearly as scatty as your mum!"

"Shauna, no!" Hermione grabbed the woman's arm, tugging her back in from the fidgety owl. At her incredulous expression, the witch hastily improvised, "That's dangerous. He's a wild bird, and their talons are sharp. Perhaps you should run and see if the grounds gaffer can shoo him off, maybe put something on the sill to keep him away?" Fingers crossed, Hermione mentally begged her roommate to follow the suggestion.

It worked.

Latch barely catching upon exit, Hermione immediately turned to invite the harried owl in. Wary at first, he seemed to realize this was the witch he sought and quickly edged his way along the sill and into the room. Hermione nipped cold pizza crust from the tabletop fridge and offered the tawny his meal while she removed the message about his leg.

Unrolling the parchment, Hermione's eyes darted across the scrawl. Once. Twice. A third time, more slowly. Breath coming shallow, she sat without detouring visually. A soft, choked sigh escaped her.

"Oh, God... *Harry*..."

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++ "Drapery, my arse," was borrowed gratefully from Isis Uf, because it was too wonderful a line to hide from the world... thank you! ;-)

Chapter 14: Confucius with a Quill

Chapter 15 of 36

Cryptic words leave Hermione fearing the worst, and desperate to solve their riddle. Can the one man she never expected to see again be the one man capable of helping her?

Reviews are much appreciated

Chapter 14: Confucius with a Quill

"I didn't know what else to do."

Fretful worrying tore ragged, tiny gashes in her bottom lip, strong white teeth tenderizing the flesh until blood seeped. Sirius wished he could reassure her. Gut instinct nagged he couldn't.

"It's quite all right, Hermione. You did the right thing, coming to me." Returning his heavy gaze to the parchment he held loosely, Sirius blindly stepped back to seat himself upon the scrubbed table, angling the message so as to catch firelight. Bleary-eyed from being awoken at two in the morn, it took moments to focus the untidy scrawl known from years gone by.

Ms. IKIA,

Sorry for not writing sooner, but we've been playing Wizards' Chess for ages with Snuffles' family and their lot. But it's soon back to research as usual. Mum's batty school chum from summer holidays is putting us up for a bit, until we get what we need to finish it.

As to your mate Troyes' drinking it will get him forever in trouble. I think JR's heading for the same if you don't order for him. Ask the Head barkeep for suggestions. Your friends need your help to stop.

Got to fly another round is winding up heatedly.

Tut-tut,

TCO

Wearily rubbing his eyes, sigh escaping, he considered the situation. It was as though the past four years had never been. Well, to him, they truly hadn't. Though still blotchy, his memory was improving in fair spurts. All except for the moment he'd been hit by Cousin Bellatrix's curse, through waking up in the band's flat. And that would be four years, minus the weeks he'd spent as Stubby Boardman. He hadn't even figured out how to gloss over his most recent disappearance of the past two days with that lot. But that was a chore for another moment; as for now, his godson and said's best mate were possibly in peril. That is, if Hermione was correct in her worry.

She usually was.

"I studied over it, time and again, but nothing makes sense." Hysteria slowly seeped into her words. She paced. "Well, nothing except for 'Snuffles' family,' which obviously means the Lestranges and other Death Eaters." Quavering entered this time, belying attempts at emotional control.

"That doesn't mean they're not safe, Hermione," Sirius softly reasoned. Extrasensory perception suggested otherwise, but he would not upset her further. "After all, he was able to get off a message. Coded, yes; but like his father, he knows the importance of secrecy. They've got a place to go. And a plan, you said. Something about a book...?"

Plucking her courage to still her nervous prowling, Hermione ventured to the table, seating herself before him in a rickety spindle-back. Long, lithe legs settled opposite her in masculine grace; one drawn up before him, flat-footed upon the tabletop and knee to chin, the other dropping to swing through emptiness at his side. Wrapping his free arm about the posed limb, he leaned his head upon it, watching her patiently, waiting.

Staring, feminine brows knit in puzzled thought. He thought at first she would burst forth some idealist philosophy, or have suddenly broken the cryptic phrasing. Her face read so. Instead, however, muddy eyes left their focus to his right, face clearing its troubled mar. "Genealogy." Eyes returned to his own, tired but coherent.

"That's his cover story. The whole Wizarding world knows he and Ginny married last year, and they all know he was orphaned obviously. So after the, er, *incident* after graduation, he let it be known he was researching his family history. Made everyone believe he was going to write a memoir, but that he wanted to include detailed information photographs, descriptions, anecdotes and the like. Things that required travel to foreign places, research into history and facts. Work that required someone to assist, thus Ron's presence. And since the general populace wanted their hero to write such a story, they bought into it easily enough." Put out would be her current expression, lips slightly pursed and askew, single brow quirked.

Details of *the incident* were not forthcoming, and he hadn't expected them so. Ginny had debriefed him only that shortly after their Hogwarts graduation, there had been another foray at the Ministry, another face-off with Voldemort he hadn't known there was a first, even where the end result had been another vanishing act of the Dark Lord. And again, the Ministry had played the part that all was well, that the Dark Wizard was no longer. But they didn't believe as they preached, keeping Aurors on alert and intelligence streaming.

"And he's been at this for over a year, then?"

"Yes. He and Ron come home when they can, but that's not been often, and not recently, either. Last return, he confided that they had a lead on Voldemort's whereabouts, but not on his plans. He knows he's up to something; he has to make up for Harry's destruction of the last Horcrux." Another history lesson Ginny had shared: the Horcruxes. A mouthful and then some to digest, but the summary had been enough. Now Voldemort was in hiding again, after his error in judgment at the Ministry this last go-round.

Sirius considered Voldemort's opportunities. Regaining great power from another weakened though far from helpless state required such a level of magic as to limit all resources available. Harry intended to stop him before he grew back to former glory. It was a race against time.

"So why this message?" he inquired, more to himself than her. Had there been a development? Or were they in real trouble now and needed a rescue?

Adding more crimson flow, Hermione bit down again, shadows hiding her worried eyes. "I'm afraid something's happened. Or is, rather was, about to happen. And they need help. But I just don't know what kind. I don't even know where to begin!" Abrupt return to standing, pacing, wringing hands. Sirius sought to calm her, but words failed him.

-o-

"Get some sleep, love. You're beat, and we're neither of us getting any further on this without rest."

Sirius' words hung in the pale gray dawn, the kitchen of his boyhood home chilled against the cooling embers in the hearth. Hermione inwardly agreed, eyes burning in desperate plea for moisture and ease. Cruel deprivation was not limited to denying coherent thought; invited in said thoughts' place were images and considerations never before entertained. And in clear-headedness, Hermione deduced, never would be.

Before her, Harry's godfather reclined wearily, one foot propped upon the table ledge, his chair tipped back on two legs. In normal mind, his presence would be reassuring an adult with courage, knowledge, leadership. Even reckless, Sirius was a wizard in which one could put their faith. But sometime in the wee hours while they pored over the meanings Harry's message could offer, Hermione had suddenly realized that this wasn't fifth year, that she wasn't sixteen, looking for an adult to help. She also had realized just as suddenly that the dynamics between them had changed. Not only were they now peers, but maturity had brought an understanding and view she before had misplaced. Sirius, though driven by passion over contemplation, was by no means lacking in intelligence. Rather, he was extremely bright and gifted, such talents having been hidden those years she'd known him, hidden behind arrogance, cavalier attitude, and... well, passion.

With such revelation came others, these much more worrisome than their predecessors. It was these unorthodox considerations that had brought one of her endless paces to a standstill, had brought her to stare in abject horror while Sirius read through the parchment aloud once more, oblivious to her delusions.

He was a man.

No longer simply a godfather, an escapee, a forgotten casualty of a preferably forgotten war. Name of the past, name to be feared, name to be honored in memory... Best friend of James, brother to Regulus, nemesis to Severus, Argus... No longer merely these did he represent. No; Sirius Black had become in no more than an eye-blink a man. Period. And something about that new status unnerved her desperately.

"I'll Apparate to the flat, borrow Blue's owl, and send word to your boss you're calling out ill today." Snapped from her reverie, Hermione could only numbly agree. Nodding absentmindedly, she allowed Sirius to take her arm and guide her above stairs to the one inhabitable bedroom his. Ginny and Harry had taken the room as theirs after marrying, but had done little to the others, as the Weasley clan refused to leave Ginny alone, given the state of things.

He mothered her, darting to and fro in the room, searching clothing he had retrieved from the band's empty flat the previous day. All she could do was stare, nervously curious, at this new sight. Frightened, she was, but not of him... exactly. Just...

"Here; this should make do," he commented, tossing heavy blue linen across the separating meters. His Asian collared button-down looked nearly new. Due to his height, it would serve its purpose as sleepwear for her petite frame.

"Get some rest." Drawing up to face her, Sirius' expression was weary, soft, paternal. "I'll kip downstairs after a bit; I've some errands I need to attend, first." Tired smile, then he turned toward the door, tossing over his shoulder, "I'll wake you later for lunch."

Though normal it may be for the door to click shut behind him, Hermione could not help but stare stupidly at it, attempting to shake the oddity of loss that fell over her. She wanted to talk further with him, engage him in intellectual conversation, delve into his opinions and views outside of schooldays.

But why?

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Mid-morning rays wove brightly into corneas, stinging sleep-deprived eyes. Sirius squinted against the invasion, head already bitching over the excessive alcohol, lack of food and nary-proper rest. Without conscious thought, steps brought him back out onto the high street, many shops just waking for business. Mind muddled, he took vague notice of vendors preparing their wares, seeking only sustenance to ease the gnawing in his belly.

At least it had not been a total waste, he considered. Information could always be gotten at the Hog's Head, but the price was usually formidable. So he had hidden in the shadows of the bar, nursing an unidentifiable concoction and heeding all words of the watchful barkeep. Years had not altered Aberforth Dumbledore's appearance much, and had affected even less his perceptive, keen mind. Knowing beforehand that he had taken a year as Transfiguration professor at Hogwarts after his brother's death would have been beneficial. As it was, Sirius' innocent queries as to the current staff pegged him suspicious to the man, earning him a long, shrewd, calculated look. Not knowing the well-documented posting identified him as having been out of touch these past years. Deeply out of touch. He'd had to carefully mind his words after that.

James would have been proud of his son's deceptive skills. Sirius chuckled lightly to himself, remembering Harry's sly reference to checking with the *Head barkeep when ordering*. The insinuation was obvious, even if Hermione hadn't seen it.

Well, she wouldn't, would she? Brilliant though she may be, her past does not include copious amounts of firewhisky at a Hogsmeade tavern, so coincidentally tended by the brother of the founder of the Order of the Phoenix. Aberforth was known for his ability to gather information, but it was high time he gave some up, as well.

That last part did not go quite as planned, sadly. But not all was wasted effort, as Sirius established he was positive that Dumbledore did not have acquaintance with a bloke by the name of Troy. It must be a reference Hermione would know, a code of some sort. It is the meaning behind the code they must ask Aberforth to explain.

Also deduced by idle chatter was that JR could be anyone, and apparently no one of consequence to the Order. Not the slightest sign of recognition crossed the barkeep's face at the initials, and though well schooled in controlling his reactions, Sirius did not believe he could so well hide even the slightest expression of familiarity. No, another alias or code it must be.

Adjusting the black bolero hat deeper over his eyes, Sirius slowed his pace, dropping his chin slightly to catch partial view over his right shoulder. He was being followed; had been since leaving the Hog's Head. Had Dumbledore become so suspicious so quickly? Surely not. He *had* disappeared into the back room on several occasions, long enough to Floo someone, but the question was, did he have reason? It was doubtful. But someone was interested in him, and at this point he was disinclined to treat them.

Quick duck in to Honeydukes provided temporary refuge. Secured behind window displays of Lizard Tail-ismans and Cobweb Candy, Sirius eyed his back trail, awaiting his pursuer. He needn't wait long.

Draped in onyx-violet velvet, the short figure drew near, its hooded head steadily facing forward with purpose. No hesitation befell the tracker, and, to Sirius' great surprise, they immediately turned right into the doorway of Honeydukes. Eyes widened in amazement, speechless, Sirius could only stare as the stalker glanced about briefly, caught his image, and walked straight up to him.

"You left your spectacles, dear." Proffered hand submitted his Muggle sunglasses, held gently by mottled, aged hands, bony in their flesh, wrinkled in years.

What could he do but take them? "Thank you," his hesitation relented. Puzzled, he could think of nothing else to say as he pocketed the eyewear.

"You are very welcome, dear," came the sweet, high voice again. Raising her head to meet his eyes, her cloak hood fell back enough to reveal a weathered face with bright, blue eyes and a heartfelt, grandmotherly smile. Before he could reply, her gaze turned abruptly to her right, and a girlish squeal of delight passed in laughter. "Sugar Quills! I haven't indulged in those since Bubby and I used to do summer research back at school." As she pored over the display, her voice became dreamy in memory.

"We'd take a small crate of these with us for study on holiday, traipsing hither and dither in search of long forgotten spells and rituals." Her tone suddenly grew amused. "Not that we did much essay writing with these, mind you." Giggles under breath. "Oh, we had such fun in those days."

Snapping up several packets, she rounded on Sirius again, joy spread across her lined face.

"You must come have tea with me; yes, you must! It would be wonderful to reminisce with such a handsome young man."

Sirius moved to protest, but her excitement cut him off.

"Oh, it will be so lovely to have young company for a change of course. Bubby was always young at heart, but his last years left him so busy and all... And I haven't thought of those candies and travels in years! What fun! Come, come..." Bony hands gripped his sleeve with surprising strength, dragging him across to the counter where she quickly paid for the sweets before ushering him out the door.

Finding his voice, he called to her as she led down an alleyway. "Look, ma'am, I really need to get back to "

"Nonsense, dear!" Not even a glance back at him, she cheerily continued on, quick steps belying her advanced years. "Everyone has time for a cuppa, now and again."

Hating to disappoint the elder witch, Sirius nonetheless had to find an escape from hospitality. He needed to get back to Hermione, discuss what he'd learned, get a bite and some much needed sleep. Glancing behind, he desperately searched for some excuse as would deter her ambitious endeavor. A lone figure was just rounding quickly between the buildings into the alleyway they'd just left, on his way to the apothecary, to be sure. His rush suggested an emergency, but too far away they were for Sirius to offer the stranger assistance, thus stopping his own imposed exodus.

Disparaged of hope, Sirius watched the shopper disappear about the corner they themselves rounded. Apparently a back path to a country lane, the shortcut found them suddenly out of the hubbub of Hogsmeade. Despite himself, Sirius couldn't help but appreciate the serenity offered by the woody path they'd entered. Bird calls and squirrel chatter tugged a smile from him. It had been too long since he'd felt any sense of real peace. Not since... not since ever, really. Always at odds with his family, the closest time to happiness he'd felt had been his early school years with James, Remus, Peter. Before betrayal, death, and heartache.

"Here we are, my dear." Sirius' attention snapped back to present, taking in the neat-as-a-pin cottage they'd reached. Resigning himself to the good deeds of a lonely old woman, he graciously followed her in, prepared to make this tea a brief encounter. Just in case, his wand was tucked safely up his sleeve. He'd learned long ago.

"Have a seat and I'll put the kettle on," she called from the kitchen. Settling at the small rounded oak table, he glanced about at the bright yellow walls, décor of ancient photos and frilly keepsakes lining the white shelves and open spaces. Trinkets covered most surface areas, items odd with Muggle invention or foreign descent.

Cozy, charming were his words to describe her secluded home. Rising from his chair, he wandered about, taking in the memories of a lifetime. Several photos were of the woman herself what was her name? while most included a variety of witches and wizards, of every nationality it seemed. Many snapshots of his host included a tall, lean man, himself blue-eyed, auburn-tressed, crinkles lining his eyes in genuine smiles. Vaguely familiar in simple robes, he appeared with her in locales of desert, of mountain, of ocean, of meadow. The couple was blatantly happy, impish grins sneaking out of a pyramid; teasing nose-tweaking on a park tree limb; hand holding across a rocky beach.

"We were inseparable, he and I. Folks used to say, 'There goes Bubby and Zelda, again. One can't swing a Kneazle without hitting the other.'" She chuckled softly, setting the tea service on the table. At his shoulder she gazed lovingly upon the framed memory he held, this one touting 'Bubby's' scratch of beard, his shoulder-length hair drawn in a ponytail like Bill Weasley's. Photo-Zelda was toying with a pointy wizard's hat, alternately placing it upon his head, tilting it ominously, and jerking it back child-like before he could adjust it. Their laughter displayed what words never could.

"Well, they never actually said 'Bubby,' as I was the only one who ever called him that. He was my first love, you know. My only, really." Gentle sighs broke her monologue.

"What happened to him?" Sirius ventured, not wanting to cause any grief to this perky lady.

Wistful smile spread, easing of brows. "Everyone expected our engagement any day after graduation, and when that didn't happen, they expected after our two years of travel and research. But by then, Bubby and I realized he had a calling much greater than what he could accomplish with a family."

A moment of silence fell, more awkward for Sirius than Zelda, and she sighed again, turning back toward the tea. "So I later married a family friend and bore children. But Bubby and I remained friends until his death; I still converse regularly with his portrait, you know." A smile laced her words, and Sirius set the photo in its place and re-settled at the table, watching her pour.

"His calling... did he go into spiritual intervention, or the medical field?" Proffered cup before him accepted, he added sugar in spoonfuls.

Chuckling heartily, she answered while preparing her own cup. "Oh no, dear. Nothing so artistically dramatic. No, no. Bubby wanted to use all he'd learned in his studies. Went into politics judicial politics, I should say and a little of practical use of defensive spells."

Tea spurt out of his lips as he choked momentarily on the beverage. "He was an *Auror*?" Sirius had never seen a less-likely looking figure for a Dark Wizard catcher in his life. He seemed too... *jolly*.

Laughter even harder this time. "My, my, dear, you seem to have quite the vivid imagination. No; Bubby did do his part to rid our world of scum, but his greatest claim to life was his love of knowledge. Godric Gryffindor himself would have approved Bubby's rule as Headmaster all these years."

This time the tea found itself everywhere but Sirius' mouth, the china splintering upon impact with hardwood planks. Zelda only smiled and *swished* her hand across the shards, the fragments repairing without wand or word. At his comical expression, Zelda grinned bemusedly.

"Yes, my dear boy; Albus Dumbledore was my childhood sweetheart." Refilling his cup, she set it before him, settled across the table, and spoke with solemn clarity. "Now, let's discuss that man who was just following you..."

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Lounging about in his shirt and a pair of athletics she had found, Hermione curled her slippered feet beneath the quilt and half-lay on the settee, sipping peppermint tea while jotting notes. Toast and marmalade devoured she was hungry focus could now be given on the message before her.

Refusing to allow thoughts to stray on Sirius' whereabouts, she concentrated on deciphering Harry's cryptic message. Instinct demanded she take it seriously, that the boys were in some sort of trouble, though they currently must have a temporary fix. But obvious still it was that Harry was requesting her help *Your friends need your help to stop* was **not** a reference to alcoholism. And it was her friend *James* who pub crawled every weekend; she didn't even know *aTroy*.

"Cor, Harry; learn to spell," she chastised to the empty sitting room, correcting the *Troyes'* on her own sheet. "The Boy Who Lived could save the Wizarding world time and again, yet he can't grasp singular possessive. *Honestly*..."

"Hermione!" Sirius' voice resounded against heavy plaster walls, setting off complaints of napping portraits. Mother Black had again been Silenced, and should remain so for the next couple hours.

"In here!" she called out, alerting her host to her new location. Returning her thoughts before her, quill scratching continued, greeting Sirius in his breathless entry to stand before her.

"There you are." Childish joy spread across his features. In one hand he held what looked to be large photo. "You'll never guess who I met, and what tales I heard!" His playful excitement drew her in. And for a moment, Hermione let go of ciphers and riddles and sat up fully, intent on Sirius' story.

Twenty minutes and two cups' tea later, the pair were seated at the kitchen table, regaling their own tales of Albus Dumbledore, while Hermione gazed at the old photo Zelda had copied for 'Stubby Boardman.'

"It was good to hear stories of Dumbledore from years ago." Sirius was thoughtful, wistful. Hermione knew he'd lost so many years to Azkaban, to hiding, to the Veil. And now that he'd returned, he still could not admit his identity, and he'd returned to the loss of even more of the few who'd known him, who'd accepted him.

"Yes; it's amazing to see him so young, so, well... *normal*." They both chuckled; Albus Dumbledore was never quite normal, but everything was relative. "I wonder where they were," she pondered aloud, referring to the four faces laughing in friendship aboard an old schooner-type boat named *the Solomon IV*.

"Check the back," he suggested, leaning over the table to flip the photo for her.

"It says here: *Zelda and Bubby Bubby*?" Sharply looking up, Sirius only nodded in amusement, motioning for her to continue. He'd explain later, it seemed. "*Zelda and Bubby, with dear friend Jacob and little Argus Autumn 1945, Mount's Bay*." 'Little' Argus looked to be no more than five.

"Well, that doesn't tell me much," she commented deflatedly.

"Dumbledore never did tell much," he mused wryly. Rising heavily from his chair, Sirius strode over to the kettle, preparing for another round of tea. "Damn; out of tea and..." Pausing for a brief scouring of the cupboards, "...everything."

"Oh, God, Sirius. I'm sorry!" Popping up from her seat, Hermione joined him at his weary drape upon the counter. She pulled at his arm, its slender solidity surprising her. Demanding in her best motherly voice, "I had a nice nap, and you've been up all this time. Go upstairs and have a lie-down. I'll pop out for a bit of market shopping and have a nice meal ready when you wake." Brooking no argument, she shuffled him up the stairs, promising to wake him before six, as he had more information for her, but neglected to state of what sort.

As intended, Hermione gathered her rucksack and left the house to Apparate to Diagon Alley. Praying she'd not be seen by anyone from the Ministry (she was supposed to be ill today, after all), she ducked about her shopping, ignoring the quirked looks matrons gave her. Obviously attired in a man's shirt, the insinuation hung in the air what she'd been active with during the day, why her eyes bore smudges below in signs of sleep deprivation.

Stopping for a moment's rest before tackling the crowd at the twins' shop, she sat outside the ice cream shop where she and Ginny had rested only days before, contemplating the logistics of Sirius Black's return. Irony dripped with her melting cone, as she stared this time at the photo of her late professor and mentor. Of all people, crafty Zelda was his true love. *Brief snort*. Then again, that would explain the sherbet lemon sweets.

"I've seen that picture before!" Excited awe of youth proportions broke Hermione's study. She turned to Chelsea Chamberlain's enthusiastic face, her furrowed brow of interest changing to dark scowl at the interruption.

"Where?" Hermione's voice was flat with annoyance.

Eagerness twisted into smirking arrogance, as the teenager straightened her spine and tossed her head, a pseudo sense of sultry attempting to present. Even darker Hermione's narrowed glare became, tolerance for such childish games rapidly coming to an end. But Chelsea missed the silent warning, playing her part of womanly mystery, and failing miserably. Her Cheshire grin grew, and sing-song voice flowed in nursery-rhyme beat.

"In Raj MacGregor's *bedroom*."

Chapter 15: Inconsistent Variables

Chapter 16 of 36

What is this sudden obsession her feminine side has with Sirius Black? And just who in the hell is Raj MacGregor, anyway? Surprises turn Hermione's logical mind inside out, as original variables are simply no longer consistent.

Reviews are much appreciated

Author's Note: Many, many thanks to all who review I do read each one, and reply when possible. Your words are food for the artistic soul.

As always, reviews are much appreciated.

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Chapter 15: Inconsistent Variables

Perhaps it was the tension of the past days; perhaps it was lack of proper rest or nourishment. In any case, Hermione Granger was not in such a mood as to play word games with a slightly spoiled, flitty teenaged girl. Especially when the subject was Raj MacGregor, a man she had yet to understand or trust.

Eyes narrowed dangerously; teeth grit in exasperation. Hermione spoke slowly, carefully and with meaning.

"What, pray tell, were you doing in Raj MacGregor's bedroom?" Cutting off the girl's obvious smart reply, she quickly added, "And don't give me any rubbish about an affair, as we both know you are far too young for his taste." Said with more conviction than she had a right to, Hermione only hoped Chelsea could not see through her presumption of non-existent facts. Only that Raj was a serious, mysterious flirt to her was she sure. Mayhap he *did* fancy young girls, but doubtful.

Blanching at the unexpected sternness, Chelsea's demeanor fumbled. Suddenly she crumpled under the authoritative manner, all haughtiness washing away, leaving scared girl-child in its place. Fearing censure, she shrank back under Hermione's gaze, her voice little above a scolded child's.

"I, er... I was just lookin' around." Nervousness grew into rapid, slightly panicked speech. "Honestly, Ms. Granger, I didn't do nothin' bad." Real concern marred her young features. She'd been caught up in whatever insinuation she'd portrayed, and now felt the consequences of such folly.

"Dad had to go to Raj's flat a while back, and I begged to follow. While they were chatting Ministry, I took a look-see about his place. Wasn't really meanin' to, mind you, but I found myself in his bedroom. Didn't touch anythin', honest. Just looked at his photos an' a couple old books of his. Right private, he is. I just wanted to know more about him." Crestfallen in shame and sudden unsureness, Chelsea looked every bit a little girl in reprimand.

Irritation warred with the need for answers, and Hermione's face softened slightly. "Have a seat, Chelsea," she instructed briskly, leaving no question it was not a request. Settled to her right, the younger witch waited with obvious fear, though Hermione could not deduce just why her concern was so great. Her next words answered.

"Please don't tell my dad, Ms. Granger." Frantically pleading, Hermione understood. Her father was strict Chamberlain would be severe in his punishment. "He's still right tossed over last month when he caught me slinking around the evening reception in Belfast. I was only trying to get a good look-see at Raj in his dress robes, you know; didn't mean to overhear private Ministry stuff, like. Got right interrogated for that one. *What'd you hear? Exact words, missy...* 'He'd kill me if he knew about this; would bar me from the Samhein Festival, dead sure," she finished with a meaningful glance at Hermione.

"Not that you wouldn't deserve it." Derisive in her speech, the elder witch spoke her immediate mind. But she was not without compassion. "But no, I won't say anything to him. After all," she added with a half-smile, "you'll not say anything about seeing me here, as I'm supposed to be out ill."

Relief dropped Chelsea's shoulders, held breath releasing in a high chuckle. "All right, then. I keep your secrets, you keep mine, eh?"

Seriousness overtook Hermione's features, and she stared inquisitively at the girl. "Yes, something like that," she began in an aside. "So tell me, Chelsea..." More intent her gaze now. "What do you know about Raj MacGregor?"

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Marred were the cheap white, red-striped trays battered fish and greasy chips sat within, oil staining in increasing spots the thin cardboard. Muggle take-away had risen to prime choice for Hermione after her enlightening talk with Chelsea Chamberlain. Sadly, *prime choice* wasn't quite as definitive in terms of the food itself.

"So what did she say?" Slightly muffled through the partially chewed fillet, Sirius' words broke their repast silence in the single-oil lamped kitchen.

Though nearly a quarter hour had passed since Hermione had shared with him her run-in with Chelsea, no doubt did she have as to what her companion meant.

"Not much, I'm afraid." Another chip, buying her time. Thoughtfully, she continued. "She fancies him that much is obvious but her conversations with him... Bit odd, actually."

Sirius paused in mid-bite, focusing on the words following. Intent was his gaze, his attention. So much so that Hermione found herself needing to look away, lest the shivers suddenly dancing down her spine tell-tale in her eyes. *Bloody hell, Hermione!* Chastising came easy by now. *Just forget your little revelation at five a.m. this morning. Yes, he's a man, but he's also... Sirius. Just Sirius. Same old Sirius. Laughing, childish, brooding, reckless Sirius.* Tea-brown irises drifted just below his eyes, opting to at least appear mannered before answering. Staring at the darkened corner would be rude and questioned. *So what that you've quite recently and unexpectedly noticed he has regal, refined cheekbones, a shadowing of black scruff suggesting masculine roughness, solidity, diametrically opposing of soft, tender, feminine*

Um, yeah.

But so what? All men have facial hair, and the human skull is created such that the structure involves supporting bone protrusions to help define the orbital socket. And he is a man, as previously and unquestionably established, and thus

"And a bit odd, just **how**..."

Slapped from her path of self-destruction, Hermione started. "Er, yeah... Odd. Yes." Bite of fish to compose her thoughts, distracted as they were currently.

*Focus, Hermione. Focus. Raj... remember? Remember Raj, the guy who has something to hide? Black hair, olive skin, cryptic personality. Remember him? Important info, that. Could be right pertinent to finding, helping, **saving** the boys.* Sanity returned in a beat, bearing with it the situation at hand, the analytical dissertation her mind had held between Fortescue's and Grimmauld forefront again.

"Right." Sirius' prompt drew the considerations from thought to word, and Hermione shared her concerns. "He's something to hide, I'm positive. Something dark he can't afford to have known about him." Quirked eyebrow exclaimed silently her audience was at least attentive.

"It seems he has a gift for not saying anything, yet drawing loads of information from someone else. Take, for example, a chat Chelsea had with Raj shortly after he began working for her father, just about six months ago. He was over at their townhouse they keep in Muggle London, and Chelsea had asked him all sorts of questions about himself, yet after three-quarters an hour, had only learned his name which her dad had already mentioned and his post. Again, her father had already mentioned such. Even now she only knows about him what her father has deigned to tell her."

"That's not exactly equivalent to evil incarnate, Hermione." Sirius tipped back his butterbeer leisurely; his eyes, however, did not leave hers. Solid was the *clunk* resounding as the glass again found purchase on the scrubbed table. "What grown bloke wants a half-aged schoolgirl pattering after him? 'Course he doesn't want to tell her anything. And he's enough experience with the Ministry to know how carry a conversation without telling you a blasted thing. No law against avoiding a wand-tip wedding or St. Mungo's because daddy didn't like the attention you gave his little girl..."

This time his gaze shifted about lazily as he drank deeply, humor sparkling his eyes in remembrance.

Hermione bristled. Unknown reasoning gnawed his words into annoyance, crawling just beneath her skin. Several chips found her mouth, their presence solely keeping it shut against biting retorts... retorts against his questioning of her intuition; against the condescendence of grown wizards to school-girls; against witty, cocky, older men whose dog-like mannerisms greatly exceeded that of magical physical transformation.

"He's *too* secretive, Sirius," she argued, temper reined in once more. "Six months there, and no one really knows a thing about him. And he wasn't surprised about the Death Eaters attacking that pub in Waterford, either. Come to think of it, he didn't say anything to me until Bailey blurted out my friendship with Harry. I didn't even know his existence until Kerry. Then he nipped out of dinner just talk to me. And he's suspiciously mysterious about his life, about his family, about things I know he knows, but don't really know quite what, exactly. That is, I know he knows something I know he doesn't want known Oh, rubbish!" Mumbled swearing beneath her breath, composure soon following.

"What I mean is, I know he's keeping something of importance from me, but it's something I should know, as his hesitations scream it. I can just tell. And it's usually something to do with Voldemort. Right." Explanations were turning into spoken musings, more to clarify to herself the connections her mind was attempting to make. "When everyone else in the Wizarding world pretends he's gone for good again, Raj is just a little too sure he's not. He won't tell me why he's so sure, either; just some rubbish about Voldemort being just like anyone else desiring power. And all those cryptic tales about his ancestors... what does he take me for, anyway? A first-year simpleton? Entranced by his tales of Arthur and Morgana, trying to impress me with his great-grandfather's association with Merlin, himself?" Agitated sigh, a flounce within her chair, slamming of palms to scrubbed wood. "No; there's something not quite on with Raj MacGregor."

At this, the last Hermione expected was the soft chuckling from the elder Black brother. Oddly, irritation faded on the spot, replaced with confusion and fascination as she again faced him. "What you told me last night... rather, this morning," he corrected himself, a wry grin pulling the right corner of his mouth. Hermione immediately slid her view to his throat: a much safer location, to be sure.

Or not.

Quick nip again. "You don't much trust the guy, but you obviously like him. Well... enough as a fancy, anyway."

"Do *not!*" Shot up from her chair, Hermione's indignation sprang forth like defensive tactics of old, her maturity dropping to adolescent discord. Failing to see her own childish reaction, only half-muttered, semi-coherent sentences escaped her pursed lips as she gathered the remains of her meal and made off to the bin by the counter, back solidly fixated toward him.

Again, rich, deep chuckling drifted to her ears... soft, inviting. Hermione could not decipher the immediate reaction her psyche chose. Blended in not-quite-equal measures were agitation at his assumption, vexation at his making light of the situation, and an acute awareness of the timbre of his voice, the reverberation his mirth echoed throughout her body.

Long moments passed ere she realized no breath had left her. It seemed the concept of exhalation had become foreign to her. Foreign ever since hormones had drawn a neon sign about Sirius Black, flashing in staccato that there sat an attractive, passionate man.

Wait. When did she decide he was *attractive*?

-o-

Flustering young girls was always a positive to life, Sirius recalled. Hermione had stiffed her stance, back firmly to him, as she wiped down the counter with a damp wash cloth. She was right fit for a row, he could see with no little amusement. This only made him chuckle more, and in turn...

Well, he could remember now why he so enjoyed teasing the girls at school. Of course, then it had often been in an effort to initiate flirtatious sparring. But not always, and if an opportunity had come up to embarrass one, or egg one into a debate, Sirius had always been game. It was good to see he'd not lost his touch.

He liked Hermione, however, and did not honestly want her angry with him. It was cute to see she fancied this kid, and as long as said bloke revealed himself neither a danger nor opposition to either her or Harry or anyone else he cared for then all his wishes of luck were for her. She was a good girl, one who cared deeply for her friends, and he would like to see her happy. He had always figured she'd find herself married to Ron Weasley, but it appeared as that was not the case. In fact, neither she nor any Weasley had yet mentioned them as a couple.

Not all things come to fruition as appearances suggest, then, eh?

"All right, all right," he relented with a chuckle. Tension was by now oozing from the young witch, and best it was to chivvy the situation along lest her temper catch the bit and run away with her. She was nearly all the company he had now, anyway, until he concocted a plausible story for the band. Another day or two would be necessary. Besides... the riddle Harry had owled could well be a real call for help.

The thought suddenly sobered Sirius, and he straightened. This time his tone lacked vibrant humor, instead wrapping his words in a cloak of studied concern.

"Harry's letter..." Meal forgotten, only a general sweep of his arm cleared the table before him, granting space for the parchment of mention. Eyes dashed cursorily upon the words read dozens times more before, grasping for the elusive. "First off.... If they're playing around with my family, you can bet your arse it isn't a friendly game of chess. Wizard's chess, indeed."

"Means they've been dueling, I know it." Beaten, her voice came, drifting on a reverberation, as she still spoke to the wall. This time, however, it wasn't out of vexation for him.

"Harry's smart, Hermione. And Ron won't let anything happen to him. From what Ginny's told me, he's turned out too much like Lily to be reckless with his life. They'll play it safe; here's the proof," he added, lightly rattling the letter.

Sigh of resigned agreement left her lips, shoulders dropping in weariness. Sirius knew she'd now fallen back to her inner fears of what had gone wrong, if indeed anything actually had. But he knew more was at stake here than merely an update to their days' wandering. If he had to code it so, there was cause. And help was surely being requested.

"Look... it's late. You've work in the morning, and I've a few errands, myself. I've got to make good with the band, and some other business I'd like to attend as well. What say we call it a night, get some rest, and look back over this tomorrow? We'll try to meet up after you leave the Ministry, eh?" Encouraging, light tone was attempted; logic was key to agreement.

Deep sigh and quick face rub later, Hermione turned back to Sirius and admitted his to be the best course of action. Agreeing upon a meeting time and place, Sirius escorted her to the foyer, guiding her gently with a hand to her shoulder, afraid if he didn't, she'd collapse from the strain suddenly showing on her face.

Once she'd left, he turned back to the letter. His primary concern was where the boys were, and with whom. Trouble was, he had no clue as to who Lily had spent her summers with, and the only person alive who might know...

Well, one simply did not waltz up uninvited to Petunia Evans and request an audience. Not a grown wizard with a past, anyway.

-o-

Exhausted, Hermione barely found her bed before collapsing in a dead heap. Lack of sleep had only been part of her weariness; Sirius Black and his soot-polished tresses now long enough to lay over, teasing his lower lashes could claim responsibility for her mental state. When the hell had she gone *mad*?

And mad she must be, for developing almost instantaneous attraction for a man she'd known since the age of fourteen, a man viewed as a parental-esque figure to her best friend, was absolutely barking. Taking a mental step back, she could without bias see he cut a figure of male beauty. Yes; she could admit that. One need be blind not to admit a certain handsomeness in his features. But to take a sudden fancy to him...?

Why not? the devil's advocate countered in her head. *Older, experienced, tawny in build. Swooning material, he is. Lithe and refined enough to be regal, aristocratic; rough and raspy enough to be protectively masculine. And smart, Hermione... he's got brains 'neath that framing veil of fine locks. Even you couldn't dismiss him for that.*

Still, he isn't my type. And even if he was, which I'm noting now he's not, I'm with someone. It'd be wrong. Totally wrong.

*What would it hurt, really? Just here, inside your head... allow yourself a bit of freedom, a bit of naughty 'what if' to play out your seed of inspiration. It isn't **cheating**; you're not doing anything but daydreaming...*

But Ron

Ron's not going to know. No one will. And there's nothing to know about. You're just... going on a little adventure, playing out theories, proving to yourself how silly it is that little Hermione Granger finds infamous Sirius Black fanciable... snoggable... shaggable.

*Wait! Who said anything about snogging? Or **shagging**?*

Suggestive chuckling answered.

-o-o-o-

"Granny kicker-bobs!" hissed the voice, annoyance evident.

Testing each limb and joint experimentally, Hermione roused herself to the world of awareness, grogginess shedding its blanketing hold. Scurrying noises scratched her ears, alerting her to Shauna's mishap of notes and such, guaranteed to now be strewn upon the floor. Theatre-read through and through, the girl had a way with colorful if not entirely logical exclamatory phrases.

"Invest in a binder," Hermione mumbled, mouth half covered by duvet. "It'll save you loads of aggravation."

"Nice to see you up," Shauna's reply penetrated. Hint of derisive humor tempered her greeting. "Lovely sleep, was it?" Immediate suspicion washed away all the witch's remaining drowsiness.

"Why?" Furrowed brows narrowed as she rose, seating herself bedside.

Shauna laughed. "Oh, no reason. You just kept on and on about dragons and Merlin and *'Tell me who you are,'* she enlightened, fingers depicting the quote, voice rising in mock pleading. "Cor, Hermione. You must've been dreaming of Camelot and the Knights. Or rather, the España version of it."

Hermione frowned, eyes following Shauna's renewed exercise of reclaiming her study notes. "What do you mean, exactly?"

Actress skill aside, the blonde's amused curiosity revealed surprise as well when she looked up to see such serious contemplation. Forgoing further rescue, she absentmindedly laid those recovered upon her desk.

"You were speaking in Spanish. Which, by the way, I didn't know you knew. Well," she clarified, expression of allowance flattening her face, "you kept repeating *'Ceborando Dragones'* ever so often, like you were questioning it." Met with puzzlement, Shauna added, "Means 'Concerning Dragons.'"

Gut-punched by the revelation, Hermione considered her dreamscape but moments before. She'd been there again, the loch carrying scents of heather and soft laps of water to wooden bow. And **he'd** been there again, *damn it*. The one man who'd ensnared her obsessive nature like no other had ever dared. And she bloody well *still* didn't even know his face!

Just as Raj's voice declared all was well, and she'd begun to turn to see him behind her, the scene changed. Again the books lining a dark shelf, weak sunlight, dust hanging, floating in its beams. And the worn, green cloth enveloping the text pulled from the shelf, ring-less fingers caressing faded gold etching... *Ceborando Dragones*...

Concerning Dragons.

Hagrid.

-o-

Several owls passed the mid-week day in transit between the Ministry of Magic and The Burrow, each visit bearing semi-coded questions and responses to the well-being of one formerly dead, imposter rock and roll star, as well as a thorough bitching out from one quite pregnant, ginger-haired witch. Said mother-to-be had just learned quite unintentionally and quite un-fortuitously that her long-absent husband and her elder brother had sent a cryptic message to her best friend. And had been kept in the dark about it. Purposefully.

Not good.

Thankfully, and by involving the twins, Sirius had managed to calm Ginny down. Relaying again the contents of the message, he assured them that if he were in threatening danger, Harry would have been more explicit for his request of assistance. Instead, it seemed highly likely that he had found something, and needed help with its deciphering.

That was early morning, when Mrs. Potter had visited Grimmauld to check on her guest. Since then, the airways to and from her childhood home had been heated with continuous wing travel. Now nearly five, Hermione was anxious to escape her duty-filled cage and meet up with Sirius and Ginny.

"You toddle on, Hermione," Bailey's congenial voice split into stagnant air. Startled jump followed, but was quickly covered through supposed readjustment of files in hand. She'd forgotten his presence, actually. Too wrapped in remembrances concerning dragons... and dream-lore... and tragically realistic phantom seducers... Well, she'd simply lost all connection with the here and now, a now that included her boss' touting of ideas for his upcoming trip to Egypt. She was supposed to be taking notes.

"Right." All she could think of, truth be known. Hermione was not one to enjoy being caught off guard, and embarrassment at yet again daydreaming before her boss held little appeal, either.

Gathering notes and filing them away, only her personal items remained to be stowed in her iridescent black dragon-hide book bag last season's Christmas gift from the twins. Bading a quick 'Evening' to Bailey, she hurried out the office door, fighting said bag for room to include *Convex Citings and Other Cryptic Codes*. Last wanted was undue attention to her current reading preferences.

"Well, hello, dear," pleasant dulcets trailed nearby. Hermione looked up from her reorganization to note the previously empty corridor before her now held evacuees from the conference room to her right. Among several dignitaries, the Sherbet Lemon Liaison herself stood just before the weary witch.

Surprise merely hinted the moment, and moments passed before Hermione could form a proper reply. "Hello, Zelda." Self-conscious giggle borne in confused amusement. "What brings you here?"

Genuine smile full of life greeted the question, breaking only to say, "Nothing much posh, ducky. Just a word with Rufus and the usual lot." Hand wave encompassed the cliqued numbers gathered about the corridor.

Before given the chance to question further, Bailey's voice rang out from behind Hermione, startling her beyond words.

"Ah, there you are, Madam Luminare." Sidling up between them to her left, Mortimer Bailey took in the meeting with immeasurable glee upon his face. "I see you have met my Hermione Granger, my most brilliant protégé. Haven't seen such skill with wand or word since Drexil Zorg, back in..." No lack of bragging held his continued ramble on her attributes; blushes faded in light of mortification. Truly, he was embarrassing her beyond measure.

"A wonderfully bright dear, I'm sure," Zelda returned, her eyes bright with humor. Conveying sympathy and encouragement simultaneously, the elderly witch's expression suggested enraptured attention to the diplomat's words. Occasional nodding and affirmative or agreeing-negative vagueness kept her appearances up with Bailey, allowing his unending praise. Finally, his focus turned to his assistant.

"Watch and learn, Hermione, dear." Such sage advice was bestowed in stage-whisper confidence. "You'd never know it to hear her, but Madam Luminare holds the ear of many a leader. Not bad for the head of an oft-ignored department such as Muggle Artifacts, eh?" Polite snickering at his own joke covered Hermione's shock. **Head of the Department of Muggle Artifacts?**

Thump! Text now upon the polished hardwood, the young witch knelt to gather it, its loose pages dispersing about just out of arm's reach. While Bailey chatted on, Hermione could only wrap conviction around Zelda, the sweets bandit, being one and the same with a Ministry official and one, mind you, who impressed Mortimer Bailey. Not an easy accomplishment.

Snagging the last bit of loose parchment, Hermione busied herself stashing sheets in their proper places, half hearing the conversation above her. However, a new speaker entered their party from her right.

"Good afternoon, dearest Auntie." Hermione froze. No way. Impossible. Incredulous. Inconceivable.

Surrealism knew no boundaries this day.

Looking up from crouched position, the image reflected a young man affectionately placing a kiss upon his weathered loved one's cheek, worn, calloused hands taken gently into strong, smooth ones. Speechless again, Hermione could only stare as she slowly, shakily rose to her feet, eyes wide.

"Ready for dinner?" he asked, smile tugging his handsome face into angelic semblance.

Girlish giggle erupted from Zelda's throat, eyes creasing in merriment as she swatted his broad shoulder with a slender hand. "Mind your manners now, Raj; can't you see I've company?"

Chapter 16: Crisis by Identity

Chapter 17 of 36

"Who?" is an awfully apt question these days: 'Who is stalking whom?' 'Who is Raj MacGregor beneath that composed exterior?' 'Who is the man of Hermione's dreams?'... Who, indeed.

Time is running out for her friends, and Hermione must find answers, before it is too late.

Reviews are much appreciated

Chapter 16: Crisis By Identity

"Now that I have been weighed and measured..." Voice hoarse with weariness, his raised remark found only resonance in the seemingly empty study. Shadows blended in part, weak sunlight fading in the growing evening. "Have I been found *wanting*?"

This time his causal stance relaxed further into aimless wandering; inspection of cobalt glass vase; fingertip flick of cobweb remnants upon a bookshelf. Leisurely stroll to the glass-fronted mahogany cabinet developed into the draining of three fingers from the decanter. Left handed retrieval of the tumbler, seemingly unfazed slouch at the darkened window, eyes assumingly taking in the limited view. He knew someone was there, in his library, lurking in the shadows. Watching him. Studying him. Believing themselves hidden.

Tiny hairs prickled at his nape, his fingers lightly gripping hardwood tucked into cotton shirtsleeve. Visually hidden, yes. But senses more than sight were acute in his worn body, detecting his intruder upon first entry of the room. He waited.

If they were going to kill him, they would have done so by now. Stun him? The same. His wife and daughter were kipping over with friends for the evening; he was very much alone. Under circumstances, that was best. No fear traveled through him for their safety. Which led only to concerning himself with his own well-being.

He swirled the amber liquid in languid motions, sharp whisky biting his nose. Patience he'd learned long ago; but had his uninvited visitor?

"I know you're there," he spoke to the mullion-paned window before him. They'd lain in wait for him, knowing he'd venture into the careworn room sometime this evening. Such arrogance could only be borne in familiarity. Had they studied him long, then?

Disturbing scents mixed with the alcohol. Suddenly he grew uneasy, more cautious. He stilled, shallow breaths slow and meticulously even in growing anticipation. Something wasn't right, more so than merely being stalked by one intent on stealth.

Unsettled now, lanky limbs eased back slightly from the glass, reclaiming greater perimeter of view in its reflection. Without preamble, hazy blackness behind him began to take image, boundaries, form. Keen eyes squinted, deciphering, yet he dare not turn about. The form grew, drew closer, took on specifics, detail, identity.

Remus Lupin's blood ran cold.

-o-

Raj MacGregor turned slightly, a soft smile to his lips... one not quite reaching his eyes. Wariness lay there, a slight peering as he acknowledged Hermione with some surprise.

"Milady, Hermione," he greeted with an inclination of his head. Ever the gallant knight, he drew her right hand to his lips, eyes never breaking contact. Gentle, barely brushing in a kiss, he held her delicately ever so longer than necessary. *Was he flirting with her, again?*

Hermione's solid gaze broke suddenly, words returning tardy to her mind. "Er, hello, Raj. Fancy meeting you here." Slightly accusatory perhaps was her stare, but he appeared unruffled.

In fact, he merely held her eyes steady, unwavering, without comment. It was Zelda who broke the lengthy, uncomfortable silence.

"Yes, dear, I'm nearly ready." Her words were to Raj first, before turning toward Hermione. "And you, my dear, are most welcome to join us. It would be grand fun to have you along." Crinkling at the eyes set her genuine smile to heart, and Hermione could only be endeared further to this paradox of *grandmère*-hood.

"Er, thank you, Zelda, but..." Glancing back at Raj, she suddenly realized he still held her hand. Still held her look. Still held her thoughts... fears. Nonchalantly as possible, Hermione pulled free his grasp, offering him one last tweak of challenging glare. "No, I've other plans this evening. But I'm sure you and your nephew will find your own company quite enjoyable enough, I should think."

More chuckling. "Raj is not precisely my nephew, love," Zelda was explaining. Hermione turned immediately back to the little old witch, her visual battle with MacGregor momentarily forgotten. "Auntie is an honorary title; I've known his father since Argus was a wee lad, back when Bubby and I were still at school. Of course, Bubby was closer than I to Jacob, Raj's grandfather, but kept up with the family for years. Sadly, when Jonas and I married, we went off to France for many years, and I lost touch.

What a thrill it was, then, when dear Raj came to the Ministry this past winter. Oh, I was so *delighted* "

"Auntie, I don't believe Hermione wishes to learn the genealogy "

"Posh, Raj!" she gently scolded, waving a frail, bejeweled hand dismissively. "As I was saying, dear," Madam Luminare continued, warming further to her subject of reminiscence. "When Raj came to the Ministry, just out of the clear blue, it was like fifty years had rolled back." Soft sigh. "I had always envisioned little Argus had grown up and had children of his own... to meet his handsome young son was like gaining another grandson." Sly, self-deprecating glance stole from her animated face. "Well, like a long-lost grand nephew."

"Really?" Hermione drew out, arched brow turning from Zelda to Raj, keen focus observing his reaction. Disappointment briefly slashed through her, as she noticed his face: impassive at worst, well-acted pleasantries and shyness at best. From the floor his eyes rose, catching her look and holding her gaze steadily. Talented at this game, he betrayed no inner thought, feeling. If he had nothing to hide, more emotion should have shown from him. Annoyance, humor, embarrassment, boredom, interest. But nothing crossed his unreadable features.

Raj MacGregor was controlling his reaction too well. Only one with a desire to remain unconsidered would remain so completely composed.

Ice water trickled down her spine, and Hermione suddenly grew fearful. Hints of power radiated off Raj, a sensation she'd not before felt in his presence. An oddness, yes, but never this aura of ancient strength. It unnerved her greatly.

Self-preservation ceased eye contact, and she again turned to Zelda, quietly clearing her throat, re-wetting her quite dry mouth. "Er, Zelda... when did you meet "

"If you would excuse us, Auntie," Raj interrupted, grasping Hermione's wrist and swiftly turning her about, her bag and wand falling ungraciously to the floor. Meters away he forcefully pulled her to a nearby cross-corridor. Her mind delayed registering the move. Mouth gaping, the young witch found herself pressed back into a heavy-wooden wall, facing Raj MacGregor but a step before her, his face hidden in the shadows of the ill-lit area. The Ministry was shutting down business for the evening.

Soft muttering from Raj brought Hermione's attention back to her situation. Casting an Imperturbable Charm, was he? Didn't want to be overheard, it seemed. Too late, Hermione also guessed that included any cry for help she may utter. Assistance only a mite away in distance, but eternity in sound. She shuddered.

"Don't look as though I'm going to hex you right here." Annoyance prickled his words. Raj leaned heavily upon the wall through a straightened left arm, both shielding themselves from possible prying eyes and essentially pinning her by his grip on her robe's shoulder. Eyes penetrated the darkness to peer intensely into hers. Frustrated, heavy sigh fell; a brief glance to the darkness on his right, as though to seek answers not yet yielding to his need.

Eyes returned, carrying with them honor and gentleness as par Raj MacGregor. "Hermione..." His breath was warm, sweet, and in that instant Hermione realized she noticed this by the sheer fact he had leaned in, closer to her. Pulse quickening, uneasiness darted through her, though whether in fear of him or in excitement, she knew not.

"In earnest I plead of you, do not question dear Zelda further of my family." His voice low, breathy, deep. Earnest, perhaps, but authoritative as well. No mere request was this. Nor commanding, either, but something in his tone leveled to her an unspoken need. What was he hiding?

"It brings her sorrow to think of days gone by. Her true love has passed on, and with him the days they spent with my family. Recalling the past will only return those feelings. She would never admit such to you, for she is quite fond of you, but I do not wish to cause her old pain from wounds long since scarred."

Scarred drifted across her cheek, gooseflesh following its path. So close was he that her eyes could not focus upon his; too near was his five o'clock shadow, his heat, his scent... his lips.

"*Hermione!*"

"Hermione! Where are you?"

Jumping in start, Hermione regained her composure and sense of self. Raj had also stepped away, muttering. Rationale stated it was the counter to the privacy spell, but ill-mannered oaths of aggravation caught her ears. Raj MacGregor did not appreciate the interruption.

Instinctively straightening herself, Hermione spared no glance at her companion, and instead whipped about the corner as quickly as possible, greeting the now limited crowd still gathered about in small cliques. It was Bailey's voice that had first called, followed by that of the new arrival to their group. Broad smiles broke through both their faces.

"Fred!"

-o-

Rattling words only half registered as he and Hermione made their way through the near-empty Atrium. Retrieving her per Ginny's need, Fred was attempting to detail situational aspects on the way, but images of olive skin and white, even teeth... dark hair and darker eyes... all refused to let go her thoughts. Dispossessed of faculties, Hermione found herself reliving the bizarre moment, each answer suggesting only further question. Raj's mood had swung greater arcs than a henchman's blade; challenging, secretive, angry, beseeching, seducing, annoyed...

He'd not returned from the corridor when Fred had arrived, Arthur having escorted his son toward Bailey's office. By that time, most of the adjourned meeting members had left, and Hermione had greeted her friend in grand smiles. Materials gathered, she had turned to leave with a quick farewell to Bailey and Zelda when the elder witch had taken Hermione's hand as once before, whispering to her, "As predicted, your young man has returned. It will take him time, but his wild ways will soon leave him, and he will realize his unspoken pledge to you." And with that, she had patted Hermione's hand with a knowing grin. No amount of protest was heard by her aged ears, and Hermione could, even now, only shake her head, amused. *Fred and I are not together...*

"So she's in a right state," Fred was saying, his voice low as they neared the Floo. "Finally agreed to tell Mum and Dad about the other night not about our guest, I mean," quickly clarified. "But about seeing Lucius Malfoy."

Cold slivers trickled down Hermione's body. Memories of that night years ago still brought a queasiness that seldom subsided ere long. Shoving down those thoughts, she instead pressed Fred further for explanation. "So she came across Harry's wedding band in the back garden, right about where she spotted Malfoy the other night... Sure it couldn't have been dropped there his last holiday home?" Scenario offered, but doubted even as spoken.

Fred shook his head, looking about suspiciously as they stopped, having reached the Floo alone. "No; that's the kicker, you see. There was a message attached to it charmed to show only when Ginny's ring touched it. Found out right by accident, but it's definitely not from a prior journey home." Concerned eyes met hers, and grim defeat shone through. "Best if I just let you witness it for yourself."

With that, Hermione stepped though, calling her destination. Apprehension swept her visions of a near-kiss away; images in mortal peril instead dominated her thoughts.

-o-

Consoling had taken half the night. Exhaustion spread throughout, not only from rallying Ginny, but convincing herself that Harry and Ron were fine, just fine. Fact was, this last bit quelled all assurances on Hermione's part, but admitting that to anyone even herself was not in the plan. Not yet, anyway.

The message had been brief, and like Hermione's, a bit cryptic. Once the rings were placed together (as Ginny had inevitably donned it next to her own), a scrawl drew up

in Pensieve fashion, a vision of parchment and dictated quill, words flowing in hurried Potter script.

Dearest Ginny,

Do not worry; am safe enough. Will take time. Waiting for answers. Cannot risk more. I love y

Abruptly it had ended, gone black. Vanished. And the ring had been found where Lucius Malfoy had broken the wards, invaded the property.

Not good. Not good at all.

Waiting for answers... answers he'd sent her on a quest to find. And she was failing him. Guilt was a heavy bed partner.

Past one in the morn, Hermione eased the dormitory room door open. Weary bones swore her bed was calling, and indeed she intended to comply its request.

Feeling her way about in the silent darkness, she changed into summer pyjamas and tucked herself beneath cool sheets. As her mind drifted off, awareness recalled events of the evening, both actual and intended. Abruptly recollection hit.

*I forgot to meet Sirius. **Bugger...***

-o-

Flame, single and curvy and flickering, illuminated the nearest corner of aged parchment spread about the low table. Refined fingers battered and bruised splayed across in effort to minimize crinkles of shadowing. Eyes bleary in sleep deprivation, Jonathon McCaine surveyed the ancient map before him yet again. Something had been missed, forgotten, left out. If only he could *investigate* the landmarks

But no. Too dangerous by far at this early stage. Hah! 'Early' was not quite accurate, as time was of the greatest essence, else he dare secure it and its power for the Dark Lord. But early it was, nevertheless; only under the most ambivalent and formal circumstances could he pass unsuspected through the streets, and his opportunity was not yet at hand. They should hurry.

Barely had he managed to send word of his plan, of his need to involve the others so that he could locate the true, precise site. Only he, Jonathon, knew where. He had discovered it purely by chance, the parting gift of the Council Leaders in South Africa. Knowing his weakness for authentic writings of Merlin, they had bestowed upon him an original script by the wizard himself. Pages from a letter, detailing the rumored site... and debunking the long-held belief of complete purity. There was a lineage, one different than his mother's brother, Elyezer. And Jonathon was the only one who now knew this. But he still didn't know the line; only Dumbledore had. And Dumbledore was dead.

Thomas was currently searching the ancient texts in a fury, seeking the powers, the rituals... Still, no one knew who was of the birthright, and thus neither did they know where to find the sacred. But the Dark Lord had someone quite clever, for he was ever growing closer to acquiring it. Their own stolen information confirmed this. Light was lent his plans by this same source. But if the Dark Lord knew the guardian's identity, secret he kept it, and well.

Restlessness gave way to uneasiness, and with that came fear. He felt watched. If something untoward should happen to him, before the others learned his new knowledge...

Damn! Why had contact been so difficult? Spies everywhere! The Dark Ones can not know... not who, not where. It is too great a power!

Acrid bite hung in the air, alerting his senses. Jonathon sprang from the earthen floor, gathering the fragile parchment in a rush. No time for delicacy, he little more than stuffed it into his pale robes, anxiously grabbing up only the essentials.

He dashed for the trap door of the subterranean room, desperate to gain exit before the smoke and flame overtook him.

He had been found out.

-o-o-o-

Thursday and Friday found no unexpected chat-ups with Raj, or shocking revelations of Zelda, and for that, Hermione was sure she was grateful. Absolutely. Definitely.

Wasn't she?

Fact of the matter, she was amazed by Madam Luminare, and Raj MacGregor both excited and scared her. Intrigue followed about him; Hermione found herself desiring to puzzle the pieces of his mystery together. Come what may.

Bailey had been his usual, slightly patronizing self. Egypt made up his primary focus, St. Cyr nipping in only once to verify the diplomat's agreement to attend the meeting later in the month. Hermione's presence was not planned; uni would be beginning soon, her internship concluding with the start of term. Which was all right with her, honesty be told. More than enough to be going on with, she had. Daily her attention divided itself, much going to deciphering Harry's message to her he needed her help, and she was blank with ideas! Fair bit of thought fell to Ginny, and how to reassure her when Hermione herself held little hope that Harry had not been captured by Death Eaters and a dead one at that.

Errant spells of consideration latched onto Raj MacGregor. Foolishness could only deny her faint attraction to him, a realization marred by her growing leeriness of his presence, his quiet power, his unspoken knowledge.

Then there was Sirius.

What could she say? Blind truth forgave weeks of denial, admitting that she now, and had had for weeks, a growing fervor of awareness to him. Before she'd found him, she'd found herself thinking of him, believing she had seen him when, indeed, she had not. Blushing at his teasing words, breath held at inadvertent brushes of his hand, tingling chills when catching his intense gaze...

Well, any warm-blooded woman would find him attractive. Still childish, enough of Sirius proclaimed his mature masculinity, and Hermione's body noticed long before Hermione did. And now she missed him, but three days apart. Laid out on the table, her cards revealed two things: Sirius Black was a want she never even knew she needed.

And she was never actually in love with Ron Weasley.

Sensations of betrayal enveloped her as she left the Ministry that Friday afternoon by the Visitor's Entrance. Long, hard thoughts over the past few days forced admittance to her feelings. And they were not happy thoughts. Years of friendship, dating, planning a future together... Abhorred to concede her being right, Hermione realized her mother's words, spoken not a week past. No, Ron Weasley would never be her husband.

Lost in her own mind, Hermione's eyes followed only the path before her, the bustle of Londoners jostling her without care. Only when abruptly arrested and whipped around did she awaken to her surroundings.

"David!" Before her the young man stood, concern creasing his brow, negating the warm smile his boyishly handsome face bore. Immediate return smile graced her greeting, faltering at his obvious worry. "What's wrong?"

As though attempting to throw off the scent, his face livened further before his answer. "Oh, nothing, nothing. You just looked in another world, is all." Glance over his shoulders, over hers, then eyes settling back on hers. He sighed, apparently unable to grant falsehood longevity.

"You didn't answer when I called to you, which was fine," he quickly added. "But as I was trying to catch up to you, I noticed someone following you. Looked like he might've had a knife or gun on him, from the constant grip he had on something pointy in his coat pocket. Bit too warm for long-coats today, as it is. Bloke wasn't up to any good, I'd figure. You need to be more careful, Hermione. All these alleyways make for crime scenes, you know."

Blood flushed from her face. Wands were pointed, too. And outer robes could be mistaken for long-coats. But maybe it was just a Muggle thug, intent on her unaware body. Not that that was a comforting thought, mind you.

She hastily looked about, seeking out the new problem in her life.

"No need. He's gone now. About the time I got close enough to catch your attention, he looked over at me and veered off down an alley. Long gone by now, I 'spose."

"Didn't happen to catch what he looked like, did you?" she inquired, dryness setting in her mouth.

"Don't worry; you'd know if you saw him. Just walk the other direction if you run across a tall bloke with long, white-blond hair. Walking stick, too."

Woozy, faint. *Get a grip, Hermione. You can't pass out now. Think about it later. Just get home, and think about it then, in private, in safety.*

Deep breath. Refreshed smile. "Right. Thanks. I'll be more careful from now on." Glance about, locate another topic. "So... what brings you out again to London? I thought you were heading back north for some gardening or something."

Genuine smile, relaxed from previous tension. He edged her closer to the wall, away from the afternoon commuters. "Old mate of my mum's saw me the other night at the Origami Legion concert, and engaged me to re-landscape the venue's front garden, what there is of it. She's on the Wimbledon Greyhound Board."

She chuckled. "Well, good luck with Attila." At his quirked eyebrow, she elaborated. "That massive bodyguard trolling the corridors and watching the band's dressing room. Giant bloke, blond, body art..."

Head threw back, and David laughed heartily. "Ah, yes. The personable Dursley. No fear, Hermione. I'm used to his tactics. Just have to know how appease him. In Dud's case, loads of well-placed Galaxy bars."

Dursley? Dudley Dursley? Hermione's jaw must have dropped, for David only laughed harder.

Misunderstanding her befuddlement, his answering words did little to clear her confusion. "Yeah, scoffs 'em all down in a blink. Didn't think he transformed himself that squidgey by garden salads, eh?" Chimes in the distance echoed through the streets, and David's face cleared to realization. "Gads! Sorry, Hermione. Got to fly; Beechers' closes in a half, and it's all the way up in north Camden. It was good seeing you, again. Mind yourself!" The last he called over his shoulder as he trotted through the masses, heading for the tube entry.

Gobsmacked for a moment, Hermione quickly drew herself together and hurried on, now more than ever ready to be home. Peace and quiet and security she craved and needed, now. Time to sort all this new information, and prepare herself for coming face to face with Lucius Malfoy, his deadly intent evident in his cold stare.

Again.

-o-

Laughter bled through the door just as Hermione slipped her key in. *Lovely. I'm having a mental breakdown and now I've got to do it with an audience. Please, Shauna, run lines somewhere else...*

Turn and push combination later, pleasant faux smile plastered on her face, she entered the room to find Shauna seated on her bed in naught but her dressing gown. Draped in black-print Asian silk, the blonde distractedly and repeatedly readjusted her attire, slips-off revealing bronzed flesh here and there. Animatedly chatting up her guest... all lithe, male, and sensual...

"Sirius!" His name bounded from her lips in utter surprise, and the pair before her glanced up from their happy fixation. However, Shauna made no move to un-side herself from his side, and Hermione found great annoyance in this.

"Hermione, you're back!"

"Hey, love. Just who I came to see..." He made no move, either, Hermione noted. *Look right snug there, you two. Glad to see you were able to keep company whilst I was away. All chuckles and hugs, no doubt, eh?* Where was this bitterness coming from? She, Hermione, had no claim staked on Black, and really, he was just being his usual flirtatious self... with the ever flirtatious, gorgeous Shauna....

"Hermione..." Said gorgeous, flirtatious babe called from her cozy location practically atop Sirius. Appearances smacked of suggestive, quick-shag-by-nightfall intentions. Mental images of such called bile to her throat. "Your friend Stubby here has some fantastic stories. Didn't know you were mates with a top musician." Girlish giggling betrayed fandom tendencies, Shauna carelessly running her hand in play along his denim-clad thigh. And Sirius was quite enjoying it.

Just *cracking*.

Launching into recapitulation of Boardman exploits, Shauna's voice rang in the small room, leaving Hermione free to store her details and bag without comment. Loath she was to concede his storylines interesting, but truth was that she recognized his antics as those of young, pre-Azkaban Sirius Black. And deep down, she was simply mesmerized by him.

Eleven minutes' time was all she could suffer watching thinly veiled seductions on either side. Nearly half that time she'd sat quietly on her own bed, staring blatantly across the room at the couple *shudder* without their breaking stride. Though Shauna was telling Hermione the stories, Hermione could just as well not have been there, for all the notice either gave her. Disgusted, it was time to put a stop to it.

"Yes, Shauna, that's all well and good," she interrupted, and the two finally turned to acknowledge her continued presence. "But I've a bit of a schedule, so if you don't mind, I'd like to get on to business." Direct stare full of peevish animosity zeroed in on Sirius. Surprisingly, he met her baleful gaze, amused curiosity reflecting in his own.

"What did you need to talk to me about... *Stubby?*"

Dog-like, Sirius cocked his head to the side, his humor spreading to his firm lips in cheeky taut. "Why, my dear Hermione... I believe I've located our missing *friend*..."

Chapter 17: Truth Be Thy Name

Chapter 18 of 36

Can truth be found simply through keen observance, by failure to indiscriminately dismiss? Hermione now believes so, as she has missed many a truth right before her eyes.

Reviews are much appreciated

Chapter 17: Truth Be Thy Name

"I suppose he wasn't quite as grammatically thick as I'd believed."

Gardenias graced the pools of mulch-filled landscape mounds, their curves trailing along the tree-lined walk upon which they now strolled. Humming shot across with intent, a honey bee diving to its perfumed rendezvous. Hermione was thoughtful with each step, her spoken words reflective of the inner turmoil caused by arrogance. Her ego had not once allowed that perhaps Harry had known *exactly* what he was writing. And she'd simply ignored it, glossed over the presentation as poor talent with a quill.

How wrong she well may have been.

"I just can't have imagined it, Harry being so literal at a time like " Bitten lip and surreptitious side glance silently expressed her self-dismay and guilt. But Sirius showed no sign of condemnation; his walk was leisurely, un-faltering, his gaze ahead and searching. He remained mute. "Well, you know," she lamely finished.

"I didn't know he was so well versed in ancient Muggle literature, to be honest. Not that he's illiterate or anything," she quickly added, another fearful look at the contemplative man beside her. All traces of flirtatious ladies' man had disappeared once they'd left her dormitory seven minutes prior. Instead of typical mischievous grins or even passionate cause, a rare, subdued continence brought Sirius' face to her attention, all manner of previous petty jealousy instantaneously forgotten. He was fascinating. And at the same time, unnerving. Suddenly, Hermione cared very much what he thought of her. If only it wasn't as a complete bungling fool.

"Actually, I don't know that much about Chrétien de Troyes, myself. Just that he was a poet in the Twelfth Century. I mean, I know he wrote romances about knights and damsels and such, King Arthur and all..." Words failed her, Sirius' continued refrain shaming their life ere passage upon lips. Her 'friend' Troyes elusive, alcoholic Troyes had been located, and not by her. *God, Hermione; how could you be **stupid**? And Sirius blames you, he does. Wasting precious time almost kissing Raj, and worrying about bloody dreams and stalkers instead of figuring out Harry's code. Harry could already be dead because of you, because he trusted you to be clever and suss it all out, and you failed him miserably. He and Ron, both. And Sirius knows it. He had to figure it out himself, and he's a pureblood with no taste for Muggle literature, and even **he** spotted it before*

Unresolved questions brought her strides to an abrupt standstill. Only a second passed before Sirius swung around, inquiring as to her stop with a raised brow. Struggling confusion marred her face as thoughts tumbled out.

"You " Calculation of parts of speech, formation of syllables. He was quite intelligent, yes, but for him to figure out something so literary, so **Muggle**...

"How could you possibly have sorted that out? Your exposure to the Muggle world is really rather limited, after all, especially with all those years in Azkaban and in hiding, and behind the Veil and now in a rock band and..." Trailing off, coherency abandoning her, Hermione fell to simply staring at him with pleading, beseeching some logical explanation. Had she gone mad? Had her own intelligence sought refuge in light of her best friends' peril? Or had the Veil

"All in due time, Hermione," his answer breaking her mental flailing with a knowing smile. "Come along." With a sweep of his hand, he turned and continued down the courtyard walk, passing hurrying students on their way to class. Hermione stood but a moment, perplexed, before scurrying along to fall in beside him once more, this time curiosity overriding disgrace.

Still fascinated by his apparent assuredness, long moments passed before realization struck that the building they were entering was, indeed, the campus library. *Sirius Black, in a library? Voluntarily? Gone mental, has he?*

And he was awfully smug about it.

Decisions could not be reached as to whether she was annoyed with his superior attitude, relieved that he may have found a solid connection, or dismayed that his actions were now quite un-Sirius-like. Battling between these three yet blindly following, Hermione accepted (for now) Sirius' complete leadership. Weaving between ceiling-high oaken shelves, islands of colorful reference displays, shadowed study carrels and focused co-eds, they made their way through the dense interior of the ground floor. Reaching a quiet section of back wall, Sirius nipped through a stairwell door, ascending the eggshell white concrete two steps at a time. Hermione dutifully followed suit.

Third floor landing gave way to re-entrance of the building. Much quieter and less-used, the stores of aged, bound periodicals lay dusty, the air slightly stagnant. More maze-trolling led to an obscure corner table, texts spread all about in varying states of openness. A man in faded azure cotton, his pressed sleeves rolled to mid-arm, studied over a particularly large, seemingly old tome. At their footsteps, he casually peered up, obviously expecting them. Hermione blanched.

"Hello, Hermione." Softly spoken, as was always his way. Weary, thoughtful expressions grew to a smile upon his scarred face.

"*Remus*..." Breathily whisper betrayed distress. Quick, furtive glances betwixt the two men made apparent her confusion and concern. Throaty, hoarse chuckling drew her back to Remus.

"It's all right, Hermione. I know." Endearing look full of quiet joy and shared humor passed from his eyes in a fleeting view to Sirius. Returning to the young witch, "Sirius came to see me a couple days ago. At first I had thought I was hallucinating, else it was a horrid trick or trap, a lure by Death Eaters. Because when I saw him, realized... Well, I knew it couldn't... Not when I'd been there, seen him... fall..." Here his voice broke, choked with emotion he desperately tried to contain. Tightness reined in his features, jaw set and lips pressed, attempting denial to the raw feelings now surfacing. Saltwater glazed his kind eyes, eyes that searched about the room, seeking to land anywhere but the sweet former student before him, and the best friend he'd long believed dead. The love of a brother he'd so desperately missed.

Empathy reigned within Hermione. Yes, for once she understood well what Remus was feeling, though its origins for her were altered. She had not the history of best friend antics with Sirius, but her affection for him had grown in the time she'd first begun to ponder upon him intensely these past weeks. And she understood the depth of friendship, and of the horrors of its loss through death. Ron and Harry might already be dead, surely captured, and like Remus, there had been nothing she could have done to prevent it.

No, that's not true. She could have. She simply wasn't up to scratch, it seemed. The thought sobered her, bringing back the point of the visit, comprehension dawning.

"So *you're* the one who figured out Troyes' identity." Remus seemed to welcome the change of topic, hastily brushing a lower eyelid with one long, calloused finger as though a speck of dirt had caught. Breaths returned to him with relieved sighs, sniffs brisk and forgotten in his rummaging of the volumes on the rickety table. Once put to rights, he peered up at her, a self-conscious smile tugging at his right lip corner.

"Lucky circumstances," he excused, modest beyond measure. "When Sirius showed up, frightening me beyond comprehension, I had just concluded *Yvain*..., and the name was still fresh in my thoughts."

"Your humility astounds me, Remus," Sirius interjected, seating himself at the table. "After all these years. Some things never change, I see." Accompanying grin lightened the mood with teasing, and Remus blushed slightly, more so as Sirius continued, this time to Hermione.

"Remus read the copy I'd made of Harry's letter to you "

" after sitting me down for a full explanation as to how he came to be here, alive "

" after *he* performed every identification charm and arresting mechanism known to "

" only after *he* crept into my library to stalk me like "

" as if I'd have knocked on the front door you'd have greeted me with a bottle of firewhisky and a, 'Hello there, Sirius. Glad you could pop by. Thought you'd toddled off to the Hereafter. Good to see you're back. Come in for a cuppa, eh?' " A snort of incredulous humor doused Sirius' monologue, and Remus choked with laughter.

"Perhaps not, dear friend, but didn't anyone ever teach you that it is rather rude to slip into someone's house unannounced and lie in wait for them *particularly* when said mate believes you to be quite dead, as he saw the death with his own eyes?" Liveliness sparkled in Remus' eyes, a light Hermione had not seen since her fifth year.

Sirius conceded with a wry grin and casual toss of his head, lengthening silky locks tossing about his unshaven jaw. "Lily might've mentioned it a time or two."

Withholding the chortle of laughter bubbling up, Hermione chose to cease the game, as they did have pressing matters to attend. Games and reunion play would have to wait further.

"All right, boys," she broke in just as Remus was forming a response. "We've a pair of wayward wizards to save, if you don't mind..." Though sobering her words were, the laughing tone conveyed her understanding and joy at seeing the remaining Marauders together again.

"Right." Remus flipped a few pages, smile still present, and Sirius gestured for Hermione's joining. They were alone on this floor the reason, she was sure, it was chosen and no one bothered to whisper as they began discussing the encrypted message.

"We've been studying Harry's message to you, Hermione," Remus began again, running his finger down the aged pages of an especially yellowed text. "And Sirius and I believe we have a bit of it worked out.

"You're on about the boys getting into skirmishes with Black family Death Eaters; he couldn't have been more blatant about that. The next bit about Lily's friend... I've no idea. She never talked about holiday making with anyone in particular in the summers. Not even to James. She stayed with her family as best we knew, and no one outside of them or schoolmates ever spent much time with her." He looked up, weariness beginning to show in his failure for answers.

"We'll just have to get back to that," Hermione reassured him. They needed to fill in what they could now, and the gaps later. Noticing blank parchment and quill near her, she gathered them to her and began jotting notes, first copying the copy of Harry's message Sirius was now reviewing, then, line by line, noting the translations below. When she finished, she felt marginally better. They now had a logical process through which to work. It was the first time in a long while she felt useful.

"All right, what else do we know?"

Sirius threw a meaningful glance to Remus, the answering expression one of resigned allowance. Deep breath preceded storytelling. "The Head barkeep is definitely a reference to the Hog's Head... and Aberforth Dumbledore."

Sharp breath admitted Hermione's surprise. Aberforth Dumbledore was a gifted wizard, intelligent and keen, but he was not his brother. Silent and crafty, one could never be sure what he was thinking, or what he would do next. It had been rumored he'd gone a bit barmy after too many years in the dodgy bar, surrounded by dark and questionable magical folk of all sorts. He was quiet, kept to himself, and lacked the personable qualities the former headmaster had thrived upon. Left to gather information from Aberforth Dumbledore was not a pleasant option.

"I see you understand," Remus acknowledged, Hermione's reaction equal to his expectations. Affirming nod, and Sirius continued by retelling his trip to the public house just days prior. He'd failed to mention the where's and who's when he had first told Hermione about meeting up with Zelda. This time, he even mentioned his unidentified tail.

"That makes two of us," Hermione responded, revealing the meet-up with David and his notice of her apparent blond stalker. Concerned looks exchanged between the men, but no explanation was forthcoming. Sirius did not know the details, but the night he had regained his memory, he had understood from the Weasley conversation that Lucius Malfoy was supposed to be dead.

But then, so was he.

"We'll have to be more careful from here on out." Remus' worry etched deeper furrows around his brow and mouth. He did not need to vocalize consequences, each of the three knowing too well what ramifications lay in wait for carelessness at this point. Instead, they returned to the subject matter at hand, the former professor elaborating research findings.

"Chrétien de Troyes wrote five major poems. Four were completed. *Erec and Enide*, *Yvain*, *Cligés* and *Lancelot*... The fifth *Perceval* was not. What gave me pause that Harry's letter may regard Chrétien was his work *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion*, which I'd only completed a few days ago for a bit of pleasure reading.

"In it, Yvain rescues a lion from a serpent " Hermione's eyes shot open; both Sirius and Remus grinned. "Yes, the symbolism was difficult to miss. But as I was saying, it fits Harry's second year at school. I had heard all about the Basilisk, and how he had saved Ginny a Gryffindor from a snake. The story is also said to be lightly based upon Saint Mungo's life. If Harry says that 'Troyes' needs help to stop, where does one go for help?"

"St. Mungo's," Sirius offered needlessly. His point, however, was made in the suggestive stare he presented her with. He was mentally egging her on, forcing her to conjure the answer herself. Slightly disturbing it was, as well, since that mental exercise was directly a Remus Lupin speciality.

"Meaning..." At a loss for answers, she hedged. Glances around the dark, musty lair of written word... pursing and nipping of lips... dull hmmm gnawing from her throat. "Meaning there's another Horcrux at St. Mungo's?"

Hesitation, this time from Remus. "That's where we run into a wall. Harry had destroyed the last Horcrux over a year ago. We meaning the Order, myself, Sirius all believe Voldemort hasn't the strength or power, or even enough soul left, to create any more Horcruxes."

"No, not Horcruxes," Sirius intervened. "But what of the same sort of idea would you look for in hospital?" Questioning gaze from Hermione only encouraged Black's smirk already forming. She hated it when he was brilliant. "A hospital *heals*, Hermione. There's a healing potion or charm, or a *Healer* there who can give him his abilities back in full reign, or perhaps give him his soul back. I don't know what, exactly, but it makes sense."

Light suddenly fell upon Hermione, a growing excitement bursting her revelation loudly in the cavernous room. "A potion, yes! He must mean a potion!" Taken aback by her sudden force, both wizards leaned slightly from her, interest and surprise holding rapt attention. "*Drinking!* Harry said 'Troyes' *drinking!* It has to a potion, something that will bring Voldemort back to power."

-o-o-o-

Two weeks from their library revelation, Hermione found herself seated again at Grimmauld Place's antique kitchen table, sporting a mug of cinnamon tea and plate of simnel cake, drowning her mental block in sugar rush. Blotted, scribbled, torn and crumpled, her parchment notes littered her surroundings. Nearing ten in the evening, she was tired, worn and frustrated. They'd gotten no closer to answers on the potion, even after they had shared their information with the twins, who, in turn, took it upon themselves to accompany Ginny to St. Mungo's for a check-up. George was 'officially' there, while Fred slipped in, pretending to be his brother when noticed, allowing him to nose about. Unfortunately, this turned up nothing.

Ginny had been informed, as well, in order to give her hope that her husband was still all right. Guesswork concluded the message in the ring was sent well before Hermione's letter, delivered by Malfoy in times of desperation in order to cause Ginny despair. Harry and Ron were all right; they had to be.

Soft creaking behind broke her brooding, and the door admitted Remus, his gentle demeanor prevalent even in the worst of times. Tea quietly drawn, he seated himself at the head, a corner from her. Companionable silence ensued for several minutes, Hermione studying her notes, Remus studying her.

"So how long have you loved him?"

Gentle demeanor aside, Remus Lupin could cut to the quick should the need arise.

It arose now.

Hermione, however, was slow on the uptake, startled confusion knitting her worry-lined brows further. "What? How long have I loved *who*?"

Brief pause, contemplative.

"Sirius."

He said it without censor, without condemnation or folly. Soothingly spoken, like an encouragement to a frightened, wild animal. At the moment of his words, Hermione felt like one. Denial was an option, of course, but Remus was no fool. Observant, logical, sensitive to emotional current... It did not hurt that he had some training in Legilimency, though she knew he would never stoop to that unless required, such as ensuring one was who they claimed to be. He had done so before to Harry his fifth year.

Just because she refused to lie, however, did not mean she intended to give full credit easily. In fact, she had little taste for like admittance at this time. It had only been a festering thorn-wound to complicate matters. Continued presence and close proximity had done nothing to assure her her fears of attraction were mere child's play, a sudden awakening to the existence of older, more self-assured men. Time spent working with and now practically living with Sirius had only come to reinforce the growing feelings developed in the last month.

Averted eyes confirmed her guilt, she was sure, but she could not face Remus. Not until emotions were controlled, at any rate, and that could take years considering their upheaval. Several slow, calming breaths allowed her strength enough to turn back to him, eyes *almost* clear of pain.

"It doesn't matter." Flat was her own voice, foreign to her ears. Attention returned to theories, beseeching wordlessly for the subject to be dropped. Hermione hated being vulnerable, and this was undeniably the most vulnerable she'd ever been: owning up to being in love with Sirius Black.

In love, yes. Days ago she had given up lying to herself, excusing reactions bold and unequivocal as feminine curiosity or physical lust only. When the urge struck him, Sirius could be gallant, a gentleman, and those rare occasions exuded genuine honor and thoughtfulness. Acting the playboy, deep down he honestly cared. Complex. Methodical. Eager. Forthright. Resolute. Fervorant.

Flirtatious. Haphazard. Reckless. Arrogant. Egotistical. Insensitive.

But curling up beside him one night, when she unintentionally fell asleep against him on the settee Tuesday evening, exhaustion overcoming her in the midst of perusing *Potions III Conceived*... That had been the eye-opener. His upper arm her pillow, she'd awakened to the steady, subtle rise and fall with his breathing. Vantage point being hers, consciousness had gone unnoticed. Unfettered, she had studied him beneath lowered lashes... the beauty of his face, his eyes stormy, turbulent. Refinement bespoke breeding in his elegant hands, grace that even the Veil could not rob him. Scent, masculine and leather and natural oils and *Sirius*... All this she took in as he, unaware, continued his own study of St. Mungo's staff of Healers. But most important of all, she closed her eyes yet again, and took in the sensation of simply *being with* him, and she noted her own feelings, her mind and body's response to him.

And it was good.

In fact, the longer she remained positioned there, the more right it became, the more comfortable, the more... essential. And that was the point when she realized this was no game of hormones or infatuation, of rebellious wickedness. Deep and desperate, so much that she later dare not look him straight in the eye. And for that moment, it was all she could do not to move, not to slide her limp arms from her own lap to his solid, bare arm. Not to turn her head and stare into his face directly. Not to kiss him.

She had liked Ron; he was one of her best friends. She had found attraction to Raj. But in Sirius she had found... *longing*.

"I suppose not." Hermione jerked, reverie popped in its delicate bubble. Remus was answering her. What had she said?

Oh, yes. That her loving Sirius didn't matter.

"*When* you fell in love with him really isn't an issue; only the fact that you do love him. He will be appreciative to hear that." Horror pulled her face. Remus chuckled heartily. "Don't look so frightened, Hermione. I won't tell him," he clarified, his smile crinkling the corners of his brightened eyes. Breath returning to her lungs, tenseness left her body and her gaze fell back to her tea. She really needed something stronger at a time like this.

"*You will*." China splintered with resounding bite to the air, the warm liquid seeping into the wood of both floor and table. Remus' laughter grew to a short roar. Containing his mirth for a moment, his eyes softened with his speech as her petrified face met his in astonishment and fear. "When it is time, you will..."

Saved a retort, Hermione nearly jumped clear her own chair when the door opened once again, this time with negligent care, with force and speed, offering nothing of Remus' former ease. Taboo subject himself strolled in, muttering choice phrases as he stalked to the counter, poured his tea and fixings, and swung back to exit, handily partaking of a piece of Hermione's sweets en route.

Once gone again, company dear coughed discreetly, bringing her back to some semblance of reality. Barely she noticed as Remus flicked his wand to clear the mess, and without show left the table to retrieve a fresh cup for her. As he poured, over his shoulder suggestions resumed.

"You might want to be careful, however, when you're out with him. He's not even supposed to be alive, and you're supposed to be dating Ron. Your public company with him will only draw unwanted attention to his existence, and now would not be the time for anyone outside of this house to know of his return."

Still without reply, she remained silent as he turned back, delivering her tea before her then reclaiming his chair. "You were seen noticed, actually a few weeks ago outside a café. Sirius wasn't recognized, but you were, and it was of particular interest."

Realization struck. "Tonks said something about that," she sniped, suddenly annoyed that her movements were so monitored. "Right woolly about it, too. Wouldn't tell who saw me, or told her, other than it wasn't Lynley. She thought I was having an affair behind Ron's back." *Not that now she wouldn't be half right. Desire to have an affair isn't*

quite the same as having one, but still...

Pause of cup to lips, Remus narrowed his eyes in thought before seeming to make a decision. Sip first, he answered. "My father-in-law saw you. From what I gather, he was sitting directly behind Sirius, so he never saw his face. You were lucky Annie wasn't with him instead of his Muggle co-worker. She'd have spotted Sirius, no doubt." He studied her a moment, considering. Finally, feeling she had enough to be going on with, he let it drop with a simple, "Just be careful."

She feared she was well past careful, thank you very much.

-o-

Zelda's interoffice owl had been quite specific. Lunch would be tea at her cottage in Hogsmeade, without argument. Due to the distance, a Portkey would be authorized (being a department head had its advantages, she had pointed out), and as it was a Monday, there was little going that prevented them both from taking an extended meal. Zelda had even cleared it with Bailey. Thus being, Hermione found herself at noon in the Atrium, awaiting Zelda Luminare's attendance.

"There you are, dear." Perky as ever, the little witch greeted Hermione on the move, still tucking a few papers into a folder and casting a quick binding charm to keep them in place. "I'm delighted you agreed to lunch; I've so wanted to know you better."

"Thank you for inviting me," the younger witch replied politely, the childish retort that she had no choice in accepting quickly dissipating. She truly liked Zelda; it was only that she had so much more on her mind to contend with right now, and socializing lunches were not in her time table.

"Sorry we can't Floo," Zelda said as they took the Visitors' entrance up to the London streets. "After Jonas passed on, the thrall endured by its existence held me to visitors at all hours, welcome or not, everyone wanting to check up on me, make sure I was doing well. 'Fine, fine,' I would tell them, but the pop-ins were over much, so I finally cut off the Floo Network access. Much more pleasant now." Her smile broadened as she pulled out the windscreen wiper blade from her robe pocket, tapped it with her wand, and presented it to Hermione.

-o-

Grandmotherly cooking filled Hermione's stomach to the brim, and nostalgic stories filled her mind with visions of a charismatic, youthful Albus Dumbledore. *Bubby* had been idealistic, ready to save the world. *Aspirations of grandeur were not wasted on him, though* Hermione considered with a wry smile. He certainly had changed the world, changed so many's world. Were it not for him, great wizards like Remus Lupin would not have been allowed an education, close friends, a chance to teach and prove his worth.

Now they wandered through her knick-knack filled cottage, Zelda reminiscing with each hodge-podge memory, every porcelain figurine, this portrait and that photograph. Serenity coursed Hermione's body. For now, troubles and mystery lay far away, a tiny elderly witch possessor of soulful restoration in her tales of long ago.

They had passed Dumbledore's portrait earlier down in the hallway off the dining room. But he must have been out visiting another of his frames, as only a chintz armchair remained at their passage. Now they had maneuvered up the worn, polished stairs, slipping into Zelda's bedroom of bright, rich teals and pinks. All foo-foo and eclectic at the same time, with sheer bed curtains and French laced windows, whirly silver instruments worthy of Dumbledore dotting the nightstand, dresser and wardrobe.

"Ah, yes," Zelda sighed in fond memory as she retrieved a small photo frame from her nightstand. "This was taken on holiday in '45; we were celebrating, enjoying life with newfound energy." Before Hermione could question just what they were celebrating, further explanation stopped her cold.

"Jacob MacGregor and Bubby were such close, fast friends. Trusted each other with their lives. Had secrets and plans like best friends always do. I remember on this particular trip, I was left by Mount's Bay to watch little Argus Raj's father, you see while they whisked off on some adventure nearby." She chuckled lightly to herself, returning the photo to its place. "Ah, boys will be boys."

Little Argus and younger Zelda appeared to be fast friends, too, the photo displaying the two playing about a sandcastle upon narrow beach. Jacob was in the background, fiddling with his boat. Upon her lips questions formed, but again Hermione could not voice them, for Zelda had moved on to a wall frame on the other side of her headboard. She stepped around the foot, striving to keep up with her hostess.

"And my newest acquisition..."

Ice water could not have caused greater pause or shock to Hermione. Clutching the bedpost, she stared in disbelief. There, gilded frame ever encompassing, was a memory of her own.

"Though I vaguely recall it once went by another title," Zelda continued, "it has been engraved with the moniker, *The Mystic of the Mists*."

Chapter 18: Conjecture

Chapter 19 of 36

Assumptions without all the facts... Supposition with incomplete evidence. Guesswork. Sometimes we think we know what's going on, until we learn what is REALLY going on...

Reviews are much appreciated

Author's Note: An **important** point for chapters here on out. Occasionally there will be one or two references made that contradict directly something JK has stated. Please note that this story was conceived and begun before these relevant statements. Also, there will be *extremely debatable* subject matter in this and subsequent chapters. In rare cases I have altered facts/legend for my own purposes, or (more often) have gone with whichever version best suits the story. At no time is any of it intended to be offensive or lecturing/preaching. This is the only time I intend to state this.

With that in mind, please enjoy the story as it is written. It is, after all, only a story.

Thank you!

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Chapter 18: Conjecture

Maudlin thoughts plagued while tapping quill marred the checklist of documents, proposals and attendance list lying before her. Parchment adjacent revealed a copy-by-memory of Harry's message, the current translation below. Yet even that held little attention. Hermione could not keep her mind on work. Lunch with Zelda had left her befuddled with unanswered questions, and worse yet, answers which only *led to more questions*

Once voice had been regained, Hermione had asked the portrait again as she had at the Gala. *Who are you?* This time, however, it was Zelda who had answered.

"She is Nimüe, High Priestess of the Isle of the Blessed. A mystic, you see; has the gift of foresight. My Bubby was a good friend of hers, though she and I never met. He once pointed out this very portrait to me, many years ago, when I had accompanied him to Agatha Pallet's studio. Quite talented artist she is. Was painting Bubby's portrait, just at the time he took on the post of Headmaster at Hogwarts.

"I suppose that's why I bought it; it reminded me so of Bubby." Wistful smile had softened her glistening blue eyes.

Zelda had continued on in this fashion, sharing once more times afar, yarns which existed now only in memory. But attention had fallen from the stories to Hermione's own memory, one of the night she had first seen that very portrait. Even then its aura was mysterious, only speaking to Hermione four words, these in deference to her one question of identity: *"I am your gift."*

Hours later this long Monday, she sat contemplating still, the nagging sense of an undesired answer quelling her usual enthusiasm for finding solutions. Not the meaning she had been looking for, no, but no other fit. Sensible, clarifying, but not wanted. No. Hermione Granger did not want Nimüe's words to explain her own dreams, her own visions.

No; Hermione Granger was the one witch alive least desirous to endure such a trait as that of Merlin's great-something granddaughter. She did not want to have *the gift*.

Of foresight.

"Ms. Granger!" Hermione snapped back to present with the call. Chelsea Chamberlain dashed into her office, overflowing book bag in tow, hopefulness lighting her face. Not seldom were her escapades throughout the halls of the Ministry, her father often neglecting parental duties for those of government. Sigh of resignation escaped before Hermione could check it. Chelsea never noticed.

"Ms. Granger," she repeated, reaching her desk in breathless state. Forced into politeness, Hermione turned attention from her scribbled travel plans and cryptic notations to the teenager, tight smile in place. "Dad said I should come ask you if you would mind to try and help me with a summer report I sort of forgot to do."

Doubtful it was a matter of forgetting more likely a choice of ignoring but now was not the time to draw out the interruption. Quicker point-making made quicker exiting. Hermione stifled the tick at her eye, choosing instead consideration for the poor girl. After all, her father obviously was not helpful.

"Sure, Chelsea. What's it on?"

Giggles of relief bubbled to the surface, Ms. Chamberlain jumping in a manner of joy. "Thank you so much, Ms. Granger! I knew I could count on you. I've got to finish it before start of term, and that's only two weeks away! And if I'm late with it, it'll be detention, at the very start of term of all things, and Dad will never let me attend the Samhein Ball. And I've got to ace this, too, or he'll use *that* as an excuse for me not to go, and I've waited so long to be allowed, but I'm *reading* this particular assignment. And I just bought that new set of dress robes just for the occasion where everyone who's anyone will be." Sudden stop for breath.

"All well and good, Chelsea," Hermione answered while intermission lasted, "but you still haven't told me what you need me to do, and your subject matter."

"Oh, right. Um, it's a two foot-long essay on Merlin's errors in judgment. I know, I know," she quickly added, rolling her eyes dramatically. "Merlin, of *all* wizards, didn't make mistakes. But Professor Binns seems to think we should consider the fact that Merlin wasn't perfect. Though I don't see how."

Hermione's brows shot together. When had Binns started teaching anything more than direct historical facts? As he was a ghost and a monotonous one at that why would his curriculum change? Voicing her concern, Chelsea replied almost as afterthought.

"Oh, Professor McGonagall had a chat with him, I heard, suggesting he give us all essay subjects for summer holiday that'd make us think." Indignant snort broke her explanation, another eye roll accompanied with a long-suffering sigh. "It's History of Magic; what could possibly require *thinking?*"

It was Hermione's turn to roll her eyes. Never was she this obnoxious as a teenager. Never. Bypassing the bait, duties requested became her focus.

"What do you need me to do? Proof your work? Help your spelling? I'm not writing it for you, if that's what you think." Recollections of her boys and their cajoling flashed across her mind's eye, reminiscent grin tugging at her mouth. But Chelsea was not one of the boys, and Hermione had neither time nor inclination to go that far to grant good deeds.

"Oh, no. No, I can write it, all right. I just need help with the research. Right crap trying to find something on the greatest wizard ever botching up!" Half laugh, then, "Really, I'm pants at research. Don't have access to Hogwarts' library, so I've been out interviewing a few Ministry personnel, but they're not much help. Dad even took me to a Muggle library to find something in their old myth and legend stuff, even helped search old newspapers and such, but of course they didn't have anything about Merlin doin' somethin' stupid. Just went on and on 'bout his little tricks with the Muggles, whole sword in the stone stuff."

Girlish pout followed annoyed scowl, entreating with big eyes. Horrible face, really, but at least partially sincere. "If you could just gen up something for me...?"

Virtues such as patience were growing more rare for Hermione as time ticked away for her friends. She didn't have time for this; she didn't have *time* for *anything*. But the girl had been helpful concerning Raj, and she couldn't turn her down now. In fact, a break from that damn cryptic message might just give her a clear perspective.

"All right, then, I'll help you. *But*," she continued at Chelsea's jubilant cry, "I will only gather some information for you. The write-up is in your hands, completely. Do we agree?"

Interruptions came in all sizes and shapes, but the walk-in distraction this time sized up in above-average height, lean build and unreadable intentions. Raj MacGregor entered her office without fanfare. In fact, without acknowledgement a tall, stepping past both witches directly to Bailey's door and, to both her and Chelsea's astonishment, waltzed right on in with a solid click of the door closing.

Moments passed, but Bailey did not shout for his removal or impudence as he would at any other time, any other person. Curious, that. Hermione stared at the silent door, barely registering Chelsea's observations of young wizard-flesh, polite inquiries to her desktop of work, eventual monologue of gratitude or subsequent departure. *How the bleedin' hell did he just do that? And get away with it?*

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So young Harry Potter had sent Hermione Granger a message after all... en code. Apparently Avery's guess had been correct. Rather interesting. And useful. If only she wasn't so paranoid with her possessions now. But then, my last search left little to be desired in way of subtlety. By the sound of it, he's in hiding with his mother's friend some Muggle, no doubt and has figured out what the Dark Lord intends. Such a bright witch. Such tenacity and apparent contacts. Perhaps locating Potter and the sacred might now be as easy as keeping watch on the Granger lass.

Easy enough, with the right talents...

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"Where're you off to?"

Sirius was pulling on distressed leather in bomber jacket style, cantering down the last few steps from his bedroom. Freshly shaven but for the two-day growth encompassing refined lips and chin; tousled hair still wet and glistening from showering; blue denim and black boots; navy, silk button-down un-tucked, wafting about his lithe form. He felt good, relaxed. Would more so by the end of the evening, if all went well, he reminded himself.

A smirk played across his face as feet hit the main floor. Adjustment of jacket collar, tuck of the head to sweep the ever-lengthening tresses from leather.

"Pub crawl with the boys first, to keep up appearances as Stubby. Then a date with an *adoring* fan." His lips curled even more in anticipated events this Friday evening. A redhead with legs up to here, and pouty lips just begging to be thoroughly kissed. "Being a rock star does have its advantages, you know."

Hermione scowled. Lecture forthcoming, he knew. He loved his godson as much as she, and Ron was like a second godson to him. He cared about them dearly, but he also knew from experience the first war with Voldemort a wealth of experience that all work and no play drove one mad, allowed outside distractions, faltered focus and confidence. But when one's needs were met, that hierarchy of shelter, food, drink, companionship, rest... well, one was much more inclined and able to do their part. She wasn't old enough to recall that, to have learned that. And it wasn't in a sodding book.

"You can't *go out* tonight," she reprimanded, not meeting his eyes. "We've more research to do, more plans to set up for finding Ron and Harry." Search the paneling, the hardwood floor, the polished stairs...

Barked laugh. More walking as he darted about in the hallway, grabbing up keys and pocketing items. Light humor flooded his words, his mood definitely whimsical. She looked so frustrated and angry, and yet so vulnerable. A child not sure if she could command in real life the debating skills learned upon bound parchment. It was entertaining, actually. But she was bantering in seriousness with the wrong person. Well versed in both the fairer sex and gift of tongue, Sirius knew how to handle Ms. Granger. All veneer of courage when it came to her own people, she was. Intellect alone the world did not make.

"Hermione, love, Remus has some ideas he's discreetly running by Kingsley tonight, without telling him about me or Harry's predicament." Logic began his rebuttal. "Plans to rescue and retrieve the boys cannot be construed until we know their precise location. I've Dobby doing some pirating of Dumbledore's old records up at Hogwarts. So at the moment, there's really nothing more we can do. We've had three weeks non-stop at research. I'm tuckered with it and need a break, as I'm sure you do as well." He paused from his rifling of a cabinet drawer, pocketed a preemptive-strike item, then turned to face her with a direct stare, brows high and inquisitive.

She met them. He quirked higher in false innocence, light-hearted, gearing the casual, bare-factual statements that would indeed close her slightly waspish mouth.

"I need a drink with some fun-loving mates and to get laid. So unless you're game for a bottle and a right hot shag with me tonight..." Amusement sparkled in his gaze, talented lips barely reined in from another bark of laughter. *Unabashed tease*. Self scolding with a mark of appreciation. Hesitation for comment... Nothing. "I'm nipping out for a piss-up and totty." A moment again he gave her for response, eyes bright, big and laughing. Baiting.

Jaw fell slack, her eyes widened. Blanching replaced immediately by girlish blushing drew even more expression from him. He knew he'd embarrassed her greatly as was his plan and was delighted in the aftermath of prim and proper innocence in shocked dismay.

If only he had known what she was *really* thinking.

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But damn, he looked enticing.

Stomach clenching was not a familiar reaction to her; not when it was due to jealousy, particularly mixed with desire. Inviting to the eyes, appetizing by scent. Hard swallow cleared her throat. Professorial indignation rose in effort to conceal these violently clear thoughts. Casual attitude toward sex was expected, she supposed, when referencing Sirius Black, charm boy extraordinaire. But thrown in her face that he was leaving here tonight to pull some ditzzy buxom blonde (well, all those chattering fans were, weren't they? Ditzzy and simple. She couldn't give them credit to be anything but, and still retain her sanity)... It wasn't acceptable. Dashing, exciting, sensual... All described Sirius. And she was... well... she was herself. Hermione. Bookworm. Rule keeper; logistics calculator; practically mechanical in her dealings with the opposite gender. Yes, that was her. And no one not even herself expected otherwise. But to have it pointed out to her, so blatantly, so...

Cruelly.

Instant intention was more shocking than his words. It was not until later the hurt seeped in, slowly and with amazing accuracy. But that was later, later when she was alone, stroking a content Crookshanks and reading text for Chelsea Chamberlain's essay in an effort to muddle the distinctly clear and all-too-real feelings and emotions drenching her spirit now. Here, now, appealing lips suggested such powerful images as to be palpable. Embarrassing, yes, but not for the reasons most who knew Hermione J. Granger would conceive. Not out of innocence did she first pale, then redden. Out of the materialization of dark fantasy did she go near faint. Honestly, who ever expects their deepest, wildest and most improbable desires to come to fruition? Even in jest, the challenge lay bare upon the heavy air between them; Sirius noticed nothing.

But then she blushed in shame, in self-consciousness. Recalled to who and what she was, the sudden spitfire of courage that welled within diminished. Alluring retort of, "Who said I'm *not* game?" or, "You never asked," disintegrated upon her lips. Who was she kidding? Certainly not herself, and certainly not any more. Sirius knew better, knew it a joke, knew her the loyal, intelligent, fight-for-her-friends Gryffindor she was. And the stalwart figure, never to swear un-seemingly from virginally pure lips.

So she stood, unmoving, silent but for punches of exhalation. Choked on hints of approval, stimulation of agreement, acceptance of offer spoken, her jaw dropped slightly but no words issued. Everything raced through her mind, but force of will lost against petrification of nerves. And instead of humiliation of being caught in wanton thoughts of him, she looked scandalized by his cavalier announcement and dirty suggestion.

Just what he had expected.

Laughter swallowed her as he threw an evening closure over his shoulder, swaggering out the front door, chuckles still shaking his broad shoulders. Heavy *clunk* announced desolation to the proud, dilapidating house. Even the portraits had fled for the evening.

Fearing the welling of shameful tears, so would Hermione.

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Driving rain pelted the bay glass, the cushioned window seat the stage from which to view an audience of conifers and daffodils. Blurred by endless water flow, their heavily grown limbs merged into shadowed faces of Hermione's life present and past. Tears had long since ceased, leaving a sense of apathy in their wake. She was a coward. And a failure. Acceptance of the facts left her numb.

Even if she should succeed in locating Harry and Ron, succeed in delivering them from harm, succeed in helping them destroy Voldemort once and for all time, succeed in ridding their world of Death Eaters... Even if all great tasks should come to pass, she would still be a failure in her own life. Any hope of returning to Ron had long since evaporated in the stark light of Sirius Black. Held in limbo was not fair to Ron. Half a relationship for half was all Hermione could offer, her physical presence in lieu of emotional deprived him unjustly. No one deserved that.

Coward she was, as well, her inability to speak up, reveal to Sirius her affections only made her realize the other fault of her failure. Grown, vastly experienced wizard. Strong minded, strongly opinionated, well versed man. No place for a wallflower as herself in his life. He'd reminded her of that fact this very evening without once stating it,

without once realizing her vying for such a position.

Merlin's Quest for Camelot slid deeper into her lap, her drawn knees too steep to allow the tome secure seating. Only half attention did she give it, her hands automatically going to steady its movement. Forehead corner against cold, damp glass; eyes still fixated two stories below into her parent's back garden. Sanctuary of familiarity she had run away to, Grimmauld only taunting her with her solitude. Absentmindedly her left hand felt again for Crookshanks, the half-Kneazle perched precariously on the narrow shelving beside her.

Booming clap of thunder rattled the house, jarring Hermione from sorrowful wallowing. She did have a promise to keep, and after several days of minimal fruit, she was glad to find the text she had left here, the gift of Raj's she had forgotten in the madness of the past month plus.

There was another realm she need not dwell within. Raj MacGregor was an enigma, one she both feared and found fascinating. Original gut feeling that he was hiding something had been confirmed within their numerous meetings, though Zelda had sworn Albus Dumbledore had wholly trusted Raj's family, particularly his father and grandfather. But suspicion lay all about Raj himself. Six or seven months at the Ministry, without explanation of his past accomplishments, posts or education. Privately tutored, nomadic living, keenly powerful in his magic. Respect he commanded should his ability be known, but she felt that such knowledge was limited to only a few. He was treated as she, for the most part, by officials at the Ministry. His was a paying position whereas hers was merely stipended for living expenses, yet beyond that he appeared to be regarded solely as efficient staff.

Love bite à la demanding kitty broke her newest brood, drawing once more her attention to the book. She really needed to regain her sense of concentration, and act upon logical perspective, such as refusing to waste time or heart on men and their mysterious ways.

Merlin's fondness for defining Muggle worthiness based on enchanted weapons was a lasting moniker for the great wizard, growing in strength of legend centuries after the downfall of Camelot. Nowhere was this better displayed than with the sword of Uther, Arthur's father. To transition Arthur's status to the great leader of Britain, Merlin had, years before, turned Uther's sword Caledfwlch into a rock, from which only the true Heir Apparent could draw it. He engraved upon it the words, 'Whoso pulleth out this sword is by right of birth King of England.' Of course, it is this sword Arthur drew, twice, reclaiming his lineage. This is not to be confused with Caliburn, or Excalibur, which was given to Pendragon after this lineage sword broke in battle with King Pellinore. Caliburn was gifted to the Muggle king as unbreakable by the Lady of the Lake.

Speaking of, the Lady Lile of Avelion had another sword she bestowed upon a Muggle warrior, though this one not by choice. Unable to draw her blade from its scabbard while visiting court, Balin drew it for her when no other could. But, refusing to return it to the Lady as requested, he doomed himself. Cursed, he went on to kill his beloved brother Balan, with Balan also fatally wounding Balin. When Balin died at his brother's hand, Merlin confiscated the sword and imprisoned it into a block of marble to await its worthy master.

Flamboyant at times, Merlin's style often left Muggles with little question as to the responsible party in great feats of sorcery. Always a leader of fashion, there were often copy-Kneazles tottering about, imitating His Greatness. Case in point was fair-talented wizard Guido Imitazione, who sealed the sword of Sir (later Saint) Galgano Guidotti into a stone in Tuscany, Italy. But Imitazione failed to produce the flourish Merlin did, and fell to obscurity.

As with Caledfwlch, the Sword with the Red Hilt was etched elaborately on its blade, stating, "Only the greatest knight in the world shall draw this blade from its stone scabbard." And the block of marble was set adrift, floating endlessly for all the Muggle world to see. Vanity may be a downfall, but a wizard as great as Merlin had rights above all to indulge in such a sin.

Sin of Vanity, eh? Hermione scrounged beneath her raised knees for her legal pad and felt-tip pen, easily transferring to the Muggle implements as the only ones available in her parents' home. Yes, she could definitely note that as a mistake on Merlin's part. Apparently even the greatest of wizards had ego and vanity, she acknowledged, a reminder of Sirius' arrogance earlier coming to mind in a rush. Abruptly she shunned herself, admitting weakness and desperately attempting to change her course of thought. She reverted back to the book, seeking out further weaknesses of the great Merlin. If even he could be faulted, perhaps she would not condemn her own self so.

Skimming, she realized his penchant for theatrics could be great. In spite of herself, she snorted in amusement. *Men*. Further in she decided he was no matchmaker, either. Though he discouraged Arthur from taking Guinevere to wife, he did not stop it, either. Though Arthur loved her completely and blindly, she soon fell in love with Sir Lancelot Arthur's champion. Lancelot loved Guinevere, and a fateful affair was started between them, thus beginning the downfall of Camelot. But Elaine, magical daughter of Pelles, loved Lancelot, as well, and used deception to have him. So in the end, no one was happy. Most hurt was Arthur Pendragon, who was completely innocent of illicit affairs.

Great. Another true-to-life love story. Hermione's hopes were ever soaring now. Hardly. Ever-deepening frown held at bay the tears that threatened. *Read, Hermione. Just read. One can always get lost in a book.*

Pages... chapters... hours later, mind drifting in fits of heartache, self-anger, and slight interest in the story before her. Hermione fought to keep focused on Merlin's plans, only too aware of the parallels between his command of Camelot and that of Albus Dumbledore. The latter had been murdered before victory could be achieved. Was tragedy the only legacy of the Wizarding world?

Apparently Merlin had had high aspirations for Pendragon and Camelot; even Lancelot had been chosen especially to lead Arthur into victory. Judgment can be skewered, however, and people can disappoint. Only Lancelot du Luc's illegitimate son by Elaine of Corbenic, Galahad, had lived up to expectations.

Like Pendragon, he had drawn a magically incased sword to prove his worthiness, this at the feast of Pentecost in AD 487. Later he used his purity and chastity to lead him to success where his father had failed in the quest for the Sangreal. Was this Harry's fate? Would history repeat itself? She read on...

Merlin most feared its discovery by enemies of Camelot, its power too great in the hands of one's foe. Documented only marginally correctly by such Muggles as Malory and Chrétien, the Sangreal offered in a single drink the gift of everlasting life

"Oh my God," Hermione whispered reverently, cutting off her own reading. Head popping up from its study position, eyes wide and unseeing. Grip fell from the text; the valuable volume slid down her legs, caught crookedly at her stomach, twisted and fell to the floor. Hisses from ginger fur exhibited all the attention this garnered. Hermione sat oblivious. Throat suddenly dry, body shaking, blood drained from her face. Barely audible came her words of astonished wonder.

"I now understand. *Everything.*"

Chapter 19: A Tale of Two

We each have a story within us, a brief memory that stays with us, guides us... scars us. For better or worse. And memories cannot be changed. But the future can. With a little help.

Reviews are much appreciated

Chapter 19: A Tale of Two

Heeding his grandmamá's words had always been a partiality, particularly since said matriarch was oft quite uncanny in her apt observations. Eccentricity skipped generations every other, and he'd inherited her flash for the misrepresentation. General folk assumed by his flamboyant attire, punk hair and station in life that Blue Foncé was a gormless busker, intent solely on wine, women and song. And while each had their special attributes, life limited to these would indeed lie dull for him. Deeper below, away from public consensus, keen intelligence drew fantastic lines, creating a web of seemingly unrelated lives. Magical in their own right, these connections. Ethereal at times; Blue found them, studied them, all with a whisky in one talented hand, a bird in the other. Rare did one question his appearances, seeing only expected visions. But as Gram always said: *Folk will assume the façade you assume. Just don't assume the same.*

So he let the tarts fancy over him, the Muggle Goth boys comp him shots, and the pub at large treat him as rock star royalty. Let them all believe him so silly and dazed. Words most secret are spoken uncensored before those considered ignorant and below notice.

Yet in it all, not once did he assume the same regarding carefree attitude and shadowed eyes across the table. Stubby Boardman wasn't quite whom he portrayed. Gram had taken that note upon initial sight of lean frontman, falling prey to a warm night and warmer wine, enchanted by an evening show for the Ministry Gala nearly six weeks' back. Ever since, suggestion that Blue keep watch over Stubbs prompted his ever-watchful eye. Intense scrutiny added up, a single conclusion striking out above all others.

He wasn't Stubby Boardman.

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Sipping Guinness left Sirius warm inside, if only less-than-slightly fuzzy. Third pint for the evening, courtesy yet again of adoring fans strewn about the pub, eager female fans strewn about him. Across scarred pine sat an unusually reserved Blue, his motions conservative, his speech soft, reflective. Considering.

Offered smile to said drummer was repaid in kind, genuine friendliness reflective in his eyes. Chatter on either man's sides drowned out any possibility for honest conversation. And surprisingly, meaningful words were exactly what Sirius craved at the moment. Regardless his remarks to a flustered Hermione earlier, desire for a wicked roger had fled some time ago. Nagging sensations plagued him, formless in their need.

Guilt did not haunt him, this uneasiness of his. No; he'd been honest and true in his summation that they were doing all they could for Ron and Harry at the moment. Until Remus came back from his quest for information, they could go no further. And a chance to relax always made for better shape when action was called upon. He'd been right. But Hermione's face had spoken more than girlish embarrassment at his suggestions, and now upon reflection, Sirius realized her feelings more accurately for what they were. Though he loved Harry as a son, and should he ever admit it under Veritaserum as his closest link to his late best friend, to Hermione, these young men were her best friends. Just as he'd have given his life for James and Remus, she felt the same for James' son and his cohort in play.

She only wanted to find them she'd missed them terribly and he'd dismissed her floundering for priggish lecturing. Well, it was. But born of affection for her mates, such attitude should be understandable. Facing facts in the din of a crowded public house, Sirius accepted he'd been a bit of a wretch. So long it had been since he'd had to worry over comforting an irrational female (and Hermione Granger was *never* irrational), he had lost all aptitude for such task.

"Fancied 'imself a bloody winged horse, an' tossed 'imself off the roof o' the mews," a pissed Kent was sharing, darlings hanging on his every word and accessible flesh. Properly placed 'ooh's' and 'aw's' filtered through the Celtic band on the corner stage, encouraging the bassist in his tale. Nigel split his attention between his mate, his bourbon, and the twin redheads vying for position on his lap.

Recalling this a Muggle pub, Kent sobered enough to censor his story. "Mum sent 'im to hospital wi' a broken leg, rib, wrist, an' concussion. Would've been much worse if Uncle Havish 'adn't've cast a, er... *landed* in a *castor* bean bin." Sirius' eyes closed briefly in resignative weariness, mental sigh of quiet suffering. Leave it to Kent to weigh secrecy statutes against male ego, all to impress leather minis and boob tubes.

Colloquial syllables wove through bodies to reach his ears, expressing the fact Kent had won out again in the balancing game with luck and his pushing of it. No question of spells or witches or cauldrons a-brew. Just chuckles and giggles and sideline commentary followed.

One small hurrah for their party, at least.

"Oi, Stubbs!" Sirius jolted from his reverie, attention spotting Kent mere seconds after the call. "The lassies wanna hear 'bout you next. Give 'em a story 'bout you an' your brother. *Who's his name? Ryan? Yeah, that's it. Go on, tell 'em.*"

Blood drained from his face, pooling somewhere in his throat, Sirius felt. *A story about his brother? Great Scot and then some...* he didn't know who Ryan even was, much less a tale to tell from Stubby Boardman's point of view. So long he had portrayed this role, easily forgotten was the fact in face: he wasn't Stubby Boardman. *Think fast, Sirius.*

"Oh, 'course back when you was kids, mate" Nigel interjected, sloshing several syllables. "Tight lipped usually about his older brother," he was enlightening the girls about the table. "Never even knew he had one 'til we was on the *Simmering Cauldrons* tour; nearly three years together by that time. Family row and all; hadn't spoken in ages." Turning back to Sirius, he continued. "Oh, c'mon, Stubbs. Everyone's sharin' this evenin'. Just one happenin'; just somethin' to prove you was actually a lad of some level of disobedience." Hearty chuckles this time.

Careful glance toward Blue confirmed Sirius' concerns. Suddenly piqued in interest, eyes narrowing slightly, brow rising a whisper. Blue was waiting for a response, and doing so with more than mere passing curiosity. Intently waiting.

Repeated choruses pleading his tale reverberated against glass, wood, flesh. Wariness set in abruptly, tingling coursing through his veins in a reminder of his precarious position. Sirius could not immediately locate the faux pas which led to the drummer's suspicions, but he knew when he saw such questioning in a single look. No chance was there of avoiding the whole thing, yet he could have little hint as to anything the real Stubby would have shared. Apparently Boardman did not fare well in familial matters, either, and at such time as the bonds dissipated he could only surmise. Careful and calculated his words must become.

"Must have been around seven or so," he began slowly, weighing the memory against assumptions of the man he claimed himself. Best to be vague, not specifying which brother was seven, refusing to suggest an age difference. Point of view cast downward, nervous fingers toying in detail with a booklet of matches, **McCulley's** dashed in white script on green cardboard; below, *Est. 1892*. Distractedly, he noticed the torn edges within, evidence of two charcoal gray matchsticks gone.

"We were fighting... over some nonsensical item, I'm sure. Quid" Eyes darted up, about. *Muggles*. Returned to hands. "Quid's worth of toy, perhaps. Not even a favorite, just a matter of 'what's mine is mine' ideology." Vision unfocused, blurred from the matches to an upstairs hallway, décor of suffocating wealth and antiquity, haughty and rigid. No place for two young boys, one a carefree rebel, the other an overlooked second, wishing only that he could be something special in his older sibling's eyes.

Voice softening in thought and yearning, remembrance bringing to life the scuffle of scrawny boys tugging over a forgotten Quidditch model. Seven-year-old hands wrapped about it aggressively, determined to hold onto a possession of his idolized elder brother, the eight-year-old just as determined to retain ownership over one of the few toys

he had acquired whose purpose was not to groom him to head the family one day.

"Ryan'd grabbed the model, I think it was, and wouldn't let go. I grabbed his hands from behind, my arms encircling his neck tightly. We struggled, and in the process I slammed his chin down onto a hall table, catching the edge and shattering a vase." Expensive and antique vase, but such detail held no purpose here. And little did it matter, anyway, as Sirius felt the tender, plumb childhood flesh of Regulus Arcturus Black beneath arms even now, the strength of will refusing to let the older boy win in the struggle.

He could still hear the crack as bone hit teak, Ming porcelain shattering in the short tumble from upright to prone... the *crunch* of shards embedding themselves into baby-smooth flesh, force of jawbone splintering it further. And he, Sirius, had been the cause.

"Tore a gash in his jaw," he elaborated, tracing a centimeter-long path along his left jaw, indicating the deepest of the wound. Blood had poured heavily, pooling reflectively on the polished half-moon tabletop.

"Did our best to clean it up, both the mess of the vase, and the wound." Walburga would have *Crucio'd* them had she caught the childish behavior or its aftereffects. Reg'd held his chin over the table to prevent staining the hall runner, while Sirius had run to the bath, gathering hand towels. Magic wasn't an option, and neither was garnering aid from a house-elf. Too loyal they were to the elder Blacks.

"Cleared the remnants with a whisk broom, wiped it all down. I tried to treat the wound as best as possible. Re Ryan never once said a word, giving the slightest indication it hurt." Not a cry or tear fell, though Regulus' blue eyes welled in saltwater. Brave front before his big brother, and Sirius had to respect that, even then. Reg even helped Sirius bury the shards in the back garden, along with the bloodied towels so the house-elves wouldn't find them.

"We never told, and no one ever asked about the scar he ended up with." No one asked because when it came to Regulus, he was just the spare to be held onto, just in case the unimaginable happened to the Black heir. And it did just not the unimaginable that had been imagined. "I suppose, on some level, that left a bond between us. He could have told, caused me grief and punishment, but he never said a word. After that..." Soft throat clearing of encroaching emotion. "Well, we never fought again over toys."

Never again over something so trivial. But blood was never trivial. Pure or otherwise.

Sirius raised his head to see numerous sets of eyes upon him, maternal kindness in the feminine ones, mild confusion in Nigel's and Kent's.... keenness and casualness in Blue's. Too much must have been revealed in his story. Enough so that it didn't match what was previously known of the real Stubby Boardman, and though befuddled by drink, Nigel was not stupid. Blue, however, wasn't even liquored. Concern drew his stomach muscles tense, internally calling for a speedy exit. Backpedaling was useless, and would be most obvious at this stage. Sirius could only hope he'd not marred his cover too badly, that perhaps he could learn the truth, and later talk his way out of any trouble his ignorance had caused him. He wasn't ready to proclaim himself Sirius Orion Black, former Azkaban inmate.

"Don't recall you ever mentioning physically fighting with your brother." Nigel cocked his head in thoughtful consideration. "Always believed it was because he was older and bigger. But this must've been the one time you did, and afterwards your guilt was so strong you never again brawled." Sobriety led to philosophy with Nigel, spurts of the Muggle psychology of Hermione's lectures leaking out as words of wisdom. It didn't matter; Sirius was not confident enough to stay. Hell; he wasn't *comfortable* enough to stay now.

"I suppose." Rising swiftly, he knocked the chair back without grace, one hand sweeping through the ever-lengthening locks in agitation. Avoidance of eye-contact, he mumbled a quick apology to the table, turned, and left in haste through the masses of bodies, the echoes of voice and tune. He had to get out, not only for his blunder of identity, but for the rush of feelings his tale had invited.

Muggy atmosphere smacked Sirius with a dull greeting as he stepped through the pub door. It had rained while he was inside, leaving the air heavy with steam from the burning asphalt. Overcast withheld the moonlight now, streetlamps glowing against the rising fog of late evening. Odor reminiscent of ozone and fish marketers wafted from the nearby docks. Throngs of partygoers clamored for position on the walks, each pair or set eager to make destination before the threat of another downpour materialized into reality.

Sirius jostled himself into the flow, desperate to vacate premises and memory both. Lightening above the clouds lit the sky in uneven muted displays, mimicking the palpitations of Sirius' soul. Turning points mile-marked his scarred life in gashes on the inside. Long since forgotten was the battle over Roderick Plumpton's likeness, the subtle change in sibling rivalry after the fact. There had been hope, until Hogwarts. By then, Regulus' attempts to gain approval from their parents drove him to the wrong house, the wrong friends, the wrong path in Sirius' opinion. Some breaches expanded far past bridges of any kind.

Half-attentive, it was many minutes before Sirius took notice of his surroundings. He'd left the heavy flow of foot traffic behind, the well-lit shops and entertainments blocks away. Orange hue illuminated from behind the local buildings, directing all night owls toward the *craic* of the night. Wrapped in his own thoughts, failure to note direction had left him vaguely disoriented. Was it that loss of placement that flicked the hairs of his nape? Or did a sense of foreboding follow something more sinister?

Slowing his pace to tread lightly upon the stone, ears perked to nocturnal noises. This time there was no overzealous female breathing in his ear, covering the telltale disturbance of nearby footfall. He was being tailed. Again.

-o-o-o-

All right, so she didn't understand quite *everything*, Hermione clarified to herself as she paced the entrance hall of twelve Grimmauld. But enough puzzle pieces clicked together to grant a clear view of one subject of the picture, and it was definitive of her search. Another cryptic line broken, obvious in hindsight. Yet only more questions posed themselves in its enlightenment. And more fear.

If only she could speak to Sirius.

Bitterly the memory of their words earlier chanted in her mind, and she found herself helpless in their prick of pointed insults. No, he had not degraded her, but her lack of honest response had left her demeaning herself. True Gryffindor blood would have marched up to him, clutched those layered tresses, pulled him to her and

And what? her conscience challenged. *Nothing. You'd have done nothing*, she admitted to and of herself. Sirius' high spirit mirrored his wild animal hierarchy in her world. Beauty and finesse and strength and cunning... and unattainable in more than appreciation from afar. Even Godric would have recognized the innate defeat of such folly.

Quarter to midnight and still the Black heir was nowhere to be found. Entertainment flyers had suggestions for where he might have gone to meet the boys, yet none had panned out. Pacing continued in increasing steps, worry mixed with anticipation, flavored in dare she admit it jealousy. How *dare* he go out catting around? When she had pertinent information to his godson's plea for help? After all, it was his inherent duty to...

Stay home and dismiss actually living his own life? The inner voice was little and soft, but there. Angry tears threatened their blemish, and Hermione dabbed the corners of her eyes with shaking fingertips. Rehabilitation was said to begin with admitting the problem. Yet, even voiced, hers seemed only to worsen.

Stirrings of sleepy portraits distracted her thoughts. Sirius could be all night, or even all weekend. Wincing the plausibility to the back of her mind, Hermione decided her news could not wait. Remus was not the first in line for such progress, regardless how much respect and affection he garnered. Sirius was her support. Sirius was her sounding board. Sirius was her guide. Sirius was her...

Weakness.

Grumbles emitted more frequently now from the oil and watercolors, distressing over three single flames illuminating the hall. Mutterings of rudeness and inconsideration filtered through oppressing darkness.

"*Sod it all*," her snip grated into the suffocating silence. Abandoning further wear and tear trials of the floorboards, Hermione grabbed up her book bag and stalked out the front door. Missions brought out the best in the witch, and for once gratefulness for the mess exuded through all other emotions. Busy mind equaled no dwelling on matters too close to the heart. Matters best left for a rainy... er, *rainier* day.

Meeting the encompassing night, Hermione fell into its disappearing spell, stride purposeful, anticipative. Sirius Black was somewhere in London this night, and she was going to find him.

-o-o-o-

Sirius Black was somewhere in London this night, though precisely where he was not sure. Nor was he sure who was stalking him, but it had to end. Here. Now. For his own sake; for everyone's sake.

Shadows obscured corners, nooks, alleys. Lack of light scrambled brick and mortar, creating mixed sundry where solid forms once stood in daytime. Misty gray blurred where sky supposedly lay, the city backlighting its echoing expanse. Every darker form was suspect, every curving mass another wizard with a wand.

Killing Curses surprisingly did not frighten him. Why this was never was questioned. He had supposedly died once. What was another time without pain? Surely few would miss him this time; of those with tendency, only the few who actually knew he was back. But then... he had too much to do, too much to accomplish. And for that, for Harry, he would live.

Death he did not fear, but capture was another story.

Controlled breathing screamed in his ears, every creak of building settlement, every stray feline's misjudged leap. *McGonagall would never be so inept* he thought wryly, as another bin lid toppled further down the street. Scurrying at left briefly brought image of old friends, and old times. Quickly followed by old stone walls of desolation. He grimaced. Peter had caused death and pain, but in the end, he had paid for it as best his weak-minded heart could: he had taken a Killing Curse for Ron Weasley. Courtesy of Lucius Malfoy, when his cowardly son could not perform the act himself.

Dismissing Ginny's succinct volley of information, Sirius resumed calculating his risks and options. Rolling footsteps blended his noise into that of ordinary background, granting him further stealth. Looming silhouettes threatened ambush or worse; they also offered refuge and strategic advantage. Not trusting his Animagus form (as thumping long tails did not agile movement make), Sirius relied more on intuition rather than sound or sight. Touch, however, was imperative; fingers lightly trailing across crumbling rough brick led him through abyss.

Right hand now palming wand, left keeping orientation, ears attentive, body sensitive to nearby presence... There. Pause; running fingers gently, quietly back over wall surface. A divot in structure, little more than architectural whimsy, this hollow of barely a man's width and breadth. But that was all he needed.

Encasing himself within the squared-off indentation, Sirius Black waited, bated breath and coiled muscles, aware, tense, expectant. Ready. Eternity of seconds ticked by, each privy to dozens of scenarios dashing through his head. But the time for guesswork had diminished the moment he'd gone out for a drink this very evening. The clock now read *Action*.

Clip. Clip. Clip.

Reverberation thickened the distinct grate and snap of sole to gritty brick walk. Any doubt offering this may be only a nighttime stroller vanished in the hesitancy of footfall. Not that of a woman fearing for safety, nor that of inebriation seeking home. It was of one looking for something in particular. One looking for *him*. And they'd found him. Just not as originally intended. Not when his wand hand slid up his body, pressed against it for disillusionment, poised for the all-important first curse thrown.

Nearer now. Pause. Scrape of metal pipe adjusted out of the way. Gentle push of rubbish bags, longer pause still. Heavy step, weight falling harder due to unbalance. Ever closer; ever more careful. Sirius slowed his breathing, feeling the intruder hesitate just to his right. Just one stride and the stalker would be before him, just as planned.

Shift of weight suggested he'd changed his mind, was turning round. But abruptly direction changed and he stepped forward, directly in front of the cubbyhole where Sirius waited. Lunging, Sirius wrapped a forearm across the man's throat in a submissive choke, his wand digging into soft flesh just below the jaw joint to his right. Resulting force of impact brought the mystery man to a stumble, flung hand catching the renewed wall structure before him. Sirius merely stepped for balance, pulling the man's head back against his chest.

"All right, all right!" pleading words broke in resembled gasps. No fool, Sirius only slightly eased his grip, ready for sudden movement. Wand pulled back mere centimeters.

"*Lumos*," he whispered, calling for light to reveal his capture. Low illumination broke darkness about the head, reflecting handsome features and... blue hair.

"*Damn it*, Blue! What the hell do you think you're doing?" hissed Sirius, releasing his grip all together, stepping back to allow the drummer to stand and turn. Kept trained on him was the Black Market wand, wary and cautious its master still. Blue rubbed his throat, discreet coughs attempting to clear the trachea's passageway. Guilty was his face, though not without some hint of sheepishness.

"Sorry, Stubbs." Eyes met Sirius', and the latter knew the man sincere. He relaxed a hair more. "You looked rather off color back at the pub. Didn't think you should be heading out alone." Hesitantly he reached out, open palm down to lower the wand. Sirius swept it to the side and held it back up, now chasing away the darkness full circle about the two.

"You obviously knew you were being followed," he added, motioning to the nook. "Why didn't you just Apparate out?"

"I could have done," Sirius replied casually, "but then I wouldn't have learned who was doing the following." Critiquing the man before him, Sirius grew uneasy. Something else seemed on Blue's mind; something not limited to concern for a mate's health.

"What are you not telling me?" he asked, finality in his words, in his expression. An answer was required, and without further question.

Full of trepidation this evening, Blue paused thoughtfully before answering. Sober, articulate, carefully his words fell.

"You're not Stubby Boardman. And I think you're in danger."

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Insufferable Know-It-All, Severus Snape always called her. But at the moment, sadly mistaken was that moniker. Hermione Granger was at a loss for all sorts of information, the exact location of Sirius Black being but only one.

Mindlessly wandering about, Hermione found herself in a park in less-than-savory atmosphere. Across the duck pond figures could be made out, movements inferring illicit dealings she'd prefer not knowing about. Surely Sirius wouldn't have gone for a stroll past one in the morning in this neighborhood. But sighting Kent and Nigel recalled from the night she had first actually seen Sirius had put her on the right path. Acting a groupie, she'd infiltrated a crowd of girls swarming the musicians at their table. She'd never even have looked in the pub had it not been for overhearing chatting girls on the street talking about meeting the Hobgoblins there.

Not able to simply ask the guys where Sirius was, she hung about, eyes seeking the bodies for Black's lithe figure. Ten minutes passed, and no closer was she to his whereabouts. Gathering to leave, almost missed was the girlish giggle nearby, the story shared with her friend that she had just minutes past 'spotted the vocalist up by Charlie's Fish Mart, heading toward the park.' Once out the door and armed with 'park directions,' Hermione had set forth into desperately bleak trails.

Now she was as good as lost, and none too pleased about it. Frustrated, scared, she began pacing. New to this game of saving the world, stress and pressure weighed heavily upon her shoulders, and only Sirius Black seemed capable of relieving her this load she bore. Heroic affairs were Harry's lot, not hers. She did not want this, did not want the responsibility of rescuing her friends and every other wizard in turn. And if she could not locate Sirius soon, get the help she frantically needed, only dire consequences would result, she was sure. Not this time did she believe Harry would be saved by Fred and George's talents. Not this time would Voldemort lose his wand in a stray Cutting Curse to his hand, reach for another and strike a pose for the Killing Curse at a cornered Harry. Not this time would that replacement wand, at the hissed *Ava*, emit a *squawk!* and turn into a rubber chicken.

No, not this time. This time Hermione had to save him. And Ron. And she needed Sirius Black to do it.

"Godric's hat, Sirius!" Anger fueled her resounding cry, startling the night's hum of business as usual. Words carried wildly into the night. Screeched, frustrated. "Where the bloody hell *are* you?"

Dropping to rain-soaked turf, Hermione bowed her head in defeat. Tears started in earnest. How did Harry do this for seven years? Well, more than that, but primarily whilst at school? She wasn't cut out for this Chosen One rubbish. Much more and she'd be barking. Honestly. Cup of tea and all that... She was Hermione Granger, friend to Harry and Ron, but bookworm, source of logic and research. Content with this position, as well. Adventures with the boys had their place, and yes, she'd done her fair share of dueling and escaping death, but... After the last bout at the Ministry, she'd had enough. Racing pulse and extreme fear and chaos and

Resurrected dead stalking her changed her taste for it. Lucius Malfoy had had her dead to last rites, yet she had survived, and only by millimeters. And only by a lucky shot by Hestia Jones, who in turn found herself battered and bruised by the same Malfoy. But his death soon followed, and of all executioners by the Dark Lord himself.

Hermione shuddered. Weeping increased. Too many emotions, too strong their pull. Thrown ungraciously into the mix were the passions for Sirius Black, and not only did she not understand them, she did not *want* them. It was too much. Too much!

"I'd never taken you for a simpering female," a familiar rough voice challenged above. Peeking from behind masking hands, Hermione looked up to see her quarry, Black arrogance evident in even his stance. Scrambling up, she caught herself just in time from throwing her arms about his neck and clutching with all her might. Instead, dashes of the tears, quick rub of the face, and fidgets for emotional control of both voice and body.

"What's with you?" he continued, appraising look scanning her from head to toe and back. Disdain laced his words. "Deaf Inferi could have heard your bansheeing. And what the hell are you doing in a place like this in the middle of the night?" Detected anger in his voice only worsened her mood, but a voice within whispered it was out of concern. And honestly, were she to take an unbiased view, he was right. She should not be here, much less in a heap of tears, neglecting vigilance for safety.

Rather than bite back, revelation of import broke excitedly from trembling lips. "I found it! I figured it out!" His confused expression forced elaboration. "Harry's letter. I figured out the last; I know what Vol!"

She stopped dead, realizing for the first time he was not alone. Blue-haired bandmate beside him, Sirius seemed unconcerned as she rattled on. The friend, however, was listening intently. Flickers of question in her eyes darted between the two, and Sirius, realizing her cause for pause, sighed in resignation.

"It's all right, Hermione. You say whatever you've to say in front of Blue. He knows." At her shocked expression and open mouth, he cut her off curtly, hands raised in pleading. "Just... go on. What is it you found out? What is what who what, Hermione?" Honest attention now, keen interest tightening his words and face.

She turned her focus back to him. More calmly now. More quietly. "I know what Voldemort is after. He's JR. Tom Riddle, *Junior*. And he's after the Sangreal." She paused, taking in the blank expression on both men's faces. Eye roll reminiscent of school days, she bit her inner cheek to keep from snorting in derision.

"The *Holy Grail*."

Chapter 20: Broken Child Reborn

Chapter 21 of 36

Sometimes we surprise others. Sometimes we surprise ourselves. But sometimes...

We never even see it coming.

Reviews are much appreciated

Author's Notes: Here lies my last chapter before *Deathly Hallows* is released. I will be taking some time off to read said book, recover from its ending (for it is THE ending, sadly), and recoup my bearings for further chapters of The Valiant Never.

****Please note:** regardless of what happens in *Deathly Hallows*, I will NOT change my story to fit anything revealed. If my story lines further on match up, it is by mere coincidence or luck. Chances are, however, few of them will. If you read something in later chapters, and it matches up, or if you have not read *Deathly Hallows*, do not fear spoilers. I will stick with my original ideas throughout.

By the by, Sir (later Saint) Galgano Guidotti of Tuscany, Italy, referenced in Chapter 18, was a real knight. That is a real tale of a sword in the stone.

Subtle nod to Trevor Tchir, whose "Soul Sister" lyrics from which I borrowed this chapter title.

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Chapter 20: Broken Child Reborn

It was here somewhere. The chit had hidden it. Somewhere. In this very room. Everything was too neat and tidy, too in place. Unnatural. For an office.

She knew something, and he intended to learn just what. Useful information would earn him points, no doubt. And failure after failure, he could use all the favor he could curry.

Quick this time; in and out. Security upgrade since his last visit increased chances for exposure. That would not do. Simply not.

Ms. Granger was no one's fool. But neither was she as clever as everyone believed. Oh yes, he knew those notes of deciphers were here, waiting about to grant him rank with the Dark Lord. He'd seen them. Knew what Potter had sent her, cryptic though it was. Knew what she had figured out with a little help from her friends. Nothing, however, was complete, and knowing what she knew, what Potter had conveyed, was tantamount. Plans must proceed. Nothing was allowed to err at this point. Nothing.

Else... his life was forfeit.

Searching continued.

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"The Holy Grail?" Blue cocked his head in simple interest, not the expected shock Hermione's expression awaited. An oddity Sirius himself found fascinating in its own right. Unruffled by the revelation, he was still surprised. How she'd come up with that he wished to know. Far fetched, the idea was not totally beyond merit.

Expectation drew on him, he realized. Her eyes had not left him, despite Blue's inquiry.

Silent for several thoughtful moments, Sirius considered the arrangement of facts. Repeated in his head were lines from Harry's message and the possible link to Hermione's theory.

"Should Voldemort be interested in the Grail," he began carefully, covertly eyeing her reaction. "How is it the Order is not aware of this? The Holy Grail is by no means an obscure relic. Legend of its gift of immortality is well known, even if unproven. Albus Dumbledore would have considered that long ago, especially in light of the Philosopher's Stone and Horcruxes."

Slight indignation knit her brows. "Dumbledore wasn't infallible, Sirius. As he well proved when he trusted Professor Snape. Led him to his death, didn't it? And after all Dumbledore had done for him, for his mother, too."

"His mother?" Off track though it was, Sirius couldn't pass up clarification of that statement.

Huffing in annoyance, Hermione swatted out a reply as though it not were worth her time. "Yes; Madam Pince. Rather, *Eileen Prince*. The Order took her in, hid her at Hogwarts for her own protection. Realized this seventh year, after Harry told us what Dumbledore said to Draco when he was desperate to kill the headmaster himself, in order to save his mother. He told Draco that the Order could hide anyone better than you could ever imagine. But even with the Unbreakable Vow Hagrid believes he forced on Snape, Snape still killed him. So I'd think that puts Dumbledore's omnipotence in considerable question."

Quirked brow of disdain prefaced his reply to her energized monologue history lesson. "Snivellus never cared about anyone but himself. So if Dumbledore saved his mother, it was purely out of compassion for her. Trusting Snape was Dumbledore's defining moment of lunacy, I'll agree. But he was inarguably one of the greatest minds of the world. He wouldn't have just ignored or forgotten about such a powerful relic, Hermione. He would have considered it long ago and taken such action as to secure it from ever being an option or weapon for Voldemort."

"I'm telling you, Sirius; it's the Holy Grail he's after!" Hermione's frustration erupted, raining everything down on the man before her. He was, after all, partially to blame for her state of mind and nerves. "I don't know how or why Dumbledore didn't know. Maybe he did and didn't think Voldemort could get to it. Powerful wizards can be a bit vain, you know. Just like Merlin. Just like Voldemort."

On a roll now, she barely paused for breath, exorcising demons of hurt and longing and unrequited affections. Time to prove her knowledge, her privileged information, to show herself worthy of this quest bestowed unwillingly upon her. Childish need arose within, pressing her to show off, to belittle Sirius with her answers to questions he'd not yet voiced.

"And did you know," she went on, proudly smug in her display of knowledge, "Voldemort's in the spot he's in now because of that same vanity. Did you know that because he thought so little of Neville Longbottom, that in that fight in the Ministry two years back, he foolishly boxed Neville across the head like a Muggle teacher, not even considering him worthy enough to fire a spell against? And you know what?" Nearly sly her face became, her whole attitude slipping into the energy now spilling over. She stepped nearer, peering haughtily into steel gray.

"His *arrogance*..." Stressed latter, meaningful glare and cock of the head. "Led him to his failure in killing Harry that day. He'd thrown Neville to the floor without another thought. Poor Neville stumbled in his effort to gain his feet, and guess where he stumbled? Right behind Voldemort's legs. The great Dark Lord of our time tripped backwards over Neville, and fell into the bell jar, and couldn't manage to scramble out until he'd been reduced to a sixteen-year-old again. Void of most his powers as well. Had to flee, because he was too arrogant and vain to consider anyone worthy of his attention."

Conflicting emotions and thoughts raced through Sirius. He didn't understand her reference to a bell jar that left Lord Voldemort sixteen again, nor did he understand her hostility toward him. But he did recognize the challenge and insinuation in her voice, the daring of her look. She was angry with him, accusing him of arrogance. He, arrogant? Hah! Well, yes, a certain extent of his early years reveled in a sense of superiority, but that was long before Hermione knew him. Self-assuredness of his later years was altogether different, and confidence was not a sin. He'd once thought her bright, but now Hermione was teetering on a breakdown.

Knowledge that Lord Voldemort was reduced such in his power, however, was an interesting point. Useful, as well. It would help in defeating him once and for all. Sirius considered this, his mind working in leaps of fantastic bounds.

"Lord Voldemort's really reverted back to the power of a teenager, has he?"

"See what I mean!" Anger now exploded, hysterics borderline as she jumped back, pacing to seep out the inner force in controlled portions. Sirius was confused. "All that revelation, and all you could glean from it was the state in which Voldemort left the Ministry! Not a word about Neville. Not a single, bloody word. He was a hero, and you just like Voldemort brushed him off without one thought more.

"You know his students still ask him after every Herbology lesson to recount that fight? They don't know precisely what happened, just rumors that he was involved, and that he was instrumental in saving Harry's life. *Instrumental*, Sirius." Again she closed in on his face, taunting him. "He killed your cousin that same night. She, too, thought him nothing, not worthy of her attentions. And she paid for that arrogance with her life." Seethed that last tale came.

Backed off again, Sirius caught the glimmer of threatening tears well up in her eyes. All this passionate anger she held offered no explanation to him. What spell was she influenced under?

"Hermione, love, please calm down. I think that's grand that Neville performed so well. Grander still that he rid this world of my dear cousin. And it's all quite fascinating, really. But what does this all have to do with the Holy Grail?"

Belief he had approached her with serenity and respect, it was with amazement he greeted her sudden reaction.

"What is it with *you bloody men*?" she screamed at him, casting nominal glances at Blue, who stood by still without a first word into the conversation, such as it was. "Oblivious, all of you!" she concluded, flinging her arms in a helpless gesture as she paced once again. No longer caring to see him, she rambled on, more to herself than directly to him. "Can't see what's right in front of you. Oh, no. Have to have it spelled out for you, and when someone does, you ignore it. All because it's not what you want to see, because in your *arrogance*, you see them below you, not worthy of your attention because they aren't the flashy, self-conceited perfections you find interest in. You're all just alike. All of you!" On this she turned once more to face him.

"Sirius Black, you deserve to be the dark." Octave lower, throat tight. "For you're just as blind as they were."

Hesitation of a breath, then whirled about and stepped off, into the mists.

-o-

Harsh catches of her palm's heel dashed the saltwater of many emotions away. Never before had Hermione been so susceptible to tears. Sirius Black had single-handedly and unknowingly turned her world upside down. She felt as though never again would she be in control of her body's reactions or her thought's directions.

Angry tears they were, too. For once more self-doubt raised its ugly head to remind her her faults and shortcomings. No Shauna was she, nor even Lily Evans or Andromeda Black. Women Sirius found attractive, affectionate, or endearing, respectively. She was like Neville in his eyes. Never truly seen; just seen through. And it hurt. Terribly.

Dazed, minutes passed before Hermione realized her precarious position. Apparation would be more than suitable under circumstances, but fierce pride and desperate pain demanded solitary steps of expression. Turmoil of epic proportions chased her heels, pressing her deeper into the night without caution. Dangers lay only peripherally to her tunnel vision. Until one.

Appearing with three long strides from his post at a nearby elm, a young man of stringy hair and tossed cigarette ventured into her path. Trapped to her right by a low stone wall, Hermione felt she had little choice but to speed up, keeping to her original path. Show no fear, she chanted mentally. Mantra aside, she was afraid. Averted gaze and steps with purpose she clung to, her defense a matter of indirect offense.

Nearly there... nearly past him... unmarked line of contention steps away. Then she'd be past him, heading further away, proving her overactive imagination just that.

Nearing from the left, but she was almost level with him. *Step... step... step...* Level. Past level. Leaving him behind. Sigh of relief. Panic releasing its hold, washing down her torso in waves. Scared of her own shadow at this rate. Sirius just had her stirred up, mad with anger of his patronizing. Self-conscious with his biting appraisal. Not that he had any room to talk, really. Not when all he

Grip like talons secured her right arm, jerking her body around in mid-stride. Holding her wrist high as a trophy won, he reeled her in close, appraising his catch.

"Io, there..." Lazy drawl bespoke menace with tangible certainty. Sullied face and hoodlum denims, ripped concert tee with cracked, faded band logo, and miscellaneous silver chains across narrow hips suggested perhaps he was not open to a cup of tea and biscuits. Lending to such option even less so was the leer pulling across his face.

For a moment, she wasn't a witch. Frightened, vulnerable young woman in the wee hours of the darkest of nights, isolated from public... from help. Adrenaline, meek and bold, cut through veins with the same violence as her attacker's eyes. Faint orange glow cast his face in relief. Streetlamps buzzed too distant to gain visual attention. She was alone.

"What do you want?" Trembling muddled her words, triggering knowing catches in a suddenly dry throat. Silly question, really, but so much emotional upheaval these past hours had left Hermione without her signature logic.

Snide murmurings contorted his face into a distinct leer, glares licking her body like a lemon ice. Pointless question before, her one challenge now lay ridiculous between them. Sadly, nothing else did a'tall.

Foul breath laced in alcohol and rotting gums wafted in gaseous clouds against her face. Assailant code must include a knack for just the right response to any comment. Just the right grit-teeth response as to elicit the greatest fear from their prey.

"Where's your friends *now*, Sweet Thing?" Of course Ron and Harry were not his reference, yet a stake it drove nonetheless through her heart. For even now, with everything, she knew not the answer to that. And should he kill her rust-strewn cheap steel stole life as well as any spell never would she find them. They would die, if they were not already so.

Curiously cold the nicked knife was, pressed intimately below her jaw. London's promised heat failed to touch the menacing blade now digging into flesh. It was the trickle of warm liquid slowly tracing down her neck that triggered delayed reaction.

At that moment, Hermione Granger began to scream.

-o-o-o-

"*Women*," Sirius swore, incredulous confusion inhibiting both words and expression. Vaguely pissed off, he turned back to the enveloping fog into which Hermione had disappeared in her stalk.

He liked her he truly did and he understood her stress and passionate rebuttal for chasing wisps of clues all about to find Harry and Ron, to end this torturous strain of merely *waiting*. He'd done his share of that; restlessness driving recklessness; unease evolving into anger. But Hermione was bordering on something else entirely and taking it out on him. Normally such sacrifice of himself would come naturally, a part of friendship, compassion. For his friends, Sirius would do anything. Desire and need to heal and protect fueled his energy. Gut reaction, really, to protect. To bleed and suffer abuse in order to shield them of harm.

But Hermione...

Yes, he cared for her. Yes, he respected her... her vigilance, her strength, her empathy, her loyalty...

But he knew better than she this game of biding time, the sense of uselessness and growing agitation within. Yet not only would she not listen, but time and again she struck out at him, clawing at his veneer of self control, mistaking it for selfishness and apathy. Or arrogance and conceit.

"Is she always like that?" Sirius had nearly forgotten Blue's presence. He turned, offering the drummer a grimace of comical taste.

"Never that bad. But she's always been a bit of an overachiever."

Dry wit returned, attempting to mask the growing trepidation reeling his senses. Leave it to Granger to turn principles of reasoning into an emotional torrent. With him, it seemed she was always toeing either one extreme line or the other. Lately, anyway.

"Seemed she had a bit of a bone to pick with you, this evening. Think she'll shed some light on what all that sniping on you was for?" Blue's smirk nudged mirrored moves from Sirius.

"Only if it's decreed in the high and mighty book of rules: Thou shalt explain thy irrational and unsolicited actions against thy most confused ally."

High brow suddenly abandoned him, unnerving flights of fancy washing over him in its stead. Eyes flickering wildly about even with solid stance, Sirius sought the skies for dementors. Chills shimmied down his spine, hinting at ill, at evil, foreboding

Screams echoed from the darkness.

Hermione.

They began to run.

-o-o-o-

"Shut your bleedin' mouth up." Growled, his words held warning, but involuntary reaction kept lungs filled and emptied in great gasps, second soprano filling the night.

Until both grasps moved abruptly. Knife hand halted the screams with a start, its acrid taste of stale smoke pushing into her open mouth, smearing double-backed inner lips with sweat and unwashed body. Metal now scraped jaw bone.

Hold of her arm vanished, only to relocate in a jolt about her waist, jerking her whole body against his stronger frame. Illness draped her, threatening stomach revolt and fainting.

Shoving her backwards... pressing into her, dominating... filth in verbal descriptions sneering from his lips... groping hand falling below her waist... biting whiskers burning her cheek... her stumbles righted by a deeper grasp to him... blurred vision of peeking stars above mocking her at every step

Explosive impact from her left tossed Hermione roughly to the ground, away from violent chaos only meters to her right. Frozen in shock, she could only stare bewildered at two dark forms, grappling heatedly in the shadows.

-o-0-o-

Pain in his gut had little to do with physical state of health. No; Sirius' stomach felt punched the moment he and Blue came round the blind curve in the park, view cleared now to the confrontation but five seconds' dash from them. They'd stopped dead, however. And the fear clenched deep within. Such a sight would always be burned into his mind. Later, he would consider it take it out for study and dissection. But for now, he could only react.

Rapidly moved his legs; swiftly emerged his wand; forcefully formed his defensive curse...

To no need.

Blue and Sirius slammed to another halt, disbelieving the sight before them. Emerging from depths of foliage and darkness came a mirage of speeding flesh. Cloaked in black and hood, masculine shape rammed into the unnamed assailant who dared arrest Hermione. To the ground they slammed, tossing the young witch to the side none-too-gently, but apparently unharmed.

The struggle lasted but the briefest of moments. One desperate flip over left the assailant free to gather his feet and dash for safety. Left behind lay a dark form, prone on his back, limbs testing carefully their range and bend. They made their way to both victim and rescuer in a jog.

-o-

Snapped from tunnel vision, Hermione rose shakily to her feet, greeting Sirius and Blue upon arrival with passing glance of acknowledgement. Focus intent lay on the figure before her, himself slowly adjusting, rolling to his side seeking purchase. Hands steadied torso, propping straight-armed against the damp ground. Cloak hood draped heavily upon his head, masking features even as all three upright cautiously made their way to him, crowding in semi-circle.

Blue lit a wand.

Soft glow dimly illuminated the quartet in campfire style. Sirius switched wand hands, stretching out his right in proffered aid. Movement ceased abruptly. Head tilted upward, unseen eyes peering long from beneath opaque fabric. Hand raised as though in acceptance of Black's hand, but veered instead toward the hood, hesitantly pulling back its folds.

-o-

Hermione stared down in astonished confusion. The 'thank you' she'd intended fell unspoken from chapped, bruised lips. Gringotts. The man from Gringotts. Blue eyes, regal features. Intense stare. Whose mere appearance had tricked her mind so.

"It's you..." Accusation or wonderment, her words could not distinguish.

Blue, too, stared wide-eyed at the savior in the night. *Incredulous*, his face said. His voice, however, favored identification. Clear, curious was his statement, as much an exclamation of wonder as a greeting of pleasant familiarity.

"Stubby..."

But neither response fazed this man of passionate protection. Haunted eyes stole no glance but that at Sirius, still standing immobile near Hermione. No offer of consolation or attention to her. For Sirius, himself, could not draw his eyes away. This stranger held all intent for Sirius Black an intent so strong as to be tangible.

Expression indescribable, voice mute, Sirius stared. Echoes pierced his head, Hermione's agitated words looping: *The Order could hide anyone better than you could ever imagine...*

...could hide anyone...

...anyone...

...ever imagine...

Air thick with fog and expectation, his voice weighed but the bounce of a needle, resounding against the night. Crystal, drawn, anguished. Hollow in its meaningful depth. Sirius Black's ability to speak returned, relying solely on one panted, pained word.

"Regulus..."

Chapter 21: Fragments Vague

Chapter 22 of 36

Puzzle pieces fill in the edges of holes, and a semblance of the whole picture begins to take shape. Much to many's surprise, and Hermione's chagrin...

Reviews are much appreciated

Chapter 21: Fragments Vague

Voices blended into low murmurs of varying decibel and intonation, drifting down with remarkable clarity through aged oak and ancient stone. With careful, ever-so-gentle movements, Hermione worked the tea preparation, adding scones, biscuits, finger sandwiches. Too much rattle or shuffle reduced hushed conversation to muddled thickets of sound. Such would not do; she intended to hear every word spoken above stairs.

Burnished silver glinted against soft oil lamplight. Hesitant to brighten the memory-filled kitchen any further, Hermione moved about with intent precision, easing canisters open, pillowing cup and saucer's meeting. Slow, shallow breaths complimented the dulled sense of illumination. Soft padding of socked feet. Lightest settle of crested sugar spoon to etched tray. Gentle, smooth pour of water from cast iron kettle above low, licking flames into serving kettle, sudden heat and steam clouding the silver's shine...

Nothing for it; delay all she could, she would have to return to group, face the men... face Sirius.

Deep sigh of resignation. Anti-climatically drained, drawn... weary in spirit; weary in mind. *Body* didn't even begin to offer strength, the turmoil and stress of past hours finally rendering exhaustion. Yet rest was not an option. Even should the possibility be offered, declining was inevitable. Questions to be answered, to be asked, to be considered.

Regulus Black, for God's sake! Wrapping that leaf of storyline round her head *still* could not smother out memory of her own actions. Accounting for her suggestive accusations was only the self-admittance of her growing affections. But she'd sniped at him, ranted like a spoiled child, tossed suspicions as though lording over him her superior intelligence. And it was that outburst, that display of consuming emotions, which draped her now in utter dismay.

How could she face Sirius after all she'd said?

Though, looking back, words exactly were not scandalous. Rude, yes. Uncalled for, yes. Arrogant he was, and blind to that which all but blazed before him. Horrid display, but not scandalous. No...

Scandalous was her heart exposed upon her sleeve, and her powerless state to cloak it.

Wearily toting the service by hand, Hermione edged her way in soft, slow patters of step. Muddled conversation rose in volume and clarity through dust mite-strewn hallway, its ash coating of neglect sickly colored in the dim. Portraits feigned sleep in her passing, gentle snores fading into white noise. Each stride bore tighter grip upon her gut, light perspiration beading miniscule upon an already damp brow.

"...that's when Dumbledore found me. Not the headmaster; his brother." Regulus' voice was much like his own brother's, slightly raspy from ill use and pent emotion. Hermione paused, shadowed just aside the sitting room doorway. Held very still, breath slow, shallow, she listened. Intrigued, nervous. Unsure.

"I knew to go back, Bella would eventually discover me. And my treachery. With no qualms, she'd kill me if the truth came to light. Yet I didn't trust the barman, either. Dumbledore's brother, after all. Even merely *seen* in his presence would be enough to draw the Dark Lord's attentions. I didn't wish to explain my way out of that. The Dark Lord had *has* a way of determining the truth. And I wasn't a very good liar."

The expected snort of contempt did not emerge from Sirius as Hermione had fully expected. Silence reigned, absorption clinging in the still air, sweet and damp with summer rain and musky sweat. Her own fingers trembled beneath the strain of silver and Earl Grey, biceps crying for relief of their burden. Anticipation checked her desired movement.

"Why are you so sure your own cousin would have denounced you?" Blue's inquiry sounded clear and innocent in the grit of Black vibe.

Harsh chuckle answered. "You obviously don't know our dear Bellatrix," Sirius remarked dryly. "Cunning pet of Voldemort. Reg was her favorite relation, but no one interfered with her choice of master. Any sign of disloyalty real disloyalty and blood would take back row to Slytherin ambition." Bitterness filtered through, and visions of descriptive Death Chamber tales rose unbidden in Hermione's mind. Slytherin ambition against blood, indeed. She shivered.

"Sirius is right." Regulus' voice softened in painful recollection. "I was favored, but only by stipulation. *Tourjours pur*, or not at all." Held in definitive, tangible silence, the admission resonated. Finally, Blue's practicality broke the spell.

"What did you do, then, when Aberforth Dumbledore found you? Obviously returning to your own fold wasn't an option, not if your family were quite the fanatics you claim. Did he turn you over to his brother, then?"

"That's the oddity; he didn't," Regulus replied, tone less morose than previously. Hermione took her cue to enter, relieved the more personal air was abandoned for the time.

No worry was needed, however, as her appearance garnered only observatory flicks of eyesight. All focus was upon the younger Black, he himself aware solely of timeline dissection. Settling the tray upon a low table, she set to filling cups and handing them to each in turn.

"He knew by my ragged appearance I'd been involved in, shall we say, less than reputable dealings. But he didn't say much. Only eyed me shrewdly for long moments, then beckoned me to follow him. Don't know why I did so, but I found myself trailing without question, without explanation. He led me to the backroom of the Hog's Head, where thank you," he spared, quick glance to Hermione for her offering.

Brief interlude of sugar addition and testing sip lost no tension. The young witch settled herself in the only open position: beside Sirius. Hugging the settee arm, unobtrusively as possible she drew distance from Sirius. Exhausted though she was, tingles of awareness still traced through her body, sensitivity akin to embarrassment battling for blushing rights. Attempt to follow discussion rerouted her wayward thoughts, however, and she turned to face the eerily familiar man before her.

"where he ascertained only that I'd left the Dark Lord, and feared swift and permanent retribution. I'd no inclination to share either what I'd learned of the Dark Lord's measures, nor my own steps to diminish them. I was stuck. To go back would mean certain and swift death; to accept the promises Aberforth was touting me... well, let us say I did not trust him, but my choice had been made when I'd switched the locket in Bella's keeping. I'd as well as signed my death warrant."

Curiously, Hermione accepted his story without shock, only mildly surprised that indeed it had been Regulus who had switched the locket, the Horcrux for which Albus Dumbledore had sacrificed his life. Fleeting bitterness swept through, an acknowledgement that had the younger Black been only that much braver and told his story to the barman, the headmaster would still be alive. But nearly as quickly as contemplation arrived, it fled, giving way to more abstract consideration.

Regulus Black was quite well spoken for the young man his brother had described. Unexpected, yes. Disturbing, no. Something of this nature felt right. Perhaps it was the comparison with Sirius that brought all together. Though thick-headed and reckless, arrogance and moodiness and occasional flippancy aside, Sirius was extremely clever. Loath to study over such admittance, Hermione continued on leveling brother to brother. Other aspects screamed relation: extreme physical likeness, though pewter irises warred cobalt; the slight scar on Regulus' jaw, marring the fine stubble of black masculinity. Sirius was taller, she noted with recall to their return to Grimmauld. Regulus held heavier, muscle broadening shoulders and chest. Bias aside, it had to be admitted Sirius was the handsomer of the two, but not by lack of Regulus' attraction. Where self-assuredness reigned in intensity of the ex-convict, wary self-doubt lay shadowed across the former Death Eater's masque. Weakness in fear lay beneath, but Hermione wondered if it were more a fear of disappointing than of engaging. Flecks of notice between the two men now silent again in their face-off gave her pause. Regulus would not meet his brother's gaze for more than a breath at a time, yet Sirius' face was unreadable, not contemptuous.

Regulus feared Sirius' disapproval.

Dawned in such realization, magnitudes of weight released from atop her shoulders. Tendons released their strain, melting tension in waves down her form. That was it. Nerves alight in his presence, alerting to his unease. Caution had created in her mind it was Regulus' untrustworthiness that disquieted her in his vicinity. Worry had gnawed inside, repeating his intentions ill. But now...

He was nervous... for fear of falling short in his big brother's eyes.

Sensible and completely safe explanation drained anxiety, leaving limp flesh fueled by mere adrenaline. Hermione sank back, heart rate easing, mind clearing to attend the words spoken.

"If he didn't turn you over to Albus, what did he do?" Slowly came the question Sirius breathed. Eyes never wavering ere his sibling, he held his words with expectation and keen interest.

"He killed me..." Startled, Hermione's eyes widened in new energy, a flush stealing her warmth. "Then gave me a new life. An elaborate scheme he set up so as to let it be known I'd turned coward and sought to leave. He ensured Rosier and Nott would be sent to deal with me how, I've no idea and that they both caused and witnessed my demise. Word quickly spread I was dead, and Aberforth hid me beyond my dreams. Two years later when the Dark Lord disappeared Stubby Boardman was born."

-o-

Mist heavy and chilled collected upon her goosed flesh, drawing further inscription from the multitudes surrounding her in spirit form. Sight revealed only ebbing, flowing white shear depthless layers unceasingly dancing with their fellows, implying movement not yet verified in bodily sense. She believed herself atop solid ground, but could not feel her feet solid upon the earth. Rhythmic laps kissed the shore, the scent of heather tarnishing the illusion of seafaring.

Breeze delicate and comforting, brushed tendrils off her face... breathy in approach; succinct in release. Time and again the locks drew away, the caress but transitory upon her skin. Lightest of prickling followed in the fall, hairs rigid in their dampness, forming artistic brush tips in their collectiveness.

*Behind the veiling of vapor, the Lady of the Lake awaited. Hermione knew this, felt the honesty of it. Yet no steps did her feet take. Frozen by intangible need, she held steady, worshipping the essence behind her, a sliver's breadth from touching. **He** hovered near; **he** invaded her realm of self; **he** broke free his place to reach for her, grace her chin, guide gently her face to greet his own. And yet again it was Raj's voice comforting her, offering counsel just over her shoulder. "All's well, milady." Yet she could not correlate the young wizard with overwhelming longing and hunger. Why was this her reaction to him, when all other instances tickled her interest and favor, but held not this reined passion?*

Feather-light her curls wisped about, dropping gently in reminder of sensations born by skin and touch. Further away murmuring took shape, growing in level and clarity with nearing proximity. Somewhere coherent, Hermione realized this new development, new voice.

"But it's dangerous, though. I was followed... twice. Narrow escapes, both. But the value..."

"That's why I shied at the café. It wasn't you I feared seeing me; it was Ted. He'd have recognized me, even when no one else would. Andromeda still has photographs; I've seen them at her home. A few she's aged a bit to look as she would have expected me to appear, had I lived..."

Mists fell to black; slits of light broke the new darkness. Crackle... snap... accompanying voice of the low fire, its rapid licks of flame red-gold against the ebony of the room. Hermione gave allowance to her senses, each reeling from the dream and battling at once the unanticipated.

She'd drifted off. Obvious now, yes, but disconcerting nonetheless. Still upon the settee, her position had altered since her last conscious thought, and now she reclined upon her right side, level to knees clad in worn black cloak opposite. Regulus. Yes, yes. She remembered now. Regulus Black sat across from her, lower torso and legs cast in distinct relief by the failing fire to his right.

Eyes remaining hidden, the view was drunk in with cautioned fervor. Each image nudged a memory, a nerve. Regulus spoke still, his words hushed in weariness, but ever roaring in the blackened silence. No spit of burning wood competed his rusty baritone.

"Lynley was my contact at the Ministry. One of only three who knew the truth of my so-called death. I was to meet him that night I saw you at the concert. I'd been attempting to make contact with you, Sirius, for quite some time. Ever since the band's write up in the *Prophet*. I'd seen your photograph, but... I couldn't believe you were alive." Croaked his last three words were, giving credence to emotion that refused admittance.

Awaiting his continuance, breath held anticipatively, Hermione nearly jumped at the touch. Light, soft, caressing. Tangent her dream, reality had fled its confines to join its netherworld cousin. The breeze dancing upon her skin, waltzing damp tendrils in countless rhythm... Amazed at her feign of calm, Hermione detected every light brush of fingertips, every modicum of body heat emanating near her temple... her cheekbone... her brow. Gentle passes of lithe fingers stole her attention from the man across the carpet. Every cell within attuned itself the subtle, breathy ministrations.

Shifting beneath her head confirmed sudden suspicions. Adjusted position and brief rigidity eased into the slightly forward lean of earnest to the speech. Hermione mentally sighed in anguish of sweet torture. Surely she remained in sleep, for in no waking world she find herself curled upon the settee in the Black ancestral home, bushy curls pillowed upon Sirius' firm thigh, draped in his jacket, soothed by his petting touch.

"It's all right, Reg." Little more than a whisper, throat tight with memory and disbelief and unwashed black marks between them. "I'm here. As are you. That's all... that's all that matters right now." Several heartbeats passed without word before the solitude broke.

"If you were helping the Ministry through your inside knowledge of Voldemort's doings, then why why were you living and working as a Muggle? Why didn't they take care of you, put you up in a safe place?" Blue's logic had all night settled emotional turmoil.

Regulus sighed, and Hermione felt Sirius' pose relax as he drew back again to lean upon the antique upholstery.

"Like I said, there were only three who knew the truth. Aberforth knew, and without explaining who or the exact situation, used the Order to secure me a new life. Lynley knew; he was an understudy of Moody years ago, and eventually gained Aberforth's trust. After his brother died, Dumbledore realized someone in a position to use information needed to know whatever I could offer, and he convinced me to liaise with Lynley. Otherwise, I had to make a living. Black inheritance was gone to me once I'd perished beneath the wand..."

"At first Dumbledore tucked me away from the Wizarding world completely, until Voldemort's disappearance at the hands of the Potters. Then he felt it safe enough and time enough removed to allow me a partial return, and it was then I'd formed the band."

"I remember," Blue cut in, wistful humor evident in his voice. Though she could not see him as he reclined past the top of her head, to Sirius' right in the mahogany Queen Anne wingchair, she felt his pleasure at the history lesson. "I'd always wondered how we'd never known anything about you, how you seemed to have no past. In rare instances, a tale of the Brothers Boardman could be leached out of you, if you'd been pissed enough, but anything more was not to be had."

"Well, I couldn't risk it, even with the Dark Lord gone. In all senses, after I'd left the fold that day, my life was no longer."

"And after the disastrous show with the bloody turnip, you called the band quits. Apparently you did the same with our world, too," Blue concluded, resentment failing in appearance. He seemed to understand.

"Yes, and with pity, now. I needed a break after all the attention attention I eventually realized I didn't desire nor could ill afford. So I left, until Aberforth approached me about Lynley. Then I returned to help him out, to accomplish what I had tried to do in my own naïve way years before."

Air was thick, heavy in the din of failed conversation. Minutes long and weighing passed, the men empty of verbal expression. Log splitting through broke the repetition of the flames' biting, a dull *thunk* disappearing into the void of shadows with a finality Hermione felt bone deep.

"What do we do about *her*?" Momentary breathlessness struck her, Blue's soft query a shocking turn. There was no doubt as to whom he was referencing, and she could

only fathom what had been said in her conscious absence to bring about such a knowing question.

"We'll discuss it later, once we're not so... *drained*." Sirius shifted again slightly, continuing his decision. "It's been a long night. Go on up to bed. Get some rest. A full belly and a good kip will make matters a bit clearer.

"Blue, you can have the master bed. Reg, if you'll show him...?" Regulus did not seem to question his brother's master-of-the-house authority, but simply rose with a few words of evening parting to Sirius, and request to Blue's following. Shuffling faded with hushed conversation, until only the flames and her own heartbeat could be discerned in the hollow darkness.

"You can stop pretending now; they're gone." Gentle but knowing tone broke her concentration of stealth. "Hermione, I know you're awake. You have been this past quarter hour. Come on, get up," he added, strong hands suddenly slipping beneath her head and shoulder, kindly but firmly lifting her upright. To fight it and playact herself still in slumber was pointless and an insult to both their intelligence.

Bracing her arm to the seat near his thigh, she pushed herself up, catching the jacket as satin and leather both glided and caught respectively down her torso. She fiddled with the material, unable to look at him, though she knew his gaze bore directly upon her.

"Hermione... we've got to talk." She stilled her adjustments. Steady outside; trembling inside. Had he finally understood? Had he seen through her thinly veiled words, realizing her childish hope of returned admiration? Chest constricted; mouth grew dry. "I think you're right; Voldemort is seeking power of the ancient line. And the Holy Grail, no matter how fantastic a reach, may well be his intended target."

Visibly her shoulders dropped, back still three-quarters to him. So no, he hadn't figured it out. He hadn't thought of her at all. It was only her mind, her logical deduction. She was a tool, an asset, to be used in reasoning and research. Honestly, she should be relieved by his lack of notice. But she wasn't. Part of her inside wanted him to see her as a woman, an equal. To be given the consideration that she just *might* be more than simply a resource of quoted tomes and equations.

"It's late," he repeated, voice even softer now in its exhaustion. Weight leaned upon her left shoulder, and his hand gently squeezed. "You should get some proper sleep. Take my bed. I've matters to attend down here and won't be using it."

He rose, drawing her to do the same. She followed him to the foot of the stairs, daring not to catch his eyes until he turned her upon her first step. Dominating her view, little choice was left but to admit defeat and face him.

Reflected firelight cast shimmers of his features; he was beautiful, she admitted without pause, but so dangerous a need. Ill afford could she this uncontrolled awareness of him. She would do best to remember that, and to avoid him. But there was Ron and Harry to consider...

Ron and Harry. How could she continue to lose sight of them, of their plea for help? Sirius was truly the one person left she could count on for help, the one person besides Remus who was *able* to help. And yet... his presence drove the two young men far from her mind. Their mission, their safety, their distress call fled in the face of... in the aristocratic face of Sirius Black.

Moments stretched without word, and Hermione fought for control to return his attention. How could he be so calm, so self-assured? While all about her very foundations of truth in her life shook in instability.

-o-

Head tilted to the side, he studied her in a mildly curious fashion. An edginess had returned to her demeanor, a guilt measured in awkward silences and averted stares. More than simply fatigue and worry creased her smooth skin in tenseness. It was a look he had seen before, but not from her, and not in many years. It niggled at him, teasing his memory for foreign shape and size and color and form. Yet defining answer it would not grant, and Sirius let go the game, promising to return at a more agreeable time. Instead, his stage whisper flowed into the space between them, low and cautious.

"You've grown into a remarkable young woman, Hermione Granger." Involuntarily his right hand found her cheek, barely stroking it thoughtfully with the backs of his fingers. Quivering bled through touch, her unease a physical reminder of the heady night. Mental shake cleared his thoughts to the pressing present, dropping his hand limply to his side. "Sleep well," he bade, quirk to his lips, meditative softening to his eyes.

Sirius turned before he could watch her further, and strode without purpose from the hallway. Things to be done, yes, but distractedly so. Emotions uncategorized attacked from all angles; time alone and yet occupied by task was his greatest need at the moment. Greater than his body's need for sleep. Greater than the hunger gnawing his belly. Greater than want of feminine pleasure.

Greater than that, indeed.

-o-

Replica of decades past. Moving photos... emerald and silver brocade and silk... canopy atop rich mahogany... texts and parchment and robes and... memories.

Regulus dwelled in the doorway, eyes adjusting to dim lamplight of old oil wick beside him. Unlike his parents' room where Blue was comfortably ensconced his own boudoir had not altered since his *death* decades before. Yet, ironically, it was clean and tidy. Someone had gone to great lengths to keep his room up, yet had not disturbed its sanctity. Vaguely he thought of his old house-elf, Kreacher, but dismissed the idea. Kreacher was surely gone by now, if not by age, then by possession of the house. Sirius had said James Potter's son now held title. Harry Potter. Sirius' godson.

The thought gave him pause. A godson. His brother was godfather to someone. Had he, Regulus, been twenty years younger, he would have scoffed and challenged Sirius' ability to tend anyone's life needs. Derision would have soaked through each thought and word on the capability of his elder to ever be selfless and attentive enough for such responsibility. But years have a way of coloring the eyes, and wisdom cleanses their sight and allows the grander scope to be taken in one fell swoop.

Reminiscing panged at his heart, touches of the past fleeting in their reminder. Thirty-nine years, nearly, and a level of peace had finally allowed him to admit love and affection for his brother, their differences wide but not so that bridges could not be built. Sirius had always been headstrong and passionate, and deepest of depths of soul, Regulus had always longed to be as strong. But family, he had believed, was not a part of Sirius' code of ethics. Blatantly and violently he had shed his association with the family, turned black sheep, flew in the face of Mother and Father his direct disloyalty to their blood.

But it had taken all these years for him to realize that Sirius had not walked out on him. He had not turned his back on family itself. He had grown into himself, stepped up to follow his own rites of passage, and had offered his younger brother the opportunity to flee the tyranny with him, under his protection. And Regulus had turned his back himself. He had failed to see the truth. And he had failed himself.

It was not until Regulus had learned of Sirius' innocence how had he ever doubted him, the unyielding Gryffindor he had been? and his death that misgivings and regret and understanding and loss had all enveloped him. And he had wept.

Shaking off the mood, Regulus stepped further in and closed the door. He would have time later to run his hands over the keepsakes, renewing their texture to memory. For now, he was completely worn. The attack, his brother, the additional information on the Dark Lord... it was all taking its toll. Slytherin sheets beckoned with siren calls, and without preamble he answered.

Falling into slumber, last visions crossed his mind's eye. Sirius' mention of godson had rekindled his own longing for children, a family. Before now he dared not believe it possible, not as a wizard with a price on his head. But collaboration could bring finality to this disease of the Dark Lord, and with that ending his own life could find its own dreams. And he had found hope for them... in a bright young witch named Hermione.

-o-

Blue burrowed deeper beneath crimson silk, muscle tension giving way to demands of repose. Hints of gray bled through the heavy drapes, signaling just how late it truly was. A body could take only so much in one evening, and he had experienced more than his share on this one.

Stubby's er, Sirius' stories had set his mind in motion. And then the real Stubby er, Regulus had further thrown him into frantic search of fitting pieces. Puzzles were entertaining unless lives depended on them, and so many did on this one. He wasn't sure quite where he fit in, but a role he did indeed have to play. Of that he was certain.

And it all began, he thought, with his grandmother.

And Raj MacGregor.

Chapter 22: Unsavory Conduct

Chapter 23 of 36

Sometimes one forgets what they **should** do, and find themselves giving in to Unsavory Conduct.

Reviews are much appreciated

Chapter 22: Unsavory Conduct

"St. Cyr's widow is on the move, me boy. Something's a-brewin', and 'tis not a lovin' potion, either, ye ken."

Thoughtful sigh answered. "Yes; she was conferring with Bailey the other day in private. I've no doubt it's to do with Jon. I'm uneasy about him. Word should have reached me by now. The Cistercian have kept watch, yet..." He trailed off, worry evident in the hushed, clipped words. Agitation married suspicion. "Last known to be in Sarras; trailed him there, but I've no confirmation since of interception. He knows more than he should; how much, however, is the question."

Aged blue eyes looked up from freshly inked lines and curves of demarcation. "Right loyal soul was St. Cyr to the cause. 'is widow'll be carryin' on his plans, for sure. She's a followin' to be notin' as well, and Jon's a part, no mistakin'. I've seen 'em oft enough together; they're matched. So's I'd suspect if ye follow her, you'll find Jon as well. And best be ye find 'em first." View returned to squint at evolving notations, compass and legend half complete in the flickering candlelight. Flick of wrist and quill, and mountains identified their image.

"Ye're bein' hunted, son. Ye jest don' know it, yet."

Youth glanced about, paced in excessive energy. Eyes everywhere before, aft, and unknown. Time was against him. Duty lay upon him in most difficult terms, and not yet had he discovered the solution, nor rid himself of the problems.

"Mind the girl; she's the knowledge... and shared it with yer mark, ye ken."

Pausing his restlessness, the younger studied the guides upon the wall, each map a world unto itself, a secret told to those who knew how to listen.

"I know. She's not aware of what she's done, but it's of no matter, now. Courses change; I've other options open, if only they prove valid and... obtainable." Below his breath, spoken thought untangled his mind's scenario. "Potter's involved, now, and that means she is, too..."

Gathering heavy, woolen cloak to his breast, "Evening's grown deep; I'll be missed," fell from his dry lips. Steps long and purposeful drew him abreast the oaken outer door. From behind, a call soft and earnest...

"God be with ye, Raj..."

-o-0-o-

A dream would not render taste. It was logical. And logic ruled. Proven was sight, sound, even smell. These could transcend into the 'scape of subconscious thought. Almighty touch, even, had shared its bounty with the intangible. But taste, no; she was a singular sense upon her own, destined only for existence. She could be counted upon for the truth, for the test assaulting dream-state impersonating reality. And thus so, no other avenue lay open but this quad of classical distinction bitter or sweet, salty or sour. Honesty, there was no other choice.

Or so Hermione told herself.

Dormant desires burrowing to the fore had nothing to do with the decisive actions she was about to partake. Logic demanded it. For sake of clarity and answers. To prove reality over imagination. Yes, that was it. A matter of experimentation, deductive reasoning. Wicked yearning figured naught in yielding to the draw of the specimen before her.

Hermione blinked again, slowly, expectant to find gone in that crippled flash of vision the image she had stared incredibly upon these past minutes. Yet eyes open again, the mirage still lay before her, mere decimeters opposite her pert nose and bleary, sleepy eyes. And logic proclaimed none but taste could identify actuality.

Pulse quickened, breath calmed, mouth dried. Skin chilled, face flushed. Eyes raked briskly down the bed before her, taking in the rumpled sheets and duvet. But just as quickly they returned up the length, cautioning at the break point when raven silk gave way to apricot flesh. Just shy of flank, the material draped but a hair's breath atop firm almond skin, pale hairs gracing in baby fine array. So masculine the taut muscle beneath; even in repose, lines marred the gentle curve of hip to rib, echoing instead a poise for action.

Divot of spine and rise again, her eyes traveled across breadth of lean torso, vaguely curious if proper nutrition would ever fill out the dim outline of ribcage. Further up her sight traveled, taking in detail miniscule the raised shoulder blade, a pocket of skin below shadowed in the hollow created by its arm draped above head-level. Said arm settled upon feather down, elongating the natural flow from point of hip to fingertip, slenderizing and stretching and calling to attention the utterly graceful form in slumber beside her. Belly down, his face turned away, ever-lengthening locks splayed across cheekbone, mere stubble-laden jaw peeking from beneath in man-child masculinity.

Cream colored lines nicked hither and yon, evidence his turbulent past. Yet these only served to intrigue, to mesmerize... to trace in lightest finger-pad their origin, destination, journey. Her touch was no less than reverent, worshiping in physical connection the traces of violence untold. Marks bespoke tales in semi-healed words. Faint, irrevocably and unnaturally smooth... seventh vertebrae to ninth in curling J fashion... right floating rib midway its center, dimple reminiscent of a Cutting Curse... left

scapula, high point, splintering starburst.

This last inspection pleaded the test, for touch alone had proven untrustworthy. Skin soft in repose did not convince her mind, for in what true world would she ever wake to find Sirius Black lingering in sleep next to her? Not, in any case, as he was bare back exposed in trust, face soft in total relaxation. Grayish illumination bathed the room in ethereal fascination. *Just a dream.* Her life's story did not include richly male body languid against her own, nor did it include finely grown hair tickling said back, such disheveled ebony locks teasing nerve endings of her own palm and fingers in itching need to meet.

But he was just a dream. Only a dream. Touch proved nothing, nor did sight. Mists and a loch and a feathered breeze had proven that. Only one test...

Logic. Yes. One logical route to take, to see for purely academic purposes, mind you, to prove the imagination was fully responsible...

Starburst crossed lines... growing larger, blurred, filling vision... breath warm in reflection off hot skin... lightly musky in oil and evaporated sweat... growing, blurring... heady, radiating

Salty. He tasted salty, drying her tongue tip and inner lips as they encompassed then retracted in a glide across the taut skin. Deviation of porcelain and kid leather encasing pliable sculpture, her mouth distinguishing scar tissue from battle-spared with uncanny notice. But it was his taste that fell her: slight tang and hint of bitter with mineral and natural oils. Light and tempered and oh-so-earthly.

His taste sold out logic's plan... and he was real.

Experiments claimed better credibility if repeated, it was widely known, assuming in turn they reaped the same results. Thus, it was all for the sake of scientific legitimacy. Or so she told herself, clarifying somewhere in the back of her mind... *justifying* the lingering over his cool skin. Justifying the trailing of parched lips slightly catching, dragging apart against high friction of heated skin.

Supple flesh coating solidity below, with sweet flavor of lingering perspiration and vaguely scented soap tickling tongue and breath... merely this limited course before her, yet Hermione could notice nothing but these stimuli to her mind and body. All encompassing were these; all reality were these. Leaning heavily upon left arm, balancing with right on his other side, bushy curls draping this pallet of flesh tones. Onward, random, exploratory... kisses languishing each mark, inducting every crest and valley to memory, blessing one scar and another with healing caresses and holy water of love and compassion. Trailing ridge of scapula into ravine of spine, rising to *oh, God* joining of neck base to shoulder, his hair tickling her cheek, scents of smoke and rain and something spicy drowning her, engulfing her as tongue-tip relaxed to glide along, following the dominate lips from shoulder point to neck column. Raising up on elbow for better access, hovering her chest above him, curtain of brown mane shielding eyes to the gray dawn, inadvertent sighs of passion escaping in slight exhales on now-damp skin, quickly remedied by repeat performances of lips, blending at the nape hairline

Bang!

Arctic cold slapped Hermione with force of gales. Violent jerk to upright seating, eyes gaping in fear, heart slamming against suddenly tight pectorals. But the immediate twist to the door revealed its calm demeanor of still fully closed. It had not been disturbed.

Quick glance about admitted no concern, and held breath eased out. However, a return to present situation stole relief. What in the sodding hell was she *doing*? Cursory glance over Sirius' back gave rise to the blush threatening to spread further. Dear God she was losing her ever-kinetic mind! Under what curse must she have been to have given in and no, she couldn't admit it, even to herself, mentally. But

Shite. Simple fact was: she *wanted* Sirius. And she *wanted* to kiss him. And she *desired* him like never had she another. Not even Ron. Bloody hell; Ron didn't cause her to lose all awareness to her surroundings simply because she woke up unexpectedly to his bare back draped casually in sleep next to her in the misty dawn. And worse... she peered through the haze of creeping daylight and uninvited emotion... regardless of consequences, she damn well wanted to return to that back, that neck, continue where she had left off her ministrations...

Which was why, in a rush of sanity, she scrambled in desperation off the bed, drew on her now-dry trousers and bra beneath Sirius' tee, and, with panicked stare at his still form, backed her way to the door silently and fled.

Easing down the stairs gave opportunity to regain mental ground. Breathing relaxed, offering solace to furiously engaged nerves. She willed muscles to uncoil, a command reminiscent of days gone by with Harry and Ron and the ever-threat of Voldemort or his clan. Light-footed each step fell, each scrap of bare foot to hardwood ten times the announcement to her own ears as to reality. Skimming the final landing with relative sanity, she took stock of the atmosphere.

Semi-opaque pewter had given way to translucent, granting contrast enough with which to make her way to, through, and about the sitting room. Her wand lay on the lamp stand beside the settee, apparently placed there by Sirius when she'd fallen childishly asleep on him. *Way to go there, Hermione. Curl upon him like a needy little child to a parent, drooling on his leg, no doubt.* Dissection of the evening lay too painfully in her mind, and she chose to store it back for later analysis. One could only take so much mortification in so short a time span.

Snagging the wood of power, Hermione returned to the hallway, destination now the kitchen. Calming cuppa and biscuits courtesy of Marks and Sparks were just what she needed to get her head on straight. And her mind as far from Mr. Black as possible. As well as her mouth. And his taste.

Damn.

The kitchen door laid open a hand's length, dim firelight playing through in cast reflection off stone. Someone was inside. Easing the door, praying no sound, Hermione peeked in.

Sudden intake of breath collided with the diaphragm's immediate clenching, and she drew back in a start. Seated at the table, head resting into his propped palm over a steaming cup, sat Sirius. *Sirius!* Hermione choked back the strangled cry straining throat muscles. If Sirius were there in the kitchen, then who... *No. Dear God, no. No; please don't tell me I just... no, not Sirius' brother... oh, no...* Ensuing stress forced her throat's proverbial hand, a tight squeak emitting despite worthy attempts at restraint. Soft shuffling, scrape of wooden chair leg across oaken floor, nearing the door. Terror froze her retreat, stilled her defensive expression from clearing tell-tale face.

"Hello?" soft whispering came, the door gently opening to soft glow and shadowed form. He stared wordlessly at her but a moment, then shifted in a half turn, gesturing her entrance to the room. Hermione mechanically stepped within, excuses ready upon dry lips... lips that had just wantonly worshipped the blessed skin of this man's brother but minutes ago

"Sorry to have woken you. I'd forgotten the copper urn on the first landing. I'm afraid my grace has all but left me in the last twenty years..." His voice was gentle, apologetic, self-deprecating with an audible smile.

Regulus.

Breath released in a wash. Sirius, then, was truly upstairs. Truly... defiled by erratically emotional, virginal lips, dry now and chapped, surely reddened but for the lack of telling illumination. She sighed soundlessly, turning from his dark form instead to make her way to the cupboard to retrieve a cup. Fingers unsteady, china *clinked* in response.

"Sirius told me a bit about you." Voice low, soft, careful as treading eggshells. Location altered from doorway in return to previously occupied seat, scrape of chair to flagstone again reinforcing the move.

Her shoulders tightened in anticipation. Movements slowed for fear of missing follow-up.

"He said you were the brightest witch he's ever known of your age." Shoulders slumped in illogical disappointment. "You were at school with James Potter's boy; best mates, I assume."

Strained silence echoed, filled by hushed ministrations of tea preparation at the countertop. What was there to say to him? In reply to his brother's observations? Nothing. Mere repeated opinion of intelligence, and basic fact of social engagement. No words of personal nature had crossed his lips last evening, it appeared. But honesty decreed she should not could not have expected any different. Bared soul aside, just because she, Hermione Granger, had declared to her own conscience an obsessive attraction to the elder Black did not preclude a requiting of affections.

Schooling her features, she took a resolute breath and turned to face this man of mystery and marred memories, plastered smile glowing real in the faded light.

"Really? That was... how kind of him." Neutrally spoken, avoiding the bitter bile longing to flavor the words. She settled herself across the scrubbed pine, facing more her steaming herbal than the man avidly watching her. He tried again.

"You're a remarkable young woman, you know." Hermione's eyes darted up, staring at Regulus in puzzled surprised. They'd spoken little since officially meeting the night before, most conversation being held in the park and on the way to Grimmauld. Little of that was direct between the two. Certainly not enough for such proclamations. "From all I've heard," he quickly added. His own eyes dropped, held, shifted around uncomfortably, seeking solidity on which to alight.

His gaze finally returned to hers, only to shift about again, overcome in schoolboy shyness vaguely endearing on the former Slytherin. Resumed head bow left saucer and cup his focus again. Curtain of onyx fringe arpeggio'd down to cloak his reddening cheeks, high color threatening confession... but of what? That she made him nervous? Hermione considered. Yes, of course she made him ill at ease; she'd directly caused him to shed his safe cover, to be found out. And should she or Blue or even Sirius not be fully faithful to keeping his secret and no Slytherin worth his green and silver would trust so his death would be imminent. His life lay in her hands, and he feared her intentions.

-o-

Heat flooded his face as had not done so in many a year. The blush was swift and unexpected, yet Regulus had little escape or remedy. He had not expected this pre-dawn vis-à-vis, and her presence left him nervous and unsure. Weeks ago he had first seen her, sitting there with his brother outside the café of his employment. Immediate impression was less than flattering, her state of dress suggestive of groupie mentality a characteristic familiar from years of musical success. But last evening she'd shown herself true, and though flustered and weary, her colors stood strong and... engaging. Then Sirius had shared a bit of her knowledge, her loyalty, her strength of character.

Maybe Gryffindors weren't so bad a lot after all.

Regulus spared a glance at the young woman, once again regaling her attentions to her tea. Reading leaves, perhaps? No; she didn't appear the sort. His unwanted attention could perhaps be unnerving. Deciding to shelve his blatant interest, Regulus settled on mundane and not so mundane topics.

"Bit of a chill this morning," he commented, rising to tend the cooling hearth. Choice spells and mindless poking of split logs filled his time as he considered his next words. Flame grew in leaps, bestowing heat and glow. "Always was a bit frosty in this house..." Visions of years past drifted languidly, each dousing a bit more of his heart in bitter cold. He turned abruptly, shaking off ill-fitting clothes of despair.

"But no matter." Accepting smile creased his staid face. She was watching him now, wary. Easing down to the table once again, he spoke an incantation to reheat his cup, hers as well. Slight nod gave her thanks. "The past is as it was, and shall remain. I am grateful to have my brother back, odd as it may seem to those who knew us in our younger years."

Her expression changed, interest piqued at the reminiscence. "Yes," he elaborated with a soft chuckle. "I'm sure you've heard all about it, how the Black brothers could barely tolerate one another... but it wasn't always the case. In fact, it rarely was. Family was always most important to me; I had to earn the love no, not love. Affection," he corrected without bite. "Yes; affection is closest." Vocubularic search honed in on the impressionist word. "I had to earn what *affection* was bestowed upon me, while Sirius was smothered in it from all relations from the time of his birth. That is, until his escapade at sixteen. Then suddenly I was the Heir, and had to uphold everything Black and Slytherin. I didn't want it, honestly. What I wanted was my family's respect. Sirius had that without lifting a finger, yet he tossed it all aside like rubbish. And to so solidly turn his back on family and tradition..."

Momentary cessation granted time to regain ground. He'd not intended to go down this road not here, not now. Perhaps not ever. But Hermione had simply listened, and he found himself speaking without consideration. He would have to check himself. He was still, after all, a Black. And Blacks did not allow emotion uncontrolled.

"So... you believe the Dark Lord is after the Chalice of the Christ?" Whiplash nearly visited him, his change of subject and demeanor so sudden. Hermione's reaction agreed.

"Er... yes." Hesitancy reminded him she did not trust him, nor knew how much the men had spoken of last evening. She'd lain asleep on the settee, nestled upon Sirius' lap. A wash of resentment fleetingly crossed his heart for his brother. Ever the ladies' man, ever the charmer, ever the reckless show-off the girls would always adore. Never the duty-bound pleaser Regulus himself had been. Replacing in quick succession the annoyance was the half-hearted pleasure of karma. While Sirius had lost his world in James' death and wilted away in the dregs of Wizardkind, Regulus had taken on the persona his brother had embodied, displaying antics and flamboyance and garnering the devotion of throngs of witches. He had tasted no, *feasted* upon the world Sirius had left him for.

"He is." Leaving errant thoughts, conversation fell back to new subject matter with his answer. "He's inside sources both looking for the cup, and for the sacred knowledge to wield it. He wants the immortality, but is learned enough to recognize the foolishness of blind action."

"He's... but... *how do you know all this?*" Regulus bit back the chuckle threatening at her incredulous expression. He could not, however, hide the sense of pride his private knowledge deemed suitable. He knew a lot of things, things that would astonish and cower others.

"Auror Investigator Lynley did not seek my counsel for no good reason, Miss Granger. Having been in the depths of the Dark Lord's *family*, I and I alone could tell him intimates of the Dark Lord's plans. Even now... I know where to find information, even having been out of the lower hierarchy these many years. I've sources I can check, places where passwords and entrances have never been bothered for alteration. I've a commodity, finally, that makes me worth something. And I've been intent on using it."

Digesting such flow of information, Hermione soon lost her edged disposition and found the scarred table acceptable to lean half her body upon, intent with eyes wide and perfect lips a-gasped. "And what... what did you learn? How close is he to finding the Grail? Is it even in existence? How is he searching for it? Who is helping him inside? And inside *where*, exactly? What are his plans once he "

Hand shot up in stopping motion, imploring Hermione to settle her questions. She acquiesced.

"All in good time, Miss Granger. Priorities, first." Regulus weighed his directions, settling on the direct route to his suspicions and missing links. "Tell me what you know about Jonathon McCaine."

-o-o-o-

Suspended long enough in steaming tea, rock cakes did tend to mellow into gravel cakes edible, though not approved by Drs. Granger and Granger. *Some things never change*, she contemplated with a wry smile. Leaning back in the overstuffed armchair, Hermione nursed her treat while Hagrid pattered about the kitchen, preparing a light

luncheon for his guest, excitedly warming to the subject she'd brought up ten minutes prior.

"course, dragon research has thinned out a mite in the last century. Thumpin' shame, too," he added, rummaging his pantry for elusive spices that Hermione questioned she would desire anyway. "Dragons are such misunderstood creatures. They're only actin' on instinct, ye see. Protectin' their own, like. Charlie Weasley even once..."

Hagrid continued on, relishing in his element, oblivious to Hermione's wandering mind. Initial theory downgraded, she was unsure how to proceed. She had been so sure those dreams of a book *Concerning Dragons* had meant Hagrid was somehow hiding the boys. Since Zelda's tea, she'd accepted her gift as real, though less than pleased about it. Yet here was the chance to use it to some benefit, a clue guiding her to saving her friends. But she'd been wrong.

After her morning discussion with Regulus she couldn't believe the turn of events these past twelve hours an owl found its way to the gamekeeper, requesting a tea if he had the time. Immediate was his invite, and Hermione came round at half ten, mind furious with processing answers and probing new inquiries. After pleasantries, she'd turned the conversation to books a natural transition for her and then on to the title so vividly reappearing in her dreams.

"Never 'eard of it," he had responded, thoughtful in deliberation. "After Norbert, I'd read ever'thin' I could find on them. School library, Black library... ev'n owl'd Charlie fer books. But that'n I've never even 'eard of."

And she believed him. Not that he would lie to her, but that he had indeed sought every text on the subject. Another dead end.

Contemplating now her options, Hermione ventured a different route. Long shot, yes, but something perhaps of use.

"Hagrid," she broached, interrupting his detailed description of migrating patterns of Welsh Greens. "Do you remember who Lily Potter's friends were when she was at school? Someone she would've trusted entirely, stayed in contact with?"

Frozen amid boiling pudding and sizzling meats, the half-giant paled slightly, face full of surprise and concern. "N n nothin's 'appened to Harry, 'as it?" Honest fear gripped his words, and Hermione suddenly felt a heel for leading Hagrid down the wrong avenue by not prefacing her question. "Don't tell me yer lookin' to hide 'im, what with You-Know-Who after 'im, somewhere..."

"Hagrid, it's all right," she lied quickly, hoping to calm her old friend. Irony tinged his choice of words. "No, no... just a little, er, research project Harry asked me to complete for him. That's all."

Relief swept over him, relaxing his tenseness into peaceful smiles again. "Ah, that's all, eh? Well, hate ter be of no help, but Lily Evans that was 'er right name, then was friends with near ev'ry student here at Hogwarts. Real likeable, she was. Couldn't wait ter come back ev'ry year, seeing as 'ow she rarely saw none o' friends on summer hols. Reckon she bumped intah James an' Sirius on accounts, but tha's it. But here... Head Girl, smart, pretty, friendly as could be. Weren't no one who *d/n't* like her, 'cept maybe the Slytherins, and even they were mostly nice. Well, as nice as Slytherins go, ye know.

"Now, how do ye like yer kippers?"

Knockout, round two.

-o-0-o-

Refreshed by scalding spray, Sirius dressed casual in denims and gray knit pullover. Hair glistening in damp state, finger-combing left tendrils drooping and sweeping across angular features and shielding eyes. Barefoot, he left the confines of his boudoir to seek out fellow life in the grim inheritance.

Grandfather Clock echoed his tale of woe into empty corridors and rooms void. Ghosts of Azkaban years layered the air, and Sirius found himself increasingly desperate for company. His bed had been bare when he'd awoken, faint scent of feminine shampoo and rustled bedclothes the duvet was fully arranged to the other side of the bed! the only traces Hermione actually *had* been there when he'd climbed to his slumber just before dawn.

Exhaustion had overtaken him, but side effects in subconscious dream material motivated the vow to never again find himself in that state. Disturbing images and phantom feelings of dare he admit even to himself Hermione Granger seductively running her lips in lingering kisses across his back, pausing to grant extra care to battle scars of war and prison. Shudders involuntary ran down his body, flush claiming his face. Even now, his shower redeeming, Sirius felt the guilt lie upon him like a scarlet letter, an **O** for *dirty Old man*, or **B** for *Betrayer of old friendship*. Or simply a branding of *sick git* upon his forehead. Not that he *intentionally* dreamed any of this, for nothing could have ever been further from his thoughts. No, Hermione Granger was *not* a potential shag to him, nor had she ever been.

Which made that hauntingly realistic dream that much more disturbing.

Muddled voices reached his ears from the kitchen, and he made his way down, the humanity drifting upon the air a beacon honing him, calling. His stride lengthened, and soon was he stepping into the aged galley, greeting in sight the other two males of the house.

"... and you were rat arsed the rest of the night," Blue was describing, utter joy at the memory displaying across his animated face. He was leaning across the table, then back away from it, as each new portion of the anecdote rattled out in enthusiasm and laughter to and at Regulus, seated across from the drummer.

Surprisingly though why should it be? Regulus was smiling, chuckling in return, wry grin warming his aura. Sirius could not recall the last time he'd seen his brother smile... genuinely smile. It was a grand look for him, he realized. But so foreign, so unfamiliar...

Years lost to war, betrayal, family factions had left any sight of Regulus Black save the weak-willed puppet of Orion and Walburga a novel vision to Sirius. And he despised every ounce of the culprits for it. His own baby brother shouldn't be less than a stranger to him. Regret tore at him. There; at the edge. Just a little; but it was enough. His heart would soon know what his pride refused admittance.

He'd missed him.

Not the extension of pure-blood maniacs, nor servitude by pacifism, but cheeky taunts and good natured competition. Acting on the sly to diddle house-elves out of savories and afters reserved for dinner parties events children were spared but for obligatory appearances for Sirius as Heir. But always he'd nick some bits for Reg, and together they'd regale in the spoils of war in Sirius' room, winding up the guests and devouring treats until they were right dicky. A team, they were, looking out for the other. Until the year Sirius began Hogwarts.

The year Sirius was sorted as Gryffindor.

The year Sirius began to realize the Black motto's true meaning.

The year Sirius began to turn his back on such catechism.

The year the family took exception to such disloyalty.

The year Sirius created his own family, in James and Remus and Peter.

The year Regulus could not understand. And never would.

"Not that you were any help at bloody all, Blue," his sibling was saying, bringing Sirius back to the moment. They'd still not noticed him.

"As I seem to recall, waking up in a fancy dress of leopard skins and fishnets... looked like a pony slag, thank you very much. You and Kent had me believing I'd spent the evening in a bonk with a security bloke from the show!" Choked laughter followed, Blue's all-out guffaw and Reg giving in to his own, though he'd tried to keep a straight face. "And mind you, chartreuse is *still* not my color."

"Thought that was eggplant," Blue replied, wiping tears of mirth distractedly, while attempting to catch his breath. This, however, only served to send Regulus further into fits, with Blue right behind. Moments passed in this state, until Blue caught glimpse of their intruder.

"Oh; good morning." Friendly, but not the sparkle of minutes passed. Regulus turned to spot Sirius, his broad grin and laugh dimming to pleasant and quiet, reserved. The last... that was the Regulus Sirius had grown to know and remember.

Pleasantries exchanged, tea poured, toast and jam shared. Sirius found himself at the head of the table, symbolic he was sure to his brother, yet no comment or move indicated any hostility or begrudging. Talk turned to general state of things, eventually rounding to discussions of last evening or early this morning. Discussion had apparently been rabid since dawn, shortly after he himself had finally gone to his bed. It was now nearly eleven, and though minimal sleep had been granted, Sirius was well ready to delve further in new information and theories.

"Miss Granger left. Received an owl this morning, and went off to visit someone," Regulus was saying. He'd forgotten about Hermione, truth be told. After this morning's bit-too-realistic dream, he figured it was subconsciously intentional. "She said there was a letter from your godson, Harry, that might indicate where they were. I explained that it was highly doubtful he'd been captured by the Dark Lord or his followers; too much uneasiness still lies in that camp, as of last week, at any rate. Trophy like that would've been chatted up about."

Torn between relief at this conclusion and grating ill at the reasoning behind this source's knowledge, the elder Black refrained from comment, concentrating instead on options now left open. Sudden trivia broke his contemplation.

"Why *Ryan*?" Dumbfounded looks egged his hand. "My name. Last night, at the bar with the band, they wanted some sort of tale about my childhood. I'd gleaned enough to know that the real Stubby Boardman had a brother, and his name was Ryan. If you're the real Stubby, why *Ryan* for me?"

Snort and eye-roll suggested the answer should be well known. But Regulus complied, smirk of one-upmanship crinkling his right-half features. "Best to stick to the truth as much as possible when living a lie, Sirius. And don't you think *Sirius* would draw just a bit too much attention? Common name only in the Black line. So I went for your middle name, or rather, a variation that wouldn't cause the same stir. Orion transfigures nicely to Ryan."

No rebuttal came to mind; Sirius had to admit his brother had thought well. Rather than say so, he acknowledged this with only a compulsory nod of affirmation, turning his attention back to prior subject matter.

"Did Hermione share the letter with you?" His question was directed at both men, and each gave an affirmative. At his, "Any ideas?" Blue took the lead.

"Yeah, but I've got to check with someone first. Make no promises, mind you, but I may have an idea where to find some answers about Voldemort's failure in finding the Grail, if indeed that's what he's after." Glance to Regulus, then back to Sirius. "And I believe it is, per your brother's inside knowledge, and Hermione's research. I just hope I'm right, and I don't bollocks matters even worse."

Refusing to elaborate further, he cleared up his dishes and bid a good day, conferring with Sirius and Regulus both he would contact them once he had detail. "After all," he tossed to Sirius on his pause at the kitchen door, "we've rehearsal Monday, don't forget." Wry grin marked his departure, and in a flash the Brothers Black were left alone. It was the first time in over a quarter century.

Awkwardness fell, neither familiar with this new territory. Each had accepted long ago the other's loss, burying with their sibling the emotions and recollections and unsaid forgiveness or understanding. And now... faced with regurgitation of decades' turmoil and grief and anger... neither knew what to say, or how to say it had they known. Regulus broke the barrier, his words soft yet drawn, spoken more to the freshly poured tea than his brother.

"Sirius, I..." Sirius wasn't sure he wanted to hear what Regulus had to say. Part of him still raged at the choosing of ambition over compassion that drove this wedge deeper, furthering this chasm between them. Yet he glanced up briefly to catch his brother's reluctant meeting stare. Brows drawn in unsure consideration, and Sirius felt the confrontation of Regulus' excuses for his actions those many years passed. That was Regulus his *O's* obviously in shite reasoning and contorted logic, pleading his weak way out of every idiotic move he'd ever made. Sirius had thought perhaps with the revelations of last night he might could get past it all, accept that his brother really had grown up, had finally seen clearly and risked his life to set things right. But apparently some wounds were still too fresh, even after scars had left their mark in place of open cuts. He simply wanted no more excuses not now. Excuses were petty at this moment, when raw emotions still charged the air.

Ready to bite back with scathing lecture, Sirius narrowed his own eyes in preparation, a warning of his new mood. But Regulus had already moved his gaze back to his hands, fidgeting nimbly with a new splinter pulled from the table's edge. Slight inhale in decisiveness, then bolder, surer, without stumble.

"I'm sorry about James. I know he was a brother to you. He was a good man."

Chapter 23: If Memory Serves

Chapter 24 of 36

Brotherly admissions and startling clarifications delve Hermione and Sirius deeper into conspiracy and further from past convictions. But success can only be had if... if memory serves.

Reviews are much appreciated

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Chapter 23: If Memory Serves

Words failed him. Never before had someone surprised him so. This was not Regulus, youngest male in the line of Black. Regulus, the superficial follower. Regulus, resentful and haughty in pureblood supremacy, yet woefully short in strength of conviction. No; that Regulus would never have spoken James' Christian name, nor sincerely condoled his loss, admitting freely veritable worth of the Gryffindor. Wind stolen from his sails, Sirius hesitated, gaining composure and breath. Uncharted territory this was, bearing odd resemblance to... *understanding*.

Understanding was never forte in Reg's repertoire. Yet... Nothing in the stirringly familiar face before him bespoke less than authenticity. Regulus was being genuine, and the oddity of that unnerved Sirius.

"Yes," his voice, croaky in emotion, responded just above whisper. Eyes sought bare wall, blurring in lack of focus or heed. "James was brilliant. Best mate a boy, a man could ever ask for." Dampness blurred his vision even further. "He was loyal, a confidant. He was the brother I nev"

Abruptly words ceased, realization waking him to the moment. Sirius jarred from memory, collected himself as throat cleared and body rose and turned away, steps drawing toward the worktop.

"He was the brother you..." Regulus' soft, lonely timbre fell gently, awash in quiet resignation. "The brother you never had." Audible inhalation, gathered reinforcement. "It's all right, really." The forced smile was evident in sound alone, but just as clear was its feign. Regulus had openly called James being *like a brother* to him to Sirius but Sirius' words drove far beyond such allegiance. He'd called James the *brother he'd never had*.. though Regulus had had to finish the thought.

Regulus. The brother he *did have*.

"Regulus, I... I meant only that "

"I know what you meant," he forestalled, hand held up the second time that morning in ceasing request. No animosity colored the air. "And, honestly... you're right. I wasn't a brother to you. I know that now." Pleading look quelled Sirius' primed interruption. "I was too concerned for acceptance from our family. Too consumed with measuring up to the enigma that was Heir to the House of Black. I sought equal attention and praise to yours, but never could I quite weigh in.

"No, Sirius, please," he again leveled the open mouth of his brother. "It is the truth, and we both know it. What you perhaps do not know, however, is why I turned to them, to falling lap dog for scraps of your plaudit.

"We were brothers once, and not without bond. Remember that? Yes. We were close; fighting, yes, as siblings will do. But nonetheless, you were always there for me, protecting me I now see it for what it was: protection from the bloodlust and neuroses of our kin. You were my best friend, just and kind and mentor as well. But all that ceased when you went off to school, and I could not follow. There... you changed, and you'd left me here alone without your affection and tutelage. And when you'd returned... Well, James had taken my place in your life, and now, older, I can understand. But I couldn't then, and when I was no longer your comrade in arms, I sought solace elsewhere."

"Where you would never reap it," Sirius added solemnly. Few exceptions marred the Black family tree with honor and kindness and compassion. Such disservice he'd done to his younger brother. At the time, all he'd been able to see was escape from the ever-closing walls of sickening tradition, and rebellion against all that tradition stood for. And Regulus had been caught on the outskirts, forgotten in the war that was Sirius' conscience.

Self-condemning half-smile worthy of Remus complimented the weary emptiness of Regulus' eyes. Within, Sirius condemned himself, knowing on some level his responsibility for this other person his flesh and blood had become. Yet little brother had more to say, low and heartbreaking, but exacting with finality.

"No, I should never have reaped it. But that is the past, and a life I no longer own. Nor desire, truth be known. I've spread my wings, became another, lived a time in the same spotlight you'd commanded. Different name, different history... gave me a *very* different perspective, and for that I am eternally grateful. I would not change it, *now*, for I see that had you not broken away from the family, eventually I would have drown in my own solitude. For I would have been torn in pleasing them and emulating you, and never should the two coexist. You forced me to make choices, Sirius, rather than follow along your path blindly, as I had followed that of the family. But whereas you would have carried me, they did not. Manipulated, yes; but abandoned to fight each step myself, I made mistakes. And learned from them. I only regret I didn't learn sooner. I would have liked for us to know one another again. Perhaps..."

Here he gave pause, debating as to finish or not. Surprisingly, Sirius found himself with breath held, more than merely curious as to such option that might lay bare with simple words.

"Perhaps Fate has again intervened upon the most noble get of the most ancient line," he mused with a hint of irony and touch of honest humor. "And perhaps we have a chance to start anew; both of us returning from the proverbial dead, while the world believes us but memories. Opens up new realms of possibilities, does it not?" This time mischievous grin and sparkles of eyes broke out, and Sirius found himself answering in like.

Perhaps... the Brothers Black were back.

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Palpable silence left each musing within their own mind, the outer world breaking in only with the rhythmic *kreech-kreech* of animated scrubbing brush tidying the cast iron skillet in the sink. Distant bits of socialization wafted into the kitchen, assuring Hermione the rest of the Weasley clan was well entertained. Pausing in her hand-drying of cutlery, she broached the subject too taboo for Ginny's nerves as of late.

"*Ginny*..." Hushed tones fearful of the younger woman's response next drew out their call. Ginny's dinner plate stacking ceased, and she turned a sorrowful head to her friend. Molly had attributed her daughter's sadness to the baby, but Hermione and the twins knew true cause and effect. It was the cause Hermione hoped to alleviate now, rendering happier effect.

"We've been discussing it, and..." Here she paused, unsure how to approach the theory when it lay nearly baseless but for intuitions and past connections. "And... We don't believe Voldemort's captured Harry and Ron. In fact, we don't think he even knows where they are." There. Two full breaths. And now she held another, awaiting feedback that could surely lay theories wide open, and deepen the depression of the mother-to-be.

Shaking, plates were placed tabletop, a chair absently claimed. Eyes wide with innocent hope and fitful despair gaped. "Are are you *sure*?" Forced whisper, one the elder had fervently desired to avoid. Truth was mandatory, and only humane.

"No; no, we're not sure, but it only stands to reason, given certain new... developments we've made." Crestfallen face framed in limp ginger strands bottled up Hermione's courage, and she strode quickly to the table, depositing towel and implements negligently upon discarded baby magazines. Securing her own chair, she faced Ginny, force behind her explanatory words.

"Ginny, we've got an inside source." Ginny looked up, surprise mingling with confusion.

"New source? Where? How? For what?"

"Information," she quickly supplied. Skeptical grimace answered, reminding her the cynic to whom she spoke. It was all or nothing, now; too deep the waters had become, and they were all treading together, dependent upon each to swim... or sink.

"Last week, I figured out what Voldemort was after. Yes, truly," she added, taking in the nonsensical verbiage offered in return. "And when I went to tell Sirius... the most fantastic thing happened..."

And between interruptions of parents, brothers, and chores left unfinished, Hermione Granger shared intricacies of the past seven days. Leaving out nothing, save...

No reason on Earth was there that Ginny should be enlightened to Hermione's momentary lapse of sanity. Six days it had been since she'd lost reason and had explored Sirius Black's bare back with naught but inquisitive lips. Six days since she could look him in the eye. Six days of visits to Grimmauld to break up monotony born of making up excuses as to why others could not see Mortimer Bailey, a man secretly on assignment. Seven days since Sirius had spoken more than a few, impersonal words to her

meaning anger still existed over her nasty, one-sided row she had thrown on him last Friday night in the park, just before Regulus Black returned from the dead.

No, no need existed for her friend to know such disastrous episodes. Some things Hermione simply could never live down, not to mention Ginny was expecting Hermione to eventually become her sister-in-law. Any further deviation from the norm at this time could send the younger woman into St. Mungo's care. But the rest of the week's events lay now before her, the requisite squeals of incredibility pouring forth from Mrs. Potter.

"You're having me on!" she exclaimed, resurrection of the wayward sibling having just been announced. Hermione had to chuckle in spite of all.

"Honestly, no. It was Regulus, all right. He's quite alive. And on our side.

"Remember when Dumbledore was so adamant about making sure Sirius' will would overcome any blood bonds regarding the heritage of Grimmauld Place and Kreacher? We all thought it was a matter of ensuring the Malfoys and Lestranges didn't inherit. But it wasn't them at all he was worried about; it was Regulus! He knew he was alive, but he didn't know the details, not even where he was; Aberforth was the only one who knew."

"So that's why he didn't know about the locket, and why..."

Hermione's excitement died a moment, memory of the Death Eaters' attack on Hogwarts suddenly fresh in her mind. She shook away the tragedy. Reliving it served no purpose.

"It was Regulus I saw at Gringotts that time I thought I saw Sirius! Explains so much, really. He'd been recognized there as Stubby Boardman, the persona he'd become when he went into hiding. When the goblin asked about his hit song 'Creature of the Night,' all I'd heard was *Kreacher*, and... Well, that's why I'd thought he was Sirius. He looked so much like him. And then Sirius was actually posing as Stubby "

" While the prodigal son watched from afar, right potty over the bloke impersonating him being his long-deceased prat of an older brother."

Both women whipped about, the foreign voice to the conversation summarizing from just inside the doorway. George leaned opposite the jam of his brother, nodding in agreement, smirk firmly in place.

"Fred!"

"George!"

"Right you are, ladies," George replied, exaggerated bow of his head, salaam to follow. "Your disbelieving faces "

" suggest your inadvisable "

" indiscretion "

" in interviewing "

" and interrogating "

" less than inaudibly "

" incriminates you indubitably "

" inexcusably."

Hermione took them both in a single glare. Grit teeth and tight voice prefaced her meaning. "There are times I despise you both."

"We weren't talking that loudly," Ginny interrupted, accusing looks boring into each brother. George smiled, holding up a hand with something small and stringy dangling from loose grip.

"How short your memory, dear little sister. *Extendable Ears*."

"Besides," Fred added, his smile dropping a few degrees. "Your little revelations may shed some light on a mystery of our own." Pushing off the doorjamb, another seat was secured at the worn family table, twin two following in wake.

"How do you mean?" Hermione's brow arched, curiosity overcoming annoyance. Any insight might prove useful at this point, as they still had no direction to travel, Blue still not having discussed whatever matters he'd had in mind with his grandmother.

Thoughtful frown replaced George's own humor. "Took a little shopping expedition yesterday morning to Borgin and Burkes." Quick, breathy intakes and bulging eyes earned only dismissive glares from both men.

"Mum'd have a right state of fit if she knew you were tossing off in Knockturn Alley!" Ginny's miffed expression, Hermione had to admit, was suddenly a replica of Molly Weasley, with the colorful tongue more befitting Mundungus Fletcher.

"Easy, baby sis," Fred calmed, his own features fully serious for a change of pace. "We had reason to believe nasty little articles were coming available through the little rat's nest, so George nipped in to get a peek."

"Got to stay ahead of the tricks 'n trades game, suss out a counter or antidote before problems get too bad. Saves Dad loads of problems," he added, a knowing look directed to the ladies. Considering Arthur Weasley was on higher alert these days, anything to help alleviate his responsibilities in keeping the public well trained in personal defense was welcome.

Ginny backed off.

"Anyway," George continued, "I'd taken a leaf from Moody's paranoid book and disguised well. Extra caution with a full cloak, hood up not a stand out in Knockturn, you know."

"So what's this big mystery?" Hermione asked, anxious to get answers after drought conditions of meaningful discovery.

"Getting to that, Hermione," Fred answered, slight grin easing the fierce study of face. "Give us a breather."

Bow of the head to George, and the latter continued. "So when I went in, I was browsing carefully, vigilant not to touch anything for healthful reasons, mind. But the shop had one other patron, skulking in a corner by the counter. Done up as well, so his face wasn't too visible. Looked like he wanted to be anywhere but where he was, leaning over the case to confab with the keep. Shifty-eyed they were, too, when I came in, but obviously decided I was too far to be a concern, so they went back to hushed whispers. But they were frantic whispers, too, I could tell. Got a right queasy feeling over that."

"So what'd you do?" Blue eyes widened in her question, freckles twitching in anticipation.

"I did what any self-respecting businessmen would: I eavesdropped." He caught the inquiry before Ginny made a sound, holding up the flesh colored lines. "I *suddenly*

spotted something near them I wanted to view closely, then immediately decided it wasn't what I needed and straight away returned to my earlier odds and sods. After a few leers, they went on with their discussion."

"But this time they had an audience." Fred's tone indicated pride he held for his twin. George nodded.

"The patron did most the talking. He was definitely nervous, going on about how they'd been compromised, how someone was leaking information and he knew his master would think it was him. Course he didn't right out say it was Voldemort and he was a Death Eater, but I've no doubt. He was scared, saying he had to find the chalice before he was *dismissed* of his duties."

"The chalice? But that has to be the Grail," Hermione deduced, excitement bubbling for the first time in many days. "He's looking for it for Voldemort, but someone's breaking their secrecy. *Regulus*." Beaming, energy exploded within her, carrying new breath into aching, deprived mental muscles. A connection finally!

"Would seem that way," Fred agreed, darkness overcoming his expression. "I'm curious as to what baby Black has to say about one of the Ministry's lot searching for a legendary artifact for Voldemort himself."

Cold chills chased down her spine, knotting in the stomach that had only moments before released its tension. *The Ministry's lot?* Inside she shrank, sudden dread filling all voids. Something in the way Fred was staring at her unnerved. Fingers crossed in that his next revelation was not the one she feared it to be, and if it was... she had no sane thought left to deal with it.

"George pointed the bloke out to me this morning when we'd gone to the Ministry for our annual propriety license renewal." Eyebrow cocked in inquisitiveness. "Holds underling post for the Secretary of Finance."

Oh shite. *Raj*.

-o-

Lonely were the shops of Diagon Alley as the estranged brothers kept pace along the walk, each musing his own cautions and hopes, past transgressions dissipating in the growing light of promise. So much option now lay before them, restricted only by the circumstances they now found themselves, this state of being the *undead* hampering their progress with great annoyance.

Sirius peered down the shadow-cast structures, spotted at random in weak lamp-glow, an effort to keep out encroaching evening. Blackness was settling across the land just as it had his mind the past week. No companion could he entreat for conversation, with all but Hermione engaged in their own lives and work. And Hermione... he couldn't look her in the eye, recollections of the vivid dream still too raw to allow him aught but guilt if he gazed upon her.

"Seems a bit bare," he commented, breaking solitude of memory for comfort of vocalization. "Hard to believe it's already September. Children will on to school right about now. Maybe even there, already."

Words met by echoing footsteps left Sirius doubting temporary truces. Was he overestimating their newly defined roles as tentative friends? Sidelong glance measured mood of companionship, yet covering darkness left expressions well hidden. Silence reigned.

"The scent of well worn leather..." Regulus' voice was so low Sirius first believed he had imagined it, its wait so lengthened as to be improbable. Yet following phrases fell lightly upon his ears with steady strength and caresses of fondness.

"That's what I recall most strongly every year. Loading the trunks, you'd always leave out your favorite jacket, worried it'd be scuffed in the trunk with all your books and lot." Never missing a stride, Regulus' head fell forward in remembrance, a soft chuckle rising in solitary heartbeat, regressing just as quickly in self-admonishment.

"So you'd leave it atop your trunk, set to stow it secretly in some bag or other before Mother caught you with it. Gods, but how she despised your tendency for Muggle fashion. But with your broom and satchel of hodgepodge you and Potter had rigged up for the new year, you never had room or chance, and I'd always get landed with toting it out for you, bundled in my arms in such a way as to look like another knapsack. She never caught on."

Three strides gave distance to the spoken thoughts. But Regulus was not complete in his tale, and Sirius was surprised at his continuance.

"I'd breathe in the scent, all the way to King's Cross, all the time on the platform, until we boarded and parted ways. And you'd at the last minute remember your jacket, and I'd return it, some nasty remark on my lips about not being your personal house-elf, and how next time you could tote it yourself. But deep inside, each trip on the train, whether to or from school... each time I'd carry it safely, protectively, and each time I'd wish so hard it'd be the time you'd forget to ask for it back." Softer, now. Thick, as well, heavier with some unstated emotion. "It was you, in a sense. The best part of you. The natural side of yourself: fun, fiercely loyal and self assured. The part that stood with conviction and acceptance of yourself and your role. The part I wanted so much to emulate, but never could. I just wasn't you..."

Odd, it was, how revelations years later could contort the memories of old, speak a new mind-state with curious clarity. Yes, Sirius remembered badgering Regulus into being his footman, but never had he realized just what the role had been for him. Not as a servant, but as a keeper of what he considered the brother he was losing bit by bit to others, to a world that denounced purity-driven genocide.

They'd reached the back entrance to the Leaky Cauldron, and for that Sirius was grateful. He had no turn of phrase to match confession, and strangely felt at a loss. But Regulus didn't seem to need a reply, and pulled open the aged door for his brother, creak of rusting hinges announcing change of subject.

Dim fire and candlelight guided pathways though sparsely congregated diners to seclusion via corner table, and there they sat, abstract words exchanged in terms of an upcoming meal and scraps of mediocre success from their fresh meeting with D.A. Lynley. The latter had sworn secrecy of Sirius' return, and in exchange for their theories, had offered to share any news or intelligence regarding Voldemort. He'd also agreed to begin a private search for Harry and Ron.

Upon service and arrival, the two tucked into double hot pots, steam still rising enough to flush Sirius' face and dampen stray tendrils of his ever-lengthening hair. Murmured comments fell through cracks of nourishment, generally finding a place directly before and after sips of Guinness. It was nice to sit down publicly to a quiet bite with his brother, Sirius thought, even if it was in the dead of night under terms of conspiracy.

"Back in a bit," he offered lightly, rising to seek out the loo so that upon return, another pint would be in order. Regulus nodded in acknowledgement, next to final bite of stew already engaged in his mouth.

But no further than a turned step had Sirius taken when he bashed up into a back of emerald robes, their owner having also chosen such time to exit their encased table. Black caught himself in a step back, apology already leaving in polite excuse. Rejoinder was feminine in expressions of regret for the blunder, a bodily turn to properly speak face-on.

Shock and confusion and something akin to fear flitted across her aged features, and Sirius could do naught but stare in return, both falling abruptly silent. Her mental stumble and failed grace Sirius could not fault, for his own reaction was checked surprise at seeing a face familiar to him from days of old... and not so old.

Immediately Sirius regained himself, fast work of mind and playact. "Sorry, ma'am," he expressed, trying for casual embarrassment. He could not allow her to see the look of recognition on his own face, one to mirror hers, yet without the touch of unease.

"It's all right," Minerva McGonagall replied in a halting stutter. Eyes widened as they swept the Black cheekbones and telltale eyes, excusing the trim goatee of new that gave off slightly sinister vibes. "I wasn't looking quite where I was going," she offered, loss for words hindering self recovery.

Suddenly her gaze flicked past his shoulder, and though he would never have conceived it, her eyes grew even larger, her mouth now agape in slackened foreplay to

speech. Twisting himself, Sirius realized the catalyst: Regulus had joined his brother, obviously curious as to his hindrance in leaving the great room. *Damn*, he thought. Though Regulus had changed considerably enough in the past twenty years to pass undetected, he Sirius had not. In fact, outside of healthier, heavier in muscle, and cleaner cut, he'd only changed the equivalent of but months since his former Head of House had seen him.

But even time could not wash away the classic lines of Black blood; fine cheekbones and mercury, almond eyes tattooed them their lineage. Cleverness on a Knut, he realized, else they were doomed.

McGonagall found her voice, piercing stare having returned to Sirius, eyes locked. "Great Merlin's ghost... You're "

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No, it couldn't be true. Raj MacGregor was *not* in league with Voldemort. He couldn't be. Yes, he made her uneasy. Yes, he was mysterious, an unknown in her life. But deep down Hermione could not believe he was an agent for the evil incarnate that was the enemy. And how close she'd come to *kissing* him! Not to mention her foray into his home, she and Ginny walking into a lair completely unprepared, completely vulnerable

Hermione shook her head, demanding the feel of treason flee her mind. "*No, no, no. Not Raj...*" mumbling under her breath, lost in the noises of chair feet scraping 'gainst hardwood as she hurriedly rose. She couldn't deal with that now, not another betrayal of someone she *did* like, no matter how edgy he may have made her.

Ignoring the questions thrown to her, rapidly she gathered her book bag, settling it atop the table as she gathered periodicals without structure. "I'm sorry, really, but I've got to go. Ginny, please let me know if you still want me to help decorate the baby's room. When you decide how, I mean," she continued, speaking to the pages contorting as efforts intensified to store glossy Muggle covers and advertisements.

Near tears now, frantic in fighting the clasps, the bag overcorrected and fell in solid *thump* to the floor, items *sluicing* out the open pockets in impact. Only Hermione's dire squeak of painful frustration indicated her nearness to breaking. Falling to knees, a mess of it she made, attempting to gather papers and notes and miscellany. Through tear-blurred eyes she noticed double ginger spots hanging over the display to her right as capable arms gathered logically, constructively. She sat back on her haunches, letting the droplets fall in anger and confusion, desolation overshadowing any feeling of euphoria by knowledge. What good were spots of information if she could not rely upon her own judgment of who to trust. Gods, she was a mental case anymore.

"Oi, what's this?" Rapid blink cleared Hermione's sight, and she started, turning to Fred or was it George? to answer whatever misconception he may have landed upon. Notes were strewn about, scripts of research and analysis of Harry's letter. Brows furrowed as she realized the twins had both ceased cleanup and were instead poring over a photograph. Leaning in, Hermione peered over a slender shoulder to refresh her mind as to its content.

"Oh," she said, allowing a bit of a sniff and backhanded wipe of tears. "That's just the band, the Hobgoblins, on break at the Gala last July. Colin gave it to me. Right pissed, they are, but there's Sirius up front. You can catch a view if Blue'd stop shoving him around with that blasted "

"No," George interrupted, pointing to the background of the shot. "Who's that?"

"Oh; that's Sir McCaine, the liaison for Northern Ireland's international trade. He's quite well liked, really. Was fantastic in his dealings with "

"No, Hermione," Fred interrupted again, shaking his head yet keeping eyes focused upon the subjects. He pointed more specifically, finger following the slight movements of the other figure. "Who's that with him?"

Hermione glanced again, noting the two men arguing at the party just as they often did on Ministry grounds. "That's Lord Chamberlain..." scowl returned with lower voice of disgust. "*Raj MacGregor's* boss." Ginny's look of horrific understanding earned the younger witch a slight nod of wry acknowledgement. At least Ginny now knew why Hermione had been upset realization must have just hit as to the prime Ministry underling who would be cautiously convening in suspicious territory. Her heart dropped even further. Bitterness tore the words next from her, giving residence to the hanging condemnation in the air.

"Raj MacGregor, the young man of mystery you caught showing his true colors, the one you caught "

"That's him." Fred interrupted her stolen soliloquy once more, ignoring her sardonic rant in favor of agreeing glances to his brother, his finger tapping the photo. "This Chamberlain he's the bloke I saw at Borgin's."

Hermione nearly fainted.

-o-

"Hopelessly clumsy, yes," Regulus broke in, saving his brother with additional moments to conjure a plan. It was all Sirius needed.

"I'm far too caught up in my own thoughts this evening, madam," the elder Black elaborated, trademark grin springing sheepishly in penance.

"Er, yes," McGonagall was answering distractedly, continuous visual comparison still darting between the men. Her companion a young, dark complexioned man of indescribable expression had risen from the cleared table to stand just behind and to the side of the headmistress.

"Everything all right, Minerva?" he asked, accents of Southern France coloring his speech. His attention was direct and keen, taking in the sight McGonagall found flustering. Obvious was his intention to correct any ill situation for her. "Is there an issue here?"

"No, no, Philippe," she replied, weak voice belying negative answer. "No, these men were, er," her pause held but a moment, but it was enough for faculties to engage and shrewd Gryffindor to press on. "These men were just introducing themselves," she finished, eyes now narrowed in calculating expectation.

Beguiling smile with courteous head nod, and Sirius found himself repeating, "Stubby Boardman, vocalist extraordinaire, at your service, ma'am." Proud of his credible act, inwardly he cheered *yes!* to his quick wit.

"I see," came formal acknowledgement. "And you are...?" Her attention had moved to Regulus, and at that moment Sirius blanched, sudden realization striking. In his smug characterization, he had forgotten one tiny, minor detail: Regulus, not *he*, was actually Stubby Boardman. He'd taken his persona without a thought, and had left his brother with

"Ryan Arcturus, his agent," Regulus smoothly replied, hand thrown out in lively greeting. Philippe ignored it, turning instead to McGonagall for direction. Though pale, the professor had recovered well in past moments, currently critiquing the men artfully. One clever witch was Minerva McGonagall, much to Sirius' current dismay.

"Minerva McGonagall," she suddenly presented, form reminiscently stiff and precise. This is my brother-in-law, Philippe St. Cyr." Salutations under breath crossed all parties, tension vaguely building on the outskirts of the interview. Sirius found himself uneasy, and began to excuse himself for the loo his original destination when young Philippe suddenly tensed, eyes flickering deeper into the semi-opaque room with great intent. Harsh lines drew taut his smooth face.

"If you will excuse me, Minerva," he tossed, eyes never leaving his new interest. Rude to the point of insulting, his lack of by-you-leave at all to the aristocratic heirs of nobility in other times would have annoyed Sirius for Sirius did not like to be ignored and brought the old Regulus to dueling for family name and pride. But both men, instead, found only relief in Philippe's distracted departure. Two Blacks on one McGonagall were much better odds.

"Have you ordered, yet?" Regulus was asking their former professor, but Sirius' attention had fled to follow the young man's path, a confident stride taking him to the front door of the pub, following out the lone figure just departed. A figure he'd recognized from the Gala and Hermione's description.

Raj MacGregor.

-o-

Blue Foncé shifted uneasily upon stone-bruised feet, chastising himself the forgetting of rocky ground and whimsically warded borders about the homey cottage. His grandmamá's sense of adequate protection often left him concerned for her less-than-secure welfare. Setting off the screeching dodo bird hardly recommended itself as formidable deterrents to wankers of all nasty measure. But then again, Blue could not recall once his loved one needing to call foul against intruders. Somehow her topsy-turvy system lay in place, and though often ideal a target, she never ran a misadventure.

Come to think on it, Blue considered his own soreness and time consumption in approaching the home. And he knew his grandmamá's set-up. Perhaps she wasn't so barmy after all.

Dismissing thoughts of protection plans, fist went up to rap sharply on the gray-faded wood, a door so familiar in his childhood as the entrance to a faerie land. Moments ticked by, yet no footsteps resounded, claiming his request for entry had been heard. Worry niggled his mind, reconsideration of the old woman's competence gaining ground.

"*Bluazure!*" Blue whipped about, wand drawn in defense of self and family, only to find said family had been source of all fret. In the growing evening, his grandmamá stood yards behind him, apparently having come just from the overgrown woods path he'd transverse often as a child. Eyes lit up in merriment, arms open wide to gather her grandson as he stepped forward in greeting. Even the finch at his full name fled completely upon entering comforting embrace of memories and joy.

"How absolutely splendid to see you!" She pulled back partially to glance over him in motherly appraisal, eyes devouring his presence, smile perpetual and great. "Wish you'd said something about coming round," she stated without rancour. "I'd have whipped up a curry and fairy cakes for supper. Oh, it's just been so long and..." She rattled on almost nonsensically, too excited with his appearance to do more than jump from subject to subject. Blue felt a smidgen of guilt in his long absences.

"Grandmamá," he broke in, her lavish attention deepening his discomfort. He'd not come for a simple visit, but to gain information. Promises to himself formed; when all was well, he'd make time for moments like this more often.

"Grandmamá," he repeated, attempting new focus. "I've not a lot of time. I need to ask you about someone, about "

He was just about to allude to the mysterious Raj when another voice broke from the path's entrance, addressing them in the feeble croak of advanced years.

"Zelda, me dear." Wizen and frail appearing, the wizard in dove gray robes leaned heavily upon a plain staff of whittled birch branch, shoulder-length white locks interspersed with twigs and leaf remnants. He smiled graciously at Blue, then turned his view back to the lively witch. "Mightn't we retire tae the indoors? Me stamina's no' wha' it once was, ye ken." Self-deprecating smile pulled his lined features, yet weariness was evident in the Scot.

"Oh, Merlin, yes," Zelda recovered, looking chagrined for having forgotten her original guest. "Jacob, dear, come along. Let's adjourn for some tea whilst I conjure up a right proper meal." She shoosed the men inside, clucking all the while as to her lack of manners and where her head must have been, and what scrumptious dish should be served in the honor of two long-missed guests.

"Now, let's see," she began, seating them with matronly fuss and joy. "You two have sit-down and chat, and I'll get to work on the tea, first." She paused, revelation showing on her face. "Oh, where's your posh, Zelda?" she asked herself in wry humor. She turned to Jacob, an attempt at society form stilling her features for but a moment.

"Jacob, I'd like you to meet my grandson, Bluazure."

"Blue," Blue corrected a mite under breath. Jacob expressed his delight, and Blue accepted cordially as upbringing demanded.

"Bluazure," she continued, turning her girlish face to him. "This is my Bubby's dear friend of many, many years. Jacob MacGregor."

Repeat of pleasantries died midway on Blue's lips. Inside he tightened, nausea threatening at such turn of events. And his grandmother had been left quite alone with this man? This possible clansman of his subject of suspect? Blood drained, leaving flush his young, gaping features.

"Now, m'dear," she continued with a look of glowing expectation. "Whom did you need to ask me about?"

Chapter 24: To the Edge... & Beyond

Chapter 25 of 36

A person can only take so much. But when circumstances seem intent on converging all at once, how much more will it take to nudge you to the edge... and beyond?

Reviews are much appreciated

Chapter 24: To the Edge... & Beyond

September first brought with it a damp chill that clung to his political robes with an air of suffocation and sinister intent. *Dementors mating*, they'd called it, the last time he'd felt the mists bear so heavily on and about him, taking on threatening qualities as to prickle his nerves, heighten his senses. And Raj did not care for it. Not one bit.

In the hours it had taken for his business to be concluded, London had grown dark and menacing. Footpads and tramps worried him little; others more swift and deadly wanted his destruction. Only saving grace found was in anonymity. They didn't know who he was. Not yet, anyhow. Little doubt stood in his mind that they were close, though, that soon their acquired titchy bits of knowledge would fall together like some Christie novel. And then even his endorsers held not enough power to save him.

Footsteps quickened; Visitor's Entrance would be bare this time of evening, allowing admittance free of mindless or suspicious questions. He was going to visit his aunt, he was, who was working late. No oddity in that, now, eh? One security wizard for the night shift pervious expeditions had clued him that would be maneuverable. He had to get there before *they* did.

Holiday makers staggered by in groups, each jostle and near brush in their silliness unnerving Raj. Tightened grip on the wand tucked just inside his belt below his robes shook in anticipation. In the air a crackle of magical current sped his heart rate, his adrenaline. Laughter, cackles, shouts, horns, taxis... All these converged upon the wizard, and his stride lengthened and sped even faster. Something was not right.

Crowds were growing too large, too rough; he would need to take an alternate. An Underground entrance lay not far ahead a perfect point from which to renegotiate his path

Sudden grip like claws whirled him round, causing misstep and nearly toppling both he and his assailant. Raj's reactive wand draw stopped only just in time, the face of a rather pissed young woman taking form in the streetlamp light. She held onto his left bicep for support, weaving heavily.

"scuse, me, Gov'n'r," she pardoned, squinting through unfocused eyes, glancing him up and down in his full cloak, his robes only half hidden beneath. "Would you 'appen tah know where the Roz'in... Rosen... Rosenguild pooblic 'ouse mightn't be?"

He did *not* need this. Sloshed Muggle women on holiday. If only his problems were so minor.

Still keeping his wand in contact, Raj steadied the platinum blonde. "No, ma'am; I'm afraid I'm not familiar with London." It was all he could do not to modify that as *Muggle* London. "Now if you wouldn't mind, I've a pressing engage..."

"What's tha? Off tah a fancy dress party, are we?" she giggled, half coming out as a snort as exaggerated head movements denoted her blatant appreciation of his attire. Lecherous grin broke out, revealing crowded teeth spotted with evening supper. "Mind if'n I come along?" Girlish giggles this time, broken by chokes of chronic means, heavy fumes of alcohol wafting into his face. Raj turned his face aside, leaning away in an attempt for clean air. He really needed to be on his way.

Disengaging himself, he left his new suitor with her own personal letter box to cuddle. Immersed in seeking his route, Raj never witnessed an exchange of pound notes and a sudden sobering of one blonde lassie. Instead, attention moved into keeping a straight path, the tube entrance exiting a concentration of pedestrians. Masses bottlenecked before dispersing, their on-coming movements jarring Raj further and further to the outskirts of the walk, out of direct line to the stairs. Doxy with a pram halted before him edge to the right. Attempt to tuck back into line diverted by spotted youths bee-lining for a side shop. Nearing the rail marking the descent rowing couple to his left shoved past, bumping him further toward brick façades and window displays, skirting street entertainers and snogging couples. Past the rubbish bin and the burned-out streetlamp

Hard was the impact made as his body was jerked viciously to the right, delving into a slight chasm masquerading as an alley betwixt adjacent shops, slamming his chest and cheek into solid brick. No time had he to recover faculties; no more had he gained his footing and turned than there was chaos. Shouts, calls, swearing, flashing streams of colored light.

Raj shoved against the brick wall for balance and spun, wand drawn, but ducked just in time as the first stream of red light flashed, flying past his left shoulder to knock a chunk of mortar from the wall. Attack from the entrance, Raj retrenched deeper into the black void of alleyway. He alternated between backward steps, throwing his own spells, and weaving and ducking in a scramble from the threat. Voices carried, resonated down the narrow way, steep walls entombing him. Multiple sets of timbre, footfalls, brilliance of varying colors and brightness in offense, in defense.

Stumble, recover, slide, slip, nicked shin, scraped palm, singed hair by streak of incantation... wrenched back in a twist of thrown ward... blackness of the void, blinding of magical light... running from, firing upon, dodging... anger, fear, anticipation, nerves, calculating... closer, louder... turn again, cast the spell, move to flee

Searing pain to his torso knocked Raj backwards, right shoulder catching in a sickening *thump* against the rough stone wall. Unable to move, he felt his knees give way, buckling beneath the newly dead weight of limbs that ceased to obey commands. Miniscule jagged edges of brick snagged at his cloak, pulling it upward as his body dragged downward to cluttered alley floor. Surprisingly loud was the *ting* of his wand as it popped against concrete, its grip still within loose fingers.

Some sort of Stunning Spell, it had to have been. Raj was vaguely aware of on-goings, and completely unable to react. But between drifting in and out of consciousness, several things became clear: he was not alone in his fight, he was not alone in injury, and someone had every intention of saving him, but for what purpose only they knew.

Solid chest greeted his back as an arm wrapped about his own chest, under his arms, pulling him against his defender. His body draped, his own intentions to support himself fully unrealized. Pitch lay before him as the men behind staggered backward, sniping words between them, occasional return fire flying just above his head.

"What the fuck do ya think I'm gonna *do*, Reg?" a tight voice directly behind him hissed before firing another red shot just over Raj's right ear. "**App him out?** Fuck; it's all I can do to damn well **walk, myself**. I can barely hold 'im as it is. I'd splinch us both!"

Jerking movement pulled him back, and just in time as the piercing light struck the wall but centimeters from his face, the brief flash enough to note shards of brick and mortar exploding in contact.

"Do you take me for a bloody fool, Sirius?" another similar, hoarse voice bit from his left. "We can't take him back home. Let's get him to the Underground." Flak from this newcomer's wand in response to nearby triple shot. "Tell anyone who asks he's pissed." Sudden bright beam expanding in brief walls of white light now broke from this same wand, illuminating the alley in sharp relief for an instant. At least five figures had been exposed in that time, and Raj understood only too well the precariousness of his position. Scrambling footwork, apparent jab to his helper Sirius? in effort for attention. "Come on, this way... before it *fades*."

Hoisted higher in Sirius' grip, Raj MacGregor felt all control over his own survival dissipate with the fading tendrils of magical sparks. Queasiness overcame him in the jostle and further hushed commands.

Then he passed out.

-o-

Droplets of beaded sweat ran down his scruffy jaw, adding to the drench that converged on his charcoal button down. Between humidity, the heat of that damn Muggle train, the effort to manhandle Regulus and his insistence to avoid magic! Raj MacGregor all through London to their current location, Sirius found his body soaking his denims and un-tucked shirt most uncomfortably. Not to mention the perspiration born of injury, blood and scorched, broken denim prime for curious glances upon the train. Roundabout trails and last moment slips; crowded clubs and randy street urchins, all played as cover to their escape of more than an hour prior. He hurt, ached, and wanted nothing more at the moment than to deposit his burden, heal his wound as best he could magically, and nurse a fifth of firewhisky.

"Are you sure this is it?" Regulus asked again, speculation heavy in his query. Sirius grit his teeth in pain and aggravation.

"Once more, Reg; yes, this is bloody well *it*. I'm *sure*," he added, sniping as they reached the unadorned door, a message board of white tacked carefully upon the wall, adjacent the scarred doorframe and worn brass-work. Sirius fell heavily against the corridor wall, grateful its presence and the lack thereof regarding guests on the floor. A wall clock revealed the night well advanced into morning, but as a Friday night, they could not count on the emptiness remaining. Adjusting the dead weight of their companion, Sirius shifted his hold to one arm and reached out to his right, backhandedly rapping the dormitory entrance beside him.

Regulus paced restlessly upon the flea-bitten white of the ceramic tiled floor, repetitiously scanning the exits for any sign of unwelcome visitors. Moments passed without change, and Sirius grew concerned his plan was ill-timed. Another sharp measure of raps, the rattling reverberating down and throughout the corridor.

Again moments passed, and Regulus halted his tread, looking meaningfully at the unchanged door, and back to his brother. Lips parting to speak, they suddenly stilled at the shuffling now announcing movement within. Sirius sighed quietly in relief as locks clicked and handle turned, and the gateway to respite opened.

"Regulus? But what oh! God, what *happened*? And what are you doing with *Raj MacGregor*?" Her voice rose upon the last notation, eyes widening in shock.

"Hermione, *please*," Sirius practically begged in weariness. "Just open the door and let us in. We'll tell all if I can just sit the bloody hell *down*." Waiting not for formal invitation, the wizard shoved off from the wall and made for the opening, his grip on Raj failing with each step until the unconscious man was near to being dragged into the

small double room. Without a by-your-leave or pardon-of-impertinence, Sirius plowed past Hermione's pajama-clad figure and made for her rumbled bed, a last-ditch effort for strength calling Raj to enough height as to be tossed unceremoniously upon the single. He then dropped himself onto the bed, lying back against the headboard in near collapse, long legs stretched out along the edge.

She had lit a Muggle lamp bedside, he noted without much care. Its soft glow cast his brother's entrance in surreal effect; it captured Hermione's return in youthful splendor. *Shite*, but he was going to have to clear his mind and conscience.

Her questions began in earnest, yet it was Regulus who answered, skimming the points of their meeting with McGonagall at the Leaky Cauldron, Sirius' notice that her brother-in-law had followed Raj MacGregor out and Sirius had followed suit, suspicious. He continued with Regulus' own concern, and eventual catch-up with his brother, their greater distrust as the man had signaled to others in the crowd, and a play-out had begun to take shape. Described in great brevity was their subsequent trade of warfare in the alley, their complex escape route, and finally their arrival here, in her very room. Included in this tale were brief interruptions of questions, clarifications and even a cursory check on Raj, who was veritably deemed out for the night by a nasty Stunning Spell variation. Blanket and pillow found their place upon and below him, respectively.

Sirius barely attuned himself to the verbiage, his mind drifting in fatigue and draining adrenaline. Lightly dozing, Hermione's *shriek* jarred him abruptly, bringing him upright, wand drawn, heart pounding. But no attack had entered the room in a barrage of spells; Hermione's horrified gaze and gaping mouth with proper half-hand cover were all directed toward him. At first, Sirius was confused. Then he reconciled her line of sight: she'd seen his wound.

Oh; that was all. Lowering his wand, he leaned back again, intent on kipping moments more. But that was not to be, he soon realized.

"Sirius, you're bleeding! You've been hurt!"

"Quite, yes," his droll reply came. He was tired; he didn't have the energy for injury explanations or their fawning spoils. His eyes closed, blissful sleep seducing him

"Ah, damn it to bloody *hell!*" He bound straight up again, no wand palmed but the angered yelp of pain filling the serene peace of slumbering dormitory residents. Sirius' hands immediately grabbed headboard and night table, gripping in agony-induced need as his body arched upward in sudden tension. She was pulling the soaked, *dried* blood stained material from the sliced gash on his left upper, outer and middle thigh, for Merlin's sake! Good Morgana mayhem, but that hurt like hell!

At his hostile reaction, Hermione let go her attempts and immediately pulled back, momentary fear flashing across her face, though quickly it was replaced by both compassion and vague annoyance.

"Honestly, Sirius. That wound's got to be cleaned and tended." She glanced back at Regulus, whose expression was difficult to read as he met her gaze, then glanced to Sirius and back. "I promise without magic, Regulus," she amended, and, apparently satisfied, Regulus left his post in the middle of the room to seat himself on the empty bed against the opposing wall. She turned back to Sirius, lips set in firm resolution.

"All right; come on. I can't clean it on the bed not with Raj taking up most of it, anyway." She turned toward the door, but veered to her right to pull out a straight-backed chair before a writing desk. "Here; settle on this while I get some supplies."

Sirius watched incredulously as she disappeared into the tiny bathroom, flipping on a light and rummaging through cabinets and drawers. He shot a look to his brother, but Regulus only tilted his head, raising his brows as if to say, "Might as well." Sighing heavily, Sirius dropped his feet to the floor how his thigh had stiffened in that time and carefully rose, half dragging himself to the waiting settlement of torture.

"I'll return shortly," Regulus stated abruptly, regaining his feet again in that restless cat manner. "I'll have a look-see down the stairs. I'm not all that keen on surprises at the moment." With a quick nod he left the room, softly drawing the door closed behind him.

Minutes later Hermione resurfaced, arms laden with a bulging pink, terrycloth towel. She set her bundle down, revealing bottles and implements within its folds.

"Where's Regulus?" she asked, concerned face turning about in search.

"Gone to make sure we weren't followed," he replied tiredly. The time allowed in repose upon even the hard-backed chair had left him growing drowsy again. His left leg stretched out before him, barely leaving his arse on the chair, allowing him greater angle from which to lean back.

Hermione merely muttered something noncommittal and proceeded to apply small scissors to his already gaping tear of fabric, and Sirius bit his bottom lip. Usually highly tolerant of pain, timing, frustration and repeated misuse of the limb over the past hours had left him sensitive to attentions. But as Hermione continued, eventually adding a warm, damped cloth to ease the material from skin, Sirius found himself once again on the verge of relaxation. Ministrations to the long wound soon eased the muscle somewhat, the throbbing letting off as blood was cleared, ripped skin freed, and some sort of disinfectant tingled its numbing directly into the gash. He lay his head back over the chair's support, willing his thigh to remain relaxed in spite of the occasional sting of medicine or snag of cloth from flesh.

What seemed like hours had passed, and Sirius realized Hermione was finishing her task, a soft patting of a drying towel clearing the outer areas of the wound. Denim laid still damp and heavy in flopping sections upon his leg. Her completion was welcome, he felt, as it meant a chance to finally rest. Hell would be paid by morning, his quads already protesting the evening's assassination attempt. But that was tomorrow, and by then Regulus might actually feel it was *safe* to use magic, their Ministry-involved (they had heard the cursed word) attackers less able or likely to trace all magical demonstrations

Sirius' eyes popped open to stare unseeingly at the ceiling, his head carefully raising back up, with effort of a thousand men preventing any other movement on his behalf. Eyes adjusting in the dim, visual confirmation did nothing for his peace of mind. Dear all holy relics of the world, she was *bandaging* his wound. Oh no, not with simple cottony pads and spell-o-tape, but by bloody *wrapping* it with a small roll of gauze... around his leg...*inside* his trousers! Her small, lithe hands tickled his skin, caressing in gentle strokes the fine hairs, taking particular care in readjusting bunches and skewed layering about his inseam.

Time and again her medicinal work failed her sense of perfection, and Sirius grit his teeth and closed his eyes in the never-ending torture. *Quidditch... Quidditch...* He could feel the instinctive tightening within, and intentionally his breathing slowed and deepened, an attempt at some miniscule rein of control over his traitorous libido.

Thumb brushing the edges of his sensitive wound; palm flattening out, cupping underside tensed muscles; fingertips tickling in their quest to find the other hand, the roll of material. Deeper inside the trouser leg, retreat out the ever-enlarged rip... hand-off to left hand, burrowing once more into the confined space, caresses of simple medicinal acts engaging and alarming.

"*Aye!*" he abruptly hissed through clenched teeth, his face scrunched in painful contortion, head thrown back, whole body clenching. Hermione simply sighed heavily and muttered something under her breath about low pain tolerance thresholds of egotistical men.

Dear Merlin on high, if she doesn't stop running her soft little hand up the inside of my upper thigh... He was only a man, after all. And never did he have a strong defense against women; even in cases of one perhaps no, definitely completely inappropriate. Hermione was little more than a child; she certainly could not know what she was inadvertently doing, causing him such distress and... reaction. He swallowed, hard.

"All right, then," she finally proclaimed, his trousers now free of her fingers. "It's not tops, but it will have to do until we can get you to a Healer tomorrow. As Stubby Boardman, of course," she added, gathering her items and retreating to the loo. She was rattling on something about infections and antibiotic creams, but Sirius could ill pay attention, his concentration spent for the night. Thankfully, Regulus returned within moments more, addressing Hermione upon her re-entrance.

"I need to know all possible entrances in the building that do not include personal rooms," he stated without preamble. Hermione frowned.

"Surely you don't think... well, I mean, they *are* wizards and all; stepping through the front door would be hardly necessary." However, she looked pensive, and Regulus' unchanged expression forced reconsideration. "Let me grab a dressing gown and I'll show you."

In truth, Sirius was most relieved to watch his brother and Hermione depart the now-suffocatingly-confined room. Hermione's healing practices had about been the death of him. Even now, his body was drawn taut in demand and expectation. And he had no one to blame but himself; self control was easier to come by when one had had some sort of release in the past, what, four years? Not helping any was that guilty dream of last week...

Damn it! Books rattled with the force of his punch to their case. He couldn't get that bloody image out of his mind; his back practically *tingled* at the faux memory of Little Miss Know-It-All Granger's lips tracing his battle scars in reverent detail. Worse yet, he'd just felt those delicate hands brush him with such tenderness belying her cranky words, and now he had basis for comparison. Little did it take to mesh intangible anticipation with experienced reality, and as the hour grew later, and his exhaustion more prominent, the more blurred the two dimensions became.

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Hermione considered the man beside her, thick, rich ebony framing a handsome face of aristocratic lines and breeding. Icy blue eyes narrowed in study, long, elegant fingers gently traced door frame, hinges, locks. In the week since they'd met, she'd grown to realize Regulus was not quite the man she'd expected. Sure, she'd known Sirius' accounts of him would be skewed, colored, but even outside those sketching remarks, the younger Black was proving hard to decipher. She told him as much.

"What would you like to know, Miss Granger?" he queried, his eyes and hands still engrossed in casement window fittings and snippets of wandless magic, checking for traces of the same.

"Well," she fidgeted, house slippers scuffing across cold tile while she pondered just the right phrasing. Arms crossed in self defense, warding off the too-intimate feeling she felt at her limited attire and his all-too-masculine proximity. He really was an attractive man. "Your speech, for example. When I first met you, that night in the park well, more so in the sitting room at Grimmauld you were well-spoken and forthcoming, but not haughty or confrontational in any way, even to Sirius. I'd caught enough of your story that you sounded almost... poetic. It seemed you'd gathered experiences in your life that had left you, for lack of a better word, a bit passive and accepting."

At this, he paused his investigation and, leaning upon his elbows within the window sill, turned his head to her, brows raised in curious question. Slight smirk tugged at his firm lips.

Blushing, Hermione continued, eyes darting repetitiously to her feet and back. "Yet... yet when you're discussing things with me, and me alone, you're more relaxed, but also more definite in your feelings, like you don't need to caution yourself so much. And with Blue, it's as though you're comfortable, like you're free to speak as you choose. And then..." Deep breath, keep going. "Tonight; your mood was so much darker, fiercer, that you were almost... *frightening*." She glanced back to him, forcing herself to keep contact.

Expression altered only slightly, one brow dropping, eyes focusing to intensity that raised her hackles and spurred her fear. Slowly, directly, softly he answered.

"I'm a chameleon, Miss Granger. And still a Slytherin." His head cocked to one side slightly. "We adapt."

Words hung in the pre-dawn air with a sense of warning. Regulus Black, for all his inner growth and peaceful acceptance of life and fate, was still not a man to be trifled with. She did not fear him for a matter of betrayal or physical injury; however, matters of a more sensual aspect were obviously fair game.

What the bloody hell is wrong with me? she chastised herself. Everywhere she turned, she found herself turning into a wanton maiden in fascination of so-called *bad boys*. Raj, Sirius, her *dream figure*, for God's sake! And now Sirius' younger brother... Regulus, former Slytherin and... Death Eater. When all this was over and her boys found safe and sound, Hermione was going to visit a surgery and beg something to level out her hormones. This could *not* be normal!

She met his gaze, yet response came out in stumbles and squeaks, and poorly inarticulate. "Er... ah... I see," was all she could manage.

Bunny slippers suddenly became quite utterly fascinating at that moment.

-o-

Amusement tickled Regulus inside; it was all he could do not to grin devilishly at her obvious discomfiture. She was lovely when she blushed, he admitted. Each chance and planned encounter with this witch drew his interest more, and his initial ramblings of thought that first night back home bloomed further into plausible and pleasant options. Clever, talented, fetching... Hermione Granger could well keep his attention, and for a very long time.

A family of his own...

But carefully crafted masque still held upon his face, obviously unnerving her further. He opted to ease her tension by answering. Head tilted inward in gesture, suggesting a pique to her intellect.

"I get poetic. One of the hazards of music as a profession. At times when I become melancholy, I speak from the heart, exactly what I'm thinking or feeling and that's an odd thing for me. Very much outside my breeding."

"So your entreaties of peace and acceptance were no more than low spirits." Her tone laced in accusation.

"I may phrase it all in pretty words and iambic pentameter in moments of pensive thought," he replied carefully, a threatening edge entering his voice. "But *never* doubt my sincerity." Reflection caught his tongue in open season.

"I even told Sirius that I " He stopped abruptly, disgustedly realizing he was sharing too much, allowing far too open an expression of emotion or heart. Blacks did not reveal emotion, not even with family (though he'd fractured that rule quite recently, quite boldly). "Well, it doesn't matter what I told Sirius." Formality again replaced emotional display, words spoken rapidly in dismissal of the subject.

Pushing off the sill, Regulus moved on, speaking only to inquire of safety matters.

Completing their survey, Regulus led the way back to Hermione's room. She'd been quiet thus far since his revelation of theatrical roles he found himself playing. But he did not kid himself; her reaction to him was blatant in its nature and had little to do with confession. Admitting or not, her body told a different story, one that did not gloss over physical attraction to him. Rushing it was not an option, he knew, so in biding his time he kept social distance for the past twenty minutes. Besides, he had needed time to recollect himself, to staunch the sudden flow of honesty in feelings and thoughts that had resurfaced in the past week. Only as Stubby Boardman had he allowed himself such freedoms. But he was once again a Black, and to a degree, he found himself needing to be a proper Black. Some natures were too engrained to shed easily.

They'd reached her floor before she found her voice, suitably recovered yet still hinting at raw tenderness from his lashing.

"If you're so different now, what changed your mind? Sirius told us of your family, how, even if you didn't support Voldemort directly, you bought into his ideals. Really, I'm surprised you even talk to me so well." They'd reached her door and she stopped to face him, quizzical in expression.

"Your family wouldn't offer me the time of day. Rather, they'd be the first to throw me to the Death Eaters as sport, seeing as how they despised my kind, being a Muggle-born."

Regulus visibly stiffened. Sirius hadn't told him that.

Ever the resourceful, however, Regulus ignored the opportunity for speech and instead turned his attention to opening the door, allowing Hermione in first so as to avoid her gaze whilst he composed himself.

The sight that met them fled all traces of pureblood snobbery from his mind.

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Hermione stopped dead in her tracks. Bile rose, sickening; blood rushed, drained, grew cold. Jaw slackened. No sound could escape, and it was Regulus' *eh-hem* that broke the sounds of heavy breathing and muted, earthy moans coming from atop Shauna's bed.

Coming from Shauna.

Who lay beneath Sirius.

Regulus' voice again echoed in the tiny room, the shut of the door behind them negligent in announcing the pair's arrival. Sirius immediately startled so rolled off from between her roommate's long, curvy legs and onto his right side, half-sitting in an elbow propped way, muttered oaths slipping from beneath his breath. Annoyance and irritation, perhaps, but not a single sign of guilt shown upon his face. He didn't even have the decency to feel *embarrassed!* Hermione grew ill.

Bare of shirt, testaments of Sirius' battles lay splendidly before her, a small part of her unforgivingly reacting to the sight of him. His belt fell loose, its buckle free of partnership. Denims unbuttoned, slightly agape. Good God, at least vital bits were still concealed. Not that his naughties wouldn't be welcome a sight she blushed furiously at the brief thought but not in company, and *not* by Morgana in league with shagging her bloody roommate!

If Sirius looked aggrieved, at least Shauna offered up shame. Chemise pushed up to nearly revealing her breasts, her mini gave quite a view of red lace knickers, knickers Hermione was thanking all deities were still in place. Even at a distance, evidence of swollen lips and disheveled hair loudly proclaimed that another couple minutes more and the sight would have been beyond all repair.

But repair for what? Hermione asked herself. He wasn't hers. She had no claim upon him in any fashion. And by all obvious statements of fact, graciously displayed in three-dimension before her, she was never even in the running.

Sudden tears flooded her eyes as she turned, jerked frantically at the door latch (Regulus had to turn it for her), and fled, leaving behind a strangely, eerily quiet room of four.

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"Tell me..." Regulus nonchalantly pulled Hermione's desk chair near Shauna's bed, where his brother sat at the edge, elbows on knees, forehead resting upon palm heels. Shauna had left to find Hermione, leaving the brothers in solitude.

Cynic's humor rose in his speech. "To what lunacy did you lose / sell / offer / give / bestow or bequeath your mind, Sirius?" Rare was it he held supremacy over his charmed sibling. Opportunity to take the mickey out of him was too juicy to pass up.

Besides; he really wanted to know.

Sirius' answer was a heavy, pained sigh. Still barely clothed, he seemed unabashed yet... something was eating at him. Regulus inquired once more as to what had happened in the whole thirty minutes he and Hermione had been gone. And in monotone reminiscent fashion, Sirius told his story.

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Left with a physical ache that had nothing to do with his wound, and a mental image that practically haunted him, Sirius punched the nearby bookcase, rattling its contents and relieving none of his stress. Why did she do that to him? Why her, of all witches?

Little more time did he have to dwell on tragic woes, a key connecting with disengaged locks drawing his immediate attention. Sirius glanced about frantically for his wand, but it must have fallen out his pocket in the transfer of MacGregor. Debating his options, a soft giggle on the other side stifled his move into defense. He'd heard that voice before, and thus was hardly surprised when the newcomer revealed herself in shadowy figure to be Hermione's roommate, Shauna.

Half stumbling, she straightened in slightly over-corrected manner as she closed the door with a gentle click of latch. A bit foxed, definitely. His position of almost beside her kept him hidden momentarily, as her attention was drawn to Hermione's occupied bed, then to her own. Depositing her bag on the mattress, she turned while removing her tweed cap and fancy waistcoat. And caught sight of Sirius.

Muffled cry of start, and she quickly recalled him, right hand attempting to settle her rampaging heart. Relief spread over her face.

"Really, now, Mr. Boardman; you gave me quite a start." Shock over, she continued her shedding of obvious drama attire. "It's not polite to hide, even when you're the company." Her eyes darted to the dark bath. "Hermione's off for a Johnny, eh? Well, at least she's good for the remembrance. Got more spunk than I'd have credited her, though. Two on one..." She chuckled to herself with a glance at Raj, then turned back to her corner armoire, rifling drawers in stowing of costume jewelry and knick-knacks.

When she sat abed to remove high-heeled boots, a dark leather mini rode up black-stockinged legs, revealing lacy suspenders mid-thigh Sweet Fanny Adams, what had done in his life to deserve this never-ending pain? Sirius asked himself again, closing his eyes in desperation, and failing to keep them that way Always a glutton for punishment...

They opened to find Shauna down to chemise and skirt, her blonde locks wild from finger combing. She was standing now, a foot propped upon her desk, hands gently rubbing in some ladies' cream into bare leg. Sirius directly found his voice, surprisingly steady, considering.

"No; she's out with my brother," he clarified before thinking. But this girl was a Muggle, and she didn't know about Sirius and Regulus Black, or about how they're supposed to be dead. She regarded him from under hooded eyes. Gesturing in head movement, he continued. "Our friend's rather sloshed; letting him sleep it off." His eyes could not draw away from her a second time, following her casual switch of legs, scents of lavender and jasmine drawing his senses... the senses of a much weakened man.

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Amusement faded from Regulus' disposition. Realization was taking shape, and not one he appreciated, either. Recalling Hermione's reaction, it was not the girlish embarrassment of walking in on heavy roger action. No; it was, he suddenly understood, the reaction of a young woman walking in on her roommate shagging the man she fancied.

Damnation! Was Sirius to *always* come out on top? Regulus' humor waned, and he glared at his brother without pity.

"She fancies you, you know. Granger." Regulus waited a moment while Sirius slowly raised his head, confusion evident on his drawn features. "But you don't fucking deserve her."

With that, he rose, turned, and left the room.

Chapter 25: The Measure of a Man

Chapter 26 of 36

Sometimes it takes a bit more knowledge and understanding to truly get the measure of a man.

Reviews are much appreciated

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Chapter 25: The Measure of a Man

Cranky was his mood later that morning, hazy rays of sunlight finally creeping through the casement-framed glass. It couldn't be much past sunrise, he deduced. Headache by dehydration; back knots via cold, hard floor; disposition courtesy of sleep deprivation. Mantra-like pecking of that damn owl on the window wasn't improving matters, either.

Sirius squinted against bright reflection above, the crick in his neck protesting such odd angle. Not the energy to fully swear even under his breath, he made do with mentally cursing the bird while stiffly drawing himself up from the floor on chilled hands, his makeshift duvet of fluffy rose-colored bath mat sliding off in a heavy *flop*. Ripping pain gave immediate pause to his gathering of knees beneath him; left thigh protested every movement of quadriceps, their stretching a pull the newly healing gash could not condone. Sirius could feel fresh tears opening beneath the bandaging.

Gods; the bandaging. That's what ultimately had landed him in such a ghastly, sleepless night. *Best not to think on it* he decided, focusing instead on gaining his feet. Incessant clatter of beak or talons to glass drove him to bite down the pain and move on. Upright finally, he gave a disgusted glance to his brother at his right, secured snugly within soft, warm bedclothes of Shauna's own bed. He himself had started out there as well, he recalled bitterly, until early into their agreement of sharing the small bed Regulus had *in his sleep* managed to spread out dramatically several times, a strong leg shoving Sirius off the edge into a heap. Giving up after the fourth incident, Sirius had tossed the frilly bathmat next to the bed over his shoulders and made due for the couple hours more he had for slumber. In the light of day, it was apparent Regulus was not the toss-turn sleeper portrayed so well, the younger Black now currently curled cocoon-like against the wall.

So much for brotherly compassion.

Haltingly making way to the window, he eased it open, brisk air whooshing in, splashing his near-bare chest with chill. Buttoning up his re-donned shirt before retiring earlier might have been a right smart idea, but nothing about the past twelve hours could Sirius say had indeed been smart. Ignoring this new discomfort as well, he further opened the window, coaxing the evil-eyed predator in. Eagle owl, but one unknown to him. Who could Hermione be writing to? No one knew he and Regulus were there, and Shauna was a Muggle.

Momentary alert raked through him. Harry had last communicated through an owl to Hermione's dormitory room. But closer inspection revealed feminine writing vaguely familiar to him. At first the owl refused him collection of the message, nipping painfully at his hands. All right; Purgatory for sins of the night he accepted without complaint: the row, the floor, the cold. But enough payment had been made, and Sirius had not the tolerance for temperamental postal owls.

"Lay off it before I make quills and a pincushion out of you," he growled, eyeing the bird with testy intent and a sharp flick of finger to beak. Giving over, the creature offered up the post, departing immediately with a forceful wing flap of annoyance. Sirius closed the window. Briefly he considered if he should wake Regulus and send him to take the message to Hermione, who, along with Shauna, had opted to spend the night in a classmate's room under excuse of foul theatrical paint smells in their room. Only Regulus was privy to the whereabouts of said room, Shauna having sighted him in the corridor and shared such information. Hermione, on the other hand, apparently wanted nothing to do with Sirius at the moment.

And therein lay the utter insanity.

Limping to deposit the letter on her desk across the room, he chanced a glance at her bed, MacGregor still unconscious, but now bound tightly at wrists and ankles by Regulus' handy work. Nylons made lovely restraints, he mused. Too bad their use was something so ordinary this time. Chiding himself for lack of mental manners, Sirius considered his options for entertainment until his brother woke and they, together with Hermione, could deal with MacGregor. He was sore, irritated, exhausted, *frustrated*, and grungy. And bored. And boredom for Sirius Black was the greatest punishment of all.

Ensnoring himself in the femininely pink what was so fascinating about the blasted color? bath for morning absolutions, he suddenly realized a long, hot shower was just the remedy for all issues. Carefully unclenching, he rummaged the vanity cupboard for scissors, then oh-so-delicately cut the wraps about his thigh. Peeling back layers of padding, he realized Hermione had, indeed, done a fantastic job tending the injury. Nevertheless, it lay there angry and red, daring further strain with even more bleeding nicks than he'd opened only minutes prior.

Scalding liquid could not have been more welcome than at that first moment of contact. Beneath pulsating spray, a night's worth of scrimmage, a week's worth of stress and months' worth of pent frustration washed away. Steam rising blurred vision, such that tiled walls bled into nondescript images. Visions played out before him, consideration of what was and what could be.

Hermione Granger *fancied* him? Him? Of all people... Assuming Regulus was right, that was. But then, Regulus was a number of things; flippant wasn't one of them. And Sirius could not see how it would aid Reg, either, by telling him such a tale. No; he had been rightly angry with Sirius last night this morning and had meant what he'd said. But if that were the case, then...

Then Hermione Granger fancied him.

And she wasn't the same little sixteen-year-old he'd known what felt to him only months before. Calculating, he realized with no little surprise that she was nearly twenty-one years of age. Yes, still a *girl* to him at thirty-six, but... she was more than of age. Such thought should have cleared his conscience of guilt associated with that dream last week, but it did not. In point of fact, it unnerved him all the more. Just because he was now *allowed* to think erotic thoughts about her didn't mean he *wassupposed* to do.

Taking a mental step back, Sirius considered the situation from what-if-then points of view. Assuming he wanted to pursue a relationship which, thank you very much, he was certainly not endorsing what actually stood in the way? Harry and yes, he must consider his godson's feelings in the matter, for he and Remus and... and Regulus were his family Harry would not be an issue. Assuming all went well and the boys came out of their predicament unscathed, Harry might take exception to a father-figure becoming involved with his best friend. But in all honesty, if Harry had grown to be anything like his father, in the end only their happiness need be present.

Ron? He wondered. Difficult was that avenue. Ron was Hermione's other best friend, and like Harry he'd be protective of her. But they were dating... *right now*. He'd not known that until a few days ago, when Ginny had briefly mentioned something alluding to such fact while she searched for some odd knick-knack in the attic. Yet Hermione's thoughts dwelled not on Ron not in that sense. Too obvious were her feelings that Ron had grown more in their friendship, but less (if ever there had been) in their romance. And truthfully, though the lad was a good kid young man he lacked the drive Hermione had always shown, even as a teenager. He lacked her *passion*.

Who was left to care, really? Quick scan of names and faces revealed no one with any legitimate sway. So decidedly it fell to the two of them. Considering Regulus' claim, one mind was already made up. *But she doesn't know me!* he argued with himself. *She doesn't understand who I am as a man she's only seen me at my worst, always always in hiding.* Repeatedly excuses rose, all valid, all noteworthy.

But it perhaps all came down to him, to his wants, and it was those he could not justify, could not clarify in his heart. Bodily reaction told him all he needed to know in terms of desire, but Hermione was one of those very few for whom it was all or nothing. Too much respect lay there upon her, too good a soul was she for him to ever classify as a shag piece. No; Hermione Granger was above all of that, and dog though he may sometimes be, he would not sully that beauty with mere lust.

Thoughts of similar nature debated within his head, more than a quarter hour at least passing in fashion, allowing cleansing, releasing, soothing of his beaten body. War raged on inside his head, rousing to clouts of screams and poundings for stress of point, his own name repeating in effort to wake from his haze of self-condemnation and accept some value of answer. Facts were as they were; no changing would there be. How he dealt with them, on the other hand, defined him.

Fluttering of dusky floral, vinyl curtain pulled him back to immediate consideration, breezy ruffling brought on by sudden opening. A soft *click* indicated closure.

"Sirius?" Unsure voice. Water shut off, towel drawn down from its crest upon the rod, quick dab to face, swift, loose wrap about hips. Sirius stepped out the shower, casual in movement and attitude, to find himself face to face with the object of his musings. To Hermione's 'O' expression, eyes and mouth alike, he froze. Several heartbeats remained this stammer to their meeting. Progressively she stiffened, defensive arms across chest, stony face. Moments more it took before his own action set in.

Recalling himself, he flashed trademark grin of charm and moved to the porcelain vanity to her right, brushing arms in passing. Hermione moved to her left in quick shuffle, invading what little space was available in the cramped room.

While he faced steamed mirror, gently wiping down with a hand towel, Sirius divided mute attention between his task at hand and covertly studying the young woman he'd now be forced to view in a whole other fashion. Though he'd acted in typical Sirius Black manner, at no point was he *feeling* aught typical. Odd were sensations now, this uneasy interaction between old acquaintances. Lack of proper attire affected nothing here; exhibitionist to a degree, little more than skin found him equally comfortable. Acquisition of new knowledge, however... now that was unnerving.

Sirius stared into the streaked, wet mirror, lint left in symmetrical arcs from his clearing. Absentminded stroking of chin and cheeks, two-day growth itchy and rough, eyes averted from watching her behind him. Aware the slight puddle due his dripping body, he remained still upon foot, decidedly impervious to drying body and rapidly cooling air. *Why doesn't she say something?*

"There's... there's a razor in the cabinet. If you want to shave," she provided as though hearing his thoughts, strength of conviction much less apparent than only the night before. Brief glance to the mirror placed her eyes directly upon his back. She was still angry with him, unable to meet his gaze. But that was all right; temporal and emotional distance would be required in seeking resolve to this new, strange circumstance.

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Wet. All that crossed her mind was one word: wet. Shimmering against cheap florescent light, droplets reflected and magnified, dancing upon renewed flesh, masculine flesh. Poised before her, unreadable expression upon his perfectly still, perfectly formed face, he waited. And he was wet.

And beautiful. In her anger of the night and even morning, she had forgotten how beautiful he was, marks of past pains coloring his body in shades of stories and trials. After a night of crying and complete confession to Shauna (who was horrified to learn she'd nearly shagged the object of Hermione's deeper affections, and admitted it was she who came heavily on to Sirius and not vice versa), Hermione was worn to a point beyond reactionary shock. That was not to say no effect was had upon greeting this sight of male form. On the contrary; though she did not display it, inside her gut clenched, breath caught, belly tingled. For all his flaws, he was still quite the masculine beauty of real athletic form, body born simply of lifestyle and hardships, of fighting for life itself.

Bead of clear water gathered at mid sternum, grew with others, fell... tracing a rapid descent down his taut belly, skirting his navel, disappearing into white cotton dipping just below, dipping dangerously low in a heavy drape. Mouth dry, she struggled to swallow, then met his eyes. Wary, but lively.

Mistress of control momentarily, at least only the merest cocking of one eyebrow did she offer in response. Arms crossed chest to give off an aggrieved, annoyed air. In reality, no other solution came to her of what to do with her arms. Nerves shook them perceptibly if left to hang on their own.

Cheshire grin and in two strides, he was beside her, facing away to the vanity, forcing her steps aside to avoid crowding him. But the view from behind was even... worse.

Realization prickled: she was staring. Undignified, unashamed. Fascinated. Faded crosses to bear, bared in stark white light, fine etchings of pale against deeper hues. Scars of life. She knew that back rather well; some would say *intimately*. Heat creeping up neck and face belied her cool facial aspect.

"There's... there's a razor in the cabinet. If you want to shave," she managed, still intent upon the plane of sinew and angles, gentle divot of spine, graceful concave of lower back. Reinforcement within was called up, deep breath forcing the words from her before she made herself laughing stock.

"I just wanted you to know that I received an urgent owl from the Head of Muggle Artifacts. Zelda, if you recall. She says she needs to speak with me about *Raj*. Funnily enough, she wants you and your brother to come along should I be able to contact you. I didn't know she even *knew* about him. But suffice it to say Regulus went out to find an owl for a reply. He didn't trust leaving Raj here, so he trailed him along. Once he's back, we'll all go. So whenever you're ready..."

Ceasing her rambling, no bother to await his answer did she consider, and instead turned and slipped out the door, her breathing difficult through more than heavily humid air.

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Blue picked listlessly at his blood sausage, appetite suppressed in growing anticipation. The man across the ancient table fared better, managing bites here and there, periodically smiling at something the spry little woman between them said. Breakfast was usually a lively affair at his grandmamá's cottage, but long evening of incredible news and worrisome contemplation had left all participants depleted by sunrise.

Jacob MacGregor set down his fork and gently rubbed his frail, bony hands, skin spotted with age and nearly translucent. Attention was turned to Zelda, herself offering only a half-honest effort toward the meal she'd prepared. MacGregor's hand found hers, the dainty feminine fingers small and drawn in the Scot's larger paw. "Argus'll find Raj. Don't ye worry, lass. Then all this secrecy can come tah an end.

"Mind ye, Raj knows wha's wha', and if Blue an' 'is friends know wha' he's said, then time's come fer 'em tah know t'all. Potter an' Raj, they needn't be at odds, ye ken."

Raj MacGregor grandson to this brogue-lipped wizard had disappeared. And for once, Blue was worried more *for* young MacGregor than *about* him. If what little the elder had said was true and Blue's own grandmamá had indeed verified his story then in Raj's safety lay all their fates. Until he could be found, only brevity would be allowed upon those involved, and Blue waited impatiently for owls to confirm imminent arrivals of Stubby (*Regulus*, you idiot!), Sirius and Hermione. Much had to be done... before Voldemort closed in.

Blue took a sip of his Irish Breakfast. It'd grown cold.

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Regulus had not returned by the time Sirius had dressed, having scrubbed the blood as best he could from torn denims, new gauze of his own wrapping staunching fresh blood. Once out of self-imposed hiding, he would cast a quick Scouring Charm in effort to cleanse his sweat-stained shirt to a level of presentation. Despite his attire's condition, his body and ever-lengthening black tresses found themselves revived and refreshed, and that would do for now.

Hermione was pacing in annoyance, glancing out the window often, then to the door, as though expecting any moment some saving grace to enter. No effort would she spare him, however. Just as well, he considered, that whole distance thing previously agreed upon with himself. Right now concentration fell to Raj MacGregor, and whatever association he held with the Head of the Department of Muggle Artifacts. Had Zelda Luminare realized the boy a threat to Hermione? Possibly. His own chat with the eccentric lady weeks prior suggested a stalker of questionable magnitude. MacGregor, perhaps?

Musings dissipated rapidly in the broken vocal silence. Sirius looked up from Shauna's bed, posture reminiscent of only hours before. Hermione had stopped pacing.

"Why, Sirius?" Staring down at him from but a meter away, hands atop hips, mixture of hurt and anger and something unspoken pulling her face into tics of tension. "Why did you do it? Why did you decide... well," she left off a moment, steely gaze dropping with nervous shuffling and relocation. Sirius did not interrupt.

"It wasn't the time nor place, you know," she corrected in schoolhouse matron tone, apparently feeling safe beside Shauna's desk. Fingers toyed idly with rolled theatrical ribbon, delving into sectioned layers of crimson velvet. Periodic looks to him, her resolve falling apart. He wondered what originally were her accusations. Unclear her direction at first, illumination struck at her mindless glimpses to the bed he sat. *Of course...*

Embarrassment suddenly turned to agitation, and Sirius witnessed transitions play across her face, happenstance seeking spite over shame.

"How could you? Honestly, Sirius; shagging one's roommate whilst one's *friend* is out checking security with one's *brother* for said one's own bloody *safety and well-being* is a right bit rude, don't you think?" Voice higher now, fueled with millions of emotions.

"Please, let's not discuss this now." Beseeking, quiet. Not now, no. Unprepared, unsure, unable to disseminate loads of revelations.... He wasn't ready for this little chat, nor was he sure when he ever would be. But hysterics proved her will different than his, and on she went, a good several minutes chastising his lewd and raucous behavior. Never once suggested were her own feelings for him, a matter of jealousy or hurt. No; instead, claims of selfishness and prat nature conjured dormant aggravation he'd thought gone through some sleep, physical release and scalding water. But she'd only kept on, and patience was never his virtue.

"Merlin's eyes, you looked like some beastly little schoolboy in a right temper, fit of hormones you couldn't keep quelled for a bleeding minute. Greater things to worry about, you know, and all you cared while we were out protecting your precious backside was fawning all over Shauna like you'd never seen a girl and a squiffy one at that!" Shrewish her tongue had become. Nearer the edge she pushed him, asking for but one more piece of nastiness to shatter his newly constructed reserve. "Taking advantage of her less-than-sober state for your own jollies. What cracking behavior, Mr. Black; and here I'd thought you'd grown up."

It was the sneer that did it.

"I'm only a man, Hermione!" Sirius swung back, leaping to his feet, all consideration of previous concerns for her feelings disappearing in the heat of rant. "I'm not a fucking Saint. Good God, do you even know what you were *doing* to me last night? And you've the gall to ask why I wasn't better *behaved*."

"What *I* was doing to you?" she snapped back, hand dropping to grip desk edge until knuckles shown white in their force. "Did I hold a wand to your ego-swollen head and *force* you to have it on with my roommate?" Derisive snort. "I think not."

Disgusted at her sarcasm and lack of understanding, something inside him gave way. "Shagging Shauna had not a damn thing to do with a wand to my head, little Miss I-Don't-Bloody-Well-Know-Everything," he barked, stress bunching his features. "This... this..." He tried to form the words, but flustered at the right ones, instead pointing accusingly at his wounded thigh. "This bit of your *handiwork*, however, was more a threat to my sanity than any Cruciatius Curse *ever could* be. God's teeth, Hermione; you were bloody well trying to *kill* me!"

"I was trying to mend your leg without magic, Sirius! It's called First Aid, and though not nearly as effective as a spell, it was all that was available at the time. Perhaps I should have let you bleed to death?" she asked saccharinely sweet. "For apparently my attempts upon your person were instead blatant of my true, accursed ways. That's me, alright horrible person, me; tried to heal your wound. How evil I must be," she replied caustically, eyes narrowed in a snit. Trouncing like a child in a fit, she turned her back to him, arms crossed, hips cocked in a brood, staring towards the door.

Incredulous. She had no idea what she'd done last night. Sirius paused a moment, debating. Perhaps the only way to get through to her logical mind was to *show* her her wicked ways... by example.

"Here, let me explain in terms your pretty little head can understand," he bit off, teeth clenched. Strides few brought him to her, rough grab to a slim wrist, jarring her attention. No time to react had she before they were across the room, her desk chair whipped about and her body practically thrown upon it. No measure of civility was available to him at that moment. She'd pushed and pushed, never accepting his polite replies that never were obvious enough. So he'd given up manners. She'd demanded answers; he'd give them.

Barely settled, Sirius threw her off balance again, grabbing each leg just behind the knees, roughly yanking her toward himself, stretching her out whilst proclaiming more to himself, "Yeah, that's about how I was sitting."

Scanning the room in sharp movements, he located the perfect prop. Hurriedly he retrieved the velvet ribbon roll from Shauna's desk, returning to Hermione with a sole thought in mind: make her understand.

Kneeling, Sirius grabbed a handful of trouser fabric over her left thigh, bent over the spot and neatly tore a hole with his teeth. Brisk further rip, and the trouser leg lay open in a gash, much resembling his own. Shocked into silence up to this point, Hermione did not, however, let this particular gesture go unvocalized. She let out a screech of surprised dismay. Her body, on the other hand, allowed fear to halt movement, so said her wide eyes and taut muscles.

Ignoring minute protests, he fussed about the tear, muttering beneath his breath "like this" and "more like that" until the size and shape were perfect. Gathering the ribbon roll, he suddenly stilled, pondering. He wasn't sure he could do this, this little lesson. Nagging voice inside his head told him it was a poor plan, that backfiring was very great a risk. But he'd come too far, and a point had to be made. Lesson of life, as it were.

Much slower, gentler, he began again. Eyes now narrowed rose and met hers, wide in concern and bafflement. Dark brow creased, restrained force holding him in check. Burrowing visually into her, calloused hands delved softly into her torn trousers, crushed velvet taking on roles of gauze and implement of torture. Settled between her knees, his hands recreated her attentions of the night, the same fluttering, perfectionist movements she'd performed. Slowly, calmly, ever so lightly his fingers played upon her skin. Repetitiously. Ministrations mirroring her own once upon his jagged flesh.

But unlike the night, this time he watched her, a tale of plenty written brilliantly across her young face. And she watched him, ever curious, ever scared.

Hermione's breath caught, seeming to stop, even, and the oddest look played across her face. Body tensed, stilled. Trembled slightly. Mirroring hers, Sirius' fingers found themselves readjusting placement upon soft flesh of hamstring, tips straying in unconscious measure, brushing innocently higher and higher yet in a dance to correct bandaging. Finally material ceased its unravel, and his hands tied off supple ribbon, freeing themselves of her trousers with ever-so-cautious easing. Carefully, slowly he regained his feet, their eyes following each other's. But her body remained frozen, and he leaned over her, hands placed either side her hips, his face drawn closely to her own.

Controlling his now ragged, shallow breaths, Sirius continued to stare. And for a moment he'd forgotten she was Hermione Granger, best friend to Harry and Ron, bookworm teenager he'd known years before. For a moment, all he knew was the set jaw and gentle curve of cheek directly before him, the hint of peppermint from warm breath and supple lips, the magnetism drawing auras into her own, his included. Constricting his air and tensing his body. Careful restraint found his voice. Hitched, weak, strained.

"For the brightest witch of your age," he spoke but above a whisper, tight and focused, "you're sometimes quite clueless."

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Breathe. Just. Bre... eee... eeeathe...

Hermione's brain commanded, but Hermione's body insubordinated. Comprehension was a formidable thing. Lessons learned by hard experience were both effective and long-lasting; extremely well-learned was this one.

Great heavens; if what she did to Sirius last night was anything like

Eh-hem... well, one could only say that he *did* have a rather valid point, after all. Because what he was doing to her now... it was torturous. And inhumane. And had to be in violation of seven different peace treaties. In guilt she recalled tending his wound in wee hours of the morn, her own fingers fluttering about tensed muscles and delicate skin. Understood now was just why his muscles were so tense. And it wasn't due to inferior pain tolerance.

There! There oh dear... She had to bite her lower lip in effort, forestalling uncivilized noises breaking through her lips. Eyes shut tightly a moment, but ever quickly opened again, their closing allowing far too much awareness of Sirius' fingertips grazing tender flesh, hypersensitive and quivering of its own volition. Touches stilled, hands withdrew, eyes... searched. And he stood, placed his hands near her hips, leaned forward, close. Too close.

And staring into pewter framed in raven wisps, Hermione knew things would never *could* never, ever return to innocence.

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Ghostlike prints tingled upon fingertips, memories of soft, feminine give and goose-fleshed skin responding to lightest pressure, graze, presence. Flexed fingers, slight shake of hand, deep breath out. Nothing relieved phantom awareness in Sirius' body, memories sharp of her beneath his touch.

He should be drug out in the street and *Avada Kedavra'd* after that. If guilt had lain there before upon him for barely recalled taunts and teases and inappropriate displays of sexual hunger, then what he'd done several hours ago deserved little better than quick execution. Intent on communicating, on *making her understand...* his conscience had been right, and all had backfired. All desire and frustration had returned to him, tenfold. And more so, the responsibility. Only Regulus' timely return had broken the spell after his little demonstration. Yet he had crossed a line forced *them* to cross that line and no going back was there to be had.

And they both knew it.

No excuses of ignorance could anymore be made; each now quite cognizant of the other, each fully sighted in baser attractions. Each only *too aware...*

Refusing to glance at the preoccupation of his thoughts, Sirius concentrated on the other occupants in familiar drawing room ambience. Young MacGregor stood window-side, hands clasped behind, staring unseeingly through sheer whites and mullioned glass. Straight, formal, still.

Regulus sat the settee across the room from Sirius, wand trained inconspicuously upon their former captive. Reg didn't trust the wizard; neither did Sirius. Easing posture minutely, his own wand cleared his knee-propped left foot, shot ready should need arise. Center seating found Zelda, uncharacteristically nervous, worried eyes following Raj MacGregor's subtle, almost nonexistent shifts of weight. Frail and lean, an old Scot introduced as Jacob MacGregor Raj's grandfather reclined beside her, comforting hand nestling her own. Blue and Hermione found floor-space near the fire, damp chill in the air forcing such desired accommodations.

Empty *tick...tick...tick...* counted uneasy seconds, minutes of otherwise cottage silence. Even crackles and spits of flame remained muted against the echoes of time. All eyes trained upon stately figure, anticipation running rampant. Sirius had been against sharing any information when they'd arrived more than an hour past, despite Zelda's encouragement. But Hermione had seen no reason to keep her suspicions of Voldemort's plotting, most of which Blue had already told his grandmother and Jacob. And yet now, now they sat waiting, some expectancy upon young MacGregor for what purpose Sirius knew not. Only Jacob seemed to realize there was reason to consider Raj's response as important, and the sense wafted through their party in contagious form.

So they waited.

"A birthright ages honored...." Raj's low voice lay even, emotionless. Still he stared out into gray overcast. "A lineage ages hidden."

What the sodding hell does he mean by that? Sirius quipped, but held silent. Raj was going on like some blasted minion of Dumbledore's: secretive, evasive, riddling. But like others, he waited on edge, vainly awaiting continuance. Despite judgment, he was curious. Raj, however, had little intention to satisfy.

"Is all right, Raj," Jacob finally said, resigned acceptance in his aged voice. "Tell 'em. Might'n't be our only chance, ye ken. We've nae time tae be wastin' an' if the lad here knows his plans..." Trailed off, unspoken phrases understood. Solemn blanket, heavy and worn, fell upon the room. Raj's eyes flicked, not to his grandfather, but to Regulus. The "lad."

"So he *is* after it." Confirming statement rather than inquiry, but Regulus perceptively nodded regardless. Returned sharp nod, returned facing glass. Quiet again, gathering of thoughts.

"Imperative secrecy, and yet now..." Raj left off again, seeming reluctant to speak further. Quarter view of his face offered enough to discern conflicting emotions warring within. Suddenly Sirius felt poorly for him. Inexplicable, yes, but a sense overcame him that MacGregor held a responsibility greater than any were prepared for, a decision battling between betrayal of an oath, and failure of its need.

How very right he was.

"*San Graal. The Sacred.*" Eyes narrowed in thought, consternation. "Over the centuries it was lost to history, but never was it lost to those charged with its custodianship. A charge passed down in blood, to protect the Chalice of Life Everlasting. Birthright bestowed upon the descendants of the only one worthy to succeed in the Quest, to locate the Sangreal, to be revealed its divine truths." He paused, looking down in remembrance, voice softening.

"A lineage thought never to have existed. For though renown by his purity, his chastity, he was rewarded by God not only the Ecstasy of the Sangreal's revelations as is well known by history but also of a night with his one true love, Evangeline, who had followed the men of the Quest as a servant. He had denied himself his whole life in the name of God, and his sacrifice was not forgotten. The morning after, he ascended. Left behind: his bloodline, successful only in its complete secrecy. Sworn to protect the Sangreal, as he had sworn. As had his descendants ... as had sworn their sons ... as had sworn the son of Jacob... as had sworn the son of Argus..." His voice caught, now but a pained whisper. "As had sworn *I...*"

"Your... your *ancestor.*" Hermione's voice cracked, amazement laced in incredulous awe. "Your ancestor was *Galahad...*"

Turning, he looked up then, eyes seeking hers. Sirius felt ill. They had stepped into something larger than ever imagined.

"Yes. Bastard son of Sir Lancelot du Luc and Elaine of Corbenic. Knight of Service of Arthur, King of Britain, and acquaintance of Merlin. His journals kept the knowledge alive, offered guidance. And now the Sacred has fallen in turn to my protection, yet Voldemort is its greatest threat ever... and one I've not the power to fight."

"So, you just need to keep Voldemort's hands off it," Sirius interjected, logic pure and simple for the brave at heart.

"Yes, it would appear that way," Raj responded, slight grit to his speech. Level stare to Black conveyed his rare annoyance. "But Voldemort's reach is greater than any concealment I might offer. Not when the Sangreal is so powerful it can only be hidden by such means for a short time." The despair in his voice told Sirius all anger was not directed at him, but at Raj himself, at his situation.

"But surely you've hidden it well." Blue this time. "He's not found it, yet, has he?"

"No, not quite yet," Regulus broke in. "But he's close. That much I've learned. He's someone on the inside of the Ministry, though I've not yet learned their identity."

"Oh!" Hermione squeaked. All eyes to her. "Oh Merlin!" She turned to Raj. "Chamberlain! Lord Chamberlain, your boss! Raj, he's the one Voldemort's sent to find the Grail." She pulled out the now-creased photograph from the Gala, and explained George's overheard knowledge and their own surmises. Once finished, chatter erupted. But it was Raj's pale face that drew attention back to one focus.

"He's closer than I'd believed," he said, a certain level of edge creeping into his words. "I'd marked him as the culprit was sure of it but had no proof. *Bollocks!*" Uncharacteristically he cursed, smashing a fist into the plaster wall. "If he'd spotted McCaine by the night of the Gala... then he knows McCaine's one of them."

"One of who?" came several requests.

"One of St. Cyr's people. A Wizarding order branched off centuries ago from the Muggle Knights Templar. They're searching for the Sangreal, as well. To protect it, of course, but too many differences lie within the group, and it could never be safe there. However, they've knowledge that would help Voldemort, even though they may not realize it. And if Chamberlain has marked McCaine... then McCaine is in dire straits. And the Sangreal is nearly exposed." Raj's agitated state grew into blatant fear. "I've got to retrieve it I'm the only one who knows its location and move it to its one true refuge before he determines its position. But timing is crucial... the last piece of the puzzle no one has ever uncovered..." More to himself his mutterings now fell, furrowed brow in thought.

"Surely it isn't that easy to find," Hermione reasoned aloud. "You've hidden it somewhere safe, right? Somewhere obscure and out of the way, somewhere that no one would ever cross its path, like a cave or underground vault or "

"like," Raj cut off, piercing look to his Auntie. "The Department of Muggle Artifacts."

Chapter 26: Brethren

Chapter 27 of 36

Is anyone or anything like we grew up believing? Or is there more depth, more options, more variations that offer up paths unknown, but greatly desired.

****Reviews are much appreciated****

Chapter 26: Brethren

Sudden silence fell, Zelda Luminare holding all attention. Yet hers was solely on Raj, confusion and bafflement stark across etched lines of her face.

"But... Raj, how..." Words would not form, seeking litany of how this supposition came to be. "I don't understand. You could never have gotten into the department on your own, much less hide something so, so... reverent. I have a complete inventory, as well, of every single artifact in the hall, and nothing ever comes in or out without my knowledge. In fact," she added, straightening of spine, gathering of propriety and indignation. "Nothing has come into the office that I have not thoroughly researched, tested and catalogued."

Raj's smile held little humor. "*Nothing*, Auntie? All matters in your area are recorded thoroughly? Your quills, personal items...?"

"Of course not, Raj," she answered a mite dismissively. "Personal items are not artifacts, though no one brings any in but for myself. Even my assistants have their desks outside the inner cloisters. As for myself, I hardly think a change of robes or tin of sweets constitutes a need for research, since they are of my own making. Point of fact, my dear, nothing not of my own creation has entered into the department corridors in over eight months, and even then only the lovely purple *Tradescantia Zabrina* you gave me for my desk when you first joined the Ministry. You remember; the one in the lovely goblet-styled pot "

Chuckles trapped in his throat, weighed down by implication severity. Auntie Zelda was clever as they come; to have snookered her so well... But empty was the amusing triumph. Greater was the worry, their situation crumbling with each revelation.

"Yes," he said instead, softly confirming insinuation by her abrupt silence. "My greatest concern now is retrieving the Chalice without suspicion, and placing it out of harm's way. Unfortunately," he added with a sigh, a weary glance around the room, "Chamberlain will be monitoring every item moved in the Ministry, now. And the safest place actually known is no longer viable; a new location must be found whose power overthrows anything the Dark Lord can even envision. He cannot be allowed to secure the Grail. He *cannot!*" Horror filled his eyes and voice, making very apparent to all the treachery should this unthinkable act come to pass.

"What about St. Cyr's lot?" Regulus questioned across the room. Voice of reason, of calm. "You said the Guardians were seeking to locate and protect the Grail. Why not ask their assistance?"

Raj sighed wearily. "It would seem the course of action to take, yes," he confirmed. "But regardless of your new knowledge, it is still not safe to share my lineage with any one of them. Another rogue could be found, and this is no mere ten pence culinary piece with which to play. No; all must be kept secret, which is why they suspect me as a possible threat, if the attack last evening lays any claim."

"You were too close to something, then, yeah?" Blue spoke with renewed interest, piquing Hermione's as well, for she looked expectantly at him. Raj hedged, considering.

"I knew about St. Cyr both her and her brother-in-law Philippe. I knew McCaine was involved, and that he had uncovered something important. I needed to know what; perhaps it was relevant to my own knowledge. But I lost track of him shortly after he traveled from Ireland to the Continent. I had those loyal to the Line watching him as well, but they, too, failed to keep him in sight. Frustrating though it may be," he added with a slight grin, "it is reassuring to know they have someone on the right side

capable of thwarting those intent upon trailing him as a wounded deer."

"This Philippe St. Cyr..." Sirius now had the floor. Thoughtful was his expression, viewing Raj with mixture of suspect and interest. "Professor McGonagall introduced him as her brother-in-law..." Statement trailed off in question.

"Minerva McGonagall is sister to Madam Madeline St. Cyr," Raj explained, vaguely surprised his new associates had not yet sussed that out. "Albus Dumbledore's Order has discreetly kept contact with the Guardians through that very link. He is a prime runner between the two, as well as "

"Hold on," Hermione interrupted, sudden awareness lighting her face. She looked from Raj to Regulus to Sirius, then back again to Raj. "Philippe St. Cyr... does he have a French accent? Not very old, perhaps my age?"

It was Sirius who answered. "Yes..." Gaze turned expectant, narrowed, attentive. Raj couldn't blame him. He himself was quite curious at Hermione Granger's tone, and just where it might lead.

She turned abruptly to the elder Black, sharing some intimate secret in one glance. Tinge of jealousy coursed his veins, denial of hope for her attentions becoming well too clear. But he had no need of that concern at present; nothing was more important than the Sangreal.

"At the concert, when you and I first, well, met," she reminded Black, head cocking to one side. "Your, er..." pausing indecisively, collected thoughts formed finally to understandable words. "*Waiting room* for me provided a conversation I overheard from the men's toilet. Obviously I didn't see who was conversing, but one voice sounded young and French, and the other a northern accent called him *Philippe*."

Attentive now, Raj stepped from the window, finding himself several steps closer to the young witch, leaning in with titterings of excitement. Information that could save them. "What did they say? It had to be important or you'd not have recalled it," he reasoned.

She beamed with pride. "I think so; it was awfully cryptic at first, but now with everything you've said..." Gracing him another smile, one grander, eyes twinkling with sorting out some complex problem stumping her peers. He waited anxiously.

"I didn't hear all of it, mind you, but the one gentleman told Philippe that he wanted you watched something about the attack in Waterford. That he wanted you questioned so there'd be no breach." Here she paused, confusion lining her features. "But I thought you'd been with me that evening we'd gone walking in the garden. In fact, that's the night we met."

Certain pleasure washed MacGregor at the wince and hard jaw set Sirius Black gave at the revelation. Jealous himself, perhaps? But fleeting was the joy; deep down Raj knew Hermione's favors were not for himself, but haunted by another. It seemed now he might know whom that other was. Turning focus, he corrected her assumptions.

"Indeed I was, milady, but I fear they were not speaking of me, but of my father, Angus MacGregor. He had been keeping watch upon a certain few, and was witness, sadly, to the destruction in Waterford. Thankfully, he was able to secure the girl who had escaped, and spirited her away for safety. They must have seen him," he added softly, more to himself in consideration.

Murmurs flitted about, but Raj ignored them. Peering intently, he silently urged Hermione to continue. There had to be more.

"They also spoke of a girl knowing, and that though she didn't know everything, the Englishman had taken care of it with some precautions." Murmuring ceased. "Said she had too much to lose." She looked questioningly at him, seeking clarification. At this point, only speculation could he grant.

"Little more than a guess, but I would have to say they knew about Chamberlain. I'd suspected, but some tip must have shown itself to them. Thinking back..." Missing puzzle pieces began to fill in the collage of unreadable edges. "If they worried over Chamberlain, and he indeed had been desperately seeking the Grail's location... Chelsea. Chelsea Chamberlain." Eyes surveyed the room, assuring all took note. Heads nodded in sudden understanding as he went on to explain Chelsea's wandering off in his flat, her blush upon reentering the room with himself and her father, the aura that said she'd been where she ought not, doing what she ought not. Galahad's journal, not quite where or as he'd last placed it.

"Oh, yes!" Hermione suddenly exclaimed. "Yes!" She stood from her fireside placement, pacing in excessive energy. "That's it! Chelsea was regaling me with tales about how nosy her father was in everything she heard at Ministry parties, how she had to tell him every last detail, even what she accidentally overheard while hiding about some reception in Belfast, looking to catch sight of you." Blush crept rapidly up his neck and cheeks, causing Raj to turn away from the cocked eyebrow Sirius was now granting him, a knowing smirk upon his little brother's face across the room. Chelsea Chamberlain's fancy of him had not faded to the wayside as he had wished these past months.

Regaining face, he turned back to Hermione's mumbling, drawing her back to matters at hand. "But surely that is not all you heard? That simply confirms how Chamberlain was doing it. Sadly, I would need to know what their plans were in order to formulate some action, myself. I can get the Grail out, but how to proceed from there without notifying either group... At this point, 'tis hopeless, I'm afraid."

Dejectedly, he sat down heavily, the room silent about him.

"It's past time for a bite and some tea," Auntie Zelda commented to no one in particular. Grandfather Jacob agreed, willing to assist. Leaving the younger group to themselves, half-hearted but well-meaning suggestions rose up randomly from the brothers and Blue, but Hermione kept her piece, pensive face delved in thought. Quarter hour later, they found themselves at the table, enjoying homemade scones and tea, mutely encouraging each other though not so optimistic at such point.

"You know, Jacob, dear," Auntie Zelda was saying thoughtfully. "Those Cotton Weed plants we studied over yesterday, they really should be allowed to gather a mite more growing. Plucking them too early will forgo the medicinal qualities as an anesthetic. What was that old yarn? *Ninth month nettle, sour stomach settle. Tenth month claim, feel no pain*. I really think we ought "

"That's it!" Hot liquids scalded this time as Hermione's yet again ambitious shriek startled the group. Though under breath, Raj caught Sirius' biting swear, the older man dabbing at red patches now blooming on his hand.

"What's it?" Blue asked for them all, cautious in his query.

Again, she'd turned to Raj to speak, and pride rose within, this beautiful witch having blatantly been thinking of him and his worries, and not those of the Brothers Black. Raj smiled, mystified.

"That night the conversation I overheard. There was something else, but I just couldn't recall it. But you," she clarified, glancing at Auntie Zelda, "reminded me just then with your adage." She turned back to Raj, occasionally a sweeping look at the others to state that she was not mental, that excitement rose for purpose and meaning.

"Raj, the Englishman told Philippe St. Cyr that he'd learned that the *power to overcome* would show itself the first day of the seventh month. Then they heard something and quickly ceased talk, but the last thing they said... ooh... it was sort of like Latin. Spanish I think. He said, '*Que sera, sera*.'" Met with silence, abruptly deflated her face became, and she sat back in her chair, all sparkle gone from her eyes. "I know; no help at all."

Raj studied her a moment, contemplating. "On the contrary," he replied slowly, gaining all attention. "I believe you may have heard more than you realize." Now his turn came to encompass the group, to explain optimism.

"For centuries, it has been passed down that the Grail, if returned to its true home at the right time, would bestow upon the caretaker powerful knowledge, insight to slay thy enemies and enrich thy kin and self. Often referred to as 'the power to overcome,' as it was to overcome the vulnerabilities of life." Soft clinks of cup to saucers, as hands surreal in motion fell to the table. Expressions asked if ears had heard correctly, and Raj could not contain his growing amazement.

"But the time and place were lost. To all known records. It seemed only Merlin himself knew. Unfortunately, to knowledge he had never deigned to share such with anyone, including any ancestor of mine. But now..." Giving Hermione a look of wonderment, he smiled, the first real smile of too long.

Sirius to his left drew thought somber once more. "But if that's the case, MacGregor, we're too late. It's already September. We'd have to wait another ten months to find such a place." Reality washed in icy flows upon all, tentative joy replaced by depression. All but Raj.

Turning to Black with a mischievous grin, he quirked a brow, relishing both the news and the chance to prove to the charismatic prat that he Raj knew something Black didn't. Intelligence was not limited to the ladies, after all.

"That would be the case, *Black*, were we dealing with the Gregorian calendar." Pausing, a moment of silence for realization to dawn. Little time did it take.

"*Tishiri*..." Breathed not by Hermione, as Raj had expected, but by his grandfather. The younger MacGregor nodded. "The seventh month of the Hebrew calendar. Raj, that means..."

"Yes," he replied, voice now lower with the weight of knowledge. "We've little time." To the group, he addressed looks of confusion with explanations brief. "The first day of Tishiri begins at sundown... on the eleventh of September... In nine days."

"Then we need to hurry," Blue put in for the first time. "Surely the power to overcome includes knowing how to keep the Grail from Voldemort, and how to defeat him once and for all, yeah?" Murmurs of agreement.

"Yes, it would, I should hope," Raj answered. "But unfortunately, we still don't know *where*. Unless there is something else you now recall, milady?" he asked, eyes returning to the witch on Sirius' other side, right after Blue. Meekly she shook her head, this negative response bringing their cycle of euphoria and depression back down to the latter.

"What if..." Carefully spoken with breeding and manner, Regulus Black brooked the table, keen consideration written upon his handsome face. Unreadable though it was, Raj sensed the younger sibling to be quite cunning in his thoughts and efforts. The man was an enigma.

Vague words from all about encouraged him to continue, yet it was to Raj his ashen eyes bore. "What if what Miss Granger heard wasn't Latin or Spanish at all. What if she heard correctly, but misunderstood. What if she just *told* us the answer?" His voice was soft, articulate, resolute.

Raj cocked his head, but was interrupted in question by the man's elder.

"What are you pondering, Reg?" Sirius asked his brother, peering cautiously at the man he knew to be the Slytherin he'd been Sorted. "The last I'd seen that look, you'd just routed a loophole round Mum's pantry protections."

Regulus only smiled, slight deviance to his demeanor, but Raj could only remain intrigued. If Hermione's information was correct, and was complete...

"What Miss Granger heard," he cast a look unread toward her, then returned to the populace, "was not Spanish, nor even Latin, I believe. It was the Queen's English it was a name... and a place." Hesitating only long enough to ensure all attention was his, Regulus continued. "My chats with Al Lynley have not been merely one-sided; I know much of what goes on at the Ministry, including those schemes preferred in the dark.

"McGonagall's sister is involved in a titchy little trip, mind you, that was kept from public knowledge. Even yours, MacGregor. She and her merry band were off to Egypt only days past, to follow up with an emissary sent ahead. A fellow by the name of Sir Jonathon McCaine another of your brilliant Templar outfit," he added with a hint of disdain.

"Regulus, what " Hermione began, but quelled was her outburst by Regulus' tight glare.

"Miss Granger," he slightly drawled, beginning to show his family background of arrogance. Raj soothed his ruffled feathers at the insult to her now was not the time. Instead, he listened intently to Black's words.

"You did not hear *Que sera, sera*... What you heard was *McCaine*... *Sarras, Sarras*... the location of the private party St. Cyr was rushing to get to, without alerting your dear Chamberlain... or *you*," he smirked toward Raj, brow raised.

Agitating he may be, Raj considered Regulus Black's words carefully and knew the man was right. Implications suddenly seeped through, and forgotten was the smirk of aristocratic arrogance, for the man was worthy to allow himself such leverage. He was brilliant and the centuries-long secret had been learnt. Only one thing remained...

"Then I suppose I need to nick the Grail back, and make a path for Sarras." Raj's declaration met with an outcry, and for the first time in his life, he realized the stewardship of the Sangreal did not fall solely into hands of limited strength and power... for the first time in centuries, its guardian was not alone. Raj MacGregor had help.

-o-o-o-

Minutes passed into hours; tea passed into supper. Collaborative planning and strategy replaced suspicion and defensiveness. Years it had been, really, since Regulus Black had found himself working in group effort for purely a common cause. Though general reason was worthy and noble, Regulus was, still, both a Black and a Slytherin. Never did he fail to scan an opportunity for self benefit. Experience had changed him, true; altered misshapen views and erased misconceptions. Left without family or connections, he had built himself up into a man with a past of his own choosing, own decisions. Very different it had been, really, waking each day with open choice for future endeavors. No courtesy required based on blood, based on begots and names and wealth. Yet, tradition engrained was not simply wiped free with a change of venue, of signature.

Regulus battled internally throughout animated discussions of travel routes and preliminaries, covertly studying the witch that had bewitched him so well. A Muggle-born, after all. Mental shake cleared exasperation at such revelations, allowing focus on dealing with the matter. She was a Muggle-born, one of dirty blood, the very kind Blacks did not see as worth life at all. How dare they educate and participate with the purebloods, with true magic folk? Yet no denial could be made that Hermione Granger was clever, talented, generous... lovely. An old pang momentarily crossed his mind and heart, but he brushed it away with annoyance. It was the now he had to contend with, the now where he was, and the now was a matter of desiring family, ones to protect and nourish and continue the family line. Love... an ambiguous concept, fleeting at best, rare and insufficient on its own. Practicality and ignoring status suggested Miss Granger as not only a potential, but an agreeable partner for him, a mother for children yet conceived.

"Perhaps now would be an opportune time," young MacGregor was saying as Madam Luminare began clearing the meal, "to adjourn for a bit. We've established a feasible plan; tomorrow we can work out the incongruities." Chattered agreement rose all about, each individual regaining their feet for some other pursuit.

"Zelda," Miss Granger insisted a moment later, her hands already flitting about platters and serving dishes. "I'll take care of the clean-up; please, enjoy your visit with Mr. MacGregor." In gesture she indicated the elder Scotsman. Half-hearted protests failed in changing the girl's wishes, and Madam Luminare agreed with cheeky grin and alit eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Black," Ms. Luminare called to his brother, drying freshly washed hands upon a yellow-checked tea towel, "I'll have a look at that," she nodded, indicating the wound from their antics of the night before, "if you'd like. We'll clear it up in a jiffy." Sirius followed the woman out, and Regulus caught the call of front door adjustments. Both MacGregors ventured into the sitting room, talk continuing of history and best-ventured plans. Blue disappeared down the hallway, the direction of the loo.

He was alone with Miss Granger. Just as he had intended.

Too many years had passed for Regulus to give much thought to picking up after himself, house-elves being impossible conveniences when living as a Muggle

underground. Thus so, his mind was not on the dishes he was gathering by hand, setting either upon the worktable or within the sink for cleaning. Rather, thoughts and sight followed his companion, herself seemingly caught up in contemplations.

"You've an ace memory," he said, breaking the silence. She started, glancing up from study of stacked plate and cutlery. Expressive eyes grew wider in confused question.

"Your recollection of the conversation. The one from the concert last month," he clarified, depositing leftover shepherd's pie upon the worktop. One stride from her, he kept his advantage and merely leaned casually sideways upon a forearm, elegance in lean form. Black tendrils framed his eyes, offering boarders about the sight before him. He chose not to think on her blood status, instead reveling in practicality, for Miss Granger was a powerful witch in her own right, and would bear such talent in her offspring.

"Ah," she answered, somewhat distracted. "Thank you." Off for another run at the clearing, his presence yet again pushed wayside. All right; so Regulus Black did not appreciate being ignored. He'd had plenty of that growing up.

"You're quite the clever witch, Miss Granger. A most admirable trait, to be sure." He studied for a reaction.

Nothing.

"Rather... *pretty* one, as well." Pause... nothing. Continuing her duties, little more than polite acknowledgement fell from her lips. He'd much prefer that furrow between her brows to release its hold, her notice to dwell upon him and not some abstract thoughts surely controlling her now. Third return to the sink, hands laden, he changed tactics.

"Sirius had forewarned me, before we'd properly met," he began, and at the sound of his brother's name, her attention sprang forth to the present, to him, his words now golden. His own brow furrowed slightly. "Yes, he did. And as loath as I may be to admit him right in anything, his oft-deranged opinion was spot on with you."

"Sirius said I was pretty?" Eager puppy face too many times hurt to believe looked at him, interest glaring in her voice. Regulus scoffed, irritated.

"Look at you. A witch of your caliber Muggle-born though you may be reduced to pining like a lower-class schoolgirl, panting after one morsel of kind attribute from my dearly esteemed older brother." A sound of disgust left his lips as he pushed off from the worktop, busying himself with continuing the clear-up as Miss Granger stood still, mouth agape.

"I'd have expected greater things from the likes of you, Miss Granger. A higher level of expectation, in the least. Quietly suffering while awaiting his notice is rather beneath you." The table itself clear, he wet a cloth and proceeded to wipe it down, taking peripheral note of her lack of composure. Her breeding showing through, he figured. No matter; she could learn. It was the fact it took Sirius' name to draw her mind to the now that bothered him most. "Of course, I wouldn't hold my breath, were I you, waiting for his commentary. He had nothing to say, actually, when I pointed out your everlasting crush on him."

"You *told* him?" Her voice was shrill in panic. Honestly; she really was acting the part of a simpering female, and as was always the case, after his brother. Charismatic bewitcher, Sirius. Though success had smiled upon Regulus finally all those years in the band when again reunited with his sibling, second place always found Regulus wanting. Ire rose in remembrance, yet held in check.

"Well, it was hardly a secret; you were so bloody obvious about it." Nearly flippant now, he found he could not sympathize with her. She really was above Sirius' status. Perhaps not by blood, but as he had told his brother, Sirius did not deserve her. Now she needed to understand that fact.

"But but you had no... *noright*," she said, indignation attempting to cover the blush of embarrassment coloring her fair cheeks, eyes watering with unshed tears. "And it's none of your business, even if I *do* fancy him, which I'm not saying I do." She was starting to ramble, speaking faster as though to put words between the accusation and herself, as time and space were clearly not options.

Tossing the cloth in-sink, Regulus stopped just before her, his face impassive, voice calm and steady, nearly bored.

"Miss Granger, I've no time and little use for games." Head cocked matter-of-factly, slight smirk, he broached the subject clearly. "It insults me that a witch of your intelligence and potential has let herself be played about over what my brother does or says. Too many other matters are of greater importance, and your tiffs with Sirius are of little consequence to the rest of us. However, your attentions should be to matters at hand.

"I've no use for love; I find it a tiresome, fatalistically flawed emotion by which many a soul has lost their future. Mutual advantages and unions of influence and power make more sense. But if you're so blatantly on for my brother *don't* try to deny it," he interrupted himself when she moved to do just that. "Wouldn't have been quite so pissed off when you caught him with your slaggy friend, there "

Wetness started down her cheek as she turned to flee, but Regulus was quick, grabbing her wrist tightly and drawing her back, his commanding voice forcing her to face him.

"You're hurting me," she bit out, half indignant though primarily for show. His grip only tightened.

"I don't wish to hurt you, but you're being too thick to listen; stop running off like some frightened little rabbit. You're a bloody *Gryffindor* for God's sake! If you want the man, bloody well stand up for him and tell him. Admit it; take what you want. If you don't, then you don't want him badly enough. You're just deluding yourself."

This time anger won through her tears. "He's an arse! He treats women like his personal gift from the gods, like they are all there to do his bidding. He treats me like a little girl who's done a proper job of showing her elders she's learnt her lessons well. But even those he sees as grown women, they mean nothing to him. He acts as though he should do little more than smile and crook his finger, and the world is his. Well, it bloody well isn't, and he's acting a prat when he does it. A self-indulgent child who can't grow up and take matters seriously and act like like a man, and... and... he's not acting like he's supposed to do. He just teases cruelly and is a horrid flirt and..." She trailed off, failing for further descriptors. Regulus, however, was annoyed.

"Sirius is Sirius he's never put on any airs. I rarely ever acknowledge him and more than half the time I don't even like him. But he's never been other than himself. That's who he is. If that's not what you want, or you're not able to handle that, then look elsewhere." Intense was his stare, never leaving her eyes as his own bore into hers. Noticeably tightening, the muscles in his jaw worked in fiercely controlled motion. "What you want what you may well need could be right in front of your tear-stained eyes."

Moment's breath of strained silence, then he flung her wrist from his grip, turned, and stalked out of the room. He'd had enough talk of his brother. It was time to find the man responsible.

Fog drifted the expanse of the front garden, yet Sirius' distinct shape could be made sitting sideways upon the railing in the small gazebo just meters from the door. He was alone.

Good.

Regulus stepped up into the structure, accepting Sirius' failure to acknowledge his entrance. So it had been since boyhood. No matter; vision may be peering into the growing dusk, but Regulus knew Sirius' attention was wholly his. Nice change, that.

"Interesting fact, Miss Granger's torn trousers." Miniscule startle nearly missed (were he not watching intently) belied the fact that this was not what Sirius had expected to be said. Regulus smiled to himself. He continued, casually pacing about the small area, distractedly portraying interest in its beams and stylings.

"Comparable to your own, bandaging and all, though I dare say velvet ribbon holds a lesser degree of medicinal purpose than perhaps... erotic purpose?" He paused in step, facing his brother's form. Presented as a question, the words should have brought response.

He was not disappointed.

"Sometimes Hermione needs things spelled out for her," Sirius replied, voice tight, face still turned away toward the garden gate and empty fields beyond.

"Hmm." Steps resumed, though slower now, methodical. "She is not a child, Sirius. She is a grown woman, of her own mind and merit. Blood status notwithstanding, there is nothing wrong with the girl but her absurd fascination with you." Another inner smile broke at the sudden tension Sirius' body took on at the jab. "Whatever game you're playing with her, cease. She deserves better than your devil-may-care usage."

This time Sirius turned. Even in fading light, Regulus could make out his features of arrogant amusement.

"Fancy her, do you?" he asked, low chuckle to his words. "The great Regulus Black, smitten with a Muggle-born of comparable talent and intelligence. *Tsk, tsk*. What would Mother say?"

"That her only son was taking advantage of the only choices left him aside from senseless suicide. With a bit of training up, Miss Granger could take the place of a proper wife befitting the Black line."

"Don't you even *suggest* any of that *proper training up*, Reg!" Sirius cried, jumping down in defensive gesture. Speech no longer entertained, honest anger revealed itself en masse. "Hermione's no placid little female brought up to act the part of dutiful pureblood wife. She's a powerful witch unto her own, and no Dark Ages, weak-willed prat like yourself is going to cage her up like one."

Regulus faced Sirius fully, stance unyielding. Soft, calm, reminiscent of Slytherin nature... "If you cannot acknowledge those facts for yourself, mark my words that I will. My standards are high, Sirius, and Miss Granger is a first in a very long while. I desire a family; I shall have a family. And if you are so ignorant, your own actions will hand that family directly to me."

Sirius moved to retort, then paused, a change from indignant to suspicious coloring his face. "No... no, you're not going to trip me up with your misdirection, Reg. You're warning me first; that's not like you. It isn't your style. You take what want, however you need to do so. Avoid confrontation, avoid competition. True Slytherin bastard: underhanded and opportunist, using others' misfortunes or mistakes to your advantage. If you truly want her for yourself, why are warning me of my own errors?"

Regulus merely peered with haughtiness gracing. "Simply to prove I am the better man. Even with prior knowledge, you'll fuck it up. You always were the impetuous type, could not settle to one woman. And when she realizes that, I'll have my future."

"No, I don't think so," Sirius answered lightly, curiously. "That's not your reasoning, and I'll not rise to your bait. I'll grant you do want her, ignoring your precious blood status, but coming to tell me of that, to counsel of my potential failings... That is a move of honor and fairness, and not of your nature." He hesitated again, peering through the nearly opaque evening.

"You're not the same boy I knew," Sirius finally stated, odd catch of surprise piercing his voice.

"I never *was* the boy you knew," came the hoarse whisper. Regulus turned and left, disappearing into mists of the night.

Chapter 27: Sands of Time

Chapter 28 of 36

A bit of exotic adventure awaits Hermione, awaits them all, in the sands of Egypt. And they aren't the only ones there for the Sacred.

****In the immortal words of the Shrunken Head in POA, the film: 'Nearly dere, nearly dere!'

Apologies if it feels much action/drama is skipped, but the story follows Sirius and Hermione rather than all parties involved (to an extent). As well, there are less than ten chapters left – if that many – and some furthering of the story needs to happen quite soon. Thank you for bearing with me.

Reviews are much appreciated

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Chapter 27: Sands of Time

Must thick with ages past hung in suffocating veils, blurring crumbling stone walls in the limited wand light. Fine white cotton of her galabia reflected ghost-like in the narrow passageway, hinting at the remaining occupants of the centuries old pyramid. Hermione steadied her breathing, covering her mouth with a shaking hand in effort to keep out dust their feet kicked up. Regulus' presence did little to settle her nerves; someone was nearby, and friendly they were not.

"Remind me once more the brilliance of this little excursion," he drawled, casually flicking a rather large furry spider from his eggshell galabya sleeve. Cast light caught aristocratic profile in sharp relief, raven wisps fading into the blackness. Arched brow met her replying turn, halting progress of foot.

"Raj believes someone of Sir Galahad's party left evidence of the Grail's true home in one of their places of refuge on their journey. Chances are that one of these smaller pyramids was used, primarily due to the unstable political nature during that time period. Something in his grandfather's journal alludes to a haven whose descriptions coincidentally match up with this particular structure. As a measure of safety, they would have marked upon the walls their destination in the feasible event that unfortunate acts would "

"*Miss Granger*," Regulus interrupted in stressed measure. "A complete history lesson is not necessary. What I do not understand is why we are traipsing about a pyramid in Cairo, when Sarras is hundreds of miles to the south. Why would they have congregated here when their destination is far from it?"

"Ash Shamaliyah in Sudan is *modern day* Sarras, Regulus. It's not *ancient* Sarras, which is where that meeting Bailey and St. Cyr were discussing is located. Honestly," she added, exasperation evident in drawn tone and glimpse of rolling eyes. "Don't you and Sirius ever listen? Raj and I discussed that very point over the last four days the entire travel down here. Obviously your attention could not be held, though I specifically explained to you both several times that "

"Yes, Miss Granger; so you've observed many times." Annoyance broke in a pained sigh, and mumbling beneath his breath sounded to be, "Sure you're not a bloody

Ravenclaw in disguise after all, are you? Just to make my life a living hell..." But when she vocalized she'd not heard him clearly, he declined to repeat comment. Instead, he waved his wand about in measured, patterned movements, shedding light to the walls and ceiling in search for markings or clues. Reverting to their earlier task as well, Hermione fell into step, mimicking.

Locating what appeared to be a wall sconce and remnants of torch material, Hermione chanced the magic and lit a fire, illuminating several feet each direction.

"That's better," she murmured, glancing around. It seemed they had come to a dead end; meters ahead a stone altar dominated an alcove the full size of the corridor. "Well... that's not good," she observed, sour pursing of lips at the realization.

"You don't say," her companion quipped, sarcasm dripping. Glares exchanged, Hermione set to retracing former steps, locating another torch the opposite wall and lighting it. Though numerous indentations could be found indicating human presence well after original construction grave robbers? no existence was there that a message had been left as to the Holy Grail's true home.

Hermione snorted very unladylike. "Another clever clogs, I see. Just like your brother. You know, you and Sirius are quite alike."

"Sever your tongue, woman!" Regulus cried, a look of abject horror contorting his beautiful face. Then he shuddered at the apparent offending thought and moved back to inspecting, mumbling to himself.

Flicker of movement caught Hermione's eye, and she turned in a start toward the bend of corridor behind them. Positive she had seen someone peer round the corner, cautious footsteps edged her nearer, slowed breathing and tense muscles ready for the attack. Beneath the chants of strategic options running through her head, underlying sounds began to rise, and awareness hit that numerous voices were echoing from further down. Not far off, either, if estimation of acoustics was accurate.

Regulus had heard as well, for a spared look in his direction found him alert and very still, reflections of firelight discerning eye movement. Growing louder, closer, jumbles of noise clarified into speech, and enough was clear: they were searching for Regulus and herself, and they were not offering tea and scones.

"*Shite*," Regulus murmured, now looking round desperately for an escape. Hermione joined him, furtive glances verifying they'd not yet been found. Realizing a bit late the condemning glow of the torches, Hermione moved to snuff them out, in the same instance spotting a figure halfway round the bend, staring at her. Blood flushed from her face, a scream caught mid-throat. *Lucius...*

Malfoy's wand drew up, voices cried still further away they'd spotted the flames carrying down the tunnel and he fired...

Jet of bright light sped past Hermione's left shoulder, striking the wall behind in a great flash of impact. Shards of stone flew, scattering in a melee of dust and energy. Eyes closed instinctively against the cloud, reopening to find him gone again. She lowered her wand in confusion. Yet gone were not the hunters down the way, energetic voices now proclaiming, "Down here!" Footfalls fast and nearing. Only the heavy rock *scrape* behind her tore Hermione's attention from the now-empty curvature. Heart hammering, she questioned nothing and followed willingly Regulus' tug through the new opening aft. Hidden doorways should not surprise her, but fear left vulnerability to such developments.

Vaguely she took notice of Regulus' scurrying; he managed the stone door closed, draping them in utter darkness. He managed freshly-lit torches had they been there or had he transfigured them? He managed to seat her upon rough shelving against the wall. Catatonic her state had nearly become; she'd seen him this time. Long, white-blond hair from beneath cloak hood; sneering mouth set in grim determination; flame and void tracing sharp lines of cheek and nose, though eyes were lost in shadow. *But she'd seen him die...*

"I'm not touched in the head, you blimey bastard! You saw the flames just as I did." Grumbling broke Hermione's daze, and she listened intently to the muted swearing. Through aged rock contention flowed.

"Look Meadows, I know I saw something, but it could've just been a ghost of one these old slaves. You know, one of them that got killed in the construction. I'd even buy a poltergeist. But you know as well as I do that you can't be Apparating in and out of here. Too many curses for that. Besides; I don't see no fires now, and those torches are cold. No footprints, either."

"That may be, Dougal, but... I'm right uneasy 'bout this. The Dark Lord's convinced Potter's hiding here someplace. What if he...?"

"What if he what?" Derisive snort followed closely behind. "Come off it; you're daft if you think the Dark Lord's fretting over Potter. The boy's naught more than a nuisance. A right aggravating one, mind you, but nothing more nonetheless. He's not power enough to blow his own nose."

"Now, look here; no trace of anyone. Nothing disturbed..."

Thuds and shuffles and jarring scratches suggested their continued verification that nothing magical was illusioning significant threat or opportunity. Hermione merely contemplated, slightly agape. Turning to Regulus in the dim glimmer of his torch, she met his eyes and with a soft whisper of realization, gave voice to hope before only dreamed.

"They don't have Harry he's alive; he's got to be *alive...*" First true smile in weeks; first true progress in her heart. Renewed in energy, she suddenly found herself pacing the chamber, her own wand alight in acute study. Steps muffled by heavy sand below, six strides brought right angle one, right turn delivered another half dozen. Etchings revealed nothing of significance not of the Grail, anyhow and Hermione calculated instead ways to escape. Their guests were not yet leaving, and only a matter of time remained before their searching led to discovery of the room. Or their own lack of air. They needed a way out.

Fingers darted over ridges and valleys, taking great care upon crevices and cracks. A secret panel, hidden door... like the one they had come through. Surely there was one in this indecipherable chamber. Regardless its designed purpose, Hermione simply knew there must be a second exit. If not, they were doomed.

Peripherally she noticed Regulus doing the same, his movements stealth and fluid. Graceful as a leopard, actually, and were she to pause a moment to consider, quite elegantly handsome as one.

Shut up, Hermione. You're not getting a fancy over Regulus Black, now. Like you need another source of estrogen uprising. Besides... you'd never get Sirius out of your head. And Regulus would never settle for being second best...

Chink!

Echoes reverberated throughout the chamber, jerking Hermione into cringes with each damning, dimming sound. Bending to the source, glints of gold reflected her wand light. She'd kicked something into the wall. Something circular, a palm-sized medallion, a short fob and chain...

A pocket watch.

Studying closely, it opened to a face of strange symbols and stars, hands having disappeared entirely. An inscription of love on the inside cover

It was Ron's watch.

Hermione squeaked, a noise loud enough to draw Regulus swiftly to her side. Wordlessly, she held the watch at an angle for him to view. His confusion evident, she whispered (as though her voice would have been able to accomplish more, even had circumstances allowed), "Ron's watch; a gift for his coming of age." Angling further into the wand light, intricate reflection of *R B W* glimmered its statement bold upon Regulus' refined face.

Attempting closer inspection, he took hold her hand to pull it to him and.... It caught. Withdrawing the chain from the sand, they followed its path to find its anchor in the floor. Beneath the desert's footing, a trap door lay heavy, stone, indecipherable. The watch chain snagged in its edge.

Additional voices could now be heard outside the wall, strong and insistent. Time was running out. They had to escape.

"Fancy a drop into the unknown?" Regulus mused in strained humor. Tightened face, however, betrayed his concern.

Beating upon the door began in earnest, distinct warnings making their way through the wall. Amidst random spells, Hermione made out a line to turn her blood cold: "What's this? Looks like a hand lever... to a secret door."

The spell was cast so quickly that Hermione hadn't even a moment to consider such course. Regulus turned his wand from the door upon which he'd levied some sort of sealing spell, she guessed, and with his left hand pushed her kneeling body back as he levitated the loose stone. Her grip still upon the watch, the chain released with a jerk, sending her backward to her bum. Righting herself, she realized Regulus had already doused the single torch near the entrance, and was now casting light into the hole. His hushed voice shook.

"All right; it looks to be about three and a half meters' drop." His eyes in the florescent light turned to her in trepidation. "Think you can take it without incident? I don't see anything deadly down there just a straight drop to a tunnel. But," he added with a furtive glance to the door, "we've run out of options."

Slight scraping of rock across the chamber chose for her. With a quick nod, she moved to the half meter wide opening, positioned herself above, and shrugged her way down, pressing her hands and feet against the wall opposing her back. Free falling that far was not a bright option. But then, neither was being in that room when their pursuers caught up.

Lit wand in her teeth, Ron's watch in her inside pocket, Hermione shuffled down quickly, knowing Regulus was maneuvering above to follow. Total blackness was broken only by her solitary glow, Regulus' wand but a white tip far away. Stone chiseled and jagged allowed grip and friction, yet also allowed flesh wounds, marring dusty cold rock in dark, flowing crimson. Steadying herself against rising bile, Hermione placed left hand down... left foot.... Right hand... right foot. Blood rushing in her ears, breath in gasps.

Suddenly the wall to her right gave way to empty space, and she dared a foot to dangle. It hit floor. Dropping to her feet, she stepped back against the chute wall and peered up, ready to warn Regulus. He wasn't far behind.

Though visibility was extremely limited, his wand waved above his head, his face staring up into the vastness, and she heard once more the scraping of heavy stone moving into place. Then more waving, more barely muttered incantations, and he turned to look about him.

"What was that last bit about?" Ever the intellectual, even in dire straits she could not contain her curiosity.

"Moved the stone back into place, then enough sand to cover it back up." Now his wand was hovering about the entrance to the tunnel before them, examining all surfaces intently without stepping in. "I'd already cleared our footprints, but I don't want to take any chances."

Regulus was surprising her all the time, now. Nonchalant about it he may be, such forethought was a quality underrepresented most times, and utterly necessary at present.

"Oh," was all she could muster. She hadn't even considered that.

"I'm not detecting any curses or Muggle spring-loads... Let us carry on carefully, but quickly. I don't trust what we could be walking into. Daylight is suddenly rather appealing right now."

Air stale and thick greeted each step through the narrow tunnel. Though Hermione could stand fully erect, Regulus' height forced him into a slouch most times, his gestures indicating the toll on his back and neck. Uncomfortable though he may be, his leadership was infallible. They moved swiftly, even for pausing every few meters for a non-verbal spell. Not yet had an encounter crossed their path with entrapments or attempted mutilation. Sometimes the path rose; mostly it fell in slight pitch, curving at odd angles.

No sounds aside their presence broke the stifling heat and ever-claustrophobic maze. Indeterminable time passed, progress steady and fraught with a tension palpable. It was not until they'd reached a dead end that Hermione froze at the sight greeting them. For upon the wall before them marked in kohl of simplest form was a drawing. A map. Of the Grail.

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While Miss Granger sketched the symbols before them of the Grail's destination she assured him the Roman numeral X with its horizontal lines above and below represented the Grail, she was positive Regulus found himself casting illumination in a decidedly boring pose. She worked quickly, the kohl stick fleeting across parchment in drifts and shakes. He had to turn away; she was much too pretty by mysterious lighting, her hair coloring black in the shadows, her petite form studious over its work.

Gritting teeth against the pang, closing eyes against the vision, he turned instead to the barrier, sure it was merely a magical one and not the solid body of centuries old earth's crust. Mindset on breaking protective curses, Regulus set to work, methodically playing through patterns learnt now by rote. By the time "I've got it!" resounded from behind, he'd broken the spell.

Dissolving before them, light materialized like a sunrise behind clouds. Rock became translucent, an ethereal presence through which they now warily walked two meters. Similar to texture of a ghost, Regulus noted the bone chilling upon his skin, an uneasy feeling to be sure. But safely they reached the other end, walking directly into the sun and sand.

They were at the base of the pyramid, opposite side to primary foot traffic, thankfully. Turning to face the opening, Regulus considered briefly the best course of action, for he certainly could not leave a gaping hole for all the Muggle world or wizarding, truth be told to see. Contemplating, he settled on an obscure, complex spell, typically above his level of technique and power. Yet memory was good, and though style had waned in years since, he found himself successful in creating a similar barrier, complete with locking curses to keep out mischievous souls of the city... and keep in those already confined.

"Merlin's pants," came the statement in awe. Regulus turned, startled, to find Miss Granger staring at him wide eyed, her gaze occasionally drifting to the new barrier, then back at him. "Being in hiding all that time must have really sharpened your skills a thousand times over," she continued. "That was... impressive. And inventive. Something I'd have expected from Dumbledore, actually. And to be on the run and teach yourself such quality work by need, I'm sure and unable to practice magic much in the Muggle world.... Simply brilliant."

Color rose in his face, cheeks hot with more than midday sun. Nearly worshiping her face and words were, and chagrined, he turned away, facing the flawless illusion rather than her expression. Busying himself with robe readjustment, he attempted to not hear her flow of endless compliments and expositions of how she believed him so creative and fantastic to have invented such quality spells. But attempts were in vain, and each syllable rung loud and clear to his ears, until he could no longer bear their weight.

"Seereetutmealt," he murmured. View still fixed upon the structure.

"Sorry?" she replied, her tone indicating she wasn't even sure he had spoken English. Regulus faced her again, roll of eyes, deep sigh, slow speech.

He dreaded this.

"Sirius taught me all of that. When we were children. He'd created it to thwart Bella and Cissa when they'd visited a little too long.

"However an arse he can be, he's always had an exceptional talent." Then, under his breath as he turned, "Like every bloody thing else."

Without offering opportunity for further discussion, he turned and began the long trek to home base. Miss Granger quickly fell in step. However, just as quickly came more commentary. Just grand.

"So... am I to understand that as a young teenager, Sirius was *creating* spells like that illusion charm?" Incredulous she was, much to his dismay.

"Yes." Curt and to the point. Perhaps she'd drop the subject.

Perhaps not.

"Nice one..." Filled with awe and hero-worship, her words now tumbled out in constant stream, praising the attributes of a young wizard who could conjure such complex efforts, never mind it was only the rudiments thereof; the finesse and true brilliance came many years later. ("Still, it *was* a feat most seventh years would not be able to accomplish, creating their own spell, much less fancying it up to something of that magnitude.")

In the midst of the throngs of the marketplace, Regulus decidedly kept his head bent, avoiding eye contact with locals. Miss Granger had the fortitude to do the same, at least, but nonstop rabble continued.

Pausing at a bottlenecked corner, Regulus pulled her up toward him out of the flow, while he scanned the adjoining alley. Careful and wary, that was the path to go. It wouldn't do for them to be seen by familiar faces.

"I cannot *believe* I'd never thought of him as particularly talented when we first met, or even that summer at Grimmauld when I had loads of time to ask about things. Just always figured Remus was ace of the group. But then, if Sirius had started that young, wouldn't you have learned it all as well? Or, perhaps not," she murmured to herself, her monologue growing with each passing moment. "You're more the 'play it by the rules' sort of boy, I'd think. Whilst Sirius is much more 'defines his own way,' I'd imagine. Where you're eager to follow, Sirius cannot bring himself to even consider "

"Will you *blasted well shut up?*" he seethed, turning back to her, his face inches from hers. He'd had enough, really. "Honestly, I'm sick to death of hearing about bloody fucking Sirius. He's my brother; I know damn well what he's like," he threw in, anxious to get off the subject. "I don't need to be continually compared to him by you, thank you very much. Had enough of that throughout my life. I'm weary of it all."

Fingers ran through trim locks in frustration, jaw tightening and eyes seeking distraction. Deep sigh through grit teeth, then returned attention to a shocked young face.

"You cannot imagine what " Explanation stopped in his throat. None was owed this slip of a girl, and self-preservation recalled to mind the last time he'd opened up. Was not pretty at all. And to this day he paid. "Just... let's go."

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"So why the significance of the eleventh?" Hermione inquired from beneath her pale hijab. Several moments passed before Raj could answer, both Britons finding themselves weaving through thick masses of late afternoon.

Returning in time to meet up with Sirius and Raj before they again wondered off on their chase, Hermione and Regulus recounted tales of sightings of the dead, secret passages, gold watches and maps engraved in stone. By completion, all agreed a breakthrough had bestowed upon them essential light. Drawing in hand, Hermione fell in with Raj to check a last source, while brothers whiled away hours in hiding.

"Contrary to popular belief," he finally answered, voice low and carefully dictated, "the Christ child was not born on the twenty-fifth of December. That date was decided upon in the attempted conversion of the pagans to Christianity. It's not a coincidence it falls close to the Winter Solstice and the celebration of Mithras. Several theories exist as to the actual date, but one of the strongest frontrunners is the first day of Tishiri the eleventh of September. Apparently some source has confirmed that for St. Cyr's people."

Steady progress against sweat laden bodies, the stream of peoples of many nations a flow opposite their own. Facts digested, pondered until they abruptly turned into a little shop of sandstone. Desolate here, no one seemed to notice their veered path. Rather like the Leaky Cauldron, Hermione noticed.

Limited light and heaviness of air, the room they entered lay thick with miscellany: chipped clay pot here, blue-green faience amulet of a man there, amber-esque red carnelian stone scarab by the way. Candles poured their muted light through chimney-ed wall scones, nearly opaque with grime. Objects unidentifiable hung from shadowed rafters, worn carpets draped along the sandy walls. Osiris smirked in private humor from an ornate quartz pedestal, reminding Hermione she knew not what lay ahead, but those around her did.

Shop keepers often abound when one enters any market or shop, prepared to haggle their wares with abundant show. But subdued was their greeting, a slight Anglo man of undeterminable years shuffling toward brittle hardwood countertop, back straight, eyes suspicious. Tongue silent, Raj was forced to approach the little man as opposed to waiting his sales pitch. Hermione followed, curious and not without worry.

"Hmm?" Gruff, annoyed. Raj always the diplomat ignored the dismissive tone, instead breaching silence directly with business.

"I understand you specialize in ancient texts, pictographs..." Hermione watched the antiques dealer closely; his closed-off expression unnerved her, and soon a need to depart was upon her.

But the man merely narrowed his eyes, and with a slight guttural noise and vague gesture of head and shoulders, indicated that perhaps he did deal in such. Attentive eyes surreptitiously darted to Raj's small rucksack hanging cross-shouldered. Could this Muggle handler sense the priceless artifact hidden within?

Raj had discreetly inquired about for such a person after learning Hermione's tale and studying her sketch from the pyramid. They needed to find something resembling the landmarks described, something of a transition from the age of that drawing to modern day. He was sure it was guidance to the Sangreal; they had but to translate through the ages.

"Might could say that," the man replied evasively in a northern English accent. "What's your purpose?"

Something about the dealer suddenly struck Hermione, and each nuance of movement, form, features was critically studied. Oddity... familiarity. Why was he so compelling to her attention? What drew her about him?

Hushed tones consulted and bargained, only tips of words did Hermione catch. His gaze flicked often to Hermione, as though he dared inquire her existence there. Deep were their negotiations when a call from the back room interrupted, heavy Arabic sluicing through the English, "Thomas! I have need of you!"

Thomas gave Raj a minute nod, glare still unwavering for either the Ministry employees. Once he'd disappeared behind the worn sandstone fabric separating the rooms, Hermione turned to Raj, confusion and feared amazement adding edge to her voice.

"Raj... that man. Thomas. I recognize him."

Raj's face tightened, and a quick glance about ensured their current privacy. "What do you mean, recognize? From where have you seen him? Who is he? We've but a moment to escape, so tell me if we need do so." An edge to his whispered voice betrayed his worry. They had come too far, were too vulnerable at present, and everything lay on very thin, very fragile ice. All they needed now was to be found out. Or worse caught. Voldemort's eyes and ears crossed oceans.

She shook her head slightly, a soft, "No," falling from her lips. "I don't think so. I've never seen him before," she clarified, much to Raj's obvious confusion and even slight annoyance.

"Then what "

"I've *heard* him. At the concert. He was in the men's... talking to Philippe St. Cyr. He's the one who wanted to interrogate your father. He's the one who knew about McCaine. Sarras. *The Seventh Month*..."

Raj stared at her, eyes wide. This was the man who'd learned of the secrets of the Grail? And if so, what other secrets had he availed himself? Scripted parchment suddenly called his vision, a short stack of elegant handwriting visible across the counter and workspace, ancient secretary littered with ink well and sharpened quills. A wizard. The signs had been there, yet he'd missed them.

Focus once more drifted over the aged letters. And a slight marring caught him with a jar: Distinctive flow and ebb of capital letters spoke, though their words he could not read at such distance. He knew the handwriting, for there had been such a single page of it etched in Galahad's journal.

Merlin.

"Come to a decision?" Thomas had re-entered the room, catching Raj in a jolt of surprise. Keen observer, Thomas stared pointedly at Raj and Hermione both, before dropping his voice further, syllables hinting at menace. Eye contact never wavered.

"You've a lot to learn, boy, about hiding your thoughts. Face reads clearer than Master Merlin's hand. Now why don't you explain to dear old Thomas just what you're playin' at, eh?"

And from beneath his sleeve, both could make out the tip of a very clearly present wand.

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She'd ceased looking for constellations hours before, now simply allowing the crisp desert sky to relax all thought and worry, to take her away from confusion and desolation. No longer did she fear them dead, but Hermione keenly missed the camaraderie of Ron and Harry. And she knew time was no longer on their side. They had to be found, and soon, so that Harry could take the newfound knowledge and end what the Prophecy had long ago set in motion.

Scrape of boot on stone nearby drew her thoughts back to present situation. Sirius had shifted slightly in his casual seated sprawl by their tiny fire, the concealment charm small measure of comfort to the fears of the desert wild. They'd hiked this far in but two hours, and would find their way in the morning to the home of Abda Karim, a member of the Wizard Underground. He would safely ensconce them safe passage without notice into countries of the Continent. From there, others would take over to return them to England. After events of the day, they could no longer be found in the open. Not until they'd reached home.

"Your brother is a bit of prat, you know," Hermione suddenly stated, for once letting the random thoughts of her mind fall from chapped lips. "You should have heard the comments he made today to me. Snippy, scathing little remarks, all because he asked a question and I was *trying* to answer in a logical, intelligent format. Honestly. He's obviously clever, but you'd think he was just a petulant schoolboy who didn't get his way. He's friendly enough one moment, then acerbic the next. Going on like just because I know the actual information that I'm just a studious little witch trying to aggravate him. Holier-than-thou, he was. Really, I've no idea how one is to deal with him and that arrogance."

She'd not really expected an answer, feeling as though prattling on had been the primary purpose of her words. Stretching slightly, Hermione adjusted her head upon her hands, once more gazing to the heavens above, fire crackle filling the void left by only occasional night calls of desert life. It was this reason she started slightly at the soft sound.

Sirius snorted in wry amusement, reminiscent. "Tia wouldn't have put up with it. She'd have knocked him off his high broom, you can wager."

"Tia?" Hermione questioned, confused. She turned to her side, staring across the low flame to her companion's shadowed form, a three-dimensional outcropping against the shallow basin of rock behind him.

Sirius' eyes crinkled at the corners, a look of bemused remembrance transforming his face. Deep, throaty chuckle escaped. "Yes.... the one true love of his life. I don't figure he ever got over her."

Hermione's brows shot up, eyes wide. "But but Regulus said he didn't believe in love, that he had no use for it."

"He *would* say that, the berk." Short, bark-like laugh. "But Tia was an exception to that. She was the exception to everything, really. Every self-imposed rule he ever had, every ingrained belief he'd been brought up to covet. She was a pureblood, but other than that was in no way acceptable to our parents. Yet Reg..." Here he leaned back against the cave-like wall, thoughtful creases in his brow. Sights she could not see held his gaze. His strained voice lowered into little more than a whisper.

"Yet Reg loved her with all his heart, regardless. She was good for him. Made him question his blind loyalties to Voldemort, to our family, to blood status fanaticism. She was as far from Voldemort's beliefs as was humanly possible, I think." His voice dropped even more, nearly to himself. "He was a different person with her..."

Hermione considered him carefully, nearly afraid of the answer to her impending question. "What what happened to her?" Obviously she and Reg were no longer together. She held her breath.

Disgust shaped his words. "Reg was his usual self. Did something infinitely stupid." Hermione's arched brow asked for her. "He joined Voldemort." Long silence availed itself to creaks and rustles of the night. Finally he added the cementing phrase, sadness evident. "She never forgave him."

A short time later, mutual consent declared a night. The dawn would come soon enough, and each found little else to hold conversation. They lay close to the smoldering embers, Sirius on his side directly behind Hermione to shield her from the sudden chill of the desert night. Sometime beneath Orion, his arm draped across her lower ribs, clutching her to him in fierce protection.

Hermione had never slept better.

Chapter 28: Besotted Fools

Chapter 29 of 36

At some poing in our lives, have we not all become Besotted Fools?

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Chapter 28: Besotted Fools

Vague grittiness shifted beneath an arm burdened with her resting head, scent of dry heat tickling her nose. Hermione's eyes parted but slits, blurry recognition of time and place settling her back to half-awareness. Desert sands were safe, she knew. At least for the moment, and soft cobalt-gray suggested the freedom of another hour's sleep.

Drifting hazily, other notions formed as semi-consciousness absorbed facts of her surrounding state. Right knee bottom of the two curled as a balance to prevent her pitching forward into the lightly-packed grains. Weight upon her lower ribs eased warmth through light cotton, deep sense of comfort and security drifting through her body. Gentle ministrations lightly jostled the galabia across her midriff, fluttering caresses soothing in their subtle repetition.

Left arm heavy with imposing sleep slowly drew up to her side in search. Fingertips gravitated to the draped Limb of Protection, and warm palm trailed down the cool flesh, soft hair just coarse enough to reinforce its beautiful masculinity. Forearm... wrist... delicate bones of a large hand. Finding refuge, her fingers drifted between the long, slender ones hovering above her stomach, sliding deep in order to curl into the rough palm. Intertwined, life felt whole, natural, complete.

Mind at ease, sleep was welcomed in such a relaxed state... drifting... floating... enveloped warmly in

Oh, God.

Sirius.

Eyes flew open in sudden and complete wakefulness. Hermione stilled perfectly in anxious, abrupt awareness. Pulse raced. Senses heightened. Eyes darted about, taking in nothing of the shifting hues of scenery before her. Sunrise in the desert... its beauty lost on a soul aware only of the body pressed against her backside, the arm lazily trapping her against him. *Sirius'* arm.

Sirius' body.

-o-

He knew the moment she'd fully awakened.

Noticed was the change in her breathing the stilted, nervous, shallow breaths. Her attempts to remain still foiled by abrupt tension in her muscles, her body length so well molded to his. Shudders of tightened, coiled fibers of flesh belied her act of slumber.

He'd been perfectly awake for nearly an hour, watching her sleep from behind, the slight rise and fall of even, steady, unworried breaths. Even in first coherency, she'd not been guarded. And now Sirius missed the relaxed state she'd been in, half asleep. Freedom of her hazy comprehension had allowed her to be utterly female, falling on simple, straightforward instinct and feelings, not logic or rules or propriety. She was soft, responsive. Yielding. He'd *almost* absentmindedly been caressing her stomach with his thumb, fingers splayed across her midriff. Beneath his palm the thin cotton of her galabia left little question to her flesh, and despite the rapid warming of the sunrise, he'd felt the bumps of gooseflesh at his touch.

But she'd lost all drowsiness, had grown fully awake. Now she would tense up, become the Hermione he knew unbendable, rigid, stoic, stressed, repressive. Disappointment flitted across him, an odd sense of loss filling the spot where only moments before wry amusement and peace had been. He supposed it had only been a matter of time, really. Regardless of now or later or some other place in time, point was she was now wholly cognizant. And stressed.

Giving her an escape from embarrassment, Sirius pulled his arm back to him, a loud yawn escaping in distorted tones, accompanied by the stretch and contortion of morning muscles. Playing up the waking ritual, he feigned grogginess with a certain ease of practice. She'd be mortified if caught having shown such an intimate side; contrary to belief, Sirius was far too much a gentleman to allow her that suffering. She was, after all, still a friend.

Drawn out groan of testing his limbs and finding them stiff and sore seemed to secure the ruse. Hermione turned over onto her back, casting a quick glance his direction to ensure he really was unaware of moments before. Visibly she relaxed in relief, and Sirius knew he'd made the right call. Smiling to himself that she was once more at ease, he ran his hands about his face, wiping faux sleep from his features.

"Mornin', m'love," he quipped. Briefest of blushes swept across her tanned cheeks. Opting for lightheartedness, Sirius offered his boyish, innocent grin. Something perhaps not used since the age of fifteen. But she smiled back, a bit shy almost, and for that it was worth it.

Looking around in interest, he went the route of neutrality. "Was afraid I'd sleep too late, but looks like the sun's just risen." He turned back to her still silent form, his smile now slightly flirtatious and all Sirius Black. "Bet you've been up for ages, watching me sleep. Mouth gaping and drool and all, eh?" He chuckled, noting a new blush had spread, but at least she smiled.

"Just don't tell anyone, all right?" he requested, keeping the mood playful. "Wouldn't want to tarnish my pristine reputation." Her replying amused snort was gift enough for his self-deprecation. She really was quite lovely when she let herself simply *be* herself.

Wandering off amongst the rocks for morning ablutions, rucksack of water and clean denim in hand, Sirius considered their plans and pressing needs. Hermione and he needed to locate Harry and Ron, the two obviously safe for the moment, but for how long that remained so still a mystery. They also had to prepare for whatever knowledge or plan MacGregor came back with, he and Regulus having remained behind in Cairo to search out Sarras.

Thomas Winston antiquities dealer of renown interest did indeed know the tale of Sarras, the Seventh Month, the Sangreal... and the heretofore unknown bloodline. Revelations and proofs later, and MacGregor had one more ally associated with Sir McCaine directly, and St. Cyr's group indirectly. Thomas had been researching on behalf of McCaine, had learned through Merlin's letters of the secret line of Galahad and Evangeline. But McCaine had disappeared in the search for the Grail's promised refuge, his hopes that the Grail was safely hidden away there fading with each step of gained ground. Left to worry and desperately research was Thomas, a learned man of ingenuity and dubious talents.

While the three continued to plow on to find the concealed location in time and in secrecy he and Hermione needed to return to London and break the riddle of Harry's letter. They had to locate the boys, and soon. Whatever revelation came from the Grail on the eleventh would need to be put into place straight away. And it had to do with Harry. It always did.

Washing up with canteen and cloth, Sirius allowed the rare heated breeze of the desert morn to caress his bare body. Closing his eyes in utter pleasure, he stood straight, turning his face to the rising sun, tilted back his head and absorbed the blissful warmth as though it were the blessings of all the gods. Black mane drenched, droplets fell about his shoulders and back, lying heavily upon a sore neck. It was good to be alive, to feel the freedom and peace of life without incessant hiding.

Several moments passed in simple absolution, existing to revel in nature, in being. Then Sirius stretched languidly and fully, realizing in the back of his mind that they had many miles to go before he could truly rest. And many duties to perform, not the least of which was to locate his godson. If instincts were trusted, such answers may only lie with the *other* Evans. And dear was his desire to find another way. *Any* other way.

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It was Monday, the eleventh. Of September. Hermione stared into space, eyes lacking focus against the fire of Grimmauld kitchen hearth. Tea cup grew cool in disuse, her hands lightly grasping the ceramic by habit only. By this evening all their hopes would either lie in waste or align in success; the Grail must be returned on the first day of Tishri. Had Raj and Regulus located the ancient structure? Had they been caught by St. Cyr's group who, though seemingly allies, harbored thieves and possibly traitors?

Though these thoughts intermittently crossed her mind, dominancy lay elsewhere, other visions of memory and self-creation far more disturbing than even their fates. Shifting uneasily, Hermione's brows knit in consternation, teeth bit lower lip. Three days had passed, but recollection was keen in touch and sight. Three days of anguish, self-torture. Three days of constant distraction. Three days of building inner tension.

Three days of recalling Sirius' possessive, protective touch in slumber.

Three days of replaying the sight of him in the desert morning, resplendent in bare flesh.

Gods, he was beautiful. She'd not meant to come upon him unawares, had not meant to intrude his privacy. She'd not known he was going to bathe just a quick change of clothing, and she'd needed something stored in his rucksack. But the object's identity had fled all comprehension at the sight once she'd topped the small hill and peered over the rocks.

He'd stood perfectly still, head back, face bared to the lighting sky. Three-quarters view of his backside, yet the stark beauty his form had presented transfixed her and embarrassed her. She should have looked away, left him to his personal matters. But torn away she could not have been; no strength had resided within Hermione Granger to turn from the image that had presented itself to her. Oh, she'd seen men in many stages of undress, had even in error caught sight of more than she'd wanted once or twice. The twins at the Weasley home rare occasions they'd spent the night had a knack for leaving the shower early in the wee hours without their towel. But this....

Sirius was lean, tall, his back marked in scars she'd recalled all too well. Slender muscles moved in defined structure, even from a distance, from the subtle shifts of weight or balance as he'd basked in the sun's new rays. Raven tendrils she'd longed to run fingers through to untangle. Glistening drops catching sunlight in sharp relief, more so than had florescent lighting in her dormitory bath. Poise of grace and relaxation, coupled with readiness of a warrior. No obvious tan line marred the picture, and vaguely she had wondered how he had come to darken taut buttocks, hips of angular leanness yet saved from a sense of boniness by lines of trim muscle.

He was no David, but curiously Hermione realized she'd not want him to be. He was real; he was... tempting.

And three days later, she could not erase the vision from her mind. Nor, it seemed, could she banish it away for more than mere minutes. Dreams now were plagued with combinations of the scene and his innocently seductive touch of that same morning. She was going mad, truly, but she could find no exit from the driving turmoil Sirius Black had led her into. Though Regulus was attractive and ever the enigma, Hermione could only wonder at how she had ever thought he or *anyone* else could ever bring her to such a frenzy of emotions. Could ever hold hostage any semblance of her peace.

Rustling above stairs pulled her slightly to the present. Enough that she noticed cold tea and fading fire. Rising, she put the kettle back on the stove and levitated more wood the grate, fanning licking flames into animation.

Sirius was upstairs, showering the filth of manual travel off himself. They'd only arrived this morning, the Underground of secret communiqués and aliases having been faster than their previous route to Cairo with Raj and Regulus. Hermione had showered quickly, choosing to relocate to the safety of the kitchen while Sirius took his time, relishing the civility of home. That was perfectly fine by her; distance was best, considering. Three days of intimate travel with only Sirius most of the way, and Hermione was unsure she could prevent herself from whole and complete humiliation. Immediate reactions of instinct were pulling on her with ever-increasing strength and frequency, and Hermione was scared.

Busying herself with the tidying of the room and setting new tea makings to brew, Hermione fought traitorous mental state and pointedly reviewed their plan instead. Though dodgy at best, it was all the option they'd had left to them. Finding Harry and Ron required learning with whom Lily Evans had spent her summer holidays. Unfortunately, only one person remained alive who might know.

Sirius had explained his initial plan to Hermione on their travel home, commiserating a lack of ideas for initially gaining invitation into her home. He had seemed extremely reluctant to go the route of Petunia Evans Dursley, but admitted he knew of no other source. That was when Hermione had recalled David's revelation, and shared that Petunia's son, Dudley, worked as a security guard at the venue the Hobgoblins had last played. And didn't he know that she'd overheard him telling a coworker in the toilet that he still lived with his mum and dad?

Hearing this, Sirius had asked for a description he could always get information from Dudley by a bit of bribery, now that he knew where to find him. But once Hermione had given the statistics of Harry's cousin, Sirius had gone quite still, then had barked in laughter. It seemed he was the same bloke overly attentive to Sirius during their time in the Green Room. Dudley had even with star-struck enthusiasm invited Sirius, nee Stubby to tea. Well, it seemed... it was time for Stubby Boardman to take up the gent's offer.

An owl was sent to Blue from Calais, briefest of descriptions outlining the rushed plan. By now he would have had time to make contact with Dudley, relaying that Stubby Boardman was considering personal security for their as-of-yet-unannounced world tour, and would he Big D Dursley still be of a mind for his offer of tea to discuss opportunities?

They'd not yet heard from Blue, but the plan had seemed solid. Yet Hermione could not shake the feeling there was something Sirius was not telling her. Something important that would affect their success. Every request for further information, however, led only to reassurances that never quite reached his slate eyes. And then...

And then she'd look into those eyes and find her own unbidden desire clouding her judgment, stating that perhaps wariness was born of not logic, but defense against his easy sway over her.

Voices broke her musings, and setting down a second cup for Sirius, Hermione looked to the door in question. Moments later the elder Black entered, ever-lengthening hair damp and clingy, freshly shaven and donned in his fall-back of denims, bike boots and un-tucked crimson Oxford. Thankfully he did not witness the crimson of her own, the heavy coloring spreading from neck to cheeks to ears. His attention and face was turned behind him, and a second later Blue stepped through the kitchen door, amusement lifting his words.

"Circe hang it, Sirius," he chuckled. "The bloke would've gladly buggered you if you'd but asked."

"Now that you mention it, yeah... how could I have forgotten?" Sirius snorted in bemused contempt. "Way too eager to please, and for his own advancement, I'd wager. Reminds me now of a long-ago friend, the little rat." Contempt fell off that last, changing Hermione's blush from embarrassment of sensuality to one of guilty memory. If only she'd let Harry kill Pettigrew in rat form when he'd had the chance third year...

"All right, Hermione?" Blue seated himself at the scrubbed table, flashing a friendly smile in greeting. Back warming to the fire, he took up the proffered cup Sirius had retrieved from the cupboard behind her.

"Er, yeah," she managed, eyes darting to the workspace as she stepped back and around a bit, certain to keep Sirius in her sights. Ever since their first night in the desert alone, the sensations brought forth from his unseen presence behind her left her highly sensitized, troubled even more in mind than ever before.

But Sirius seemed unperturbed, retrieving the heated pot and pouring for them all three. Buffer towel atop the table, he set the kettle within reach and settled, facing his drummer.

"I've Stubby's got a tea engagement at Privet Drive tomorrow afternoon, eh?" Sirius smirked, though the humor failed to reach his eyes. "And you did inform him my personal assistant would be accompanying me, yeah?" Hermione barely caught the flicker of his gaze before Blue replied.

"Yeah. Two for tea, so to speak." He grinned. "Squidgy divvy nearly got a stonker when I told him you were askin' after him. Called off to his mum, and don't you know,

she was ready to do his bidding. No word of 'please' or 'would you mind' was my job's worth not to belt him." Blue grimaced a face of loathing.

"That's all right," Sirius assured him. "All we need is an invitation. Once there, I'm not all that invested in Dudley's ambitions. He was a right arse to my godson, mind you; I've no obligation to him but to use him to our own means." Narrowed eyes and hard planes of expression gave Hermione pause; this Sirius she had not seen before, not even in fifth year. Bitterness had dwelled, and hatred for certain orders and Order members, but never this newly cultivated scorn. Suddenly the desire to leave was great.

"Er... I'd best get to the office. They'll be suspicious if I don't show after a week off. And I'm not sure if Bailey's not returned. If I leave now, I'll catch a half day, possibly learn if Chamberlain's still in the area." Not giving time for more than acknowledgement from the men, Hermione set untouched tea in the sink and darted out the room.

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A week's worth of interoffice memorandums and outside owls littered her desk, forcing Hermione's mind clear of libido-induced obsessions. It was hours before backlogged work was completed and the great pile was gone, each memo either read and acted upon, filed, forwarded or forgotten. Bailey'd not returned yet, and the official notice via memo was that his vacation had to be extended due to weather conditions in the Tundra.

Right.

No sign of Chamberlain, either, though, and that worried her. The closest she'd come to any knowledge of him was a package sent to her from his daughter Chelsea, a hapless pawn in her father's betraying game. The girl had sent from school an owl-order catalogue of dresses and formal robes, along with a note of pleading that the elder please, *please* help her choose an outfit for the Witches' Thanksgiving Ball a week from that Friday, on the twenty-second. The girl had finally been able to elicit an invite from her father, on the grounds her history paper had done extremely well (an *O*, and that thanks to Hermione's greatly appreciated assistance).

The toast of the Western world of wizarding ministries would be in attendance, and this time she simply had to look her best. Her father had assured her Raj would be attending as his assistant, that he'd be returned from relations in India by then, and she wanted to secure MacGregor's interest in time for him to formally ask her to the Samhein Ball next month. Sigh escaping, Hermione read pitifully on, wondering when the girl would give up her persistent pursuit of the young man.

When you cease your own besotted desires for a man above your league, her conscience chastised.

Shut it! she snapped back. Honestly. There was no need to be rude. Even to oneself.

Deciding a quick look through wouldn't hurt, Hermione flipped the advertisement open, taking in the detailed photographs of new designs and fashionable robes, the types for those who had not quite the time or means for personal *modistes*. Each style proved too revealing, too old, or too flashy for the young girl. It was a formal event set outside at Stonehenge, location a reverence to the day of Equinox. Air would be crisp by then, and warmth would be a factor, even in formal wear. Dignitaries and the like would attend, and if Chelsea wanted to impress Raj in a classy way, she needed a classy dress. Not that Hermione was a fashion guru, by any means, but she knew from experience the horrors one could do a first impression or fiftieth, even by a seriously wrong choice in attire. Regulus had told her whilst traipsing the pyramid his first impression of her... there at the Muggle café after the concert. It hadn't been very flattering.

Jotting suggestions on a reply, it was several moments before Hermione sensed eyes on her. Her own flitting up, an image of dread filled her doorway.

"Rather late in the office, Miss Granger. Anything I can assist you with?" Lord Chamberlain looked every bit the dapper dog's body of Death Eaters. Once she'd simply found the man a little too straight-laced, even for herself. But now... now she saw him in the light of knowledge, and in the shadows of the after-hours Ministry it was an unsettling sight. Hermione played for calm, forcing a naturalness to her voice not felt whatsoever.

"Er, no, sir. Was just catching up on some post. Actually, was looking up a few fashion items for your daughter," she added, directing a casualness to her words. Lighthearted smile bent the stiffness of tone, and while she attempted to keep a general subject line, Hermione found herself struggling to keep her seat. Part of her longed to flee. A very *strong* part of her.

"Chelsea has an unhealthy attachment to socializing beyond her years," he commented dryly. At Hermione's raised brow of nonplus, he quickly amended, though still hinting at a boredom she'd missed before. "Her obsession with formals and soirées; takes after her grandmother." He wasn't quite the caring, doting father she'd originally thought. He'd been using his daughter to get information, allowing her to attend parties as long as he could interrogate her over anything she'd heard.

Hermione barely quelled the indignant scowl rising. Wouldn't do to piss him off. Or to let on she knew what he was about. It was best for everyone, really, that Hermione keep her head. Literally.

"She's young, is all," she offered up instead, attempting to keep matters neutral. As annoying as Chelsea could be at times, Hermione found herself needing to defend the girl. From her own father.

"It's normal for girls her age. She'll grow out of it in time." Proud she was that this time her voice didn't waver a bit. Not to her ears, anyway.

Chamberlain seemed to accept this and was about to comment further when another figure paused just outside her door. Hermione let go a breath in relief, recognizing the Secretary of Finance Chamberlain's boss. So *that's* why he'd been here. Still, legitimate reason or not, Hermione Granger found herself uneasy with Chamberlain's presence, and decided it was time to leave while his attentions were elsewhere.

While the men spoke in the corridor, Hermione hastily finished up, locked up, and slipped out as unobtrusively as possible. She didn't slow her step until she'd reached the Floos. Abruptly deciding not to Floo as usual to the Chinese Chemist, Hermione turned to take the Visitor's Entrance. Just as she stepped in the box, a voice called from behind. She turned, shaken.

"Might want to do a Fragrance Charm whilst you're in there," the night security guard suggested at her turn. Hermione let go her caught breath.

Middle age, face lined with fatigue, his smile was cordial enough. From the short distance, *Eddie* could be made out on his badge, a pale likeness beneath his moniker proving if you looked like your identification photos, you were too ill to work. "s not been the same since that mangy black mutt took a ride months back. Just wanted you to know," he followed up, a grin and nod at Hermione's reply of, "Thank you, I will."

Mangy black mutt?

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Shauna never asked; Hermione never volunteered. Borrowing the blonde's vintage Jaguar was an unspoken gift of penance from the theatre major. Not once was questioned Hermione's purpose; only the keys were handed over, commenting on the one or two idiosyncrasies her beloved forest green baby had.

"Must say you look the role." Sirius' gaze raked over her fashionable charcoal trousers, black flats and silk ivory blouse. Hermione felt a bit odd in such attire, seated behind the wheel of the sports car, chauffeuring Stubby Boardman to his appointment of tea. Cut glance to her left took in his standard choice, a collarless navy knit pullover replacing trademark button-down. Sad to admit, he looked good.

Like she needed reminding.

"As do you," she managed, eyes returning to traffic avoidance. Due to his perfectly mussed hair and eight o'clock shadow trimmed into full goatee style, she *really* did not need to look. It was enough enduring slight musk mixed with faint shampoo and the simple essence of Sirius himself. She need not see to be keenly aware his presence.

"Hermione," Sirius began carefully. The sudden alteration of mood immediately sunk a stone in her belly. Nothing good ever came from so solemn a tone.

"Who is it who has been following you? I don't mean Chamberlain last night," he clarified quickly, referring to her story shared once she'd returned to Grimmauld near midnight. "Regulus told me about the guy you spotted in the pyramid. The bloke who took a shot at you." Hermione paled in remembrance, falling to automatic motoring. Preference lay in not discussing it at all, though Black was more than likely not willing to allow her preferences. He had too much to control, too many variables he needed marked and filed.

When she answered only with a casual shrug, one missing clause was added. "Reg also told me you'd gone on mumbling shortly thereafter. Something to the effect that 'he' wouldn't leave you alone... that he was dead, and you'd seen him die." Pause for reaction, though only the drain of blood from her face indicated she'd heard.

Sirius reached over to guide the steering wheel, encouraging her wordlessly to pull over into an empty car park. She obliged.

"Lucius Malfoy." Lips finally parted in speech. "I think I've been seeing Lucius Malfoy, that it was him that day in the pyramid, the man who threw a curse just past my head." Sightless eyes trained before her, words spoken as monotone fact. "It was Lucius Malfoy Ginny had seen the night they found Harry's ring at the Burrow. David'd spotted him following me on the street. But..."

Here she faltered, yet neither interruption nor encouragement yielded. Deep breaths...

"But I'd seen him die. That night. At the Ministry.

"We were all there Ron, Harry, Ginny, Neville... Some rubbish charge had been brought up on Harry, so we'd been there for character witnesses, you know. Down below the Department of Mysteries, again. Was a trap, turned out. And as it went, Malfoy... Malfoy, he..." Swallow. Slow breath. "Malfoy caught hold of me in the brouhaha, and like he always was, took a nasty turn about it. Wasn't just going to kill me, but intended to toy with me first." Shivers convulsed her involuntarily, but she kept on, determined to get it all said.

"He'd held me from behind, wand to my neck. True to form, he went on and on in that arrogant manner of his, haughty about Mu Mudbloods, and the only use for them being target practice. But he'd thought I had one more use, at least before dying." Woodenly the words came, describing the groping and explicit references he'd intended. And all this in the middle of the fight, the very room Voldemort himself was tearing apart.

"He was using me for a shield, as well. I don't know if he planned to rape me or not, but he didn't get far. Too busy fondling me, he hadn't done his job properly watching Voldemort's back and had allowed Ginny a clear shot. She'd caught him Voldemort with a Cutting Curse, a nasty gash across his neck. Voldemort didn't take kindly to Malfoy's carelessness, and witnessed well by all, denounced him a fool for worrying over me, and coldly cast the Killing Curse. Malfoy pulled me down with him when he died, trapping me by his weight and unseeing eyes. By then Voldemort had other problems, so I escaped. Barely."

Finally she looked down, realizing for the first time her hands, their death grip upon the black leatherette exemplifying her inner tension. Pale, bloodless, the contrast was riveting when a warm, calloused, brilliantly living hand wrapped about one, soothing with touch and presence. Hermione looked over to see Sirius but centimeters away, sympathetic smile melting the frigidly encasing her.

Carefully, she smiled back.

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Engine shut off, Sirius took a moment to contemplate the home before them. This modern look-alike was where his godson Harry had been forced to endure sixteen years of his life. It had not been a home of love, of smiles. It had been instead a place of fear, suspicion, and age-old bitterness.

"Ready?" the beautiful witch beside him inquired. Her fears exposed, she'd calmed, collected herself, and had recovered smoothly. Just like he knew she would. That was Hermione. That's who she was.

"Yeah. Let's get this over with," he replied with a sigh, untangling himself from the safety belt and disengaging from the car.

A sense of unease swept over him as they reached the door. Casting a sidelong toward his companion, Sirius wondered at her possible reaction when and if she realized he'd not told her quite everything about what this endeavor might entail. True, that last bit of knowledge was perhaps wholly useless, but oughtn't he have prepared her, just in case?

Well, too late now, he figured. Odds were slim at best it would never come into play; would have been pointless to add yet another concern to her roster.

Flashback of concert oddities came crashing round at the answer of the door. The great blond bloke with sleeve tattoos and perpetual scowl filled the doorway of Four Privet Drive. Posh off-the-rack suit ill fit the boy before him, both in measurements and style. But it was clear Dudley had taken pains to present himself professionally for the occasion, and Sirius made allowance that he'd grown up and was not necessarily the same bully who'd terrorized Harry for most his life.

"You came!" Dudley could not control his excitement, it seemed, and Sirius felt a pang of shame for his thoughts. Really, he was using the kid, but perhaps he could when all things settled and the world was safe once more secure him a decent post. After all, he did have friends in the music industry. Even the Muggle one.

Dudley's huge smile dissipated slightly upon turning to Hermione, brows furrowing in concentration. "Don't I know you?" he asked slowly, processing her appearance.

"Perhaps," Sirius answered for her, drawing the boy's attention back. "She's my personal assistant. She's all the details for touring and such."

Visibly relaxing, Dudley motioned their entrance, stepping aside and closing the door behind. Fanatically clean, Sirius took in the home with mixed feelings whilst led to the sitting room. Both settled on the couch, Sirius and Hermione listened in rapt attention to tales of heroic proportions. Just getting to the animated rendition of preventing mass fanatic hysteria from de-clothing the members of rock sensations Snookered, Dudley broke off mid-pant to announce their tea's arrival.

Gentlemen stood at the entrance of a lady, and Sirius recalled proper breeding to do so now, watching with curious eye Mrs. Dursley's inclusion, her shining tea service eloquently dotted with biscuits and miniature cakes. Matronly attire hung oddly on a too-thin frame, angular features far from softened by the tight chignon of wispy blonde hair. All smiles and chirp, she settled the service on the low table before them, arranging items and chatting on about how good it was to meet a client of Dudley's, and admitting her curiosity for the business that she'd never quite understood.

Propriety would have him reseal himself whilst she served, but Sirius did not do so, instead silently lending a hand when she drew the pot up to pour.

"Oh, thank you," she gushed, finishing the filling of all three cups. Pot down, she looked up, one fragile piece in hand, prepared to offer it to her female guest.

She froze. Eyes held on Sirius, and he knew without doubt the hollow meaning of statistics. She straightened slowly, a coolness to her voice masking all else, accusing, correlating narrowed eyes.

"Sirius."

Hard, dry swallow. Tight throat.

"Hello, Petunia. Good to see you again."

Chapter 29: Ghostly Affaires

Chapter 30 of 36

Ghosts of the past can haunt ever more deeply than any wisp of spirit...

Reviews are much appreciated

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Chapter 29: Ghostly Affaires

Again? Sirius felt it good to see Petunia Evans Dursley *again*.

Confused to say the least, Hermione sought any indication that perhaps she'd misheard the brief exchange before her. But a look to Dudley confirmed him just as suddenly off kilter as she. Harry's elder cousin was sitting quite still, struck silent with an odd expression as he stared at his mum. From all Harry had told Hermione over the years, the cold, accusing expression was not exactly what one would expect from Mrs. Dursley. She had been callous toward Harry, of course, and anyone she knew to be 'his kind,' but under no method had either Sirius or herself even suggested they were magic folk.

But wait. She'd referred to him as *Sirius*; he'd confirmed their previous acquaintance, as well. What was going on? When had Sirius Black ever met Petunia Dursley? Worlds apart they were, and between Azkaban, hiding, the Veil, and Stubby... Well, whenever it was, it obviously had not been a pleasant encounter for *her*. Face contorted with something akin to loathing, Harry's stoic aunt glared mutely at Sirius, expressing with eyes what lips refused to speak.

Sirius, on the other hand, revealed what was that? *Contriteness*? On Black? Yes; yes, it was. Sirius Black actually appeared abashed at the glower aimed upon him. Very curious it was, indeed. But more so were words of sincere apology trailing from his lips.

"Look, Petunia, I'm really sorry about "

"Mum! What's he talking 'bout?" Dudley interrupted, gaze traveling incredulously between his mother and his idol. "How you know Stubby, here, eh?"

But Petunia wasn't listening to her son; perhaps for the first time in his life she ignored him completely, otherwise intent upon someone else. And that someone else was a wizard.

But did she know that? Hermione wondered. Surely not; she'd never have let them in the house, much less have been prepared to hob-nob to his ego

"Mum? Mum!" Apparently unused to total exclusion, Dudley's protests swelled in volume and intensity. His beady eyes grew large with shock and dismay at the steady attention Sirius had garnered. "How you know a big rock 'n roll star like Stubby, Mum? Why'n't you tell me, eh? Could've got me a right nice gig there with him without me havin' to drudge the Wim for a quid and bit o' nookie, you know. Not nice to not tell me about "

"*Dudley!*" his mother broke in, stern in tone yet visual never breaking from Sirius, though the latter had stood up proper, as had she. Lower decibels, she added, "Go mind the kettle."

New developments occurred all the time; Dudley Dursley, however, must never have believed it true of home life. Hermione could see incredulity haggle his face from annoyed to comical to confusion and beyond. The young witch found no speech herself, this spectacle before more surreal than even Sirius' return.

Gaping mouth worked frantically, seeking purchase on commentary that would return his mother back to the spoiling, malleable female of all his days. Such words failed him; only repeats of sloshed, "Mum! Mummy!" and, "What's goin' on?" emitted from his fish-puckered mouth.

"Just do as I say!" Petunia Dursley snapped, a quick turn to her beloved son.

Everything Harry had ever told Hermione about his aunt disappeared in that one sentence. Played up as all mollycoddling, this bite to her only son indicated a whole other realm... one in which Petunia Dursley held some past acquaintance with Sirius Black. And that, if for no other reason, propelled Dudley into a stumble across the floor, casting futile glances back to the woman he obviously did not recognize.

But Petunia noticed none of her precious' alarm. Fixed upon Black, her demeanor bordered on hostility laced with... *embarrassment*? Closer inspection of pale pallor growing blotchy revealed trembling of jaw, and not by anger was this caused, Hermione was certain.

"Petunia," Sirius tried again, and Hermione could see a rare earnest expression on his beautiful face. "I really am sorry. Things went "

"*Don't.*" Grit was the single interjection. Dismissive. Another few moments of accusing stare, then she turned. But not to walk out, as was suggested by her disposition. No; arms folded defensively across her lean chest, Petunia strode across the room to the picture window, staring. "Don't apologize. It was long ago. Meant nothing."

Only a heavy, sad sigh escaped Sirius beside her. Finally he seemed to recall Hermione and turned with an odd look, one expressing repentance, a sorrow for something of his doing. He began once more, this time obvious in that within lay explanation for both women; one an apology, one a tale.

"Regardless your assurances, Petunia, I feel I owe you an explanation. First of all, I was only sixteen. I know that doesn't," his voice rose in interruptive clarification before returning to its steady, calming timber, "excuse my behavior. But it is one of several attributes that dictated my life at that point."

No movement betrayed Petunia's reaction, and Sirius cast a glance to Hermione, silently willing her to understand. "It was Marlene McKinnon's Christmas holidays party, and not one that entailed a lot of sobriety on my part. But I do recall distinctly Lily bringing you along. And yes, I do remember a bit of heavy snogging beneath the yew tree in the back garden, after a few more beverages of the intoxicating nature."

Initial shock flashing through, the witch allowed widened eyes to stray from this man of many secrets. Even from across the room Hermione witnessed sudden tensing and new coloring to Mrs. Dursley's pale face, her blonde locks tight against the reddening flesh of a long neck. She felt sympathy for the woman, understanding all too well the counterless attack Sirius Black's charm could pose. But the older woman said nothing, and the wizard in confession continued.

"And, if memory serves, you'd had a few swills yourself. Was why you loosened up enough to give Lily's *sort* a chance. You and I, we got on well, I thought. Even when "

"When you decided to stand me up," Petunia growled, attention still out her spotless window. "I'd waited in that dreadful London park all night. *Hours* in the bitter cold. All sorts of rirraff sniffing around. And yet I waited." Catch in her voice. "You never showed." Uncharacteristic and derisive sneer followed, reflection of disgust appearing in the

glass.

"Of course, you know that already, don't you? Suppose you were having a grand laugh about it all with your little friends, that Potter boy among them. You'd lied to me that night at the party. Every word was just to have me on for your amusement. I'd dare say my dear sister knew, as well. *'Wouldn't it be just delicious to abandon Petunia in a cold and nasty park on New Year's Eve, waiting like a love-struck fool?'*"

Petunia's voice had grown shaky, though by rage or other, lesser known emotion Hermione could not tell. But pieces were collecting in form, and the picture painted was not one the young witch was sure she wished to see. It simply drove all preconceived notions and tidy pigeonholed beliefs into the rubbish bin. Petunia had been heartbroken by a boy a wizard, even and it was beginning to look as though that boy wizard was Sirius.

She swallowed. Hard. Then turned to him for reaction. She wasn't disappointed.

"Look, I know I promised to meet you there. I remember that. But things got... complicated." His heavy sigh and her *humph* blended in the stale air. A film with overlapping dialogue bereft of actual communication. That's what this was, she thought. Chatter without saying anything at all.

"Really, Petunia. They did. New Year's Eve... That's the day I..." Sirius cut off abruptly, his whole mien altering to dark, brooding. Voice softened, hollowed. Dulled. "That's when I left. Became disowned, name burned off the family tree like a blight to the tapestry."

Whatever response Petunia Evans Dursley had, Hermione did not notice, nor did she care. Hands found themselves around his lithe frame without conscious consideration, pulling him to her with pressing need to comfort. Honestly, she didn't know what *he* thought of her actions, either, but once more her concerns lay elsewhere other than others' opinions. Too well understood was bitterness born of his departure from family, but often overlooked was pain of heart, of separation that he rarely admitted... even to himself.

Into the silence of several long heartbeats came Petunia's voice, though not a sound familiar. Attempt obvious at hateful and begrudging, but in its stead came personal pain and inner turmoil.

"Your life doesn't concern me any longer. Nor do your *explanations*." Single breath. Glare through the window. "What do you want?"

Hermione had pulled back from Sirius, and now sought his eyes for some answer. But to Petunia they were, a certain sadness mourning not the loss of bygone relationship for really, by no stretch of the imagination could have existed such but for the loss of defense, the loss of once more condemnation without trial. And it wasn't anger, but bereavement.

"We needed to know..." Hermione began, assuming Sirius' silence to be indefinite. "We were wondering... I know it's a long time back and you'd probably not like to relive it all, but it's extremely important we know what friends would visit your sister over the summer holidays. Most likely from school." Hesitating, she added quietly. "Harry's life depends on it."

Tense, long moments passed. Sure she would not answer, Hermione mentally searched arguments, knowing Petunia knew of Voldemort from Harry's tales. But what words could extinguish sibling rivalry unresolved this many years? Yet without Petunia's assistance... Harry would never be found. Or they would die. He and Ron. And Voldemort would live. Live to bring both worlds to their knees, to

"That awful boy she met at school." Her voice was tight, but Petunia Evans Dursley spoke nonetheless. "Always talking about *boiling* things or some such nonsense. Sampson... or something."

Foreboding chill washed down Hermione, invoking nausea of deductive reasoning. She didn't like where her mind was going. It was just too...

"At Marli's party," Sirius interrupted her thoughts, "Everyone had a fancy hat on. Colored in their house's fashion. Do you remember what he was wearing?"

Decent question, but Hermione had a deep feeling an unnecessary one.

"Wasn't at the party that night," came the woman's taut reply. "My sis *Lily* said he didn't get on with you lot. You and Potter and your friends." Nervously she worried pearl strands at her long neck, their dulled scrape nicking into subsequent silence.

Felt rather than seen was the stiffening of Sirius beside her. Same conclusion, apparently.

Not a pleasant one, either.

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Madness. Sheer madness, traipsing about ancient filings on Level Eleven. Acquiring a location, however, was paramount. It wasn't as if Hermione could simply waltz up to MacKenzie Wiltshire of the Wizarding Census and Statistical Archives Department and request the personal home address of a known murderer and Enemy of the Crown. Well, Enemy of the Pointy Hat. Whatever.

Just great. She was mentally arguing with herself not only over logic, but in testy form and flippant sarcasm. With *herself*. Grand example of just how taut her nerves were.

Similar to the Hall of Prophecy, the archive warehousing was cavernous, dank, dark, dusty. And deserted. *Hopefully* deserted, she corrected herself, ever-anxious eyes darting about half-Giant high post and plank shelves, peering into depths of blackness just beyond wand light. It was quite late; surely all but Security had left for the evening. Hairs rising on the back of her neck suggested otherwise.

Shaking off building fear, Hermione turned back to task at hand. Ultimately, Hogwarts would have been prime choice for locating his home, but that would require more allowance of information than she was willing to give. Instead, files lay in wooden crates, piled atop each other, just out of reach above.

Levitating was risky, as she wasn't sure what if anything was secured. Or, more likely, what was damaged, frail, balanced precariously. Would be all too easy for the charm to backfire and Hermione find herself sprawled upon the cold, biting stone floor, parchment strewn about. But unless levitation was an adept feat of and for herself and it wasn't she was going to have to chance it. Conjuring a ladder was not an option due to heavy wards of the lower levels.

Flicking wand light and all toward the tower of crackling scrolls, Hermione left her wary vigilance to visually follow each advancement of crate targeted. Once down, she would still have to search quickly for the identifying file, memorize the information, return everything as originally set, and depart without anyone the wiser. Tall task to be sure.

"Come on... just a wee bit more. Oh, *bollocks*," she bit out as the crate's bottom corner snagged against something she couldn't quite make out. Three-quarters the box lay beyond the edge, hovering dangerously just above her head. Hermione stepped sideways, continuing her wand movements, directing the edging to reverse, round the obstacle... caught, again.

"Damn you, you effing mock-up of splinters!" Hissed through grit teeth, patience at a loss under strain and nerves, her words were coarse and terse. "Bloody cock-up of pretentious wankers... bodge up bloody simple filing..."

"*Tsk, tsk*, Granger. Such filthy language." Hermione whirled left in a blink, wand cast out in defense and illumination. "Black find that attractive, does he?"

And all else followed in a blur as hell broke. Spell forgotten, the over-shifted crate gave way to gravity above her... Bright wand glow suddenly fell on white blond locks,

caught arrogant curve of a smirk, reflected the silver of cane trim, was absorbed by obsidian frock coat and cloak hood... Commanding call in familiar pitch from further down the aisle, "Cease and desist this instant!"

Malfoy turned and ducked just in time; red stream shot past, straight toward her; wood and parchment dropped from the heavens in great crashes... Knocked to the ground by stray follow-up crates, Hermione lost grip upon her wand. Darkness flashed; return fire flew...

And Hermione screamed.

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"After midnight," the kitchen clock tattled to those apparent. And Sirius Black was quite apparent. Pewter eyes flicked often to refresh the information, taking little consolation in its progression. The two weary men on either side of his patriarchic seat had little concern for timepieces; hot tea and prospects of scalding showers hijacked what little free mind remained. Majority attention was instead given to the Black heir and each other, both parties sharing their own revelations. That which was learned appeased neither side.

"It was like waking from a dream. I don't recall actual events or figures, but vague recollections and phrases repeat in my head." Raj MacGregor stared unseeingly into steaming tea, both hands clasping delicate china with desperate need. "When my mind cleared, the Grail was gone."

Sirius shifted uneasily, concern increasing as wretched facial lines. He turned right, eyeing Regulus with care and caution. His brother appeared little better than MacGregor, but his weight was borne differently. Arrogant anger tightened his features, leaving an image more predator than scavenger. Might he, Sirius, have been hasty in assuming his brother was exactly as his prior offenses dictated? So much had been said since their reunion, but only now did it occur to Sirius that Regulus truly might not be all of which he'd once been accused. Perhaps as Regulus had stated but a week prior he never had been.

"I did not defy the Dark Lord and death merely to be waylaid his downfall by a damn riddle," Regulus abruptly growled. Eyes brought up from his own cup, they sought MacGregor's, peering intently. "Go on. Tell him the rest. Tell him this *grand guidance* that blasted cup offered us. You know," he added bitterly, turning to Sirius, "the ancient magical artifact that was to pave the way to our triumph. Risked our fucking necks in order to place it properly on the specified date. Lot of bloody good that did us."

Refraining comment, Sirius turned to MacGregor once more, seeking explanation. "What precisely happened in Sarras?" His companion shook his head with bewilderment.

"It was like I said earlier; Thomas had the accompanying maps, and with his assistance we found the location just in time. I knew it was right when I had stepped through the curtained doorway, the Sacred in hand, and felt all my magical powers dissipate. But I was safe; I didn't need magic. Not there. Not then." Taking a sip of tea, slow swish in his mouth, leisurely swallow, he continued. "What looked an altar was deeper in the tiny structure, and I placed the Grail upon it, stepped back and knelt. Then a glow surrounded me, enveloped me, and next I knew was opening my eyes to see it gone. I do not even know how long I was there."

"At least twenty minutes," Regulus provided, impatience coloring his voice. "After fifteen, I'd tried to follow to see if anything was wrong, but the curtain over the doorway was solid, like a shield. No spell could release it. But that's not the brilliant part, Sirius." Focusing on the Grail guardian, his words nonetheless were directed toward his brother. "Our savior of choice, this goblet of eternal life, only chose to bestow upon Raj the infinite wisdom of yet another damnable riddle. What was it, again?" he asked Raj, but cut off any reply the younger man may have made.

"Ah, yes," his sardonic mood recalled of its own volition. "*Learn from the greatest wizard's defeat before the balance of light and dark tips to the night* Right clear that one, I should say." Regulus stood suddenly in disgust, stained robes bristling in the movement, chair feet scraping roughly. With grace of birth, he sauntered about the kitchen, refilling his cup and searching cupboards.

Sirius understood his brother's agitation, and by all means its source. But blatant hostility to the predicament would not help them *rectify* it, and for once Sirius found himself the calmer, subtler one of the siblings. Such role reversal felt odd.

"Getting in a nark won't remedy the situation, Reg." Calm, collected. At ease. Already Sirius' mind was wrapping about the puzzle, sorting meaning and implications. "We've little time to waste, I'm sure. We've got to get Harry and Ron away, and get a hold on matters before Voldemort catches on. Assuming he hasn't already." Shifting again, his face grew dark, worried. Voice falling between vexation and fear.

Regulus ceased his search immediately, and Raj MacGregor looked up anxiously. "What do you mean?" Regulus carefully queried from behind. "What have you not told us?"

Sighing, Sirius relayed the events of the day: Hermione's lunch leave from work in order to play out the part, gaining entrance to Petunia Evans Dursely's home, visitation of days gone by. Spattered with minor questions by MacGregor and occasional biting remarks from his brother, Sirius concluded his tale with a glance toward the wall clock once more. Unease festered.

"Hermione was determined to slip down into some archives at the Ministry this evening after everyone had left. She's searching for his address. We really have no other source to find him, assuming our deductions are correct. And, after looking over Harry's wording in his letter and Hermione's relating of school stories, I'm afraid they most likely are." Deep, harried breath and fierce rub of his weary face. Hardness entered speculation. "Though how in the bloody hell my godson would voluntarily choose to go with him is beyond all my comprehension."

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"Your continuing refusal to admit certain defeat is rather fascinating, Mr. Potter. However," the drawl allowed, "entertaining though it may be, it does grow wearisome. Shall you concede? Or might you forfeit a quick end and choose the path of folly, only to fail in the end? Hmm?"

Harry stared defiantly into obsidian depths, daring further comment. Even from across the tiny room, tension built in tangible flavor. Hair on his neck bristled, his back straightened, chin rose. "Haven't you learned by now? I don't chuck it all in fear, nor do I back down, odds *in* favor or out. I'm a Gryffindor; Dumbledore's man, through and through."

Quirking an eyebrow in haughty air, arms crossed in superiority, Severus Snape lazily straightened his wrist, flicking his wand toward the seated younger man. "*Indeed.*"

Chapter 30: Concerning Dragons

Chapter 31 of 36

When not everything is quite as it appears or is believed, anything is possible.

Reviews are much appreciated

Chapter 30: Concerning Dragons

Dazed by multiple impacts, Hermione stared unfocused at the light show just meters before her, enveloping darkness brightening spells to blinding things. Crimson, sage... flashes sharp and distinct, wavering her mind into hazy rituals. *Did I really see Lucius Malfoy leaning 'gainst the shelves, tsking me for my language? And now... now he's trading spells with... with someone familiar further down. How... odd.*

Her screams had been cut short with the errant tray's fall upon her shoulders, the abrupt meeting of stone slats with feminine chest more than able to cease all vocalization. Particularly seeing as how all air had abandoned her lungs upon collision. Yet something struck her curious further down inside, more so than mere violent acts. Something about the man who'd invaded her personal safety. Something not quite right.

Moments passed before Hermione realized all was quiet and dark again, save for a small prick of white light floating toward her. Subsequently a vague form took shape as the source neared, revealing soot and charcoal attire, matte black riding boots softly scraping with each confident step. They ceased mere steps before her.

"Good God, Granger." Annoyed drawl slipped into hinted mockery above her, beyond the light. "Alert the *entire Ministry* next time." Flicks of the wand suggested he was taking in his surroundings. "Horrid filth," he murmured, more to himself as Hermione attempted mental clarity. Something....

"One of your precious little liberated house-elves, I presume," he continued, bored, view moving to the opposite shelving. "Not worth a Sickle's draught once they're freed." He seemed suddenly to notice her position, the raised brow apparent in his voice. "Honestly, Granger. And Potter calls you the smartest witch of our age."

"*Draco?*" she whispered, throat tight with unshed fear and emotion. *That's* what nagged her so about his demeanor, his voice. "But but Lucius "

"Is dead," he interrupted flatly. "As you well know, seeing as how the Dark Lord murdered my father right before you." Bitterness crept into dialogue, the Malfoy sneer evident tenfold, but this time not for her. Eyes viewed distant visions. "All those years he'd kept to the Dark Lord's path, doing his bidding even whilst it was thought he was destroyed. Yet a mere scratch from the Weaselette and the Dark Lord turned on my father like a rabid hound." Long pause, steady, tight. Attention returned. "Some things are unacceptable."

He turned on his heel, stepping out back down the aisle. Leaving, perhaps? Message delivered? But no; he stopped several meters on. Glow dropped low, then rose, faint hollow clicks of wood upon rock. Unhurried whirl about, more dancing movements of wand tip... parchments immediately gathered about her, restocking themselves within their crate, the container returning to its place high up.

"Come along, Granger. Potter wants a *chat*." Snap of cloak fabric indicated his sudden about face, effectively dismissing the interview. Regaining faculties, Hermione drew herself up, reacting just in time to the "Here!" echoing from him, her glowing wand falling in an arc into outstretched hands. Hurriedly double-checked, Hermione dashed on to catch up, reaching Draco just as they passed a prone figure at the aisle's end. The security guard who had stopped her last night.

"Oh, no "

"Relax," Draco admonished. "Just knocked him out; he'll rouse in few minutes, no recollection. So we'd best be on our way," he added, meaningful glare implied beneath the shadow of his hood. True to arrogance, he stepped off again, assuming her compliance.

She had her wand. She could strike him now, from behind, and he'd never see it coming. Yet something stilled her hand, and compulsion drove her feet to follow his steps mutely. Logic must take a seat behind instinct this time, she knew. And instinct beckoned; Harry and Ron would be at Draco Malfoy's destination.

Into the primitive corridor they went, neither feeling speech a necessary commodity. Abreast him now, Hermione kept pace, more curious than frightened. Up the stairs, into the elevator... Deserted was the Atrium, night security safely ensconced below. Not surprisingly, Draco led her to the Visitor's Entrance, and confined closely within the telephone box, they rose to street level within a minute, departing into the alley of her fifth-year adventure. The same in which they'd lost Sirius...

"What did you mean back there?" she suddenly asked into the streetlamp-lit night. Her companion had ceased his rummage through the Muggle skip, pausing with obvious irritation. "When you asked me if *Black* found my language attractive? What were you talking about?" she added cautiously. A pit of fear grew in her belly, his answer one that could set off new concerns, as if trusting him now was not in and of itself a madman's feat.

"Really, Granger," he replied in boredom, returning to his levitating search of rubbish. "You're not the only one with deductive abilities, you know. I don't know how you managed it, but bringing Sirius Black back from the Death Chamber was either pure brilliance or incredible luck. I'm more inclined to believe the latter. Here," he inserted, drawing from the shadowed pile a filthy, battered trouser sock. Presenting it via wand to her, he instructed, "Put it on."

Hermione shot him a dark look, incredulous to his request. Her glance to her stockinged feet drew his exasperation. "Over your eyes, you dunce. Similar sides or not, our location is still secure."

She snorted, delicately taking the offending proffered item between thumb and index. "If you needed a blindfold, why did you not simply conjure one?" she accused.

"Wouldn't be quite as entertaining, now would it?"

Oh, yes. There was no question about it. It was *definitely Draco* Malfoy.

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Severus Snape's wand leveled from his former professor's greater position across the room. Harry gritted his teeth in irritation. Always the over-confident one, Snape was. Condescending as well, but not always triumphant. Harry was intent on ensuring that.

Hardwood flicked infinitesimally, and ancient ebony figures slid across mottled marble. Upon closer inspection, Harry had to admit it a bold and unfortunately brilliant move. The knight now placed his king in check, if not...

"Check...*mate*. I dare believe." Clipped tones per his usual, Snape's arrogance grated nearly as much as his understated gloating. School friend of his mum's or not, Severus Snape was a right git, Harry concluded. Yes, the man's history with Lily Evans Potter deemed him some quality, though even now Harry could not guess his mum's manner of thinking. What had ever possessed her go beyond the requisite association afforded as Potions' partners with the counter-spy before him was something Harry could only mark up as to eccentricities of the female mind. Fleeting it crossed his own that such an unusual friendship would be as like to befall his own friend Hermione Granger, but not his wife Ginny. Ginny, though kind in her own right, was less forgiving of ill natures.

Harry had to chuck the half-laugh caught mid-throat. Mere months ago he would never have found credible the scene before him which now played. Confirmation, however, had exposed itself there in the secret chamber of the pyramid he and Ron had been searching. They'd been found out, hunted by Voldemort's henchmen, cornered like desperate prey. But it had been Snape who'd caught them up before the others, Snape who'd immobilized both of them before stating in his yet-so-haughty air that he was there to save them, to make good their escape before Macnair and the others found the right passage.

If it had not been for Remus... Well, yes. If not for Remus, Harry never would have learned so well the art of Legilimency, a talent the werewolf himself had tweaked for years, had used in order to determine Harry's identity when the Advanced Guard had come for him the summer before fifth year. And it was Remus' teaching that had left Harry in the most unpleasant position to believe his proclaimed sworn enemy Severus Snape. Though master Occlumens, the powerful wizard could not conjure false images only cover those in existence. Hidden from Voldemort were Snape's true feelings, leaving only the ambiguous. Laid bare before Harry, however, were snippets of

Harry's mum... happy... teasing... and with the bat-like creature before him.

Circumstances had forced immediate decision. Incredulous was Ron, but Harry had stated in definite, unyielding terms they would follow their former professor. But information already obtained had revealed severity of situations beyond Harry's scope. Plan swiftly devised, the young wizard coded a script to the one most likely to translate it, the one most likely to solve the riddle even they could not answer. Smuggled owl released, the hope of guidance with it.

In due time, hidden away at Spinner's End in yet another secret chamber, both young men grew to learn the skeleton of truth behind deceptions aged these many years. Even Albus Dumbledore's death they later learned through Draco, Snape's remaining loyal foster had been designed by the headmaster himself. Voldemort's security potion had done its deed too greatly, and dying, the great wizard had asked no, *begged* his pawn to follow orders, azure eyes pleading obsidian for the in-character death blow.

No enjoyment had been derived from these learnings, but Harry knew by this point that not all of benefit was honey to the heart. And so it was... concealment protected the blood brothers, news of the sixteen-year-old Lord Voldemort trickling into their musty domain whilst they studied the cryptic library about them. Each delicate tome revealed only more questions to those already present: where could Voldemort begin to search for the Holy Grail? Who did he have in his employ with inside knowledge of the artifact? How could its power be harnessed for benefit of immortality?

Infinite questions had led Ron to infamous musings. *What if's* had bled into *should have's* and *if only's*, each drawing to the surface memories best left forgotten. Still, one had repeatedly resurrected its ghost, and Harry had found himself more than once voicing regrets about rash decisions and Sirius' death to the damnable Veil. One such occasion of this had brought exception: an unexpected answering remark.

"Honestly, Potter. You'd think Black was really dead by the way you whinge on about him." Malfoy had just been toting in their evening meal, smirk and dislike blatant on his aristocratic face. Before either Harry or Ron had had opportunity to snipe indignantly, the blond had continued on, unaware his words were any more provoking than his average fare. Setting the tray down with a quick theft of a biscuit, "As cousin I'd not claim him, but his Slytherin side is certainly bleeding through in true Black form. Even I would credit such a heist that could fool the Dark Lord." Here his eyes had narrowed in spiteful thought, but Harry had not noticed Draco's usual distaste of late for his former idol.

Age and experience had tempered Harry's tendency for immediate outbursts. Replacing initial barrage of insults and threats, a nagging sense of curiosity had pulled from his lips questions of intent rather than sanity. A hand of stay had warded off Ron's similar retort of anger, allowing the younger's tight, dark voice half-whisper into emptiness.

"Such a heist?"

"Oh, come off it, Potter," derisiveness commanded. Draco had stood abruptly from bent position over the tray, cocky glare and slight sneer. "Play at innocence with the Ministry, if you must, but not with me. I've not the time nor patience for it." He nicked another biscuit, sashaying to the narrow, diamond-paned window that provided the room's dominant light through its filth-encrusted glass. "Disgusted as I am to admit it, however, your ruse for his death was quite the convincing role. Having Black take up as a washed-up singer was a tidy way to hide him. Course, Granger's supporting cast as his groupie..."

And thus grew hope guarded, to be sure that Sirius had somehow been brought back through the Veil. *Hermione*. No other explanation existed but that Hermione had found a way to reverse the portal that had taken his godfather away four years before. Yet such was the case only if Draco truly had not been having him and Ron on. Though conceit and dismissive attitude had described Draco's reaction each mention of the topic, deception had not. To give into eager wishes that Sirius Black was once more alive, however

"Composing your concession speech, Potter?" Snape's flippant words drew Harry back to present, a slight shake of his head clearing the glazed focus on the chessboard. Checkmate. Right.

"Mind terribly if I forego the sentimental theatrics," he added, single brow arched, "and entertain myself rather with unfinished business? Draco shall be along shortly with his parcel, I dare say, and loath though I am for this *reunion*," he sneered, "I need be present for that particular discussion." He moved toward the hidden door, snapping flap of his robes belying silent footsteps. "Assuming, of course, you've no need for a full explanation of your strategic education just now," he tossed over his shoulder. But with no answer, he did not look back. Triggered catch released, Snape swept out the passage.

Harry sat staring silently after him. Brooding no help, he instead focused on the upcoming meeting. It would be wonderful to see his friend again. After months away from everyone he knew but Ron, excitement mounted at the prospect of seeing Hermione. Only better would be to see his wife, but it was best Ginny not be involved in this latest scheme. But to see Hermione, and to know she was well and perhaps to learn any progress she'd made since their retreat to this lair, would be a grand relief.

Rerouting his glare, Harry turned to peer behind him. Tucked away in dingy shadows and dingier bedclothes lay Ron, his long, lanky body sprawled untidily along the narrow child's pallet situated in the corner. Soft snores drifted across the minor distance, reminding Harry just how tired he himself was. They'd spent countless hours these past days scrounging through memoirs and books Snape and Malfoy had managed to nick without drawing attention to themselves. Draco had even managed to acquire several pieces from the Malfoy estate library, even with the numerous Death Eaters now taking up residence in the manor home.

Voldemort himself had commandeered rather, graciously accepted the offer of the old Lestrangle mansion in the North Country. But keen eyes often followed the Malfoy heir, and too often merely staying out of their sight was not enough for those rare occasions Draco ventured home. Narcissa Malfoy had taken to her room most days since her husband's death, and was little consolation to her only child. It was her emotional breakdown that had driven Draco as much as the death of Lucius to scorn Voldemort and turn his loyalty away. Only by good fortune had it been Snape who had recognized Draco's signs of betrayal.

Weary and realizing the need for rest, Harry drew himself from the lost game and trudged to his own camp bed, lying fully clothed. Setting his glasses on the floor atop his favored text, *Concerniendo a Dragonos*, he turned to his back to stare at the ceiling, failing lamplight dancing upon the ancient plaster in hypnotizing display. Anxiety crept in his thoughts, recalling that if Hermione Granger did not have any leads, they were in great despair. And this time, a squawking wand would not save them.

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He must have slept. Voices drifted to his ears, and prying eyes open revealed a ceiling with only the barest of reflected flame. Locating his spectacles, Harry regained clear sight and sat up, ears tuned to bickering outside their hidden chamber.

"Honestly, Malfoy; you've gone well beyond the Argyll Treaty of the 1684 Goblin Rebellion Massacre by the very nature of your inappropriate securing techniques and dangerous measures of transferring prisoners of war, subjecting said individuals with..."

Rant trailing off through distance, Harry still smiled to himself. Hermione. Hermione was there.

"Ron! Ron!" he whispered excitedly, reaching out to his mate's bed and jarring him awake. "Wake up Hermione's here!"

"Wha-wha-whaaat?" came the yawning, incoherent reply. In the dull glow of the dying lamp, Ron Weasley's freckled pale face appeared ghostlike, leaving a chill to suddenly run down Harry's spine.

About to repeat himself, he was cut short by the release of the door latch. Both sets of eyes now wide awake and intent, they stared as the opening appeared, three figures emerging single-filed. Snape swept in, his gaze indiscernible in bleak atmosphere. Draco's long blond locks caught the light next, his attention behind him. And drawing out from the shadows...

"Hermione!"

Unison so close it sounded one single, boisterous voice. Ignored were trite remarks from either Slytherin; the Gryffindor boys had only one person in their thoughts. And that one person, upon seeing the young men, froze abruptly. Eyes widened. Face frowned in concentration, then a smile lit up her expression into one of purest joy.

"Harry! Ron!" Brisk steps on either side to meet in the middle with a resounding thump! and all-encompassing embrace. And for a moment, the rest of the world fell away. Friends reunited. It was all that mattered.

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Only true exhaustion had allowed sleep. Several blinks cleared sight to the freshened sitting room fire, its only other occupant staring morosely into the flames while wrought iron poker formed in Black fashion rapped lazily against the grate. Sirius watched his brother intently. Without Regulus' knowledge of being on display, he was relaxed in a manner Sirius had not seen in too many years.

Lines of hardship edged his face, yet like most of the Black family he remained quite the handsome young man. Yet marring those famous aristocratic planes were furrows of brow and tenseness of jaw; Regulus was deep in unhappy reflection, and Sirius instinctively knew it was not about him. Guesses and abstract consideration could manifest what perils or regrets the younger man had endured in life outside blood identity. And for Regulus, blood identity had been everything. *Family* was everything. Giving an unusually honest allowance, Sirius accepted real problems and earnest emotion had plagued Reg, and like himself, his brother felt each loss with the depth of razor to bone.

On some level, Sirius also knew that their time of estrangement was at an end. It had to be... for both their sakes. Recalling their conversation on the first (just before returning to the Leaky Cauldron), words spoken candidly reverberated within. Regulus had simply wanted his elder brother's attention, his acceptance. Nay; even his love, though thumbscrews would never bring about such admittance.

Sirius smiled to himself, a sad, gray smile. So many years lost between them. Such a different path all would have been had Regulus left when he did, accepted the Blacks as delusional at best. But Sirius supposed that Regulus, like he, had loyalty undeniable for family. Their differences lay in just who was considered family. So very clear more than two decades later; so very broken both children had been... both men were.

"All I ever wanted was my acceptance within my family." Spoken so lowly, Sirius was not quite sure he'd actually heard the melancholy muse. "Regardless the sect, I never quite earned rank within any, no matter my efforts." Here he turned his head slightly, eyes downcast in the movement, acknowledging Sirius' conscious attendance.

Bypassing the feign of sleep, the older sibling replied in kind, words soft in half-whisper, reverent in the holiness of solitude.

"And I failed you," he said, understanding and shame awash with defeat inside his chest. "I should have torn you from these deranged people when I left, not abandoned you to their madness."

"I wouldn't have gone," Regulus assuaged, reminding in tone where fault truly lay. He turned back fully to the fire, staring reminiscently. "I couldn't grasp your reckless decision; though I'd resented the encompassing attention you'd received, leaving me a mere footnote to the tapestry, I didn't cease my brotherly affection of you. At the time, however, family meant all, not a black sheep brother intent on bringing down disgrace upon our name.

"But you did abandon the family, though now perhaps I understand better. Yet even so, I could not claim the interest of Mother or Father. Not really. I wasn't you, and thusly only filled a role by warmth of body." Bitterness crept in with the seep of poison. "They never actually treated me more than family on parchment, though I forsook my own ambitions to be equal as those they exalted. By choosing to please them, I in turn lost my only opportunity for my own family, a match not of duty or blood or ambition..."

Sirius swallowed, desolate in answers. Regulus obviously was well versed in all lost of his youth, of his single heartfelt desire denied. Of the cruel irony of circumstance. Sirius need not add salt... not when his own wounds lay open, half-healed.

And so it was, flame-crackles pricked heavy emptiness, and no more was said for a very long time.

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Breeze light, bearing salt in damp caresses, cooling fevered brow. Darkness thick, foreboding, taste of enemy sweat hanging in the air. Distant crashes of heavy waves warred with closer laps of gentle current. Snaps and pops of nearby flame encouraged wakefulness, but pain dulled coherency. Senses sharpened, however, in touch, voice...

"... but once, and you've already been there," it pleaded, tears evident in the strain. "You can't die, now; you can't! You can't leave me. Not when I've finally found you..."

Fingertips carefully plied back tendrils against this same fevered brow, and their touch was blessedly cool. Eyes open but to slits, attempting clarity. But the pain, the pain... it drugged and confused, played games with reality and time and movement. Lips chapped tried to speak; no sounds could form though mind cried out, "I won't leave you; I promise!"

Yet birds of prey called out into the night, overpowering what slips of voice attempted escape. And struggles to reassure fell with eyelids now too heavy. Vague image of shadowed human form faded with the flame to the right; hollowing and drifting came renewed words with frantic flare and jarring shakes...

"No! No! Don't leave me! Wake up, wake up! You must wake up..."

"Wake up, Sirius. C'mon, brother; Raj has returned."

Awake with a start, Sirius took in his surroundings in a single fell swoop. Sitting room... firelight and two low-burning lamps... ancient clock reading after three in the morn. Regulus stood before him, his gaze queer and concerned.

"Are you all right, Sirius?" he inquired, and Sirius hesitated but a moment then nodded, recollecting himself and pushing away remnants of the frighteningly realistic dream.

"What news?" he finally asked his brother, rising from the settee on unsteady legs.

"I've searched everywhere in the Ministry," Raj answered, his words forcing Sirius' notice of the young knight's presence behind him. Those same words did not bode well in circumstance.

"And...?" Regulus prompted. Though never one to admit his fears, Regulus was obviously as worried as he for Hermione. *He really must care after all, regardless all his pomp and airs*, Sirius considered.

"And," Raj began, eyes darting between brothers never before so similar. "She's nowhere to be found. There's evidence she was in the archived records, but..." He paused, clearly uncomfortable with phrases forthcoming. "There was also evidence someone else was there as well. And they did not get on."

Long moments following that ominous statement were filled with action of intent and driving force. Controlled panic underlay a façade of masculine anger and strategic planning. Rushing about, gathering items of stealth and search and stakeout attire, almost missed were sounds of entry from the front door.

Regulus ceased preparations first, stilled like a stag caught unaware. His eyes caught Sirius; in turn, Raj. But it was Sirius who led the way, reaching for the old brass handle just as it began to click open. Swinging the door wide, a heavily cloaked figure stumbled in. Resuming stature, the figure took in anxious faces and reacted with a quick dropping of cloak hood.

"Damn it, woman!" Sirius cried, feeling tense chest muscles easing in relief just as the anger born of fear reared in speech. "Where the hell have you been all night? It's after three in the bloody fucking morning!" Clenching of his heart and lungs ebbed, yet Sirius ignored more tender thoughts for rants of emotional release. They continued as the heavy oak slammed shut, yet in the foyer they all remained.

However explicit he became, however questioning Regulus grew, however silently evaluating Raj fell, Hermione noticed none. Instead, wide eyes focused entirely on Sirius in wonder. As he drew breath for more, she interrupted, soft but strong.

"I've found Harry." Brief pause to allow realization before continuing. Gaze flicked to Regulus. "And you'll never believe what has happened."

Chapter 31: The Other Brother

Chapter 32 of 36

When only half the equation is right...

Thank you to all who remain loyal to the story, faithful to review.

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Chapter 31: The Other Brother

Hot chocolate offered both inner warmth and enough spirit to support her sleep-deprived body until near dawn. With an audience of four, Hermione certainly needed all faculties available. Initial adrenaline wearing off left little reserve with which to tell the tale. But speak she did, and to utter amazement of the men before her.

"My godson *James' son* is voluntarily housing with *Snivellus*?" Sirius' growl was tight and angry, incredulous and uncertain. "You're saying *Harry trusts* that bastard?"

"Sirius," Remus placated, quiet voice a soothing balm to prickly temperament. Weary look of creased brows and tired eyes shot toward his best friend, a beseech of control and open mind. "You heard Hermione; Harry believes Severus, and for myself, that is all the answer I need. Harry's turned an excellent judge of character these years past. I myself taught him Legilimency; Severus could hide the truth, but not create what didn't exist." Turn to Hermione, deep breath. Change of focus. "So he looked good? Well cared for? Both he and Ron?"

Hermione nodded, cutting glances toward a now standing, restlessly pacing Sirius. Additional lamps lit the cozy sitting room, reflecting agitated twitches of hands, hardened face. He worried her. She had known his reaction would hold not only disbelief but instant distaste, yet no remedy came to mind for its reversal.

"Yes," she finally answered her former professor. "Yes, they were both quite well. Just as I've told you, we sat quite a while discussing what they knew and what we knew. Other than their usual nastiness, Professor Snape and Malfoy were all right enough. Actually a bit helpful." Derisive snort from Sirius ignored, she continued, eyes contacting those of Raj and Regulus in turn as well.

"It was Malfoy who'd shown up that night at the Burrow, scaring Ginny. He might have intended a bit of that rubbish, but mostly he was there to deliver the ring with Harry's message without being found out himself. He's helping Snape spy on Voldemort, so he couldn't really chance being discovered helping Harry's wife, now could he?"

"Anyway, when he found out the message was only half there, Harry was greatly distressed he'd meant it to calm Ginny, not scare her half to death. He'd had some trouble with the spell, and that's why the message had ended so abruptly."

"So it was young Malfoy who'd graced us with his darling presence in Egypt, was it?" Regulus peered intently at her, his usual replies succinct and pointed. Over the time she'd known him, she'd learned this trait of the younger Black. For all his arrogance and assumption, he was keenly bright and deductive. By no mere curiosity was his question; stronger reason lay beneath.

"Meaning, it seems," Regulus continued dryly, "that his little stunt was to trigger the hidden lever to the secret chamber we stole away in, rather than cease our active existence. We'd have not located it in time, otherwise," he added thoughtfully, ignoring his brother's under-breath epitaphs. "The question remains, however: if both wizards are on our side, why the deception? Why the coded messages and request for your assistance?" Arched brow lifted toward Hermione's position.

"Because they couldn't afford to be noticed showing any sympathy toward me, and any attention had they even known about you or Raj, or even Sirius would have alerted your existence or my importance to the Death Eaters. And Harry'd asked Malfoy to check up on me, ensure I was safe." Sweeping look held images of weary, serious men in need of respite. She sighed. "Besides; Voldemort doesn't trust Snape quite so fully anymore, so he doesn't know all that's going on. Harry and Ron have been researching about the Grail, but they didn't know where it was, how to put it out of Voldemort's reach, or who it was that was working for him inside the Ministry. That's why he sent the coded message. And he had tried to tell me in it where they were, though that's the part I didn't understand. It was addressed 'Miss IKIA' ... Insufferable Know-It-All. Snape's reference to me all throughout school." Involuntary grimace capped her recollection.

This time it was Hermione who ignored Sirius' snide, biting remarks, slight blush creeping up her fair face in response to more colorful words. But too exhausted was she to pay much heed to vented anger. In his stead, her attention turned back to Regulus, somber.

"I wasn't going to tell them about you, but Professor Snape was explaining that Voldemort was suspicious about someone breaking into protected locations, and that he was setting traps. After all the investigating you've done, Regulus, I know it was you they are trying to catch. They just don't *know* it was you."

Regulus' mouth opened in response, but was cut straight off.

"Then your visits to your old haunts will cease immediately," Sirius directed, pausing in his prowl. "It's too dangerous."

"I can tend myself, Sirius," the younger Black argued indignantly. "I've survived over twenty years without being found out; I believe I can continue to elude the Dark Lord and his minions. I can keep our secrets safe."

"It's not the bloody information I'm concerned about, Regulus!" Dark was Sirius' face as he leaned down toward his brother's, mirroring scowls reflecting checked passion. "Fuck Voldemort; I'm not losing you to a two-pence toady with a bit of beginner's luck! Over twenty years I've lost to that mad bastard, friends and family, as well. No more will I allow to be taken from me," he added, voice suddenly quiet and thick.

For long moments the pair did not move; nervous shifting broke the flame-ridden silence as Raj fidgeted with his tea and Hermione drew her woolen rug more firmly about her. Only Remus dared interfere, his watch intent and careful.

"A word, Sirius," he softly commanded, rising.

Appearing not to hear, it was several seconds before Sirius regained posture, glanced from his brother, and strode out the room. Apologetically Remus murmured a few words and followed his brother-in-essence out.

Collective breaths released from the witnesses, yet Hermione noticed Regulus was not as unaffected as he attempted appearances. Staring into space, face unreadable, body taut with unspoken emotion. Reflections of fire danced upon his cheek, a cheek refined in bloodline, rough in masculinity, marred in trials. Once more she had to admit he was, indeed, a handsome man. So alike Sirius in many ways, but in such important ones, not.

Rashness held no place in Regulus Black's movements; calculated, considered, weighed were his decisions. Hermione could respect that. Appreciate it, even. He used intelligence and cunning, solid information before striking out in noble cause. He listened first. And if he honestly had drifted away from pureblood fanaticism, an argument could be made for him. For inside Hermione recalled the greatest difference betwixt the brothers: Regulus Black had shown a personal interest in her.

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Always it seemed to return to this kitchen, Remus mused. Growing up, many a placid day and raucous evening had been spent away from Hogwarts in the confines of the Potter household, an occasional dinner with the elder Mrs. Pettigrew, and even the odd duck-in to the Lupin residence. But never had it been so within the house of Black. Yet since the day the most evil of wizards had returned to human form, Remus Lupin had found himself time and again attending the scrubbed wood table of his mate's childhood home.

"He's ruined so much of my life, Moony!" Sirius slammed his calloused palms to the worktop, back to Remus. Arms stiff, head hung, Remus could still see the tension in his friend.

Cautiously, he queried. "And yet, now...?"

But Sirius was intent on his previous statement, ignoring the peacemaker's therapeutic nudge. "He cost me twelve years ~~twelve~~ years of my life, Remus!" Sirius turned, paced again. "He robbed me of my youth, my friends, family... Stole James and Lily from you, me... Harry." Anguish nipped at angry words, and still he trod restlessly.

So; they were speaking of Lord Voldemort and not Regulus. Relief swept through Remus, thankful the slight encouragement of brotherly affection he'd seen between the Black boys was not yet again banished to the netherworld. It had been too long, too much water had passed beneath this bridge of limbo. Life and death lay on either side, each man supposedly transverse to the final destination. Second chances need not be wasted. But Remus didn't wish to speak of James and Lily, to recall even more vividly the loss so long ago.

"Padfoot... you're doing more than was thought possible to defeat him. We're making progress. I know it may not seem like much, but really, I believe we're closer than ever in defeating him."

"I know that, Remus." Exasperation tinged the reply, a cessation of movement congealing into a statue of readiness for fight or flight. Gray eyes shadowed met his tired blues. "But I'll be damned if I have this chance to regain the brother I so carelessly lost in boyhood and lose him again due to that coward. Not again, Remus. Not bloody well again.

"I should have listened to Reggie back then, realized he was simply too afraid to lose the seeming affections of our parents. I should have seen it, Moony, but I didn't." Head dropped in weariness, heels of palms to forehead, memories plaguing. "But I was young and on fire, desperate to part company with most my relations. All but Reggie. Looking back, I see he looked to me to lead him, yet instead I abandoned him. Threw him as the sacrificial lamb to the wolves.... No offense," he added cheekily, quick glance to Remus.

The latter smiled, mock sternness falling apart even as his words formed. "None taken, lapdog." It had grown too personal, too serious by far for Sirius, and obvious was his attempt at longed for levity. Remus was more than happy to oblige. "Of course, any wolf worth his flea-free fur wouldn't feast upon your brother; bitter as he was in those days, it'd take a stout lager to wash him down."

Chuckles followed.

Chat fell to happier memories, doing both men a spell of good and regeneration. Ten minutes of past revived enough humor for the pair to return face to reality of hidden grails and troublesome dark lords. Nicking a few gingersnaps from the glass jar, Remus followed Sirius out of the kitchen, climbing to the hall with banter livening the portraits who feigned sleep... and a few who legitimately were.

Easy feelings departed, however, upon stepping foot into the sitting room. Only Raj remained, head bent in study over dusty text and aged parchment. Their entrance drew his attention.

"Where's everyone?" Sirius inquired, searching the darkened room with concern.

"Milady fell asleep; exhausted, she was," Raj supplied, his focus once more upon research. "Master Regulus carried her above stairs to bed. Speaking of which," he added suddenly with a sigh and curt closer to the text, eyes rubbed with resignation. He rose, casting a friendly if weary smile to each. "I've a need for rest, myself. I shall contact Hermione tomorrow, making excuses her tardiness. However, please ensure she arrives to work before ten, as I wish no further attention be brought to her. Mister Bailey has not returned, but Chamberlain has shown a great deal of interest in his office. I worry our masques may be lowered before we are ready."

"I'll see what I can do from the Order's end, Raj," Remus assured, and after brief words, the young Grail-keeper departed.

Door closed and warded with finality, Remus turned to his friend, realizing belatedly Sirius had said nothing during the exchange, limiting himself to mere nods and half-hummed agreements. He'd followed into the foyer, but his face followed the empty staircase, and Remus felt a twinge of enlightenment as to the Gryffindor's musings. Small smile tugged at the werewolf's mouth at Sirius' agitated features. They'd grown such at the pronouncement not that Hermione had gone to bed, but that Regulus had attended her.

So much for bonds of brotherly affection.

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Days melded together, each one bringing a clue or direction, but twice as many questions. Hermione had been directed by all at Spinner's End to reserve contact to only when a significant discovery had been made. She was to signal Draco by way of requesting precisely seven and three-quarters ounces of Dragon's Bane from the apothecary in Diagon Alley. Severus Snape was the Black Market supplier of said controlled substance, so word would reach the pair rather quickly. She would be contacted within twenty-four hours.

Time spent at number twelve, Grimmauld had dwindled to two evening visits in a week. Sirius had performances and practice; Raj returned to duties at the Ministry; Remus returned to his family, the Order, and his independent tutoring. Regulus, ironically, returned to his Muggle lifestyle, serving post included. Such dispersing left Hermione alone with her return to studies at the Muggle university, a meager allowance from a newly present Bailey (for her extended stay as assistant until all duties could be caught up) her only occupations. Well, aside from nagging thoughts as to their next step.

It came to pass upon evening of the eighteenth Hermione found herself worn, weary, and distracted at her student desk. Pyjama pants and loose tank all in turquoise plaid and solid, respectively, left body and bare feet in comfort, but mind too easily drifting. University now open once more for fall term, chatter and music and trollops down the corridor again left the studious longing for later hours at the library. Staring blurrily, perforated, line-ruled composition books beckoned for her attention but received mere slights. Blame could be laid upon her dorm mates, but fairness dictated pointing fingers face more inward.

Shauna having opted for starlit rehearsals, Hermione had been left to her own devices this Monday waning. Unfortunately, all educational ventures those devices offered were impeded by her most treasured asset: her mind.

Not filled with facts or figures, or even current events and mysteries, her mind betrayed all intentions for academic progress in the relative peace. Loneliness had crept in, shadowing any analytical aspect seeking bloom or resurrection. Not since Ron and Harry's last leaving and Ginny's return to the Burrow had Hermione felt so keenly an emptiness. Yet this time greater was the hollow inside, intensified by memories of acquaintance, of laughter over old photographs, of companionable silence in literary research.

She missed Sirius. Painfully.

Perhaps no other time had brought to her such reality of how in love with him she had fallen, nor how not in love with her he was. Still the insufferable know-it-all in the form of a slightly grown woman-child in his eyes. Bright, clever, loyal to her friends and the Cause. Talented, yes, and obviously feminine with unexpected ability to remind his starving body of that very fact.

A hunger she desperately wanted to quench personally.

But viewing the bookworm as a viable romantic interest failed to gain support. In many ways she fell short of expectations his attentions required. Hurt seeped in like poison at the remembrance that Shauna her own age and a Muggle had had just the flavor to whet his appetite, and quite thoroughly. How could she ever hope to compete? Intelligence wasn't everything, and Hermione had recently realized just how carved in stone that truth was.

Drawing morose thoughts away were new breaks of silence from the hallway. At first she considered it yet another couple slipping their way to the girl's room, conjugation of more than the Language Arts student's verbs worth the tittering and flusters. Annoying, yes, and certainly less desired given current trail of her own thought and heart. Work was to be done, and if these subjects of amore could not have waited past the first week of term, then it was best they should steal away farther for privacy unavailable in a dormitory of conscientious learners. But a scowl and *humpf* later, Hermione still could not refocus to her studies. Giggles had faded but replacement came in scratches to the walls and doors, distant and not-so-distant girlish shrieks of excitement. Uncharacteristic flash of anger, she stood abruptly, shoving all paperwork heave-ho 'cross the carrel in a great huff.

"Gods to Merlin on high, you skiving tarts," she grumbled, heading for her door. She'd properly set down the dormitory disturbance rules to whomever had deemed half-eleven as prime pranking or shag-play hour. Sulky was her mood already; no great shove was required to send her over.

"This is a place of higher learning," she continued, securing the handle to fling the barrier wide in aggravation. "Perhaps it would behoove you," came the dictate through the ever growing aperture, "to first learn the attributes of a pocket wa"

Shock registered even as admonishing faded. Eyes grew wide and jaw slack at the vision of a strong back clad in worn leather and topped with silky black tresses *Sirius?*

She'd not realized she'd spoken aloud, albeit softly, when he turned on his heel to meet her, his apparent decision to depart having been dispelled abruptly.

"Regulus," she breathed, taken aback. Quickly recovering, an offer fell from slack lips for entry to the room. He followed her lead wordlessly, softly stepping into the gently lit refuge. Hands remained seemingly casual in charcoal gray trousers, the silk forest green button down clinging lightly to his form. Mistaken for his brother, yet no reaction did he show. Hermione could feel the blush creep from collar to cheeks.

He looked about, clearly uncomfortable but not arrogantly so. Briefly she wondered if ill news was his purpose, then just as quickly banished the thought. Regulus Black would not fear to first mention upon arrival were there catastrophic events to share. No; he simply appeared less... sure.

"Won't you be seated?" Politely was the offer spoken, and at first she thought he would decline.

"After you, Miss Granger," he instead countered gently after a pause, gesturing toward her desk chair. As she sat, he found his own place upon her pristinely made bed, stature his usual proper posture. Half smile tugged at trim lips in nearly bashful manner. A moment he glanced at her, brief study of her face, a momentary softening of his own. Then, remembering himself, features schooled themselves and he stepped into the origins of this venture.

"Forgive the hour, but I felt it best to discuss this with you as soon as was possible." Visibly he relaxed, a return to familiar formality a comfort to his body and mind. "I was just finishing my shift at the café when thoughts began to tumble unheeded into my perceptions; it seems that, left alone, the subconscious will volley solutions much quicker. Amazing what nature will tend to if allowed freedom from mortal-constraints." Quirked smile revealed a glimpse of white, even teeth behind whisker-bedeveled flesh. Lips firm and taut and drawing. Late for a shave, his features distorted from blood nobility into dark, desirable... dangerous.

Really, now. She was going to have to stop such flights of fancy.

Of either brother.

Hard swallow and relocation of gaze, Hermione found her voice, refocusing her mind to important measures and her eyes to his brow.

"Umm..." she hedged, trying to recall words just spoken. "Er, yes. That's quite all right. I was just studying ahead on class work. Could use a respite, actually." She threw him an appreciative smile, conveying sincerity in what she knew sounded as polite dribble. "So what is this grand revelation you've encountered?"

"Lupin learned through fairly reliable channels that St. Cyr's covey has managed to locate the ever-missing Sir McCaine. Alive and relatively unscathed, he has returned from hiding to Northern Ireland with his escapade suitably explained through cover."

Hermione nodded, well aware of this update through a brief interlude with Raj earlier in the day. But she did not interrupt Regulus, a feeling nudging that his point was otherwise and shortly coming.

"It turns out he was saved by a mere reversal of circumstances; long story short, he outwitted the Dark Lord's dogs by circumventing some sort of necessary path and doubling back. He then fled into hiding directly out in the open transfigured himself into a statue of Baste." Knowing look feathered with sly excitement drew out the pause of effect. Attention fallen to pure academic curiosity, Hermione leaned slightly forward, waiting with bated outside awareness.

"This bit of knowledge rummaged about my head all evening, and when I'd gone on to other directions and considerations, it melted with our predicament..."

"We need to know how to defeat the Dark Lord, and we need to know what his immediate great plans are. The latter I've not found an answer to, but the former if we use MacGregor's chalice tale might be right in front of us, disguised by our own assumptions. Just like McCaine."

More appropriate to his character and family, Regulus settled back on her bed just as his brother had done weeks before, right foot propping his knee along the length. Half reclining pose lent a wary, predatory grace to him. Eyes sparkled in knowing fashion, silently encouraging her yet-unspoken questions. He need not wait long.

"So you're saying," she began, leaning forward further in heightened interest, "that we're reading something wrong into the riddle the Grail gave Raj? But how?" she inquired, returning to straighten back and affronted nature that she could have jinxed herself through her own logic.

Regulus' grin of self-pleasure grew, single dark brow rising in taunt. "Theway we're reading it, Miss Granger," he replied smugly. "We read it the long way, taking the scenic route so to speak, as did the Death Eaters. And when we get to the end, we recall all the details of the long, tedious journey, and miss the statue right before us by assuming its presence as natural, even though Baste would have no place where McCaine thought to hide."

Bewilderment and confusion contorted her young face, and Hermione failed to catch the allegory within the riddle. Upon seeing her loss, the younger Black revealed the

light below it.

"In MacGregor's riddle, we're told the answer to the Dark Lord's defeat is to *learn from the greatest wizard's defeat before the balance of light and dark tips to the night.*' We've all been assuming that event to be Dumbledore's death, or perhaps Merlin's if one subscribes to the theory that he is indeed defeated. But what if we've been sidetracked by the longer road of words?" Crafty his voice became, hinting his eyes. Now *he* leaned forward, tempting her with knowledge brewing just below the surface.

"What if... what if it is not the defeat of the greatest wizard that we're meant to learn from? Shortcutting the words..." Here a hesitation stumbled, alerting Hermione that Regulus was not so cock-sure of himself as he'd like all to believe.

"What if...?" she prompted, genuinely intrigued. Blood flow quickened and fresh energy woke her weariness and banished it.

More quietly now, less teasing or jaunty or knowing. Now a softly spoken option to consider. He leaned back once more, chin down as he studied cuticles of sudden fascination.

"What if it were a simple matter of semantics? Our assumptions led us to place the emphasis wrong, caused us to look over the very phrase before us?" Quick glance up under long, heavy black lashes, then regaining fascination of digit dermatology. "Perhaps it is not the wizard defeated who was the greatest, but the defeat itself."

Anticlimactic silence held for long moments, leaving Hermione slightly bereft and Regulus awfully still. Anticipation laced with the need to please, to have accomplished or contributed. Dared he looked to her 'neath thick lashes, more like a bashful child eager for approval. But Hermione's mental status boarded on manic, rampant links and information battling for opinion on this new scenario. Then suddenly...

"Of course! How could I have missed it?" She cried out with a violence not seen from her before, stature straighter and eyes flashing in studious fervor. Slap of palm heel to forehead, expression of self-exasperation. "If it's the defeat rather than the wizard touted as greatest," she began in earnest, rising and pacing, examining only half to Regulus, half to herself, "then it had to have been a grand incident, making it much easier to locate in the history books..."

On and on she went, raising and dismissing theories, actions, choices and options. Hands flailed in voicing gestures; speech alternated inquisitive to admonishing. Animated, invigorated. New directions bade her follow; clarity lay in this novel approach, and Hermione fed heavily off it. So engrossed was she that several minutes passed before she noticed Regulus.

Lounging more comfortably than she'd ever seen him, an odd expression lay bare upon his handsome face. Wry grin pulled at lip corners and mirth danced in eyes that occasionally dropped from her presence to somewhere of the netherworld.

"What?" she demanded, unsure if she was cause of such amusement. Hands to hips, berating scowl in place, preparations grew for rebuttal. However, she'd not planned on his reply.

"You're quite the passionate one, aren't you?" he inquired, quirk of brow and teasing eyes. A chuckle found its way heavily and lowly from deep in his throat, a sound not entirely unpleasant, even if it was at her expense. In fact, not unpleasant *at all*. She'd never seen or heard him laugh. But then...

Then came the genuine smile, slightly whimsical and overtly personal. "You just strongly remind me of someone, is all. Someone I knew a long time ago." His voice had softened at the last, face faltering into brief sadness. But the memories came, his sight blurring from her, lines about his shadowed gray eyes fading in the easement of muscles. Drifting back to a time, a place not of her experience. Though he spoke to her, his visions were of this unnamed pleantry. Bittersweet read his mood, though lips and tongue created only happy pictures in tender grace.

"She was just like you... all fire and passion. Unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Dangerously honest; sometimes too much so for her own good. And like you," he added with humorous glances, "she saw no lines but what was right and wrong, and everyone deserved second, third chances." Dropped to a whisper. "Even me."

Unsure how to react or that, really, she even wanted to do Hermione merely stood still, watching him in compassion crossed with swelling interest. This was a side of Regulus kept hidden from the world, and it was one she found heartbreakingly endearing.

Breaking the moment of recollection, he grinned once more and looked her steadily in the eye. "You two would've been fast friends, I'd wager. Your Ravenclaw intelligence and her Gryffindor bravery. A pair that together would have proven... *scary*."

Abruptly he rose, clearing his throat and raising decibels to more light-hearted atmosphere. "I'd best get on; 'tis late and you've studies in the morn, and I've matters to attend, myself." Gone were the markers of random memories, but a friendliness had remained both in physical and attitude.

"No, it's all right," Hermione blurted, suddenly feeling bereft at the concept of his leaving this moment. "Really; my first class is late tomorrow, and honestly I usually stay up much later than this." Bold faced lie, to be sure, but desperation forced its utterance. "I could conjure up a proper kettle and heating plate for a cup of tea..." Childlike hope bled through her words, and inner shame flooded her cheeks with blush.

"Thank you, but no," he answered, moving to the door. She fell beside him, reminding herself as hostess. "I simply wanted to inform you of the revelation; thought perhaps you might find a new direction for us, something we've not yet explored." Sentiments were worn and vaguely trite. Though true in essence, they were handed over now as merely fodder to separate himself from the place he'd obviously revisited minutes before.

Slipping between along the door, Hermione dutifully grasped the handle, prepared to release him this unexpected situation. However, her courteous move found her wedged between the heavy wood and the former Slytherin Black. He'd reached at the same time with his left as she her right. His steps already upon the doorway, her presence now crowded the space, and Hermione's back scraped roughly against the frame.

Looking up to apologize for the brusque move, she saw instead of annoyance a curious, wide-eyed greeting. Dry was her mouth suddenly; clenching was her stomach. Regulus stared into her eyes, awkward, fearful, yet wholly entrenched. No muscle flinch from either, short pants replacing Hermione's previous easy breathing. Regulus appeared not to breathe a'tall. And when her sight lost focus, her eyes fluttered shut, for he'd ever so hesitantly dipped his head, lowered to her, encroached upon her safe, personal boundaries.

Abrupt breath in was hers, though shallow. Unplanned, her mouth reacted with immediacy. Reverent this caress was, the soft brush of his lips tantalizingly slow but brief, firm but tender, right... but wrong.

Flush was her face, dizzy her head, nervous her body. A single breath fell from him upon her cheek, then before her own exhale, he was gone. Sounds of the door, the feel of his cuff over her hand upon the latch all brought her back to the moment.

"My apologies, Miss Granger," his rapid words fell in husky, tight tones. Eyes flying open, she caught his departure through the opening. She grabbed the door and stepped out, calling to his retreating back already halfway down the hall.

"Regulus! *Regulus!*" But he continued onward with long, quick strides, turning into the stairwell at the far end, disappearing from view without comment or gesture.

Hermione fell heavily against the doorframe, staring for several unending minutes at the empty place from which he'd departed. Butterflies quelled, her stomach slowly calming. Sensations evaporated where his long tendrils had tickled her cheeks. But her lips... they'd not forget anytime soon.

Chapter 32: Mystics, Legends & Fate

Chapter 33 of 36

Mirror shards fall back into place, and suddenly things make sense... including Hermione's heart.

**Please stow your carry-ons and prepare for our descent. Only three more to go after this.

** As always, reviews are greatly appreciated**

Author's Note: Very long chapter indeed, and the next will be short. We're approaching the end, my dears, and I do hope you've enjoyed the journey. Please stow your carry-ons and prepare for our descent. Only three more to go after this.

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Chapter 32: Mystics, Legends, & Fate

Cornish pasties and scones with clotted cream and strawberry jam was not a particularly elegant meal, but all the same they were comfortable and filling. The fact they acted as Hermione's birthday luncheon mattered little; Zelda's kindness and recollection of the significance surrounding the Tuesday more than elevated the common fare to great exaltation. They left Plunk & Pop with nearly a half hour to spare before they were due to return to the Ministry. And Zelda had insisted they make a little stop beforehand.

Hermione eyed her companion curiously as they turned toward the door of *Paints Preserve Us*, the location once full of Ollivander's quality creations. Pangs pulled at her heart in memory, a sadness for the stark changes unintentional. She'd always imagined what it would be like when she'd bustle her own children in for their first wands, fitful glee and trepidation radiating from them upon first entering the hallowed shop. And no one had ever fit that role but Ollivander's. But it was not to be, now.

Assailed were her senses upon entering, *tinging* announcing their arrival with resounding efficiency. Biting scents of oils and acrylics and some essence similar to turpentine filled her nostrils; Hermione grimaced in slight recoil. Oblivious her discomfiture, Zelda flitted deeper into the room toward the empty oaken sales counter, leaving the birthday girl to peruse alone amongst gilded frames, fluttering landscapes, nose subjects. Freestanding canvases dotted the lemon oiled hardwood floor. Each seemingly haphazard in their location, but slyly calculated so that a patron would be lured throughout a maze in effort to seek out a particular piece.

She'd paused before a particularly menacing piece of striking sordid images when mingled voices distinguished themselves to a single call.

"Hermione, dear! Yoo-hoo!" Zelda beckoned from beyond levitating screens of tittering maids and sneering warlocks. Weaving about animated subjects and their yet greater animated gossip, Hermione made her way toward the counter. Zelda stood in chipper mood, eyes alight with some girlish mischief as she murmured to the vaguely familiar woman opposite the counter.

"Hermione, dear... let me introduce to you Agatha Pallet." Spry eyes set deep within cobwebs of age lines appraised Hermione carefully. An odd expression passed her worn face before an easy smile broke the study. Brief greetings polite and pleasant passed between the ladies. "Aggie here is the artist of that painting of mine you enjoy so much," she added with an indulgent smile. Hermione's brows creased in momentary bewilderment. Just as she was about to ask, Zelda realized her need and clarified rapidly.

"*The Mystic of the Mists*." She looked expectantly at Hermione, grin of claimed surprise fading against growing concern. "The painting in my boudoir; of Nimüe... You were quite taken with her..." Brows creased with further worry against the younger woman's blank expression. Until...

Blood fled her cheeks, leaving Hermione's face flush, head dizzy and light. "Oh," she managed, voice high, thin with emotion. *The painting*. The one that had haunted her since the Gala; the one through which Hermione had been claimed to have a gift. A gift of which she could not accept its validity. A gift she did not, thank you, want. Never before had she believed in the woolly branch of magic dubbed Divination.

"Sorry for the sampl'n willy-nilly," Aggie chimed in, breaking Hermione's disconcertion to bring her back to current. Sweeping gesture crossed the shop's front entrance, then broadened to include the high, bare ceilings. "Tom'd promised to assist me ready the shop, but bugger it, the Cauldron's got'im too cornered, faffing about."

Realization dawned quickly this time, and Hermione's face bloomed in understanding. This was the woman old Tom at the Leaky Cauldron had been mooning over her last trip in. The trip during which she'd come to accept that Ron was not her future husband. This epiphany, even though she'd not yet known Sirius was the man she'd fall hopelessly for. In fact, at the time she hadn't quite believed him alive.

"Shall we have look, Hermione?" Zelda inquired, breaking her from a path of thought known to be dangerous. "Pick anything you like," she added in chuckle. "Your birthday present, my dear; any painting you've a fancy for."

Several minutes fell wasted in trying to deter Blue's grandmother from such a generous gift; the little time left before work demanded their presence was spent meandering the shop, Aggie personally guiding. By this time, however, remembrances of last night had taken root from earlier consideration, and Hermione could not remove Regulus Black's image from her mind in lieu of artistry.

Rather, she could not remove the feel and taste of him from her lips.

The kiss was not one expected. Nor could she say it was desired. Yet truth demanded that at least to herself she admit it was not exactly a hardship. It simply made matters more... complicated. Part of Hermione could not move past regret that it had not been Sirius bestowing elegant if not brief ministrations. Sirius, however, had never shown even the slightest of consideration for her in that manner. He'd admitted once only that she was a woman, and he'd been in a bit of a pinch for female companionship that night in her dormitory. Momentary lust did not equal tenderness of the heart.

Regulus' kiss was not a matter of hell-bent lust. Hesitant in its offer, he'd proceeded guarded and unsure. Her blood might well be his dilemma, or even his over all irritation with her since his exposition in Zelda's kitchen or their tiff on the streets of Cairo. One definite truth: there was more to Regulus Black than Sirius had always made out to be. And willingness to seek out those hidden truths was rapidly gaining ground in Hermione. If one avenue of life were closed...

"What do you think?" Jarred from continuing onslaughts of unsettling gray eyes, Hermione started at Zelda's question, realizing belatedly the elder was seeking Hermione's opinion on a particular painting they'd paused before. Pretending a critiquing eye, she roamed sight over subtle shades of sage and cobalt, the waterfall landscape lovely in its own right, but failing to hold her attention.

"It's quite lovely, really," she finally offered with a small smile. "But "

"But it's not Nimüe," Zelda supplied, an understanding smile brightening her words. She turned to Aggie. "Have you any additional pieces of the High Priestess, Aggie? Or perhaps of the Isle of the Blessed itself?"

Concentration held the artist's lips pursed, eyes averted as though conferring with a directory behind her forehead. After a long moment's pause, a nod began, her attention back to the woman beside her. "Yes, I believe I have one. While awaiting my mistress' arrival from across the loch, I'd busied myself with a small landscape, centered on a fruit tree in full bloom. But I can't imagine you'd adhere to that one, girl," she added, turning to Hermione. "Not so as exciting as a hippogriff in flight or as breathtaking as Merlin's lineage."

Sigh of resignation crossed her aged mouth as she spoke once again to Zelda. "Normally I'd never drop to so common a subject as apples, but as Avalon is known for its exquisite and unique breed of them, I felt they deserved some recognition. After all, they seem always a grand gift to the convent at Glastonbury Abby, who often offer them as blessings of welcome to dignitaries and the faithful and some such."

She waved her hand dismissively and moved on, Zelda keeping step and Hermione lagging behind. Honestly, she did appreciate the thought behind Zelda's desire to purchase a painting from this grand artist. She recalled reading about Agatha Pallet whilst searching with Ginny through Flourish and Blotts on the ability to bring back the dead, or at least draw someone in return through the Veil. But now Hermione's heart simply wasn't in it; other images and needs preoccupied her very tattered and cracked heart at the moment, thank you. Birthday gifts diminished against firm lips shockingly soft and gentle.

"Ah, here we are, ducks." Aggie had ceased meandering before a meter-wide canvas splashed in violent strokes of dark hues. Midnight, crimson, navy, ebony... bright flash of yellowed ivory struck across at intervals as storm clouds announced their fury in heat lightening. Two wizards before them were dueling heatedly, angrily, upon bare rock and craggy hillsides of Scottish wilderness. Surprisingly, they did not stop their rather bloody battle for the women. Too ingrained in deeds of destruction... agility and cunning and pure luck their guides.

"Vivid detail, excitement... a girl with a nose for history should find the spell casting particularly interesting," Aggie continued, arched brows questioning.

"Yes, it is quite... educational," she answered, squinted at the piece, part horrific fascination and part simply horror.

"You know, Aggie," Zelda thought aloud, "this one in the mauve robes reminds me a bit of Bubby, the way he flicks his wand more with finger flourish than forearm. Might you have any left of him Bubby, I mean perhaps in one of his demonstrations? I don't have any photographs of him in action." Soft chuckle of remembrance followed as Hermione fought to draw her eyes from the increasingly graphic scene before. Ron and Harry would love this, she considered morosely.

"Sorry, duck." Aggie shook her frazzled gray haired head, small frown pulling at her weathered skin. "What I would've given to have captured Dumbledore's fight with Grindewald, I tell you. No duel could ever have come close to matching that one, and right shame it's not immortalized in oils." She sighed heavily, and Hermione broke her gaze from the painting to peer curiously at the woman. Something she said...

"Ah, my Bubby was a talent no one could match, indeed," Zelda replied, gazing unseeingly into the vision framed before her. "Why, that of all defeats should have been seen by the world. But not a soul witnessed it. And Bubby never would speak of it. I mean, I've no idea even what spell he cast to finish Grindewald off. And with Bubby gone, there's no way to ever know, I suppose. Pity, that."

"If it were the last spell he cast, as history tells us, then a simple *Prior Incantato* would retrieve the spell," Hermione jumped in, ever drawn instinctively to discussions needing technical answers for hypothetical questions. "All you'd need was the w"

Abrupt cessation of speech. Face suddenly void of expression but for that of incredulity. Heartbeats passed, white noise clouded her ears, swirling images her eyes. Like mirror shards in the midst of *Reparo*, the fragments came together with flush interlocking. She looked up slowly at Zelda, casting an appreciative glance to Aggie. Both women had gone pale, worry marring their faces, for Hermione did indeed seem to have succumbed suddenly to a curse or illness. But the young witch could only allow an open smile to creep out, eyes lighting

"All you need," she began slowly with a sense of revelation. *Apples*. "Is the wand..."

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"And she said that the only way for a soul to pass uninvited to the other side was to offer something proving your connection, your right to passage." Throat parched from her story, Hermione downed the last of the Sangria Raj had offered her. Half hour of explanation nearly non-stop had left her weary and anxious. Initially it had been a leap from 'greatest wizard's defeat' to Avalon. But Aggie's mention of apples had reminded Hermione of preposterous dinner conversation back in Ireland, when Mortimer Bailey had dived on about the apples from Avalon, the same location where Albus Dumbledore's battle wand had been stowed in nearly shrine-like state.

Raj MacGregor stood before her, brows creased in deep thought, curled fingers tugging slightly at his bottom lip in musing. Though invoking a sense of pressure upon him by staring, Hermione could not turn from him even as she set her goblet to the shale-topped table beside her Victorian chair. To look to her right would bring Sirius into view, and less-than-honorable thoughts of him these past nights could not allow her to catch his glance without blushing. To stray sight to her left meant capturing the unreadable smoky grays of Regulus. That, too, would lead to Gryffindor crimson upon her cheeks, albeit differing, more substantial reasons. So instead she remained face-forward, watching for any indication a solution had come to his mind.

"I was thinking perhaps your grandfather's journal," she offered, both as suggestion and to break the tense silence of the flat's sitting room. Jingling echoed from below, the Muggle antique shop welcoming new patrons. The new sound merely brought into stark relief the utter silence while Raj searched his mind for answers.

Were she to chance a look at either Black brother, Hermione could well guess they still glared at the other, though what incident caused such unspoken row was still as of yet mysterious. Since their arrivals, each had taunted the other in tone and facial expression, reserving their right to keep others out of the feud by denying any issue lay between them. Coldness was left in their battle of wills, and Hermione felt not only an intruder to their family closet of dirty laundry, but oddly a particular pawn as well.

"No," Raj quietly answered. A second passed before Hermione realized what question he'd been answering. "I believe, rather," he started slowly, finally bringing his gaze to encompass all three his seated subjects, "I know what will gain us passage and acceptance from the High Priestess into Avalon. You are right about one thing, Hermione: it must be something once belonging solely to my *daid*, something that marks itself as his, and his alone."

All three now looked expectantly at Raj, and he offered a slight smile to Hermione before turning to step to the wall behind him. And there he gently lift from its tartan display the broadsword that first had enraptured Hermione her only other visit here.

"*Ond 'r 'n fwyaf farchog i mewn 'r byd shall arlunia hon eginyr chan 'i carega gwaid'*" he whispered reverently. Raj looked to Hermione from under his long, black lashes. "Only the greatest knight in the world shall draw this blade from its stone sheath."

Breath caught on her lips. It all made sense now, though how such a full circle could come back to her as witness...

"The Sword of Avelion, first brought to Camelot by the Lady Lile of Avelion. Merlin himself had embedded it into a block of marble after Balin died, setting it adrift amongst the world. Only Galahad could draw it, and did so at the Feast of Pentecost in 487. It will be our passage into Avalon, Hermione, where you will find the wand that cast Grindewald from his power..."

"And learn from it the spell that fulfilled the greatest defeat known to wizard kind," she ended in hushed tones. "To defeat the greatest fear now known to all."

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"Muggles fancy themselves clever, ye ken," Argus commented to no one in particular. The soft rocking of the *Solomon IV* its namesake having carried Galahad himself in his Grail quest lulled Hermione in its gentle rhythm toward the sleep she so desired. Heavy predawn velvet blue allowed only for silhouettes of the island not far before them. Mount's Bay was startlingly quiet this day, the twenty-second of September, allowing easy glide toward the imposing fortress. "The masses believe 'tis Glastonbury where the Muggle king was laid to rest, being cross point of more'n a dozen ley lines. But 'tis St. Michael's Ley such that links the Tor, Burrow Mump, the stone rings of

Avebury... the Mount. And the Mount begins it."

Argus' Scots brogue softened as he continued recounting the wonders of St. Michael's Mount, the stories surrounding the 250-foot high island. Legends of visits by Jesus and Joseph of Arimathea, of a place of sanctuary for the Grail, of slain dragons and visions of the archangel himself. Melodic tales and shushes of water to boat soothed her frail nerves, lulling her body into half sleep against Harry's solidness. Perhaps her best friend was the only one beside whom she could relax without some sense of guilt. Ron sat to her other side, silent, straight and still as the others. Brooding was a possibility, though it was far too dark to tell; Hermione would not venture to stare directly at his familiar, freckled face. Neither their first meeting ten days past, nor the one yesterday involved welcoming reminiscent of those attached. Hugs, smiles, friendly pats... nothing in his demeanor, however, was that of a lover. Nothing more than school friends with familial overtones, and Hermione could not help but wonder at the change. Of herself she knew, for Sirius Black had stolen her heart; his brother held a lien. Yet Ron could not know that.

Could he?

Behind her she knew Regulus and Sirius held court of terse connection, the cause of which she'd still not learned since Tuesday. Raj sat before her next to his standing father, crouched in assistance to Argus. Like herself, he had weaved a tale of family emergency to explain his multiday absence from the Ministry. She had pled the same from school.

All were unmoving but for their guide, a man of cartography whose maps could not be duplicated. A man whose maps led to the most magical of places, those unplotable. Including the place he'd once come close to visiting as a child, left behind on shore with Zelda Foncé-Luminare while his father and Albus Dumbledore crossed the Bay to the hidden realm of Avalon. There the wand that defeated Grindewald was laid bare in treasured display.

Fifty-five years it had been. She wondered what if anything had changed since that time. Would they be able to find the entrance into the land? Would the Mystic of Annwyn grant them access? Would she hear their plea and offer assistance for the greater good, assuming little Hermione Granger's deductions were correct? Too many worries drifted about her head, claiming energy and sapping strength. More heavily she leaned upon Harry, allowing weary eyes to drift shut, holding out reality for a bit longer.

She slept. She knew she slept only by drastic changes of scenery when once more eyelids drew open in what must have been only minutes later. Inky depth had given way to misty gray of earliest dawn. Slightly distant island had grown to nearly accessible with one good leap from the boat. They'd begun to skirt the island on the eastern side, drifting away from the cobblestone causeway she knew to be hidden 'neath the high tide. As the water fell later in the day, tourists and visitors would step out from the mainland of Cornwall and make their way to the shops at the northern foot of the aged castle. But themselves... they hugged the sloping shoreline, slipping round to the southern side where no one was allowed, where the edge of the island rose in cliffs behind the medieval stone structure at the sharp peak. Were it Saturday instead of Friday, they'd be left in peace for no Muggle shops would be open to the public on that day.

Regardless, if all went as planned, they would see no Muggles this day, either, tide low or commerce open. Slip in before complete sunrise, and leave under cover of darkness. 'Twas the plan, anyway, assuming they'd not be caught by wizard or Muggle. And that they could locate the secret cleft in the cliffs. And do so without crashing into the island. And...

It was a moment before Hermione noticed they'd ceased advancement. Jostling more quickly now, the boat was being held several yards from rocky shoreline, Raj fighting current with the oars, his father muttering a spell with graceful arcs of wand toward a wall of impenetrable stone. She sat up straight, unable to look at the others, though she knew them as well to be intent. Rays of sunlight peeked from their right, a sense of urgency driving within Hermione to be out of sight before the sun's rising. Watchful eyes upon them, she felt. And then

Oddity of nature, a strange, subtle fading that whispered of tricks to the eye. And they were moving forward into *into* the narrow cliff. Sense of being awash in a cloak of secrecy, bathed in cool, soft wind as entrance progressed into darkness... tunnel... light emerging.

A small inlet greeted them, and only yards from their revisit with the sun did they pull upon ground. Argus leaped out, securing the vessel to a sturdy oak whilst Raj assisted the others in transferring to solid ground, his MacGregor plaid swishing in the breeze. Hermione had to admit him a curiously manly sight, the woollen kilt of green dress so different a version of him. Once the boat and supplies had been cleared, he reached back in for the long, slender package wrapped in heavy, crimson brocade. The sword was going home, she thought poignantly.

"Mind yer step," Argus warned as they moved into the massive hardwoods and heavy foliage. He seemed to know his way down a path that did not reveal itself, and slowly they moved along in single file, quiet against birdsong and distant rustle of branch and leaf. Hermione found herself not surprisingly between Ron and Harry, though once more neither made conversation. Solid half hour passed, twists and turns of the forest requiring concentration for safety.

Rounding a bend over trickling brook, Hermione turned slightly to a snapping noise at her left. Misstep of right, slippery pebbled slope, out from underneath her her foot flew. "Oh!" she cried, surroundings a blur as she dropped helplessly above the stream.

Sudden arrest jerked her body to a jolting stop, and Hermione felt not the cold soaking of the water but the weightlessness of hovering, the warm solidity of strength around her ribs, pressing tight against her backside.

"Steady, pet," his half-whisper came in a rush, warm breath brushing her ear, blushing her cheek.

"Th-thank you," she stammered, pulse racing for but both the near fall and insanely intimate feel of Regulus Black's hold about her. Harry had stepped around her, trudging on in his own thought, leaving Regulus to dart around in a flash of action. Fleeting wistful was her soul that it had not been his brother, but then resolutely she pushed such inconsiderate thoughts away. Sirius had made it plain he saw her as nothing more than a familiar from his past still, and to linger upon him with wishful yearning in her heart was only to torture herself further.

Casting an apologetic smile at her savior whilst resuming balance, Hermione caught on her turn not Regulus' controlled expression of concern, but his brother's clouded eyes behind him, ripe with warring emotions. A thistle of fear and excitement darted down her spine. Overtone of anger mingled with exasperation, flavored with something entirely unreadable. Sharp, piercing gaze met her own bewildered, then Regulus' masque of resolute defiance confronted his brother's. Breaths hung in time for long moments before a voice ahead called back in a hiss, "Come along!"

Leaving the moment, Hermione turned, stepped out, forced her own breath. Silence resumed. Eyes remained forward, intent on Harry's broad back, noting only shifts from normal stride that indicated matter to step over, around, upon. She could not allow her mind to wander elsewhere, to dissect the power of a mere glance upon her body.

Their one intimate venture between Ron and herself more than a year past had left her disappointed, bereft of sensations expected. Yet here and now her skin fairly tingled with awareness and... need. Loath to admit it, Hermione *needed* Sirius, not just wanted. And Regulus was simply a second choice substitute, neither fair to him nor herself. No denial was there that Regulus instilled senses of attraction and magnetism in her, but Sirius elicited phenomenon beyond vernacular definition. He piqued her ire. He stirred her blood.

Lost in musings, she stumbled in breaking the woods, impact of surroundings astounding her speechless. All had ceased their step but for Argus, his stout form crossing the beach-like clearing to enticing laps of gentle waters. And though heavy mists had descended upon the land, its identity was not lost to her. Upon the loch before them, from an unseen place in the distance, would arrive the mistress of Avalon. She'd seen it in the painting... she'd seen in her dreams. The same dream that brought her to

Him.

Suddenly Hermione could not breathe. She choked air into her lungs, demanding desperately they fill. But if **he** was here... Her eyes flashed to Raj, hovering near his father, speculating with furrowed brow. Mists weaved and fell, cloaking him for a long moment. She'd heard him in her dream, right behind her. Excuses had come that it was due to his continued unsettling presence in her life at that time, but if the dream had been foresight, as the painting had suggested, then perhaps Fate had different plans.

"How did you meet him?"

Hermione turned abruptly, startled. Harry's words had been polite, curious, his gaze lingering on the younger MacGregor.

"Over your name, actually," she replied, returning watchfulness over MacGregor's emerging figure. "We were at a conference of sorts. In Ireland. Dinner conversation had turned round to you, of par, and I wasn't up to all and sundry knowing our friendship. When Mr. Bailey prattled that knowledge off... well, I left in a hurry. Raj followed to check on me." She paused, dry amusement shifting her words.

"Funny enough," she continued, "it was the same dinner conversation that told me where to find the answer to defeat Lord Voldemort."

Any reply Harry might have had was cut off by the former subject's approach. A crowd drew as Raj met her, his face devoid of particular expression. Senses of expectancy and nerves hung heavily in the damp air.

"I've sent a message to her," he stated flatly, his eyes never leaving Hermione's but for courtesy sweep of the group. "By Patronus. She'll already have been alerted our presence, so it was merely a formality and humble request for audience. My intent, milady," he added just above a whisper, his mystical eyes holding trance with her own wide, anticipatory ones, "is to explain the situation to the Priestess... then enter the island... with you."

"Preposterous idea "

"I don't think "

"Couldn't someone else "

"Would it not be better "

"*Hell* no!"

Of all immediate protests surrounding, it was the last outburst that gouged into Hermione with raw anger and authority. It also silenced every other cry of dissent.

"She's just a *child*, MacGregor," Sirius continued, jaw tight and set, features dangerous. "You're not going to throw her into some bloody warped scheme of yours just because she's fancied herself a right little investigator throughout this mess."

Shock turned to indignant anger, and Hermione scowled at the bare insult. All notions tender fled under Sirius' attack.

"She's done your brain work," he noted further, threat lying just beneath the words. "Regulus or I will go with you, settle this matter. If there's any trouble, we can deal with it. Leave the kids be."

-o-

Challenge lay in his tone, in his stare, but Raj knew the delicacy behind choice of companions, and Hermione would be the only one allowed accompaniment, he was sure. Enlightening discussions with Auntie Zelda had defined that option; the High Priestess had spoken to Hermione, and to Hermione only would there be an extended invitation. Now was not the time for ill-placed machismo, though Raj had discovered over the weeks Sirius Black's energetic, rebellious and hellfire manner. Rationale would seek like to reason with him, and the man was fuelled by all but rationale at the moment. Still, Raj had to try.

"It is not up to me, Sirius. Nimüe has a connection with Ms. Granger please don't ask for details now," he cut in with a head shake before Sirius could interrupt. "Suffice it to say that she views Ms. Granger with favor, and it is, after all, her understanding that has led us thus far. She will know what more may be needed when we arrive."

Everyone present held collective breaths, unsure the direction Black's unbalanced fury would go. But perhaps more frightening than unleashed anger was his further narrowed gaze to Raj, then sudden transition to straight, unreadable face. Pseudo flippancy rose his brow, pursed his lips. Sirius turned his attention to Hermione, quipping.

"Rose to tea and cakes with legendary mystics nowadays, have we? Such an elevation in status, Ms. Granger. I must have missed your debut into society."

Hermione's own glare drew thin, chin raised in restrained temper. "Yes, well; you've been gone, haven't you?" she answered coolly. Despite obvious agitation, Raj swore he denoted a flicker of hurt in her eyes as well before rapid blinks erased such signs of weakness. She cared what Sirius thought, and though Raj wished it otherwise, he knew the older man's blatant barbs pierced her too fragile self esteem. Black's opinion of her meant a great deal, far greater than Raj's or Harry's or, as he'd only of late learned, her boyfriend Ron's.

Defiance shone in Sirius' stare upon her, then settled into bland belligerence when she broke contact and stomped off toward the shore in a huff. Raj felt rather than heard exhalations of tension released about him.

"Sirius," Harry tentatively broached, "don't you think you were a bit harsh?"

Sirius turned a dark look to his godson. Brusquely he answered, "No." Flashed glance back toward Hermione's retreating back, then he himself walked off toward the other end of the clearing.

"Merlin, but he's changed," Ron murmured in shock, turning from Sirius to Harry to the group at whole.

"No, he's not." Regulus' flat statement brought all eyes to him, but he was staring hard after his brother.

Tension had returned, and it only made Raj edgier than he already was waiting for Nimüe. He couldn't shake the feeling there was ill about. Needing to separate himself for a bit, he took a last look at Hermione's stone still form and proclaimed resolutely, "I'm going to have a look about."

Instead of immediately setting out, Raj cautiously approached Hermione. Ramrod straight her posture, arms crossed defensively at her chest. She stared unseeingly into the heavy mists across the loch.

"Ms. Granger *Hermione*... His words were uncalled for," he began, unsure how to alleviate the pain so apparent on her lovely face.

"No, it's all right, Raj," she replied in a small voice, refusing to face him. "I'm not upset over Sirius. I... I'm just worried. About everything. This place, it's it's unnerving. I felt like we were being watched before we slipped through the crevice. I've an uneasy feeling about it."

Raj nodded slightly, too familiar with the feeling himself. "I've time enough; I'll have a look behind us, ensure we're not being followed. Would you feel better, then?" he inquired softly. Her childlike nod gave him all the encouragement needed, and with a whispered, "I'll return straight away," he left her to solitude and entered the forest, green and white kilt dancing in the subtle breeze.

-o-

Lying was never her strong point. Yet how could Hermione have admitted to Raj MacGregor, or any other soul there, how much Sirius' harsh words tore? So she stood there upon the grassy sand mutely, beseeching the mists about her to swallow her whole, enshroud her from her foolishness. Sirius Black never felt a thing for her, never saw her as more than a child of unusual talent and heart enough to assist an escaped convict flee for his life.

And she did not want his love out of gratitude.

Turmoil had become her life the heartbeat Sirius Black had stepped back into the land of living. But at the very least he had awakened her to the injustice she'd laid upon Ron Weasley. No return would there be to the way things were, after all chaos and adventure were over. They would remain friends, yes, but Hermione could see in Ron's eyes his own realization and acceptance these changes. Time to bury the past.

An hour passed this way in musings. Both sets of brothers lounged about, their chatter indiscernible around her. Argus moved nervously, speaking to the others quietly, coddling the sword in reverence. Hermione, however, had not moved, vision fixated upon the shrouded waters before her. She seemed to drift in a hypnotic state, birdsong and human speech fading in the distance.

Hauntingly pale had grown the vision, thick mists dissipating above the living waters, parting as a veil to ethereal figures drifting nearer. Fading into corporeal existence, the lady grew defined, real. Serenity and strength exuded from her statuesque form, standing in command upon the bow. More exquisite than before, radiance a tangible magic sought and envied.

Heightened were the hushed laps telltale of her approach, Hermione's ears attuned to each meeting of water to shore near her feet. Sunlight diffused about her, never quite from a single direction. Cool lifts of breeze dallied with her locks of curls, heavy with dampness. Anticipation eased, the approach of the Lady Nimue seemingly natural.

Then he was there. His presence... essence... Just like before. Just like in her...

Dreams.

It wasn't a dream. Not this time. In truth she was standing upon the loch's edge of which she'd dreamed for months. Fog lifting before her revealed the enchanted woman in heavy velvet robes, blues and violets and mystique all around her. And she was real, too. And the man behind her she *felt* him there he was real. **Him**. And she froze, suddenly fearful and excited and full of trepidation and overwhelmed in a collage of awareness, hunger, longing, life force...

Soft breath filtered down to flitter across her ear, neck, his aura mesmerizing her every sense. No longer did she account for the lady, the lake, the woods, the sun. Body heat warmed her back as though the Yule flame in winter's grasp. Her own breath shallowed, faltered. Nerves throughout her being stood alert, quivering, yearning his touch she knew was coming.

And it was. Eyes falling half closed in emotional state, only her breath hitched at the graze of fingertip at the hollow below her left ear. So tense, Hermione wavered, grew lightheaded. Then though expected, his renewed touch was a surprise, nearly her undoing. This time her chin; deft, calloused fingers lightly gripped, cupped it, tugged round with gentle insistence. Over her left shoulder, tilted upward. Unshed tears threatened to spill as she allowed the guidance, shifted her weight to turn as he brought her around to face him.

"All is well, milady." Raj's voice flowed to her from somewhere far away, but it was only the solid body right before her that drew her notice. Eyes forced open against the moment, rays of sunlight blinding her until his movement shadowed the light. And she peered up into stormy gray irises full of power greater than any wizard's spell. Cornucopia of emotions swirled in his gaze, leaving Hermione with only the knowledge that it was him, it would always be him, and no force on Earth could ever change her heart's decision.

-o-

He'd come to apologize, to admit foul mood and immense worry and fear for her safety had led to his biting remarks. But she peered up at him with tear-filled eyes and trembling jaw, and the words of regret fled his mind. Sirius' hands found themselves slipping across her skin, holding her face in gentle caress, and he could not tear away his glance even as he knew the arrival just meters down the shore was of extreme importance. Only this young woman of greater character than he could ever aspire mattered now, and he'd brought her pain.

Allowing the impulse to wash over him, he drew down his head. Lower, lower... her eyes closed unwillingly of fatigued fashion. He felt her breath slow further, lips relax, part... So close his voiceless whisper blew a stray curl from her across her mouth. Her image had grown blurry, so close... so close...

"He was a friend of my father's." Harry, down the shore.

Reality gripped Sirius in a flash. Guilt of a man who should know better flooded him, and for once good conscience commanded the upper hand. Steeling himself, he pulled his head back slightly, then redirected the nearly condemning kiss to her forehead. A light but lingering caress of his unsteady lips, full of meaning that could not be deciphered... for he did not know himself what he meant.

"Be careful," he whispered painfully across her temple. Then Sirius turned abruptly, walked across the clearing, and lost himself in the solitary protection of the forest.

Chapter 33: But Once

Chapter 34 of 36

As answers arrive en masse, sometimes it takes the unexpected to bring about the most important ones... the ones that happen but once.

Reviews are much appreciated

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Chapter 33: But Once

Bereft.

Cool air prickled her flesh, his disappearance leaving her *bereft* with longing. Hermione's eyes opened to find just what she had expected: nothing. He'd gone, vanished in lieu of facing her after making such a fool out of her. No, wait; that was unfair. She'd done quite all right making the fool of herself... *herself*.

"Ms. Granger," Raj called from further down the shore where he stood with comrades and their benevolent host. "It is time."

Pluck it up, Hermione. Your fabulous Gryffindor courage is cued for the set. Breathing deeply, Hermione sighed, turned, and made her way to the waiting adventure. It wasn't for Avalon she knew her inner strength was called; it was for acceptance, for walking away.

From Sirius. And her heart.

-o-

Sirius Black was not a coward. Never in his thirty-six or whatever years could he ever have been called a coward. And walking away from Hermione Granger and some semblance of ill-fated moment of derangement wasn't an act of cowardice, either. He was convinced of that. It was, rather, an action born of maturity and wisdom. Yes; that was it. Gripping stomach pangs were adrenaline, the unsteadiness of anticipation. Answers achieved across the loch meant an end to Voldemort, and he was merely ripe with hunger, with expectancy. Nothing did they have to do with blurred coherency and far too young lips far too close. That tug of unexpected desire was not the cause of his jumpy status or his departure. Raj had been correct; they needed to keep watch about them, and a foray into the trees was a measure of safety.

His gut would relax once this fight was over.

Tension slowly seeped from his body, the moment of internal warring releasing him to here and now. Damp bark and shimmer, deep green leaves came into focus, brushing all hazy recollections aside. Forty minutes of trekking tended to lose one's stress in the mundane. Taking a breath, Sirius glanced around to ensure he was not far off the path they'd previously taken. It wouldn't do to become lost. Anything could happen, needing his assistance. After all, how much did they actually know about this mystic of Avalon?

All right; so he was concerned for Hermione's safety. After all he'd been through with Peter and Azkaban, Sirius wasn't one to be prematurely trusting. He felt responsible for her well-being; a save-over from his days in Grimmauld where he like the other adults was responsible for the care of the kids.

But she's not a child anymore, Sirius. Admonishment echoed in his head with a voice uncannily similar to Remus'. Sirius shook his head to clear it. No, she wasn't quite a child. Not in years, at least. Muted chuckles escaped. Had she ever been her age? Visions of a fifteen-year-old schoolmarm flitted across memory. Harry had often bemoaned her take-charge behavior. Often the chit was more a nanny than friend, it seemed.

But then, she had indeed grown up. Harsh words of his own tongue slapped back, inundating conscience with guilt. Nearly to tears she'd been, and he'd gone to apologize. For he knew she was no child, but protective instincts had ignored a timeline, had insisted she was far too young for such reckless endangerment. Words of sorrow had caught in his throat at watery eyes wide and round and full of hurt, staring at him. Beseeching him. Seeing past his rebel façade to a man who felt responsible for everyone close in his life, who berated himself for failing to save them all. Even Peter... from himself.

Twigs snapped ahead; bird twittering ceased abruptly. Senses heightened in Sirius, and he slowed his steps, wand drawn. Further rustling drifted from the path to his right, and carefully Sirius crept through underbrush toward the sounds, caution slowing breath and easing step.

Reaching a stride from the foliage bent and downtrodden the only sign of their passage hours before Sirius Black fell back into the shadows to observe. Steady, calm... movement from down the way, nearing the bend only yards from him. Nearer, nearer... halt. Contemplative pause with higher brush movement. Resume steps. Reaching the bend... Sirius' eyes focused, his breath tight.

"Oh, *shit*..."

-o-

*An island within an island. No, Hermione thought; a **world** within an island.*

Stark beauty reminiscent of the Greeks blended with Renaissance detail and lush, virgin landscape. Crag and outcroppings dipped and over-shown shale paths and timeless stone and timber buildings. What appeared monastic commanded Hermione's attention to deeper inland from the beach they'd just alighted. Size dominated all other shelters, but not by width and breadth alone did the centerpiece capture.

Richly intricate in detail and masonry, the multi-story cross betwixt solarium, abbey and fortress drew Hermione as a moth to flame. Soothing, welcoming... and as they neared the two-tiered entrance under Nimue's guidance, an atmosphere of quiet strength grew, compelling a feeling of security and peace.

Through the entrance hall, colorful tapestries lining walls, carpets deep and plush draping flagstone. Parchments littered a secretariat in an alcove to the right; soothing splashes filled the air about the wall fountain to the left. It was not long before they broke from the empty hall into an inner courtyard, resplendent in deeply hued flora and abundant fauna.

And activity. Ladies moved about with purpose, platters endowed in fruits moved to trusses being draped in pale linens. Garlands of holly and ivy fell in symmetric layers from tent frames to center poles, fireflies burrowing in the strands, casting twinkles of light. Chatter filled with laughter and beauty filled the ambience as gauzy materials swept up in folds and drapes about the frames, creating curtains of shimmer and sheer tents of timeless mystery.

Hermione stopped short, Raj nearly colliding with her from his position behind and left. He caught himself against her, steadying sword and her with his usual grace. Apparently sensing their hesitation, Nimue turned, a bewitching little smile lighting her eyes.

"We are preparing for the Feast of Avilon," she explained in her soft, light voice. "I believe it is celebrated in your world as the Witches' Thanksgiving."

Ah, yes. Hermione recalled that Chelsea had the much-anticipated masque ball tonight. Pity Raj would not be there for her to impress with silks and chiffons, but he had more pressing an engagement. He had to save the world.

"It is all so... enchanting," she managed, overwhelmed by the sights, sounds and scents of the garden on the verge of celebratory bliss. Raj, too, seemed speechless.

"Yes, it is," the mystic agreed. "You are most welcome to stay for the feast this evening. Once we have completed our task..." Subtle was her reminder their purpose in coming here, and reluctantly Hermione propelled her legs back in motion.

Leaving excited bustle and chatter, the three continued deeper into the island. Straight path left the grand courtyard garden through a stone archway and onto a gravel walk, winding and rising into thick tree line. Bright hues flashed past in outspread wings and fluttering tail feathers. Calls of exotics echoed into this ancient forest, noises of the island's human inhabitants eventually fading to nothingness behind.

Perhaps another ten minutes had passed when Hermione realized their footing had changed from broken rock to heavy stone, well worn and smooth. Walls of bark and limb gave way to tended lawn edged in thick nature. The clearing was small, no more than one hundred meters square. Before them, digging out from within the sharp rise of rocks was a gently flowing stream, carving its gentle wash through speckled granite. Before it stood a low altar, the stream flowing beneath its bridge-like stance then seeking refuge once more into a quarry of rock, fleeing underground.

Nimue stepped in with a soft glide, her bare feet easy on the dew-kissed grass. Hermione watched her approach the altar, and only then did the younger woman notice the single item placed upon gathered eggplant velvet atop the carved stone. Daring a few steps herself, she grew close enough to discern it lay not upon the rich fabric, but just *above* it. Hovering as though spellbound was a wand. Simple in design, long, perhaps ash by its pale tan and off white color. Dumbledore's wand.

Mesmerized, she drew close to examine the artifact, always refraining from its touch. Ivy draping the wall of earth and stone behind rustled in the breeze, tickling the splash of water, floating above the wand. So this was the instrument that felled the last greatest affliction to wizardkind? Appearances were unremarkable, but an elegance so like Albus Dumbledore himself cast an aura about the wood. Charismatic, entrancing.

She was kneeling, moisture seeping into her trousers, wetting her knees and ankles. Reverence hung in the air, and Hermione could not quite bring herself to cast her claim upon the piece of history. Worth was not something she felt not upon this venture. Not for this rite.

Casting about her eyes for reassurance from Nimüe, she realized suddenly the woman was gone. Frantic glances revealed only herself and Raj in the refuge. Raj, however, was not just behind her as last she'd looked. The wand bearing Grindlewald's defeat was not of interest to the young man. No. Rather, Raj MacGregor was on the far side of the clearing, kneeling before a limestone encasement of great width and depth. Perplexed, Hermione rose and quietly neared him, casting off easily the decision of the wand for at least minutes more.

"Raj?" she whispered, fear of disturbing the integral peace forcing her voice at half measure. Strides more and she reached out to offer a hand to his shoulder, his bent head hidden by broad back and shoulders. Fingers moved to touch him

Closer inspection was all she needed. Hermione froze, respect and loss washing over her in a cool trickle. Before them lay a humble tomb, low and unassuming, intricate only in the relief carving in life size atop it, a knight with shield and chalice. Welsh epitaph need not be understood to know this man of centuries past. His figure held not his weapon, but it had been brought to him this day by his own lineage.

Raj remained bowed before his *daid*, the blade shed of its cloth bag and placed upon tip near Raj's knees, his hands grasping the sheath below the hilt. The sword had come home.

Tearing her eyes from Galahad's tomb, Hermione noticed further into the trees three more such slabs, these of lighter marble and more elaborate. Even from a distance, the moss-splotched designs depicted their inhabitants, and she knew there lay the Lady Guinevere, flanked on each side by the loves of her unhappy life. It crossed the young witch's mind then the heartache of the missing tomb beside this great knight at her feet. Evangeline should have been lain beside him in eternal repose. Instead, he was once again left alone, bereft of his love.

Like her.

Pulling her hand from the almost touch, Hermione retreated back to the altar. She could not allow her thoughts to drift to Sirius, or the heart that was breaking within. She had a job to do, to do her part in saving the wizarding the entire world. She'd best get on.

Steeling herself, Hermione once more knelt before the altar, closed her eyes, breathed deeply, slowly... Fingers wrapped securely about the wood, unnaturally warm to touch. The altar released its grip upon the treasure, and Hermione opened her eyes as she pulled it back to her. Staring with awe, she forced from her lips the hushed Latin.

"*Prior Incatato...*"

-o-

Deletrius had little more than ended her search into the past when Hermione sensed the Lady Nimüe near her. Setting the wand once more upon bed of air, she rose and turned, finding the mystic watching her, a soft, knowing half-smile quirking her features. Nimüe slid her gaze to her left, and Hermione followed. Raj was now standing, the sword held aloft in flat presentation upon outstretched palms. Offer of heritage, the image seemed to say. And with no fanfare Raj MacGregor lay the sword upon the tomb, its blade running along the statue's sternum.

He stepped back, and a glow began to encompass the weapon, pale and misty and evolving. Clearing after but moments, the view granted warmed Hermione's heart a mite. The sword was now stone, now ingrained into the carving on the tomb, was now in fealty grip of its true master.

"It is time." Hermione started at the soft words from her hostess' lips. "We must begin our return journey. The sun is past its zenith; the celebrations will begin soon."

Nodding absentmindedly, Hermione fell in step with the Lady, Raj materializing empty handed beside her in silence. Slightly pained features suggested his inner turmoil. Hermione could only assume seeing his ancestor's tomb and the resulting gifting of the sword to its rightful owner the cause of his solemnity. She could only imagine the sense of loss he must feel. After all, his life's purpose had been completed: protect the Grail. After generations of covert guardianship, he had nothing left to sacrifice for. His sense of identity had been returned to its origin. Galahad now rest with the blade that had revealed his prophetic stature centuries ago. Without lineage to uphold, Raj was now simply... Raj. Raj MacGregor, bright, honorable, handsome young wizard. Assistant to the Undersecretary of Finance in the British Ministry of Magic. A man now without direction.

Would that be Harry in the near future? she wondered. Lost, empty, feeling of absence within the world?

Doubtful, she realized. He had purpose beyond saving lives and justice. He had Ginny; he had a child on the way. He had a life waiting for him.

"Do your visions still bring you fear, Hermione?" A smile laced Nimüe's question.

Hermione stumbled, righting herself in confusion and shock. "Visions?" she asked. How could this woman know of the dreams she had had repeatedly for weeks.

This time she laughed softly. "Yes, Hermione; I know of your visions. I know of many things." A glance cast over her shoulder, eyes bright with unsheltered amusement. Turning back around, Nimüe continued with light step, ethereal in all movements.

Their entrance back into the courtyard was met with gaiety and welcome. Preparations seemed near completion, and only then did Hermione realize the time lost on their venture. At least several hours had passed, though truthfully it seemed so less a span. Fragrant sweet lifted the air as freshly pressed grapes gave way to older stores of wine, so prominent a tradition of the harvest during the month of September. Or so explained Nimüe.

"Today is known by many names," she continued to teach as they were seated beneath an open tent of chiffon-esque white material. Standing torches were already aflame, though the sky was still quite early in its light.

"Wine Harvest is but one of them. Non-magical mortals know it only as the Autumn Equinox," she added, taking a sip of the burgundy liquid placed before her moments before. A glance entreated both Raj and Hermione to do the same. They obliged.

Rich, sweet... enticing. Hermione could understand better the appeal, as before she had never found much particular enjoyment of the drink. However, reason was soon comprehended.

"This is one of our apple wines," their hostess pointed out. *Ah, the famous apples of Avalon. Was there any doubt now as to such delicious flavor?* "The grapes you can scent were harvested more than a week prior under the full moon. Thus, its name of Harvest Moon."

Another easy smile, her quiet confidence vaguely unnerving. Finding nothing to say, Hermione continued to drink, hoping Raj would find his missing tongue. Thankfully, his hunting skills were as brilliant as his deductive ones.

"Milady..." Words hesitant, humble. "How has it come to be that the maiden Evangeline was not laid to rest here, in Avalon, next to Sir Galahad? She was his one true love."

Knowing smile and ever-so-slightly quirked brow told Hermione that Nimüe knew exactly who Evangeline was, and how no maiden was she.

"The hand maid Evangeline chose to remain in the mortal world to raise her son, her grandson... her great-grandson. Upon her death, she was interred by her own request in a grave accessible to all her descendents... to all the peoples. She had taken on Galahad's promise to watch over the Chalice, and did so until her passing. Her marker

bears the sign of the Grail, and all who pay her tribute are reminded of it, as she wished, as would have Galahad."

"Where is she buried?" he questioned, sorrow parting in lieu of curiosity.

"In a hidden grove on St. Michael's Mount, well behind the castle her lineage constructed much later." Denoting the completion of offered information, Nimüe allowed herself a hand sweet of pastry with pistachios and honey. Baklava entreated her attention, putting an end to her answers. Hermione, however, could not abide the silence. Something unsettled her; the power and effervescence of the woman before her not the least cause.

"Why was the Grail moved from here?" she asked, honestly baffled. "This was obviously the safest place for it."

Nimüe bestowed her an indulgent expression, as though a wise adult to a clueless child. Yet Hermione did not bristle, for in this case, the comparison was quite accurate, she felt.

"All things must take their leave in turn, dear one. Everything is a cycle, and to each life force there is movement, a purpose, play that must be allowed its time. The Grail lay safe here until such time as it could be cared for appropriately. Galahad's line finally was able to procure it once a proper place was established. It was time for its journey to begin, its path toward reunion with its home."

At Hermione's confused features, the Lady expanded her allusion.

"As with nature, there is a time to act, and a time to hold still. While the Chalice lay dormant here, it was still, awaiting only the proper moment to act, to commence. It is as with the seasons. One acts in the spring, planting. One tends during growth, and one harvests at the ripening. That is our action. But this evening marks our transition into stillness, Hermione." She paused, visually seeking acknowledgement that her words were clear. "Tonight our sun enters Libra, the Lion. It wanes, giving dominance over to the moon. Day gives leave to the night; light to the dark. Autumn has arrived, and with it the season of rest...."

More was said, but Hermione did not hear it. Chills flushed down her body as comprehension dawned in a way she had not considered. Pulse racing, she turned abruptly to Raj, barely able to speak through excitement and panic.

"That's it!" she cried, all around her falling to background, even Lady Nimüe. "Raj, that's it! That's what the riddle meant!" Jumping to her feet, she paced but steps in each direction, hands flailing and desperation speeding the divulgence of epiphany. "Tonight! The Equinox! *Before the balance of light and dark tips to the night!* That's it, Raj the Equinox. When the day and night are exactly twelve hours long, but at sunset, we've entered the stage where the night is longer until spring. Tonight is equal, but tomorrow falls short the day."

She stopped abruptly, horror clenching her. "The Witches' Thanksgiving Ball," she murmured, eyes seeking Raj's, and finding them wide with the same conclusion. "That's where he's going to attack. All the leaders of the wizarding nations. All the innocents... *Chelsea.*"

-o-

Harry stared at the arriving vessel. He didn't know what he would say. Somehow, he had been prepared for this. Knew something like this would happen; it was fated somewhere, some reason. But what he would say to *her*...

They stepped from the boat, speeding toward them. He stepped forward to greet her, determined to speak before she saw within the gathering behind him. Muscles sore, screaming against movements after heavy abuse. Ragged clothing she'd notice; skewed appearance, she'd question. Trickle of blood she'd fret. But behind him...

"Harry!" Hermione called in a dash to him. Already words bubbled forth in intermittent coherency. "It's tonight! Voldemort's going to attack tonight! The Ministry's ball for the Witches' Thanksgiving. You've got to hurry; you've got to be there before the Equinox! It's at twenty-seven past five. Please, hurry! We've got to go!" Confusion marred her pretty face; she could not understand why he simply stood there, staring at her sadly.

"Hermione," he said softly, voice raw with overuse and emotion. He couldn't tell her.

"Harry, what are you waiting for?" she cried, opened her mouth to say something more, then suddenly stopped, taking in his appearance. Bewilderment and anger changed to a growing fear, and the knot in his stomach tightened.

"Oh, no," came whispers of slowly building panic. "What happened? Something dreadful happened, Harry. Tell me what it was? Where's everyone?" She asked this of Harry, but no longer was she gazing at him and his grimy, sweaty face. She was looking past him. He closed his eyes, holding breath from forthcoming sounds of pain. He didn't want to tell her.

Utter silence broke with the softest, "No." Directly on its heels...

"No!" Never had Harry heard Hermione Granger shriek in such deep pain. Death Eaters had attacked her, had nearly killed her, yet never did she fall apart with such anguish. But he'd known this time she would.

Footsteps fell hard as she darted past, varying degrees of "no" falling in her wake. Harry's eyes opened to face Raj before him, the elder man's solemn gaze meeting his in understanding and silent question.

"They'd followed us. Nearly a dozen. Your boss Chamberlain he'd figured it out when both you and Hermione were unable to be found due to family emergencies. He knew where to start, and traced us to the Bay. They watched us enter, and some dark magic brought them through the crevice."

"And...?" Raj asked, unable to complete his sentence. His attention flitted back to Hermione, and Harry turned slightly to see her now breaking between Argus and Regulus. He couldn't watch.

Harry shook his head. "We ran them out, but at a cost."

-o-

God no, please no... Mantras slipped through her lips even as Hermione shoved past Mr. MacGregor and Regulus, heedless of propriety or even slightest courtesy. They'd been gathered over him, speaking to him, obviously studying for some reason. But Hermione could not abide any studying; only pure panic and unabashed emotion wrenched from her. Knees protested their violent force into the ground, but no notice did she take. Only could she gather his head into her arms, one hand grasping lapels in a mixture of accusation and encouragement. His gaze was weak, unfocused. Breathing, shallow.

"Sirius, nooooo..." she moaned into the narrow space between his chest and her face, so doubled over to him she was. Blurred vision through tears took in without conscious notice the now four men hovering uncomfortably around her. Regulus had been kneeling, himself, but at Hermione's appearance had stood and given a step.

Her world had dropped out from beneath her. Vices squeezed her chest, nausea welling up.

"Not sure what the curse was," Regulus was saying to Raj. "We just don't know what else to do for him."

His phrasing forced her remembrance that Sirius was indeed still alive, though tone suggested that might not be much longer the case. She'd pulled back enough to face him, granting her sternest voice and most forceful glare.

"Sirius Black, you will not die. Do you hear me?" Slowly his shuttered eyes shifted to hers, ghost of a smile passing his lips. Sobs were checked as Hermione attempted to remain in some sort of command, demanding Sirius to prove himself the talent he was rumored and rise and walk. He was Sirius Black; he was meant to elude demons

and evade blemish in battle.

Hermione Granger, being the woman she was made, fell in desperation to her fallback: logic. Strangled analyses squeaked out as she cradled him in shaking arms.

"You cannot die, Sirius. You're above that. Only cowards die multiple times, and you're no coward. You're brave, Sirius. So very brave." Her voice choked, and she struggled to plead, eyes never leaving his. "The valiant never taste of death but once," she quoted, "and you've already been there. You can't die, now; you can't! You can't leave me. Not when I've finally found you..." Weeping found its way into instruction; fingertips carefully plied back tendrils against his damp, fevered brow.

Sirius' eyes were but slits now, and Hermione felt his muscles tense, convulse, then relax. His body grew heavy, and she knew he was fading.

"No! No! Don't leave me!" Hysterics grew. Fear she had never known tore at her, and she gathered him to her breast, rocking through waterfalls of tears. "Wake up, wake up! You **must** wake up..."

"Hermione..." Raj was kneeling beside her, his voice soothing. "This may help. I cannot guarantee anything, but you may try. It is at least hope."

A vial was being pressed into her right hand between palm and lapel.

"Give him a small sip every hour until it is all gone. Keep him warm, his fever down. That is all I can offer," he said, resuming his feet. "We have to go, Hermione. We have to stop Lord Voldemort, or no one will survive."

Peripherally she took in the gathering of the men near the trail out. Raj hesitated. "I've cast a protective shield about the clearing. It will give you twenty-four hours. By this time tomorrow, you must follow the path we will leave for you and wait at the pool. My father will return for you then. You must meet him there directly at noon." Quiet pause. Soft whisper. "With him... or without."

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"Cowards die many times before their deaths;

The valiant never taste of death but once."

- *Julius Caesar* (Act II, Scene II), by William Shakespeare

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Chapter 34: Unnatural Expectations

Chapter 35 of 36

Even when matters are at their bleakest, a part of us deep within will still hold unnatural expectations for happiness.

Sometimes we even realize them.

As always, reviews are much appreciated.

** Author's Note: Regarding the content of this chapter, please keep in mind there is a Forbidden Forest for certain sites, and I prefer not to go out of bounds. That said, I hope you enjoy this chapter.

Only one more to go.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

Chapter 34: Unnatural Expectations

Blankly he stared across sharp points of brilliance upon dancing waters. Mount's Bay jostled the small boat in earnest, yet neither Regulus nor his companions saw fit to remark. More silence filled this return trip to the mainland than their initial outing only that morning.

Had it only been hours since? Lifetimes pass in less, Regulus mused sadly. His had seemed to do just hours before, when certain death loomed before him at the tip of a scarred wand. Only seconds did it last, but in that breath everything of consequence flooded his conscious in rapid succession. Taking the Dark Mark still burning upon taut flesh; learning the Dark Lord's unconscionable intent; betraying his family's beliefs by turning traitor; thrown into a Muggle world of hiding.

But interwoven in those recollections threaded most curious fine silken knots in a tapestry of otherwise drab, rough wool. Slipping past house-elves for ill-gotten sugar biscuits; catching a black haired beauty's impish smile meant solely for him; of once more being called 'Regulus' after years of Stubby Boardman's identity; seeing his brother again... and being acknowledged as such. Such moments cleansed the palate, brought generous rays into caverns of self-imposed solitude and misery.

Sirius' warning had given only minutes to prepare, but those precious tick-tocks of timepieces had been enough. Preparations had been hastily made, and ambushing had given the upper hand. Swift fight full of anger and shock, deadly intent bordering on mania. Enough had been injured seriously or disarmed that respite could be seen. Until, in the midst, he'd come violently upon a familiar face.

"I'll be damned," Rabastan Lestrangle whispered, eyes bulging at the sight of a very real, very alive Regulus Black.

"You already are," Regulus replied succinctly, Black arrogance slipping naturally into his words.

"Funny; you don't **look** dead," Lestrangle sneered. "Been hiding out all this time? Coward, in every sense. Just like your goody-wank of a brother. Turned Muggle-loving,

too, have you?" Teeth were bared in a diabolical grin.

Regulus threw a withering look at his former classmate. Years under the Dark Lord had not been kind to Rabastan. Worn and haggard, a feral gleam dominating his eyes.

"Blood is of less consequence, Lestrangle, than strength of mind." Regulus surprised himself with his own statement, realizing belatedly he meant it. "I'd rather turn traitor, condemned to magic-less life than to be lackey to a half-blood madman."

"Why, you little **fool**," Lestrangle hissed, wand flung into action.

Regulus responded in kind; this tango of duelling spells invigorating Regulus such that he'd long since forgotten. This time, his cause was truly right. Whatever it was, it wasn't out of fear. That itself made it right, and he fought for freedom from oppression. Evenly matched, they warred while others tapered off, but luck favored the younger Lestrangle for a heartbeat, and Regulus' wand was knocked clear.

"Not quite the adept as your traitor brother, then, are you?" Pride forced Regulus to stand ground, refusing to cower. "No matter." Abruptly Rabastan's wand snapped up, levelled, and green light shot from its tip, the non-verbal spell hurling toward him but striding away. It was that instant images crashed through his mind, drenching Regulus in life's moments. He was going to die. But at least he would do so fighting **with** his brother.

Whirling blur turned him vertigo, the force of his body smashing heavily into the sandy ground, knocking breath from unprepared lungs. It was only seconds before clarity hit with all the shock of icy water to the face. Later he would learn it was Angus MacGregor who'd gotten off the shot against Rabastan, stunning him. But it had been only after Sirius had careened into his younger brother, knocking him from the line of fire, taking the curse meant for Regulus.

"Bloody Gryffindor," Regulus now murmured contemptuously beneath his breath, staring unseeingly toward the partially exposed causeway far to their left. Unnatural expectation it would have been to hope Sirius would have for once remained conscious of his own safety. His brother had jumped to save him, just as reckless and selfish as always. For it could only be selfishness to have moved Sirius to take the spell, to leave Regulus once again after they had only just found the other, had started to be brothers as not since early childhood. Three decades it had been since belonging of this sort had existed, and now dashed away on *noblesse oblige*. Only careless arrogance could have propelled Sirius to sacrifice himself, never giving thought to Regulus. Regulus... again utterly alone in the world. With Sirius gone, no family left would have him. And a family of his own was out of the question. One witch only among thousands had garnered his attentions, his respect in the last twenty years. And it was evident beyond all shadow she was in love with Sirius, not him.

Abundantly clear was that choice she had made, there on the dune grass before them all. Heart upon her sleeve, tears of gravest grief reddening expressive brown eyes. Her voice had been choked and anguished, pitiful, and no comfort was to be had for her once she'd seen Sirius.

Nearly unconscious, it was doubted Sirius could even comprehend surroundings or people, but Regulus had spoken so softly to him, kneeling near his ear, encouraging hand gripping tightly his brother's thumb like he had as a child his first flight upon a broom, Sirius behind him, promising he'd not let Regulus fall. Regulus loved his older brother, make no mistake. Open affection was never his strong trait, but always it was there. Sometimes hidden by pain, sometimes agitation, sometimes fear. But never ending.

And then Hermione was there, holding his head, cradling him, weeping over him. Moving all others away by mere sense they were imposing. And it was no longer about Regulus and Sirius; it was not about Ron and Hermione. And it was never about Hermione and himself.

-o-o-o-

Recovery seemed almost a fool's hope. Fever had taken hold, slumber fitful and aught but restful. Reddish-orange flames crackled into the growing darkness, bestowing warmth in tandem with the woollen cavalry blanket Hermione had draped upon Sirius. The second blanket Raj had left lay beneath them both in protection from cooling earth, allowing Hermione to kneel at Sirius' head with the loch-drenched kerchief she'd procured from the rucksack. Religiously the vial was tipped to his slack lips, drop by precious drop draining in effort for life.

Reverently fingertips grazed burning flesh between fresh douses. Sweat-dampened tendrils clung like a lover's scent to every sweep she made, clearing his brow whether or not it need be. Touch of his flesh was her second greatest need right then; knowledge of complete restoration of his health the grand winner by far.

In repose Sirius softened to childlike innocence, free of the horrors of a war he'd not been allowed to fight. Very much it was he who now appeared the inexperienced one, the dependent with troubled dreams and poor confidence. And so longingly Hermione wanted to care for him, soothe away his fears and worries, heal him.

"You've always been the courageous one, Sirius," she cooed to him, palm resting maternally in thick, long black tresses. "And so bold, so full of life!" A smile entered her voice, eyes brimming with tears of withheld emotion.

"You're daring and valiant, as well. Every obstacle thrown in front of you, you've passed. Circe, you've even beaten *death*. You've already died once and you came back to us. You beat the Veil; that has to count for *something*." Dashing away the spillage from her eyes, she continued stroking his hair, commanding throat to ease and heart to settle. He would be okay; he *had* to be.

Finally collected, she rose to gather more fuel, the mundane chore comforting in mindless familiarity. Returning amid armful of wood and handfuls of dry needles, Hermione stacked heating provisions and refreshed the transfigured pot of loch water. Once more without duties, she sat beside Sirius' troubled figure, one leg stretched out alongside.

"They're going to do all right, you know," she continued, subconsciously seeking affirmation that he heard her, that he was just below the surface of waking. "They're meeting up with Remus and the Order. You know Remus; once Regulus sends the message, he'll have every detail worked out and then some. They'll dash to the ball and stop Voldemort once and forever. And in the morning, we'll both be there to greet them at Grimmauld Place to celebrate."

Territory forbidden was growing as the subject, and Hermione quickly searched for something else to say, something that did not involve their current predicament. Darkness encroaching, only vague resemblance formed through haze, fading his image to her. She shuddered, silently pleading it was not a new foreshadow of the hours to come. Memories rose to distract her.

"I remember when we first met. You were scary, actually." She chuckled lightly, running her left fingers down unshaven jaw, dwelling on each divot, each curve. "But I trusted Remus, and he trusted you. And I suppose that was all I needed. At the time.

"But then the next two years, you seemed... unbalanced." Unsure, bitten lip. Frown; brows drawn. "I really thought Azkaban had robbed your sanity. Always it seemed you treated Harry like he was his father rather than your godson. I think you wanted James back so badly you forgot Harry wasn't like him. He didn't even know him."

Casting about visually for words that would not materialize, Hermione allowed her monologue to drift into the dusk. Did she really need to tell him all this? Could he even hear her? Did it make any difference, really?

Yes. Yes, it made a difference, for she needed to say these things, to tell him what she could not say before. Why did it take this tragedy to bring to her lips honest feelings and open frankness? Had she not, upon first seeing him prone, blurted out in no uncertain actions her affections for him? Before everyone even Ron she had made abundantly clear that it was Sirius she loved, and loved so deeply. An admittance difficult even unto herself, Hermione had announced with such finality that Sirius Black was her world, her everything, and losing him again was not an acceptable option.

"I'm sure after all this is over, tongues shall wag with renewed vigor." Wistful smile creased her eyes. "Not sure if you're aware of it, but I've made a right spectacle of myself today." Softened words coupled with renewed caresses.

"You and your showmanship; simply had to make a draw of yourself, playing hero and saving your brother. But this time I couldn't let you steal the whole spotlight, I s'pose. Had to go and make a scene, you know. Had to make sure everyone and sundry knew I lo" She faltered, syllables catching in her raw throat. Fingers stilled and she leaned down to him, inches from his pale face.

Searching for a moment, she found speech once more, a hoarse whisper of repressed emotion.

"When I was a little girl, I'd play librarian at recess. The few girls at school who were friendly to me would play at pretend boyfriends who met at the library to write love letters. They'd ask me what boy I'd marry. Of course, I said he'd be clever and witty and kind. I never thought... I never thought I'd fall so deeply with a reckless, temperamental, immature, brilliant man who called me a child and forgot my birthday..." Her voice broke and a single tear splashed soundlessly upon his cheek. Imitating his gesture from what seemed years prior, Hermione closed the gap and gently kissed his fevered forehead, murmuring against cherished skin.

"I love you so very much, Sirius Black..."

-o-

Burnt orange glow seeped betwixt eyelids, slowly drawing Hermione back into wakefulness. A distinct snap of burning log had roused her, and reluctantly she left dreams of forests and laughter, camp tents and bonfires. Peering lazily through half-open lids, the glowing fire reassured her its protective presence. Light and warmth so often associated with safety and peace. Flames licked dispassionately to the fathomless black sky, dying a little before mingling with others and sprouting once more from reddened embers.

Suddenly awareness struck her, and Hermione's eyes shot wide with shock. She'd lain down beside Sirius, the fire on his other side. Her view was clear to it, now, and

He was off to her right, just inside the circle of light. Chest bare, feet bare, right knee high, supporting a forearm; left leg curled casually upon the damp ground. He was staring into the fire, its flickering casting sharp relief and shadow upon his wearily draped form, playing upon the curves and planes of his beautiful body. Locks of ebony blended into the evening, appearing only when breeze shifted their tendrils across his chiseled cheek or firelight reflected their strands.

His blanket... it was draped upon her, she realized to some concern. Beneath her head, cotton pillowed her from the ground. His shirt. Understanding cleared cobwebs of sleep, and Hermione suddenly started, taking in the full scene. He was awake. He was *awake!*

"*Sirius!*" she half shrieked, relief flooding her as she rose, the blanket falling discarded. He turned his head to her, leaving all but right high point of brow and cheekbone and jaw thrown into darkness. No expression could be deduced, but it did not matter; he was alive, he was awake.

Little more than a brief stand, stride, then return to her knees followed as she reached his still form, and she threw her arms about him in a vehement embrace of joy and pent stress. Clutching desperately to him, all she could do was chant repeatedly through her tears.

"Oh, God, Sirius... I thought you were gone... I was so scared... thought you were *goonnnnee*..." Sobs racked through her in release, her arms so tight about him his heartbeat could be felt with her own. It was only long moments later when his arms finally wrapped gently about her that she realized he'd not moved when she'd hugged and held to him.

But he did now. Comforting rubbing glided across her back, Sirius' hands easy and light.

"Shhh.... It's all right, now. It's all right." Cooing whisper, soothing hands. "I'm here, sweetie. I'm right here. Shhh..." Timbre of his voice, tonality, resonance... all were a safe haven into which Hermione longed to crawl and never to leave. Fluttering was his breath against her left ear, so close were his lips she felt their brush as he spoke reassuringly. Her grip tightened even more.

"I've not gone anywhere," he continued, calming speech growing marginally stronger. Endearing kisses of parent-like affection fell into her hair near her temple, blending with whispers of placation and nonsensical sounds. They did not matter their meaning; it was enough they were his, of his breath.

Rough stubble scraped against smooth skin as he pulled back slightly, whiskers of his jaw caresses of their own against sensitive temple, down across her cheekbone as he lowered his angle in effort to face her. Yet still he held close, did not pull away. This closeness she cherished, needed, his near permanent departure too overwhelming in its pain for anything less than constant reassurance of presence. Yes; perhaps now she truly was acting a lost child, but she would not apologize. This time it was a coming home to be in his arms. If that meant she was a juvenile to his adult guidance, then so be it. All she needed was him, safe and sound.

Hermione was not quite sure when the mood changed, when the soft hand-strokes on her back shifted to an atmosphere unlike before. But in that moment she knew beyond question that a new tension had just developed between them. Striking stillness of his kindly ministrations all but betrayed a subtle, distinct alteration. Beard growth once more rubbed bristly across her jaw, bringing him again near her ear. But the breaths that found their way against it had now grown shallow, brisk.

This time the reassuring peck of affection dropped to the soft plane before her ear. Soft breaths tickled, and a shudder danced down her suddenly sensitive body. Somehow all thoughts of paternal comfort fled her mind, replaced instantaneously with aching anticipation. She should have known, should have foreseen what her careless embrace of relief would bring her: torture. He was merely consoling her, yet Hermione's body would not leave be that which could not could never be.

Sirius slid back further, his lips finding her cold cheek. Nerves tingled, her own breath paused. A palpable something had arisen in the infinitesimal space between them, and Hermione's sobs weakened, time held in limbo.

Then... Another drop in angle; he pulled further away. Lips soft trailed down her cheek, hovering, finding the juncture of her lips. Light sigh against tender flesh. Soft, nearly non-existent...

His lips brushed hers.

-o-

What the bloody hell are you doing? his conscience pleaded answer. But Sirius could not offer explanation, could only feel his actions... feel hers.

The kiss had not been planned, had never even entered his thoughts. Her subdued breaths of anticipation upon his neck, however, had initiated his body to what his mind had refused to ponder. Only as natural course did it seem that when he had drawn round to face her, his lips took what hers were openly offering.

Hermione's muted whimper of surprise mixed with pleasure drove all possible reason from him, and Sirius gave up any fight he had for propriety. She was no longer a child, and all proof needed was delivered before him.

He deepened the kiss.

-o-

Coherent thought fled Hermione's brain the moment Sirius' lips caressed hers, parting them ever so slightly with gentle pressure and mingling of breath. Shock fluttered through her, her reply simply to kiss back. Quickly confusion was replaced by an explosion of pure craving when the tentative pressure gave way to slow, possessive hunger. Her hands splayed: one clutched desperately to his broad, bare back; the other tangled itself deep within long locks, gripping with increasing urgency.

He was alive. He was here. He was making love to her mouth with each exquisite pass of delicate firmness, and when his tongue grazed hers in its new exploration, heat blushed throughout her body, settling in nervous energy within her stomach. This was beyond all magic she'd ever studied. It rose more befitting the level of that Ancient Magic Dumbledore had always spoken of to Harry. But this was a far cry from a life's sacrifice; this was life itself.

Intoxicated thoroughly by his mouth, Hermione became only vaguely aware the burn of flame near bare skin. Her shirt had been drawn up on the left, pushed by a strong hand barely skimming her side by palm. Then it lay there, solid yet light. The other cradled her head, steadying her. It was only as his thumb swept with callous pad across the underside of her breast did she realize he had undone her bra, chilled breeze dancing across exposed flesh. She shivered, a gasp escaping her otherwise thoroughly occupied mouth.

His lips left hers, trailing down the curve of her jaw to the hollow below her ear. Laying her head back to face the all-knowing stars, Hermione closed her eyes, drinking in the intensity of his oral ministrations. So involved was her mind to his darting tongue and grazing thumb that it was several long moments before she noticed the shudder in his breath. He was trembling.

"Sirius..." she whispered, concern lingering his name as her hands now pushed him from her. "You're shaking..." Firelight flickered across his pale face, and suddenly understanding clicked in her bookworm mind: he was still weak. Very weak. He had very nearly died, was still just coming round and here she was, a woman wanton and desperate and selfish enough

"*Hermione*," he rasped, eyes semi-focused but staring into her own with sole intent. He was relying on reserved strength, each movement calculated and slow. His hand fell from her head to her shoulder, grasping. "You're *not* my idea of a late night rendezvous behind the damned Quidditch pitch." His eyes closed tightly, a forced swallow fluttering the muscles of his throat.

"You're something else entirely. You're not something I want... You're someone I *need*..." he finished hoarsely, opening his eyes once more for their gray to grow dark under furrowed brows. "And that is all together unfamiliar territory for me." Ragged was his inhaled breath. Shaky was his whisper. "It frightens me..." Imploring eyes pulled at her heart far greater than any spell could have done. She was bound to him by laws more powerful than magic. Hermione was in love with Sirius Black in a way such as she never had been with another in the past, or ever would be in the future.

Perhaps Sirius was not yet so attached to her as she was to him, but that did not matter. Her feelings were not about to change, and if forever was the wait for his reciprocation, then so be it, she decided. For even a small part of Sirius with the eternal hope of more was far grander than the entire heart and soul of a man for whom she felt mere affection. Such epiphany marked itself as a single tear gliding down youthful cheek.

"Calm yourself, Sirius," she breathed, fingers gently parting stray strands from his troubled features, fingers gliding easily through his hair. Her eyes softened, mouth quirked in unabashed love. Her head shook against his unspoken apprehensions. "I won't let anything bad happen to you."

Hermione would have then moved to kiss him, but she never got the chance. Sirius beat her to it.

And the night passed in such a fashion. Sirius was, indeed, weak from injury. But his touch was reverent, focused, every movement deliberate and meticulous. She lay before the fire, bare to him and vulnerable, yet no more a confidant could another be than he. One knee drawn up in self-consciousness, her exposure was treated as though a modest artist's hallowed study. He knelt before her, belt and denims unfastened from her brief opportunity before he had pushed her back to the blanket, soft admonishments to remain still.

Feathery kisses traced her sternum toward her navel, tress tips tickled skin in their wake. Excited tingles darted down her spine as they crossed flippantly over her chest, heightening exhilaration. Mixed reactions warred within her body: languid cat-like stretches of sheer pleasure; taut tension born of nerve-wracked expectation from unnaturally erotic sensations. Anyplace contact was made, Hermione felt in measures ten-fold. How could this be? How could such simple and often seemingly innocent caresses affect her so desperately? Experience limited, she had only her time with Ron to compare. But no comparison was there, not of this caliber, and she thought of that time no more.

Rough-tipped fingers glided along the underside of her arm, the limb flung above her head in a grasp for the blanket's edge. So lightly did they trail down from elbow to side, gooseflesh rising immediately. Daring herself, Hermione peered through half-closed eyes to the cause of her swinging emotions. The sight entranced her. Flame caught glimpses of his aristocratic face, and never before had she seen a man so mesmerized with his task before him. Sirius' eyes glistened with the watering of intense focus. Outside of diligence, his expression was unreadable, yet it scared her. His whole world, at that moment, was her. Entirely her.

It was humbling.

Hermione sucked a breath in violently, her body stiffening then drawing up in abrupt response. *All the gods of time*, she thought tersely, teeth grit in exquisite pain. His palm secure upon the curve of her lower hip, his thumb had brushed across the highly sensitive plane just above the rise of her lower abdomen. Sirius was a master musician, her skin the delicate instrument. She was going to perish from anticipation if he did not cease this tease soon. She just knew it.

The following methodical strokes left her wriggling, deft fingers riding from hip down her left hamstring, coaxing her knee upward to match the right. An aching urgency building deep within elicited a lament from the back of her throat. Biting her lower lip, fingers digging deeply into the blanket, Hermione tossed her head side to side, attempting to steady her reactions. She was doing well, considering, as his left hand visited her neglected right side, short nails lightly scraping their backs along curve of hip, dip of waist, rise of rib. Riding out the compelling need to move into his touch, she held her breath, slowly easing it out.

Until his lips blessed her inner thigh midway, moist tongue anointing the flesh with a sign of reverence. The squeak came unbidden and loud, followed directly with a long, low moan she could not hold back.

"*Siriuuus...*" Eyes closed in concentration, head thrown back to the sky, back arched from the ground, tear escaping to one side. So powerful was her yearning she could express in neither words nor action the tide of emotions he brought. Exhausting this turmoil was, yet no cure would she seek. Torment so desirable as to claim rapt attention; pain so sweet as to border masochism. Delirium swept away all thought but of Sirius, of this moment, and nothing could ever match

She froze. Her mind blanked, eyes shot wide, staring unseeingly. She could only *feel*, not think. *God, could she feel*. And what she felt was the culmination of every second of longing, every whisper of desire, every hint of need deeply fulfilled in one glorious motion. The joining of two hearts, of two souls, of two bodies.

He moved then, a gentle, slow rocking driven only by his delicious weight.

And it would only get better.

-o-

The rucksack presented itself as a suitable enough pillow to his back, and Sirius lounged against its giving canvas with satisfied weariness. Embers flared with hungry laps at several branch pieces he'd fed the dying fire minutes earlier. It would be some time before flames rose enough to grant them warmth in the chill of pre-dawn, several hours remaining before the rise of the sun. The woolen blanket draped upon them, however, would serve, and Sirius doubted Hermione much noticed or cared at that moment.

She lay between his drawn knees, back snuggled down against his bare stomach, long, thick curls shielding his chest from damp breezes. Her breathing had settled, and he knew she was drowsing, content as she ought to be. He'd made love to her for what the heavens told were hours, but no time could be tracked in his mind. It had seemed too short a span, though moments there were when the very breath of him hung upon the air, timeless. He'd not been spouting fanciful lines when he'd told her she was different. She was. Or when he'd told her he was frightened.

He was.

A man did not learn he'd fallen prey to an incurable need for a woman and not feel he'd lost all control over his life. Uncharted waters, with nothing beneath him but endless ocean, clutching to driftwood claiming the name of Love. What *wasn't* there to be frightened of?

Shifting her position, Hermione mewed slightly, drew the blanket more securely under her chin, then lay still once more. He chuckled to himself, giving in to bend over her untamed locks and pressing an endearing kiss upon her head. So many snags lay before them, so many hurdles they would have to pass. But those matters could wait until the morrow, when a new day would greet them, hopefully with news of a safer, more secure world. This business of love was dangerous enough.

"Hermione?" he finally said, a lazy drawl betraying his body's insistence for rest. His hold about her ribs tightened fractionally.

She stirred, eyes flickered. A sleepy, noncommittal, "Hmhm?" managed to creep out lips crooked in a sated smile.

Sirius returned the smile gently, eyes softened as her features shimmied in the firelight.

"I'm sorry I forgot your birthday."

Epilogue: Of What Dreams May Come

Chapter 36 of 36

The Impossible gave her hope. The Impossible made it happen...

****Reviews are much appreciated****

Author's Notes: Alas, our tale has come to its end. Or rather, so far as I shall take you. An incredible journey it has been, indeed. Through cliffhangers and a myriad of clues, we have arrived at the famous final scenes.

Thank you all for sharing in the ride. Your reviews, comments, PMs... they've been helpful, encouraging, enlightening, and entertaining. You've made this story personal and for that, I thank you.

For those of you who have faithfully followed yet have never voiced your opinion, if you would, please take a moment in this last visit to drop a word or two in salute. If you've stayed this long, you obviously must have at least found it of some entertainment value, and I would love to hear your thoughts.

Stay tuned at the end for an informative on an upcoming story.

All reviews are greatly appreciated, as always.

And now, the conclusion of *The Valiant Never...*

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Epilogue: Of What Dreams May Come

Heavy sigh of contentment ruffled the elongated oval leaves of rich violet as they draped the water-filled juice glass before her. Hermione shifted its placement upon the teak hall table, inspecting the cuttings from Zelda's Wandering Jew. The elderly witch had insisted she accept the gift last evening, the original plant formerly entrenched in the Holy Grail itself having grown to near uncontrollable proportions.

Chuckles escaped at the remembrance of the day before. A mere week after Avalon and its events, a private celebration was held at the Burrow, the late summer Saturday welcoming close friends in fellowship. Long awaited was the defeat of Tom Marvolo Riddle, Jr., and spirits were high as the Weasleys played host to immediate family and those directly involved in the liberation from the darkest of wizards. Raj, Angus, Jacob and Zelda had joined Hermione and Remus as guests, Blue popping in for a few hours before a Hobgoblins show. Zelda had brought Molly Weasley fits of gossipy giggles, the women nigh on inseparable by day's end. However, conspicuously absent Black brothers had left the occasion somewhat lacking in Hermione's eyes, but perhaps it had been for the best.

Though privately both Harry and Ron had assured her their acceptance of her newly admitted affections, Hermione could not help but notice the quiet moments of sad reflection upon Ron's face throughout the day. Nor missed was the subject hedging Harry would make to Molly's not-so-subtle references to future family celebrations of the matrimonial kind. Ginny alone had been made privy to the scene in Avalon, and beyond exclamations of astonishment, Sirius' and Regulus' miraculous returns to life were hardly marked upon by the matriarch.

The celebration had gone on well into the late hours, and when the Potters had left near midnight, they had insisted Hermione return with them to Grimmauld Place for the night. Having little excuse to do otherwise, she had obliged, and after a hearty breakfast this morning, had deferred joining them on their venture to Diagon Alley. Time alone was needed, her thoughts bundled with the past days.

It had been a long week for Hermione, indeed. As planned, she and Sirius had been picked up last Saturday at noon, a very joyous Angus thrilled beyond words at Sirius' unexpected recovery. On the return trip to London, the Scotsman had shared the tale of the ball, of grandiose heroics and resulting casualties. But Hermione's mind could only replay emotional torrents from the night before. She'd barely listened as the elder MacGregor had detailed the limited Order members present, the capture of most Death Eaters, the fall of the Dark Lord.

But in the following days, her relationship with Sirius had been kept vague before friends and family, even themselves. Progressively their longing looks and lingering brushes of touch would grow in seconds and appearance, and no doubt it would be understood by Christmas their true feelings. But for the time being, Sirius was still largely unknown to the Wizarding world, even to the Order of the Phoenix. Stubby Boardman still performed, an entertainer of painted face and leather accents. Eventually Sirius would be presented back into society under his own identity, as would Regulus, but only in their own time. Until then, each day was new and tentative, and this illogical place called love remained free of guarantees.

And Hermione would not have it any other way.

Regulus had been recluse since Cornwall, accepting praises for his fight at the ball with little more than minimal acknowledgement. Return to serving at the café, return to tiny flat, return to anonymity. Part of her withered at the thought that he'd seemed to give up the fight once in him, the spirit that drove his intelligent arrogance and made him a fair competitor to his brother. So much had been taken from him these past two decades, and for the first time since making his acquaintance, Hermione wondered if the unflappable Slytherin now found himself without purpose or direction. Voldemort was no longer there to bring down; the Hobgoblins were fronted by his brother; the world did not even know Regulus Black existed.

Tapping at the newly plottable window drew Hermione's musings to an end, and she drew the sitting room sash to allow a small tawny owl entrance, his burden nearly the

length of himself. Retrieving the letter, Hermione relocked the casement glass behind the courier's quick departure, and turned to study the décor-laden parchment. Curious, quick tears broke the seal; unfolding before her was flowery script with hearts dotting *i*'s and smilies flittering across the parchment.

Dear Miss Hermione,

The most amazing things happened last Friday at the Witches' Thanksgiving Ball! I've so much to tell you, but you know already most of it, don't you? But let me tell you at least about the daring of one Mr. Raj MacGregor my hero! He was so dashing when he made his appearance right in the middle of the Waltzing Warlock dance. Dad had sent me to the Ladies' before the dance, telling me to wait there until he fetched me since he thought I was too young to watch the ritual stuff, but I hid out in the balcony all the same. Oh my, it was everything you read about in those love stories! Merlin, I'm blushing even as I write it.

But whilst watching the dancing (it really was devilish!), this handsome boy made an entrance in all black, a stately masque of theatre quality, and with one sweep of his wand, silenced the music. He removed his masque and, from all the murmurs I heard, would you believe it was You-Know-Who himself??? I honestly had no idea he was so fit! But then he got all hoity about everyone doing his bidding, and how he was going to take over the world, and mates of his showed up and started threatening everyone. Then my dad he knew him! He even called him 'my lord' and all! Mum was furious!

Anyway, they were pointing wands and all, and talking about how they were taking over, when Raj showed up. He was so handsome, and wasn't wearing a masque, so I knew him straight away. He took charge and dueled with some of the mates (others did, too, as he wasn't alone. I even saw your friend Harry Potter! He was fighting with You-Know-Who, but I couldn't help but watch Raj mostly, so I didn't see everything on that end.) and was so quick and serious. Oh, Hermione, I can't tell you how scared I was for him. But he did wonderfully and knocked out three of the fiends! I was so proud of him. But then someone grabbed me from behind and I screamed it was one of the nasty crowd and Raj heard and looked up, and raced up to me. My captor was horrid, keeping me pinned to him with his arm and a wand at my throat. I was really frightened, I tell you, but Raj was so calm and collected and before I knew it, he'd stunned and bound the git. But I'd been so scared that I was shaking, and he held me HELD ME! It was wonderful, Hermione. Truly. He saved my life! I love him, I really, really do!

And you know, he's invited me to a supper the Secretary of Finance is having next week (since he is being promoted to the post of assistant to the Secretary himself). Well, me and Mum, but still. I think he's opening up, just like you said!

Hermione's brows rose high, amusement shining upon her face. Yes, she had indeed suggested to Chelsea that perhaps in time Raj would open up around her, talk to her perhaps. But she had meant in a matter of years, when Chelsea was older, out of school. Raj was a fair bit older than the girl. Heavens, he was older than Hermione, and Chelsea was not known for her mature propriety or measure. But then, Hermione considered, brushes with death did tend to hurry along inner growth. Personal experience had taught such lessons well. Watching one's father turn traitor then later arrested for conspiracy and treason did force a new perspective, granted.

Sounds of the front door opening pulled Hermione from her missive, and she refolded it, storing its giggly contents in her denim pocket for later perusal. Harry and Ginny must be back already, and she wanted to properly thank them before heading off to Muggle London for planting necessities on her way back to the dormitory. Footsteps echoed in the foyer, then one set pounded up the stairs, heavy and quick. Looking at the doorway expectedly, mild surprise encroached as not Ginny, but Sirius entered.

Smiles dominated the room: his mischievous and secretive; hers overwhelmed and girlish and hinted with shyness.

"Sirius!" she exclaimed, shriek of childlike enthusiasm mortifying her before him. But Sirius merely grinned more broadly, gray eyes narrowing in humor, the lines about them creasing in a most attractive manner.

"G'morning, beautiful," he answered in that gravelly low voice, stepping to her until his leather jacketed arms wrapped about her waist, pulling her intimately against him. Cheshire grin had her questioning his recent doings or future intentions, but the feel of him was too pleasant to worry her head about 'what did's' and 'what will's.' Too content was she to remain embraced, staring lovingly up into his handsome face.

Hands smudged in bits of Indian ink found paths of their own volition to palm against his chest, resting comfortably as though forever they'd been there. "What brings you to the house of your forebearers this morning, hm?"

"Minor errand of my little brother's. Reg wanted to collect some things from his room. We saw Harry and Ginny in Diagon Alley a bit ago, and Harry said you'd be here, so I suggested we pop on over now so as to not disturb the couple later. Rather selfish on my part, really, but a good excuse to see you alone." Wolfish grin overtook one of mischief, and Hermione's body responded immediately.

Playful smack upon his upper arm brought point to her words. "Yes, but we're not actually alone," she said with humor, light dancing in her eyes at the engaging thought. She changed subjects, forestalling the path they were about to trod down. It would not do to start something they were not in a position to conclude.

"I know you've been chatting with Remus a lot lately; what did you hear about Snape and Malfoy?"

Sirius quirked his lips, smile fading with mock disgust and roll of the eyes. He sighed.

"Not a favorite topic of mine at the moment, but if you simply must discuss it..." Pouting look directed at her for good measure, he straightened long legs and torso, displaying his previous train of thought by merely tugging her hips closer to his own.

"It seems Reggie's mate Auror Inspector Lynley was involved in supplying Malfoy with updates on Voldemort's movements, thus correlating Malfoy's claim that he was helping McCaine's people with trying to protect the Grail, though of course Lynley didn't know what the object was that Voldemort was so intent upon."

"Meaning...?" Hermione prompted.

"Meaning that the Ministry is going to have an official inquiry on Malfoy and Snape but for the time being they are simply bound to their homes until the investigation is complete. Harry had spoken publicly to the entire Wizengamot on both wizards' behalf, and considering he had just saved the Wizarding world from its greatest threat since Grindewald before a ballroom full of international leaders, I'd say Scrimgeour had little room to deny him anything."

Hermione chuckled suddenly, small toss of her head in disbelief. "I still cannot believe Harry disposed of Voldemort with such... such..."

"Indignity?" Sirius inquired, barely holding back laughter. "What I'd have given to have seen that bastard tap dancing himself across the balcony and trip into the orchestra pit. Death by impalement on a cello is a right undignified way to go, I'd agree." This time mirth slipped out.

"Who would have ever guessed it, really?" Hermione agreed, giggling herself. "Though... I do suppose it does fit Dumbledore's sense of humor. After all, the Jellylegs Jinx was his sort of fun."

"While on the other hand," Sirius replied huskily, "my sense of enjoyment was much greater an incentive to stay put than either curses of a good fight, or watching my godson destroy the wizard responsible for the loss of my closest friends, of years of my life." His voice had softened, and closer he drew to her, lips hovering just above hers. "I was finding my life all over again."

The kiss was soft, endearing, full of promise. It was several long moments before Hermione became aware of heavy footsteps. Breaking apart leisurely, they turned to see Regulus just strides into the room, rucksack heavy upon his shoulder.

Sadness washed Hermione in sudden regret. Pain had flashed across Regulus' face the moment he took in their embrace, their obvious intimacy. But just as quickly as it had marred his beautiful features, the cold and distant mask fell into place, hiding from the world his emotions. His line of sight had moved to somewhere past them, and he

gave a brief nod as though not in greeting or farewell, but as in acceptance. A dark acceptance, filled with sorrow he would not allow seen. And finally Hermione understood, compassion wrenching her heart for him. She'd made her choice, and it wasn't Regulus. Once more he'd lost to his older brother.

Without word, Regulus turned on his heel, long legs stretching for quick retreat.

"She's here. In London..." Sirius began softly, stopping Regulus in his departure. The younger brother held stark still, seeming to barely breathe. Slightly only slightly he turned only his head, enough to give Hermione a quarter view of chiseled facial structure. He was listening, at least.

"Tia," Sirius clarified, barely audible. Regulus' posture, to the untrained eye, would seem to not have faltered in the slightest. But Hermione knew well enough this man to catch the tightening of the jaw, altered, shallow breathing, trembling of sudden muscle tension; he was trying too hard to retain appearances of disinterest, of no reaction. But the very contrary was true.

Silence permeated the air, thick with unspoken emotion laid buried for twenty years. Hermione was shocked by Sirius' words as well, but more than her curiosity of this woman was her concern for this man who'd given up all he'd known to do the right thing years ago. Even now.

"She never married, you know," Sirius continued to his brother's back, his voice gentle in a way it had not been for his sibling in over thirty years. "Your death nearly broke her; she never stopped." Abrupt cessation. He need not say the words; all three knew their conclusion. Tia had never stopped loving Regulus, even after his betrayal of her by joining Voldemort.

Long moments held heavy in the silence, Sirius allowing Regulus to absorb the information. A breath, a swallow.

"There's an Order meeting tomorrow night," he went on, voice cleared and stronger. "I'm sure Remus has an errand he'd like her to run. Something to round up the rogue Death Eaters, maybe. Perhaps... partnered with a new recruit who's well-versed in Muggle entertainment...?"

Hermione wasn't sure Regulus had heard his brother, so controlled his posture. But his throat began working in compulsive, tight swallows, rapid blinks of long lashes. Indeterminable pause, then the second son offered a nearly imperceptible nod toward the doorway, his eyes set to somewhere before him, unseeing the present. It was acknowledgement; it was thanks.

Stiff backed and limbed and without warning, Regulus strode off, not another word.

"Is he going to be all right?" Hermione asked, worry thick in her voice as her eyes followed him even after he'd disappeared from sight and the soft latching of the front door could be heard.

"I... I think so," Sirius replied hesitantly, watching his brother's departure through the window behind him. "Tia could make all the difference in the world for him, I think. No matter how much he may have tried to do, he's never stopped loving her, either."

Hermione pondered the thought, then turned from the window back to Sirius, mild surprise on her face. "And I didn't know Tia was in the Order," she admitted, interest lacing the words. "I would love to meet her, this woman who stole the stoic Regulus Black's heart, and apparently never let it go." She chuckled at the thought. What a woman indeed this lady must be.

Sirius turned to face her, slight confusion alternately furrowing and arching his brows. "Meet her? Why Hermione, you've known her since before your fifth year." At her returned confusion, Sirius laughed in sudden understanding.

"Hermione... *Tia* is her nickname. Short for Hestia. Hestia Jones."

Even harder did he laugh as Hermione Granger's jaw fell agape. Cocking his head slightly to one side, he added a bit impishly, "You know, that summer... I was lonely don't give me that look; you were only a child then, and you know it." His mock sternness fell in light of her beautifully jealous face. "Anyway, I was lonely, as we all know, and had on several occasions attempted to, er... well, enlist her company for an evening, shall we say. But she never would," he confessed, a small smile tugging in sad recollection. "I mean, things would get started, but then... then she just couldn't. Said I reminded her too much of Reg. First time I'd ever been accused of *that*." His look of abject horror in wide eyes and pinched expression ticked Hermione out of her jealousy.

Sirius looked down at her with a compassion in his eyes Hermione had never before seen in reference to his brother. "I don't believe she ever really stopped caring about him... or missing him, either. Tia despised him for his choice, but a part of her never let him go. Even to this day."

A quietness overcame her, and Hermione stared into his eyes, somber and vulnerable. "Some loves are like that," she whispered simply. "Once in a lifetime, and forever."

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Transportation by motorbike was little better than flight by hippogriff, Hermione decided, but at least Sirius had kept to the motorway, refraining from the aerodynamic aspect of his newly located memento from the past. Hagrid had hidden it all those years ago in the Room of Requirement, and only recently had he imparted that knowledge to Harry, who had retrieved it for the as-yet-still-assumed-dead godfather of his.

Apparently Hermione did not take as well to the bike as had Regulus when the lads had ventured to Grimmauld Place earlier, but clinging desperately to Sirius' body whilst darting between Muggle traffic did have its advantages, she had to admit. Still, it was with great relief when she climbed off the contraption once they'd reached the particular stretch of shops in London proper.

"Now behave," Hermione admonished playfully with a knowing look to Sirius as he, too, dismounted. Cocky grin of sensuality met her remark, and as he stepped up to meet her, he began to stroll past, seemingly admiring foot traffic, shops, and motoring bustle. Without pause, his strides brought her along as his hand surreptitiously caught her own, long fingers curling about hers tightly. Caught unaware, Hermione could only smile giddily and follow along in a stumble.

Easy chatter settled between them as they wove through Sunday afternoon shoppers. Even the experience of everyday browsing took on new feel with Sirius' hand nestled into hers. Storefronts glistened in bright sunlight, wares displayed in beckoning state. Smart breezes from the Channel whipped tendrils about, stinging wind-burnt cheeks. The gardening shop was just ahead, and Hermione already pictured the perfect hanging wicker basket and rich soil needed for her cuttings.

Jangling bells rang as the garden shop's door opened just as Hermione reached its latch, and out stepped familiar faces, forcing the young witch and her beau back several paces.

"David!" she greeted in genuine surprise. Smiles lit upon her face and his, the young man's expression one of pleasant shock as well.

"Hello, Hermione," he managed between easy laughs. Turning to the children at his feet, he nudged them vocally. "You two remember Hermione, yeah? She helped out at the estate garden a while back. Go on and say *hello*, Katie."

Ever shy, the little girl clung to her uncle's leg just as she had their first meeting earlier in the summer, peering at Hermione with big eyes and embarrassed grins. Little fingers released trouser material long enough for a pudgy flexing wave before nipping back behind protective leg barrier. Hermione finger-waved back, reassuring Katie that they had indeed met, and she thought the girl grown ever so much since then.

"Hullo, Miss Granger." Big brother had more courage than the last time, though still he seemed rather pensive for an eight year old. Solemn was his little face, and Hermione longed to crush him in a hug that banished away whatever heartbreaks had brought painful maturity so early.

Big smile she offered him, attempt at enticing the same an effort worthwhile. "Hello, Donnie," she said brightly, disengaging her hand from Sirius' in order to offer it stately to

the boy. "It's a pleasure to see you again, sir." Small grin tugged at his lips, and Donnie shifted multiple packets of seeds and a hand trowel to one arm, a bright turquoise leaflet to one little hand and managed a courteous handshake and young man's response of, 'Pleasure.'

"Don't mind him," David offered, a look a familial love shining in his eyes as he studied Donnie. "Poppet here is just a mite undone. We're off to the Mayhew today to look at pets. Late birthday pressie."

"But the dogs won't be there today!" Donnie cried, eyes beseeching as they stared into his uncle's, thrusting the leaflet at arm's length (his right hand gripping once more) for emphasis. "The adoption queue for dogs is for Saturdays."

Soft sigh from David. "I know, Donnie, but we can view the cats today, and if you don't find one to your liking, then we'll consider another trip next week, all right?" Patience was heavily evident in David's voice and features, and Hermione was reminded their afternoon together in the garden. Indeed, her mother had been right about her friend's son; David was quite the handsome, intelligent and special man. He just wasn't Sirius.

David looked up meaningful at Hermione and Sirius, though he first spoke to his nephew. "Besides; cats stay indoors. Much safer that way," he added, a glance back at the boy. But Donnie had turned his head again, staring off into the busy street. "Lost his dog to a car a few months back," he clarified, and understanding had Hermione nodding, though Sirius merely accepted the words as he watched Donnie quietly.

Patrons ducked round David to enter the shop, and passers-by clipped stray elbows in their attempts to move along the pavement. With laughing apologies, the group adjusted to the side of the door against the wall. It was then David made a connection.

"Hold on; you're the Hobgoblins' vocalist, aren't you?" he asked Sirius with delight. "I remember you from the concert. Well, more like the aftermath."

"I'll be damned," Sirius muttered, a smile finally evolving from the suspicious continence of his face. "Didn't recognize you in the daylight, mate. Thanks again for your help."

David laughed. "Think nothing of it; I used to work the venue, and know how rowdy some of those lasses can get at a show." That breath-stopping boyish grin tugged at his face as his hand went up to reroute long tresses blowing across sparkling blue eyes. "Would you believe that one time *Donovan!*"

Just in time Hermione turned round to the scene which had cut short David's anecdote, changing amused reminiscence into sheer panic. No time turner could have slowed the next moments more so than their mere horror.

Detached, taken in were the factoids and intricacies with an odd logical categorizing. At her feet lay the trowel and seed packets, curiously gathered rather than dispersed. Before her on its own particular breeze floated the turquoise leaflet, block type faded against the cardstock, a sign of multiple photocopies. Londoners shifting past in eager steps, crowding the pavement, their voices drowning in a parked lorry ticking over nearby, in road works down the way, in horns shouting and rumbling engines in the street. The double decker building speed down the inner lane.

Donnie darting out, arm stretched, grasping single-mindedly for the leaflet. As it reached the inner lane.

All she could do was cover her mouth, its silent scream lost in her throat. A huge black rubbish bag flew past in the wind; a great juggernaut crept by this side of the bus, lumbering in the opposite direction, cutting their view of Donnie. Breaks squealed; tires skid; sickening *thud* rode the breeze backward to them. Bile rose, and Hermione just knew the worst was near revelation.

Long breaths passed before the lorry shuttled on; the double decker newly revealed began its rattle once more the other way. And amidst lower car traffic, Hermione could see across the way to the opposite pavement.

There stood Donnie, crouched over in a massive hug round the neck of a large, shaggy black dog. Quick glances about... yes; Sirius was gone. Relief swept heavily through her, and faintly she heard David beside her, his own mumblings of praise and fear tumbling out in run-on sentences.

Rubbish bag, indeed.

By the time the three had found a pelican crossing and made their way hurriedly to the other side and to Donnie, the dog had vanished. Donnie stood perfectly still by the lamppost, waiting for his uncle and sister. Lecturing came forth from a kneeling David in equal parts anger and love, but Donnie accepted his due with nary a snuffle or sad eye. In fact, a sense of lighter mood held aura about him.

"Sorry," came the whisper over her shoulder, and Hermione turned attention from family reunion to Sirius' breathy apology by her ear from behind. He was watching Donnie and David, speaking quietly enough for privacy. "Had to find a place to change."

Feeling behind herself for him, Hermione simply took his hand and squeezed tightly, staring at his infinitely close, whiskered cheek. "Thank you," she began, choking with emotion. "You saved his life. Gods, I don't know how you managed it without getting yourself hurt, either. I heard that bus..." Throat closed against shuddering thoughts, and once more she squeezed his hand, happy he was safe.

A strange look crossed Sirius' face, and he turned to her, brows knit.

"Actually," he said lowly, somber in tone. "That bus broke my leg. I felt and heard it snap as I shoved Donnie out of the way." At Hermione's wide eyes and breath for exclamation, Sirius shushed her and added, "I'm fine, now. Promise."

Releasing held breath, she glanced once at Donnie and David, ensuring their attention still with the other and Katie, and took a brief head to toe measure of Sirius. Satisfied, she leaned into him, pressing her cheek to his solid chest, reassured his well-being.

"Didn't know you were so good with healing charms," she murmured into his cotton button down. Would she ever have a moment's peace with this man, a time without worrying daily what new life or death obstacle was going to rise and threaten his right to live out his years?

"I'm not." Sudden stilling against him nudged for continuation, and she peered up to see him staring ahead.

"Then how...?"

"*He* did it." Following Sirius' gaze, Hermione gasped.

Donnie.

"I'm really sorry, Hermione, but under the circumstances I think it best we get on. Lacy will want to know about this, though I dread telling her." David's harried words of regret registered, drawing attention back to the young man who'd risen once more. "I'll be seeing you sometime around, yeah?" he asked, friendly grin back in place.

Hermione's eyes shot once more to Donnie, the boy appearing no worse the wear for his adventure. And she smiled, truly smiled. "Yes, David; I'm *positive* you will." Softly she added, "At least in the next few years."

Goodbyes were said, and Hermione and Sirius stood amongst bustling shoppers on the pavement, watching David gather the kids in hand and head toward the opposite crossing to retrieve their purchases. Only child-strides along, Donnie suddenly turned fully, his hand drawing David and Katie to an abrupt halt. Staring back directly at Sirius, he lifted his chin bravely, smiled sadly, and called in his most confident voice.

"Thank you, Captain. I always knew you'd come back."

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Thus concludes our little tale. But what of our dear Regulus? you may ask. Does he not deserve a happy ending as well?

I do believe so, dear readers, but let us find his happy ending not from the now, but from the start.

I invite you all to share with me Reg and Tia's story, from their own beginning. And, perhaps, to a different ending.

The Voice of All the Gods

A Marauders' Era tale of the troubled romance of

Regulus A Black and Hestia A Jones.

Coming soon.