

Ordinary World

by Emelye

A tale of might-have-beens and second chances. With vampires.

Rainy Thursday On The Avenue

Chapter 1 of 4

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Papers in the roadside

tell of suffering and greed

here today, forgot tomorrow.

Here beside the news

of holy war and holy need

ours is just a little, sorrowed talk.

- Duran Duran, 'Ordinary World'

Chapter One

Rainy Thursday on the Avenue

September 17, 2003

The rain beat a steady pattern upon the tin rooftops as Harry stood beside the body. Faint pink streams flowed out from under the sheet of tarpaulin that covered the corpse toward the sewers of Knockturn Alley. A sound of settling garbage from a nearby dustbin alerted him to the presence of rats. He hoped this wouldn't take too long.

There was a faint pop and Kingsley Shacklebolt appeared at his side.

'Another one, then?'

'It certainly looks like it.'

Kingsley stepped forward and folded down the tarpaulin. The corpse was grotesquely mutilated. Flesh and sinew dangled from the bone in a stringy, red mass. One eyeball lolled sickeningly from a thread upon its cheek. The other was missing entirely. The head was severed, the neck absent, and the hair matted with blood, its color indistinguishable. The torso had been completely eviscerated, the flesh shredded and the cavity evacuated of all its contents. Both legs had been cleanly removed of all tissue.

Harry removed a small silver instrument from his cloak and, kneeling down, began to carefully examine the body.

He did not find what he expected.

'Sir, how many ... like this ... have you found?'

'Sixteen at last count, why?'

'And all victims of werewolves ... you're sure about that?'

Kingsley misread the look of apprehension on Harry's face.

'Potter, look, I understand your personal feelings on this...'

Harry shook his head, cutting him off.

'This isn't about Remus. Follow me here...'

Harry gestured for Kingsley to join him beside the corpse.

'See this laceration, here on the sternum?' Harry asked, tracing the wound. 'Where are the bite marks? This was done too cleanly. And here...!' Harry lingered over the exposed, left femur. 'No teeth marks. Look...'

Kingsley did so. Where there should have been multiple indentations from gnashing teeth, there were deep, narrow incisions in the bone.

Kingsley's look of surprise was validation enough.

'This looks like it was done with a knife if you ask me.'

Kingsley nodded, visibly discomforted.

'We'll need to have another look at the other ones,' Kingsley said. 'Some of them have been released to the families already, so we had better get a move on. Bag this one and meet me in the morgue in ten.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And, Harry?'

'Yes, sir?'

'Watch your arse. Dodgy place, this.'

'Yes, sir.'

Kingsley Apparated as Harry replaced the silver instrument inside his cloak and removed his wand. Wordlessly, he levitated the corpse, suspending it in midair.

'Sudarius.'

The tarpaulin wrapped itself around the body, shrouding it completely. Tamping down his revulsion, Harry wrapped an arm around the corpse and Disapparated.

'What do you mean, you didn't check? How the hell were you planning on finding the killer, bloody *ea leaves*?'

Stebbins lowered his eyes and mumbled something to the linoleum. Kingsley shot Harry a quelling look. He sighed and began again more calmly.

'I didn't catch that, Stebbins.'

'I don't know, sir.'

Harry pointedly stared at Kingsley.

'That will be all, Stebbins.'

Harry shut the door of the morgue, concluding their interviews, and rounded on Kingsley.

'This is exactly what I've been talking about all along. We need to have some kind of procedure established for dealing with this sort of thing! If one of my best friends wasn't the daughter of Muggle dentists, I wouldn't know the first thing about measuring a bite radius either...'

'Potter, the likelihood of capturing a werewolf during the full moon for comparison is exceedingly slim...'

'Unless said werewolf is attacking people off the street...which, incidentally, is entirely beside the point now as we have now established our culprit is most decidedly not biting anyone.'

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled deeply.

'We don't have a budget to provide that kind of forensic training, and the Ministry would never approve it if we did,' said Kingsley.

Harry glared at Kingsley.

'You could at least suggest *looking* at the bodies, couldn't you? I don't believe that *that* costs anything...'

Harry was aware he sounded like a petulant child, but the situation rankled and Kingsley knew it. Ever since becoming an Auror, it had become abundantly clear to him that his prior experience fighting Voldemort had rendered him overqualified. Once, he might have enjoyed the distinction among his colleagues. Instead he found himself taking on an ever-increasing load of casework with little or no capable assistance.

Kingsley smiled at him.

'Do you have any idea who you sound like just now?'

Harry rolled his eyes.

'Are we finished? I have work to do.'

Kingsley's smile broadened.

'Certainly.'

With that, Harry stormed off to write a letter.

The large chamber began to ring with the echoes of conversation as the magical milieu congregated within. Hermione had taken her usual place near the head of the large conference table, notes and legal references fanned out over the surface, and, as per usual, had assumed her studious attitude (hunched over her parchments, hair blocking her face, one hand tracing the lines of a crumbling text while the other scribbled frantically) well before anyone else had thought to arrive. Roman White, a broad shouldered and thick-necked werewolf, silently slipped into the seat beside her and patiently waited for her to pause in her work before extending a greeting. With a flourish, Hermione replaced her quill in its pot and cracked her neck, smiling at Roman through a fatigued yawn.

'Well, what brilliance have you to show me tonight?' he asked playfully.

Hermione smiled.

'I'm almost certain we can overturn the housing restriction. The registration bill will be a bit tougher. The only legal precedent I could find was on the books in Germany.'

'Now there's a shocker...' Roman muttered sarcastically.

'Have you talked to Harry yet today?'

'No, why?'

'I heard on the wireless that he found the seventeenth victim this morning, so I floored him over my lunch. Roman, *were*wolves had *nothing to do with it*'

'Oh, really?'

'Whoever killed them used a *knife*.'

Roman's eyebrows disappeared into his hairline.

Before Hermione could explain further, Uriah Smeichari took the place at the head of the table and called the meeting to order. He was a vampire, though Hermione would have been hard pressed to come up with the name of anyone who looked the part less. He was pale and lanky with very short, curly, orange-red hair. His fingers were incredibly long, and he was very fond of gesturing with his hands which gave him the air of a demented clown with claws. His personality wasn't nearly as winning. He never simply walked up to someone...he materialized as noiselessly and patiently as a well-trained spaniel. It was a common ability of vampires to move unseen, but Uriah reveled in it in a way that was almost perverse. His voice was sibilant and rarely raised above the volume of a whisper which forced anyone he addressed to strain closer to hear. It was a testament to his reputation as a public relations specialist that people actually did this, as being close to Uriah was roughly as desirable as a passionate tumble with an Inferi.

Hermione tolerated him because he was *her* public relations specialist, but she endeavored to pretend he didn't exist as much as was humanly possible. Unfortunately, along with her and Roman, he co-headed the organization, so that didn't amount to much.

She usually settled for ignoring him during the monthly meetings. That night, it wasn't to be. Uriah seemed to go out of his way to capture her attention in the most inflammatory way possible.

'As you know, our dialogues with the Ministry regarding the recent legislation have been met with a great deal of scorn and derision, both from the Ministry itself and the popular press. Ours is not a popular cause at the moment. However tempting it may be to lose heart in times like these, no matter how many setbacks we face, we must endeavor to persevere, even in championing the causes of those whose ... *natural* ... condition hinders those self-same efforts at every turn.'

'WHAT?' shouted Hermione and Roman in unison.

'Oi! I don't see what cause we 'ave in defending those mongrels! I say they made their bed, they can bloody well lay in it!' shouted a brutal looking ogre.

Roman made to stand, but Hermione placed a hand on his arm.

'They're making us *look* bad,' argued a diminutive goblin across the table from Hermione. 'I don't want my rights jeopardized because some *animal* can't control its *urges*.'

A great uproar commenced, arguing for and against the exclusion of werewolves from the charter, conveniently ignoring the one among their ranks that now looked fit to be tied.

Hermione rubbed her eyes wearily and fought to make her voice heard over the din.

'If you all are *quite* finished,' she began in dangerous tones. 'I'm sorry, but rewriting the charter is completely out of the question. I don't care how the media is spinning these attacks. Not only are you all forgetting that this organization was in fact *founded* by a werewolf,' she nodded deferentially to Roman, 'but according to my sources within the Auror office, it has now been established that these killings were most definitely *not* perpetrated by a gang of werewolves or even a werewolf in the singular, so you will kindly *knock all hate-mongering directly off*'

Expressions of shock, embarrassed dissembling, and indignation were her reply.

Uriah smiled broadly at her and gestured for silence.

'I'm with Miss Granger. Did we not agree to come together for the mutual benefit of *all* sentient magical beings? Infighting will do nothing but weaken the cause we fight for.'

'Here, here!' said Wenig Duften, a hag. Echoes of agreement chorused around the chamber.

'Uriah, you're missing the point entirely. Someone is trying very hard to frame werewolves for those murders. *We* have to address that. Those murders ... there hasn't been anything perpetrated on that scale by lycans since Greyback was killed!' Roman argued.

The crowd, whipped into a frenzy by Uriah's speech, was unfortunately deaf to his pleas. Hermione gave Roman a sympathetic look as Uriah continued in his speech without acknowledging Roman's arguments.

'We can't let the actions of a few determine the course of us all. That is why tomorrow, I will personally be speaking with the Minister of Magic to ensure that these crimes will not be manipulated into a rallying cry for those who would see us all reduced to animals, slaves, monsters and refuse. For as Miss Granger will surely attest...'

Oh God, don't drag me into this again.. Hermione groaned inwardly.

'...were not the vile Death Eaters, besmirchers of the wondrous variety of our magical world, among the purest of pureblooded wizards?'

Actually, most of them weren't, you twat Hermione wanted to say. She settled for rolling her eyes and sharing a knowing look with Roman as the rest of the assembled clapped madly in agreement.

Roman turned to her as the meeting closed, tensely running a hand through his gray hair.

'You know, it's nights like this I wish we'd told that bloodsucker to get stuffed,' confided Roman as the group dispersed. He stood at Hermione's side as she crammed several pages of notes into her ubiquitous satchel.

'I've had it with him,' she said. 'Did you hear him?*Infighting will do nothing but weaken the cause we fight for...* He was the one who *started* it, for God's sake!'

'Humph. At least he isn't libeling Muggle-borns.'

'Yet. Remind me again why we let him in?'

Roman chuckled deeply.

'I think it was you who tired of our grassroots badge and pamphlet campaign.'

Hermione smirked.

'Oh, yes, I remember now. Really, we weren't doing*that* badly. Maybe I was a bit hasty...'

Roman blanched.

'If you think I'm spending one more sleepless*week* charming badges to say 'Scour Grime...Impeach Scrimgeour', you've got another thing coming.'

Hermione laughed. Unfortunately, the outburst attracted Uriah's attention.

'Miss Granger, I wonder if I might have a word?'

Hermione and Roman exchanged a promise to meet at the Leaky Cauldron for a drink as Uriah took her arm and guided her away from the remaining few stragglers. She tried valiantly not to flinch.

'As you know, tomorrow's meeting with the Minister will be of great importance. I've arranged for a press conference...oh, nothing too big...just the Wizarding Wireless and the *Prophet*,' he added, her face apparently registering her feelings of incredulity and anger. 'Naturally, the public will want to know our opinion regarding the recent murders.'

She cut him off.

'You mean, *your* opinion.'

'Come now, Miss Granger, I only represent the opinions of the group. I'm aware of your feelings, but the Aurors' official position remains that this appears to be werewolf activity. To suggest otherwise at this point would be tantamount to accusing the Ministry of conspiracy...and that wouldn't make our organization look particularly credible, now would it?'

Hermione fumed.

'And I suppose you have no intention of addressing the Ministry decrees either?'

'Not at the present time, no. And neither will you.'

'WHAT?'

'I believe it would be ... prudent ... for you to be present at the press conference tomorrow.'

'Absolutely not,' snapped Hermione.

'*Miss Granger*, this organization relies upon your image. *Brave and heroic Hermione Granger, patron saint of the downtrodden and afflicted* He sneered.

Her voice was cold.

'Even if I desired to lend my *image* to this circus, it would be a moot point. Some of us work for a living.'

'My, my, they are keeping you late these days. Making any progress?'

'That's classified,' came her thin-lipped reply.

'Indeed. Well I hope it's worthwhile. I'd hate to see you sacrifice your charitable endeavors for anything less. *.deserving.*'

September 18, 2003

'Augustus, could you please bring me the belladonna?'

Hermione hovered anxiously over a boiling cauldron as a jar was placed in her hand. She delicately removed several dried flowers and added them to the cauldron. It gave off a puff of noxious yellow smoke. Augustus Pye, Hermione's assistant on this particular project, cut the flame as Hermione determinedly stirred the brew exactly seven times clockwise. Upon completing the last stroke, the mixture turned an oily pewter colour. She removed the stirring rod and stepped back, admiring her work.

'Well, that's it then.'

Hermione floated the faintly smoking cauldron to the center workstation as Augustus cleared away the bottles and jars and cutting implements scattered around their cluttered workspace. Summoning two large bottles, she began to siphon off the potion.

'Do you have the samples?'

'Right here.'

Augustus set a stack of Muggle petri dishes alongside the slowly filling bottles.

'Microscope?'

'Coming...'

He wheeled over a very large and complicated-looking instrument comprised of a number of oddly rigged, magical devices that, if looked at crossways, might be said to resemble a microscope somewhat.

As the potion continued to siphon itself, Hermione placed a small glass dropper into the cauldron and extracted a bit of the potion which she deposited into a petri dish labeled *LYCANTHROPY...S1*. She placed it under the large and ornate magnifying glass attachment and turned a few gilded doorknobs on the side, focusing the 'lens'.

As the moon was currently waxing, the virus remained visibly inactive, though the potion appeared to be adhering to the virus. Come the full moon, if something was going to happen, she would see it.

'We're good,' she told him. Augustus' shoulders relaxed visibly. 'I suppose we ought to get started on the Wolfsbane.'

'After lunch,' he amended. 'We've been at it all morning.'

Hermione nodded in acquiescence.

'Go ahead then. I'll just get the base started.'

'Right. Oh, and Hermione?'

'Yes, Augustus?'

He lowered his voice.

'Administration noticed we were low on aconite during the last inventory...'

'Augustus, researchers have store room privileges for outside projects...'

'I know, Hermione. I don't know what you're getting up to, and I don't want to know ... but I have a feeling someone might. Just ... be careful, okay?'

'All right, Augustus, I will. Thank you for letting me know.'

He nodded and left.

Before she could give his cryptic warning any further thought, there came a knock at the lab door.

'Hermione, you've got a patient,' came the matronly voice of Clara Sedgwick, Healer from the third ward, ground floor.

'Again? And here I thought I'd finished my clinicals.'

'Shall I tell him you'll be along?'

Hermione looked appraisingly at the empty cauldron. It could wait.

'Of course. I'll be right down.'

Ron Weasley sat in his hospital bed, bandages obscuring the left side of his head, grinning from ear to ear as he related the tale of his miraculous save to several young trainees crowded around his bedside. They oohed and ahed in all the right places.

It was nauseating.

'Ah-hem.' Hermione cleared her throat.

'Mione!' exclaimed Ron, his grin widening even more if it were possible. The girls scattered before Hermione who gave them her most disapproving glare.

'Ron, we need to stop meeting like this,' she told him before returning his smile and giving him a friendly embrace.

'Well, you know I would, but I'd never see you otherwise.'

'And of course that has nothing to do with your Quidditch schedule. I have, in fact, committed myself to avoiding you at all costs.'

'Just so we understand each other.' Ron grinned cheekily. Hermione took a seat on the edge of his bed.

'So what brings you in today?' she asked, examining him. 'It's much too early in the season for rioting. Did Gabrielle throw you out again?'

'Actually, I was defending your honor to a bunch of hooligans at a scrimmage against the Kestrals. They claimed intimate carnal knowledge of your person, which I assured them was a logistical impossibility since it is a well known fact that Hermione Granger has had no time for such trivialities as sex or companionship since March of 1996.'

'Certainly not when I have the likes of you to distract me from my research, I don't.'

'Fair enough. So will we have the honor of your presence at the Leaky Cauldron tomorrow evening? Standing up your best mates just wouldn't be on. Especially when said mates are there to celebrate *your* birthday.'

Hermione laughed, embarrassedly recalling the previous year's fiasco.

'Yes, yes, I'll be there. Augustus and I finished the trial this morning. Providing I have time tonight for you-know-what, I shouldn't even have to be late.'

She quieted in concentration as she knit the fractured bones of his face.

'How is that going, by the way?' he asked.

'Well enough. I'll be very surprised if we don't see some results this time around...'

Ron shook his head.

'I meant the you-know-what.'

Hermione looked at the door warily.

'Ron, I really can't discuss that here,' she answered in hushed tones. 'But suffice it to say, things have been really busy, and I could use an extra pair of hands.'

Ron nodded in understanding.

Later that evening, as Hermione made her way down the street past the anti-Apparition wards of St. Mungo's, she had the vague impression she was being followed. There were no telltale footsteps, only a faint prickling at the back of her neck that registered as someone's eyes. Hermione quickened her pace to her usual apparition point. Arriving in the alleyway, she turned and looked quickly behind her. There was no one there. Deciding she was being silly she forced a laugh and tried to relax as she unconsciously began the three D's.

Destination. *Relax, Hermione, and breathe.*

Determination. *You're getting as paranoid as Moody.*

Deliberation. *You've got enough on your mind right now*

As she turned into the third D, however, her concentration faltered.

A cloaked figure stood just behind her, knife upraised.

Can't Escape The Ghost

Chapter 2 of 4

A tale of might-have-beens and second chances. With Vampires.

Chapter Two

Can't Escape the Ghost

September 19, 2003

Harry was woken by the sound of a voice in the grate.

'Harry! Harry, you there? Harry?'

Ginny groaned and rolled over in her sleep. Trying not to disturb her, he threw back the covers and padded to the Floo. It was Tonks.

'Tonks, I haven't slept in four days. Please tell me this is important.'

'Harry, it's Hermione. Some bloke attacked her tonight as she was headed home.'

Harry's heart stopped.

'Is she okay? Where is she?'

'She's fine. She was half way Apparated by the time he got to her. She splinched and spooked the guy.'

'How bad was the splinch?'

'Not fatal anyway. They've got her in St. Mungo's.'

Harry checked the clock on the mantle. A hand marked 'Hermione' was pointed to 'Hospital'.

'I'll be right there. Floo Kingsley for me and tell him I won't be in this morning.'

Harry quickly threw on a shirt and a pair of trousers, accidentally rousing Ginny as he stumbled about their darkened bedroom.

'Harry ... what's going on?' She asked.

'Hermione was attacked last night.'

'WHAT?'

'It's all right, she's fine. I'm just going over to St. Mungo's to check in and get a statement.'

'What happened?'

'The attacker must have startled her while she was Apparating. She splinched and scared the guy off.'

'I'm going with you.'

'Gin, it's two in the morn...'

'*I am going with you*' Her tone bespoke warning.

'All right, all right. I never said you couldn't. I just thought you might like to get a full night's sleep. God knows I'd love to remember what that felt like,' Harry added bitterly.

'She's my friend too, Harry. You need to stop cutting me out of things.'

'I know, I know. I'm sorry. Can we please chalk it up to the hour and forget what an inconsiderate bastard I am?'

Ginny shrugged on a set of robes over her nightgown.

'You're buying breakfast.'

'I'll take that as a yes.'

'How'd you get here so bloody early?' Harry asked, surprised to see Ron at Hermione's bedside. She slept, oblivious to the ginger-haired young man holding her hand.

'I see Tonks got a hold of you then. That's good,' he replied vacantly. There were dark circles under his conspicuously red and swollen eyes.

'Oh, Ron, you look awful,' said Ginny. 'Have you been here all night?'

'Hermione patched me up after scrimmage this morning. She said she needed a hand with...' Ron trailed off waiting for them to fill in the blank on their own. They did. 'I was on my way to ... the place ... last night when I heard her screaming...'

Ginny let out a little shriek. Harry paled beside her.

'Fun times, this...' added Ron solemnly. Harry nodded, unable to shake the image of the mutilated corpses from his mind and appreciating fully how very close his friend had come to sharing that same fate.

'Harry, you don't think this had anything to do with *the place* ... do you?' asked Ginny.

Harry considered for a moment. He supposed it was possible. There really were only two rational explanations for the rash of murders. The possibility of a genuine psychopath perpetrating the crimes out of sheer blood lust had not escaped him, but something about the timing of the attacks was not sitting right with him as a simple matter of random violence. In fact, hadn't Remus remarked over tea only last week how conveniently these 'attacks' were taking place in conjunction with the issuance of anti-werewolf legislation? Conspiracy sounded ludicrous, and yet...

'I think it very well might,' he replied.

Ron looked up, alarmed.

'You don't think someone's on to ... but they couldn't be, could they? I mean, who would have...'

'No, I think we're still safe on that front. But Hermione's never made her position on the new Ministry acts very private, has she? I mean, she's all but fronting the Association for the Rights of All Beings, and even with that clown they have for a mouthpiece, she's still the only clout that group has and everyone knows it. I'd say they're the only legitimate stumbling block the Ministry has in passing any more of those asinine decrees.'

'Not to mention her research,' Ginny added.

'Not to mention her research,' Harry acknowledged.

Ron chuckled slightly. Ginny and Harry stared at him.

'ARAB,' he said, by way of explanation. Ginny rolled her eyes.

'Hermione's predilection for terrible acronyms aside, who would want to kill her?' she asked Harry. 'I mean, sure, she's a public figure and very outspoken in her views, but that isn't really Scrimgeour's MO, is it? I would think he'd be courting her the way he went after you during the war.'

'You would think so. But Scrimgeour isn't necessarily the only one with a vested interest in these decrees. We may just have another Umbridge on our hands.'

Ron flinched.

'Another *Umbridge*?'

Harry smirked.

'I'll look into it.'

As Hermione awoke, she discovered some very inconvenient builders had taken up residence within her temples and were doing their level best to demolish her skull.

'Nice of you to join us.'

Ginny's face slowly came into focus as Hermione regained consciousness. Beside her sat Ron, looking much worse for the wear.

'Ginny, how long was I out? What happened? There was a man ... he had a knife...'

'Shh. Relax, Harry's looking into it. You splinched yourself.'

'I have to get back ... I never finished last night's batch! I'm already terribly behind...' Hermione began to get up.

'Hermione sit down,' ordered Ginny. 'You were almost murdered last night. Let someone else worry about that.'

'Ginny, who else is there?'

'Ron and I will both come by tomorrow to help pick up the slack and Harry has promised to stop by after his shift is over. Remus has everything else well enough under control.'

Hermione sank back onto the bed.

'I can't do this anymore. Augustus and I are scheduled to start trials next week ... I've got a publicity mad vampire breathing down my neck for interviews, photo ops and

sound bites ... Now I've got some lunatic trying to kill me ... When exactly did I sign on for Harry's life?'

'When you decided to single handedly save the world,' quipped Ron.

Hermione smiled weakly.

'I suppose I have you to thank for saving me, don't I?'

Ron shrugged.

'Call it an early birthday present. Saves me the trouble of actually having to find you something.'

Hermione fortunately found strength enough to swat him on the arm.

'In the meantime,' began Ginny, 'Harry is going to have you followed for a while, just to make sure this kind of thing doesn't happen again.'

'Is that really necessary?'

'Harry thinks these attacks may be related to your work.'

'My work? How is that possible? I don't even know any of the other victims.'

'No, but somebody really has it in for werewolves, and you and Roman are their most visible advocates,' Ron pointed out.

'Oh my God, Roman! Is he okay? Did some lunatic go after him, too?'

'No, no, he's fine,' soothed Ginny. 'Tonks checked on him this morning. It looks like whoever is cutting up all these people was counting on everyone thinking it was done by werewolves. Now that you can confirm Harry's report that some knife wielding assailant is doing all the damage, whoever is behind this will have to find some other way to discredit your work.'

'So in a way, you've just put the nutter out of business,' observed Ron cheerfully.

Hermione smiled despite herself.

'I suppose I did. But even so, I'm not entirely out of danger, am I?'

'No, I don't reckon you are,' replied Ron, 'but I wouldn't worry. Harry will make sure you and Roman are tailed by the best Aurors he can find. You won't even know they're there unless you need them.'

'I'd rather I didn't need them at all.'

'That would be the ideal, wouldn't it?'

Just then, Clara Sedgwick poked her salt and pepper head in.

'Hermione, I don't think I saw this much of you even as my trainee, love! Let me have a look...'

Clara ran her wand across Hermione's midsection, noting the flicker of yellow as she passed over the scar left by Dolohov's curse and the green glow emanating from her bandages.

'Well, dear, it looks as if you're as right as rain. I do wish there was something we could do about that curse scar of yours, but I'm afraid that may be there for good.'

'I know, Clara.'

'Well, there isn't much more I can do for you. You're free to go.'

'Thank you, Clara.'

'And we could do with seeing a little less of you around here, young man,' she told Ron.

He blushed.

'I can't help it if the other teams have no respect for Hermione's delicate timetable of research,' he threw back easily.

'Humph. Hermione, feel free to stop by any time, but I want you to take the day off today. Augustus said your trial is ready for next week, and it's your birthday besides. You work yourselves too hard, you young people!'

'Yes, Clara.'

As she left, Ginny helped Hermione to her feet.

'You're coming with me today...no, don't argue...it's your birthday and you were nearly murdered last night. I have a right to spoil you a little.'

'I appreciate that, Gin, but I really should...'

'Hermione, if I hear the words 'I really should' come out of your mouth one more time today I'm going to send love letters to Percy in your name.'

'Then I suppose *I really should* just go along, shouldn't I?' Ron laughed and Hermione grinned.

Ginny shot him a withering look, grabbed Hermione's arm in a death grip and steered her out the door.

'For that,' she retorted, 'we're going to *my* spa.'

Harry sat at the end of the bar, nursing his drink and listening to Neville and Luna debate the magical properties of some plant he had never heard of. Ron had left momentarily to escort Ginny and Hermione to the Leaky Cauldron from the spa. It was unnecessary, but Harry thought it unlikely he'd be able to convince Ron of that fact. As he signaled Tom for another drink he saw Tonks arrive. Her demeanor was as stayed as had become customary these days. She hadn't descended to the depths of melancholy Harry had witnessed seven years prior when she had been almost incapacitated with unrequited love, but requited love clearly held complications of its own.

'Wotcher, Harry,' she said, saddling up to the bar and ordering a double.

'Hey, Tonks. How's Remus?'

'Oh, you know, the usual. Busy, but optimistic as ever. He thinks there's a chance he and I might be able to get married soon.'

'Tonks, that's great!'

'Yeah.'

'Just, yeah? You've been waiting for this for six years!'

'I know, I know. But Remus can't work right now, and no matter how hard I try to get excited about getting married I can't stop worrying about what we're going to do. I keep remembering what happened with Dawlish...'

'Tonks, that was entirely different. You aren't the werewolf...Scrimgeour wouldn't have a leg to stand on if he tried to sack you.'

'Somehow I doubt it would take very long for him to make the leap between werewolf and werewolf's wife. He'd probably say it was only a matter of time before he infected me as well.'

'That's rubbish, no one is more careful than Remus. He wouldn't let that happen.'

'Harry, *you* know that and *I* know that, but someone is jerking Scrimgeour's strings pretty hard. I'm not that essential to the Aurors that Kingsley would risk making waves to keep me.'

Harry opened his mouth to argue, but she cut him off.

'You know it's true, Harry. Not everyone can afford to be as loyal as you are.'

The door swung open and in came Ginny pulling on Hermione who appeared to be walking in very slowly and extremely bowlegged. Ron followed close behind, carrying their cloaks. Beside him, Tonks downed the last of her whiskey.

'I'm thinking about leaving the force,' she said simply. She set her glass back on the bar and as Harry watched, she slid off the stool and greeted them with a carefully practiced smile.

'They look so good together, don't they?'

'Hmm?'

'Ron and Hermione. They look good together,' reiterated Ginny.

Harry took the opportunity to dip his wife slowly as he tried to formulate a response to that non-sequiter. Three feet away, Ron danced with Hermione.

'I suppose so,' replied Harry unenthusiastically.

'Did either of them ever tell you why it never worked out between them? God, looking at them like that ... it seems like such a waste, doesn't it?'

As she spoke, Ron spun Hermione with great flair, making her laugh. She looked so happy with Ron, even Harry wondered for a moment why she couldn't just...

'Yeah, it does,' he said.

'I've tried to get her to talk to me about it but every time I mention the subject she clams up.'

Harry thought back to the last conversation he had with Hermione on the topic of her relationship with Ron.

He's not what I want anymore..

'They tried it and it didn't work.'

'Sometimes I just don't understand her, Harry.'

Harry smiled.

'Join the club. But don't you think you might be just the slightest bit biased? He's your brother after all.'

'Mmm, maybe,' Ginny conceded.

As the song ended, they returned to the large table where the others sat. Hermione laughed at something Ron said as he pulled out her chair for her. She played her role exquisitely. Harry didn't even have to listen to the other conversations at the table to know that they all agreed vehemently that Hermione belonged with Ron.

Harry noticed, however, that her smiles never really reached her eyes. He was, perhaps, the only one in the room who noticed. He was certain he was the only one in the room who knew why.

Holy Need

Chapter 3 of 4

A tale of might-have-beens and second chances. With vampires.

Chapter Three

Holy Need

September 20, 2003

Ministry of Magic, London. Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic has just announced the passing of Ministry decree number twenty-eight for the restriction and regulation of werewolves in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This is the twelfth such decree made in the last year in response to the series of brutal werewolf attacks as reported in the **Daily Prophet**. Decree number twenty-eight states that no werewolf residing in Ministry jurisdiction shall apply for or be granted license to marry in the interest of keeping the apparently booming population of werewolves in check. It is as of yet unknown if the lycanthropy virus can be transmitted sexually or from mother to fetus, but the Ministry views the decree as a necessary safeguard against any possible further transmission of the virus.

Hermione's mouth dropped open in shock as she read the Prophet article. The cafe was filled with the Saturday morning bustle of witches and wizards conversing over many cups of strong tea and coffee, recovering from their respective Friday nights, but the headline of the Prophet that Roman dropped in her lap was enough to hold her undivided attention.

'I don't believe this. How did we not see this coming?'

'I don't know.'

'What are we going to do?'

'What *can* we do, Hermione? Uriah has no interest in pushing the issue of these decrees.'

'Public demonstration?'

'Too time consuming. Speaking of which, we need to get back to the place to check on the stuff for the you-know-what.'

Hermione laughed.

'You're right, just let me finish my tea and we'll go.'

As Hermione leaned forward to grab her cup, movement in the periphery of her vision caught her eye.

Outside the window of the cafe stood Severus Snape.

Hermione let out a little shriek and dropped her cup, which clattered noisily to the floor, spilling its contents everywhere and drawing the attention of the entire cafe.

'Dammit! Evanesco...'

'Hermione, are you all right?' asked Roman.

Hermione looked back towards the window. There was no one there. Now the proprietor was coming over to them.

'You!' he shouted, pointing at Roman. 'Out! Now! You're lucky I don't call the Aurors!'

'Hey, take it easy,' he replied. 'I was just stopping in to speak to my friend here. We were just leaving...'

'Well, see that you make quick about it. I don't care who your *friends* are ... there are laws protecting us from your kind, see?'

'Come on,' said Hermione, taking Roman by the arm. 'It's not worth it.'

Outside, Hermione had to jog to keep pace with Roman as he marched away.

'Roman ... Roman, wait!'

'I'm *sick* of this, Hermione! I'm just plain *sick* ... I can't keep *doing* this!'

'I know, Roman ... I know, just...'

'You *know*? You don't *know* anything! I can't work, I can't get a place to live ... I couldn't even spend money if *wanted* to ... and now I can't even get bloody, fucking married! And you tell me you *know*! You know *nothing*, Hermione, NOTHING!'

Hermione was brought up short. She had never seen Roman so upset. Still...

'Nothing? *I know nothing*? Let me tell *you* about nothing, Roman. I'm twenty-four years old and I have spent over half my life trying to stop maniacs from killing my friends. I have devoted my *life* to trying to help anyone who ever got raw deal from the establishment, AND I WAS ALMOST BLOODY MURDERED FOR THE EFFORT! So you can't work, you can't marry and you can't go into a cafe without getting chucked out...you still have a place to sleep at night and friends who love you...SO STOP FEELING SO DAMNED SORRY FOR YOURSELF!'

She panted, her tirade exhausted. Roman's eyes were wide. After a moment...

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you,' she said.

Hermione sighed and relaxed her stance somewhat that she now realized looked more than a little combative.

'It's okay,' he replied, smiling hesitantly. 'Hermione, you really *are* scary, you know.'

Hermione rolled her eyes.

'I know.'

They walked on together, seeking out a place to discreetly Apparate. Finding an alleyway behind a row of shops, they stopped.

'Are you sure you're up for this? Apparition after a splinch...'

'I'll be fine. I managed to get here, didn't I?'

'Are you sure? You looked pretty jumpy there for a moment back in the cafe ... what was that about, anyway?'

'Nothing. I just thought I saw a ghost, is all.'

'Hermione, you know you can't see ghosts outside...'

'I was being figurative, Roman, there's no need to be didactic. I must have seen someone who looked like someone I knew once.'

'So you're absolutely *sure* you're all right?'

'Roman!'

'Okay, okay ... just have a care, would you? Do you have any idea what that lot would do to me if...'

Hermione Disapparated.

Knockturn Alley's old candle making district was a dingy place, thickly walled with warehouses now abandoned or converted into dismal tenements, brothels and places of questionable business. Hermione and Roman Apparated into an alleyway between a set of extremely shabby flats and a seedy looking pub. After walking a short ways down a street lined with broken glass and brick facades, they stopped in front of a large, faded sign for the Brisnel Tallow Company.

Hermione removed her wand and tapped gently on the sign.

'*Furry little problem,*' she said.

Immediately the sign dissolved and a doorway appeared. They went inside.

'Remus? Are you still here?' she called, placing her cloak on the back of one of the chairs surrounding an enormous, rough-hewn wooden table. Nearby, a kettle of water bubbled away on a large stove.

'Just a moment,' Remus replied, appearing from behind a curtained partition, wiping his hands on an industrial smock.

'The base, Remus?' she asked.

'Coming,' he replied, rummaging through a large cupboard. 'I'm low on...'

'Monkshood ... I know, I just stopped by the lab. Here you go...'

Hermione removed a jar from her cloak pocket and tossed it to Remus, who caught it mid stride and disappeared behind the curtain again.

As the kettle boiled, the door swung open and Ginny and Ron entered. Roman began setting out mismatched cups while Hermione made the tea. Remus reappeared a moment later, much relieved, and greeted Ginny and Ron warmly, removing his smock and hanging it on a peg by the door.

'Ron, I didn't expect to see you here today,' said Remus.

'Yeah, well, I had some time off coming, and what with everything that happened yesterday...'

'Good man. It'll be nice to have the extra hands. Hi, Ginny.'

'Hello, Remus,' she replied, taking the pot from Hermione and pouring out as everyone began to take seats at the table. When everyone was seated and sipping on their brew, Remus brought everyone up to speed.

'I've got five cauldrons of base going, but I think Hermione is going to have to take a look at number two. It's off.'

'Right. What color is it?' she asked.

'Blue.'

'Blue?'

'Right, then. Shall we get at it?' Remus said in a somewhat tellingly overconfident tone.

'Remus,' began Roman, 'do you want to discuss the new decree at all?'

Remus's smile only faltered for a moment.

'Well, we can't really perform marriages, so I doubt we'll see an increase...'

'That's not what I meant,' Roman interrupted.

'I know what you meant. What do you want me to say?' asked Remus, wearily rubbing the bridge of his nose.

'Actually,' said Ginny, 'I think they're only barring licenses issued in the UK. I think they still have to recognize marriages formed outside the country...'

'Yeah, that's right!' added Ron. 'You and Tonks could go to Paris.'

Remus blushed scarlet.

'This isn't about Dora and I. She has decided ... we think it would be best if we didn't for the time being,' Remus stammered out apologetically.

'Oh, Remus...'

said Hermione. 'Are you sure? I mean...'

'She needs her job. *I* need her job,' he added bitterly.

Hermione nodded in understanding.

'Well then,' said Roman. 'Unless anyone has any further items of business to discuss, we ought to get started.'

Eldred Worpel rubbed his small, pudgy hands together in the night air and pushed his wire-rimmed spectacles up the bridge of his nose again. His feet made short little strides as he walked briskly down Diagon Alley. The shops were all closed, giving the place a feel of a carnival after hours. The rubbish of the day still littered the streets and the smells of its inhabitants were not quite faded from the air.

As he stepped onto a dingy side street, he saw her. His mark.

She had her back to him as she locked and warded the shop doors she emerged from.

Carefully withdrawing the blade from his cloak, he advanced on her. Her stature was slight. He would not have any difficulty overpowering her. Eldred's only concern was having enough time to slit her throat before Magical Law Enforcement arrived.

He muffled his footsteps with a spell and increased his pace. She remained a yard ahead of him, but he was closing quickly. Eldred held the damascus blade high. She turned slightly and caught movement in the periphery of her vision. She screamed. With a crude motion the blade came down, plunging into her collarbone. She lost her footing and the blade withdrew. Knife still in hand, Eldred stepped firmly on her leg and wrenched her torso upwards, dislocating her hip. Her screams intensified as he renewed his grip on her arm and with one quick motion, drew the blade across her throat, blood spattering the lapels of his robes.

The screaming stopped.

The shelter door opened with a deafening screech as Tonks entered, throwing her cloak unceremoniously towards the stand behind the door.

It fell over. Cursing under her breath, she righted the stand and began to retrieve the scattered cloaks and umbrellas.

It was a rare thing to bring good news to the shelter, and more often than not this fact was reflected in the slow creaking of the door announcing the comings and goings of the tenants and staff. It was useful in this capacity so no one bothered about it.

Harry, it so happened, had good news to share and threw open the shelter door quickly. It slammed into Tonks' face as she stood from righting the umbrella stand. Her nose broke spectacularly.

Roman laughed. Tonks glared at him as she bled and swore with equal profusion and familiarity.

'Are you all right?' Harry asked.

Tonks shifted her glare to Harry.

'May I?' he asked.

Tonks nodded and Harry leveled his wand at her nose, silently setting the bone.

'Handy spell, that,' he said with a wry smile.

'I'll say,' she replied, as she worked the muscles of her face.

Harry was surprised, as he looked around, to see everyone gathered in the main room. He had been under the impression they were significantly behind in brewing the Wolfsbane since Hermione's attack.

'D'you all finish already?' he asked, pouring a cup for himself from the pot on the table. 'I thought you were supposed to be helping Hermione.'

Ron and Remus continued their chess game. Ginny smiled wryly as Roman set down his newspaper.

Without further explanation, he disappeared behind the curtained partition, behind which someone was whispering curses over the sound of bubbling and clinking cauldrons. A moment later, Hermione's voice exploded over the room.

'GET. OUT. OF. MY. LAB! DO YOU WANT THIS DONE TONIGHT OR NOT?'

Roman shot out from behind the curtains with a grin.

'Ah,' replied Harry, sagely.

'So what in the name of Merlin's under-shorts possessed you to burst in here like that?' asked Tonks, Scourgifying the last of the blood off her robes.

'Well, shortly after you left the office to attend to your all important umbrella-dispatching duties...'

'Oh, sod off...'

'...a call came in that the person responsible for cutting up all those people was going to kill again this evening. Sure enough, when we Apparated to the location we were given, we caught the guy having just slit a woman's throat, blood all over him and the knife still in his hand.'

Various murmurs of shock and surprise went around the table. Roman let out a low whistle.

'So who did it?' Ginny asked.

Harry's smile was humourless.

'Eldred Worple.'

The others stared at him blankly. A crash, followed by a great deal of swearing came from behind the curtain which was unceremoniously thrust aside by Hermione, face framed by a wild mane of frizz, exacerbated by the humidity of five boiling cauldrons.

'WHAT?' she asked.

'I thought you'd remember him,' said Harry.

'But he ... that can't be right, can it? He's just so...'

'Yeah, he's a fat, balding middle aged man with all the personality of a social disease, but he's our man all right.'

'I thought the man that attacked me was taller. What on earth would have possessed Worple to do something like that?'

'When we picked him up he was babbling all about vampires, and his 'immortal brotherhood' or some nonsense. I think his work went to his head. The guy is completely delusional. He confessed to all eighteen murders when we picked him up.'

Hermione sat down heavily in an empty chair.

'I suppose it makes sense,' said Remus. 'Vampires and werewolves have never been great allies...'

'And here I thought Uriah and I had made such a breakthrough,' said Roman sadly.

Hermione let out a very unladylike snort.

'Is someone planning on explaining who Eldred Worples is?' asked Tonks.

'He's an author...a biographer. He wrote a lot of celebrity memoirs. About seven years ago he lived with the vampire conclave in the Cotswolds. He wrote a book about his experiences that read like a love letter to Count Dracula. He tried to get Harry to give him his story a few times afterwards, but he never published again. A couple of years later he disappeared completely. No one heard from him again but I guess no one really troubled themselves about it. A lot of people went missing during the war,' explained Hermione.

'...So the guy got a little too into his work and started fancying himself a vampire, is that it?' asked Ginny.

'Something like that,' said Harry. 'Someone did call anonymously with the information, so we aren't ruling out conspiracy. Still, it seems strange for the Ministry to contradict its own order not to release the evidence against werewolf involvement only to frame Worples for the job...'

'So, does this mean we won't be followed anymore?' asked Roman.

Harry shrugged.

'Not much call for it now,' he replied.

'Well,' said Remus, 'it looks like we have a reason to celebrate after all. How is the potion coming, Hermione?'

'It needs to simmer for another hour.'

'Right. Dora, bring out the crystal. I've a bottle of Greta's somewhere around here for just such an occasion...'

'Blech,' exclaimed Tonks, dutifully setting out mismatched highballs.

'Now, now,' defended Roman, 'Greta makes a lovely product...all of the hangover of champagne with none of the taste.'

A dusty bottle was produced from under the sink. With comic flourish Remus removed the bottle cap and poured a measure into everyone's glass.

'Ugh, it's warm,' said Ginny.

'This brings back memories, eh, Ron?' said Harry, swallowing with a grimace. 'Remember that bottle we snuck back to Privet Drive on my seventeenth?'

Ron and Hermione chuckled.

'I don't know,' said Ron, taking a contemplative sip, 'I think this vintage is a better month.'

Papers in the Roadside

Chapter 4 of 4

A tale of might-have-beens and second chances. With vampires.

Chapter Four

Papers in the Roadside

September 21, 2003

Hermione blinked twice and rubbed her eyes, trying to push past the haze of her champagne headache as she walked through the underground. It had been a serious miscalculation to think that a brisk walk to work, rather than the traditional Apparition, would serve to clear her head. The bright sunshine was blinding to her poor, stress-dilated eyes and the result was ... unsettling.

For the second time that week, she thought she glimpsed Severus Snape on the street.

Chalking it up to an overactive imagination filling in the gaps in her questionable vision, she firmly shoved down the myriad emotions the sighting had stirred within her.

'Hermione, what's the matter?' asked Augustus. 'You're very pale, are you ill?'

Hermione hung up her cloak and rested her head on her desk.

The strain ... it must be the stress of everything...

'I'm fine. I had a late night last night, that's all. How are we coming?'

Augustus checked the small egg timer on their workstation. Ah, technology.

'Looks like another three minutes. Shall I read the paper to you to pass the time? There is an article I think you may find quite interesting in particular.'

The moon would officially change phase at 10:12 a.m. Though there wouldn't be any werewolves making the transformation until the moon rose, the viral matter would become active as soon as the moon became full.

It was 10:09.

Augustus read the article in the *Prophet* out loud to her.

'Listen to this: "*Uriah Smeichari, vampire liaison to the Association for the Rights of All Beings, disavows any knowledge of the murderer's activities and denies any connection between the conclave in which Worple lived for three years to research his book, Blood Brothers: My Life Among The Vampires (for related story, see page 11), and the murders. Said Smeichari: 'Mr. Worple is clearly a very ill man. We in the Association have the deepest sympathy for the families of the victims but refuse to make this a vampire issue.'*"

Hermione let out a short laugh of vindication.

'I'll bet Uriah has been trying to reach me for hours. I can't wait to see him try to talk his way out of this one.'

'Oh, my,' Augustus began. 'It says here that members of the Wizangamot are calling for the revocation of the anti-werewolf legislation.'

'Well it's about time.'

'Do you think Worple is really insane?'

Hermione said nothing.

'I mean, it says here that he was going on and on about the other vampires...that he had been told to do it...is he raving or do you think...'

Hermione stopped him.

'Augustus, I have no idea. I met him once a long time ago. He seemed sane enough to me...predatorily ambitious, but then it was at a party hosted by Horace Slughorn.'

Augustus returned to scanning the headlines of the paper.

Hermione held her breath as she watched the sand in the timer run out. For a long moment neither of them said anything, as they waited for the other to make the first move toward the experiment.

Augustus gestured broadly for Hermione to have the first look. She swallowed the lump in her throat and leaned forward to observe the potential cure.

A few globules of greenish-gray potion were all that were immediately visible. Hermione's heart began to pound.

'What is it?' Augustus asked.

Not answering him, she blindly groped for the extra lenses, sliding a stronger magnification into place. Focusing, she looked closer at the blobs.

The virus, or what was left of it, was dead, dissolving in the potion.

'Hermione, what's going on?'

Hermione straightened and looked at Augustus, shock evident on her face.

'We did it.'

'WHAT? Let me see that...'

Augustus looked through the lens at the decaying viral matter.

'Oh my God ... oh my God...'

A few moments later, both respected researchers were leaping up and down, shouting and carrying on enough to earn both of them a sharp reprimand from the hospital administration.

Of course, there was very little to be done when the administration joined in.

September 26, 2003

St. Mungo's Hospital, London...A spokesperson for St. Mungo's announced today that researchers have discovered what appears to be a cure for the lycanthropy virus. The virus, responsible for the transformation of people into animals when infected (most notably wolves), was discovered in 1897 by French wizard, Louis Pasteur ... The cure was developed by Hermione Granger, Healer-in-charge of St. Mungo's Research and Development and Augustus Pye, Healer-in-charge of the Dai Llewellyn ward. (For a related story on Hermione Granger, Order of Merlin, first class, see page 12) ... The Ministry of Magic is expected to comment on the discovery this afternoon (see 'Order of Merlin for Granger and Pye?' page 6). The cure is expected to go into wide-scale production at the end of next month. Small batches are available for immediate distribution to the elderly, frail, and extremely young (5 and younger). For more information, please Floo Griselda Thomas, Public Health Specialist at St. Mungo's.

September 29, 2003

Ministry of Magic, London...In a surprising press conference at the Ministry this afternoon, Uriah Smeichari, vampire liaison to the Association for the Rights of All Beings, announced the organization's protest of the new lycanthropy cure created by ARAB's own Hermione Granger. Neither Ms. Granger nor werewolf liaison, Roman White, could be reached for comment. On the subject of the cure, Smeichari had this to say: 'We in the Association find this news disturbing and offensive. We are shocked and surprised that Ms. Granger, who has always shown such an interest in the social causes of werewolves, would have concealed her work...and her apparent bias...from this organization. Werewolves do not need to be cured. They have as much right to their way of life as any other magical being. What our society needs is tolerance and understanding of our lycan brethren...not to be labeled as "diseased" by supposed allies.' (For more on Granger's alleged ties to pureblood interest groups, see page 7)...

October 6, 2003

Chapel of the Merlin on the Green, London...Following the revocation of Ministry Decree number twenty-eight for the restriction and regulation of werewolves in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Banns were read for a number of werewolves and their partners eager to be married. Among them were ex-werewolf Remus J. Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks, daughter of Theodore and Andromeda Tonks nee Black. Though Lupin, being among the first recipients of the controversial lycanthropy cure, was no longer an active werewolf, he and his fiancée opted to wait until the decree was revoked as a show of solidarity with those who were still affected by the law. According to sources close to the couple, they are taking a well-deserved break from activism to enjoy their honeymoon in an undisclosed location...

October 20, 2003

St. Mungo's, London...A young boy is near death after receiving the lycanthropy cure this morning. 'It was terrible,' says healer Bran Smythwick, who administered the potion. 'I've never seen anything like it. He began to asphyxiate on the spot. Then the tremors began. He seized for close to an hour. He is fortunate that he isn't brain

dead.' Hospital staff has ruled out an allergic reaction from their diagnosis and are now looking into the possibility of contamination. While the current supply of the cure is being tested for foreign substances, administration of the potion has been suspended indefinitely...

October 20, 2003

Ministry of Magic, London...In a surprising move today, Uriah Smeichari, speaking on behalf of the Association for the Rights of All Beings, announced that Hermione Granger and Roman White have been removed from leadership of the organization. 'We feel that in light of recent events and Miss Granger's continued involvement in the promotion of the lycanthropy cure the time has come for us to part ways. We will remember proudly their legacy in founding our organization as well as those first, small victories. As we continue to move into the twenty-first century, however, it is vital that all our leadership have a clear vision of what we stand for.' When asked for comment, Granger replied 'You can't sack the willing.'

October 28, 2003

Azkaban Prison, The North Sea...In a startling turn of events in the trial of the suspected mass-murderer Eldred Worple, the accused was found dead in his cell yesterday morning before his first scheduled appearance in court. A note found beside the body has led officials to rule the death a suicide.

November 12, 2003

'Now drink it all down this time, Magda, or it won't work.'

'It tastes terrible...'

'Would you rather stay a werewolf?'

The octogenarian looked askance at Hermione.

'Give it here.'

She was only eighty-four...middle aged for a witch...but her appearance bore more directly in common with a Muggle woman of her age. Years of excruciating transformations had not aged Magda Dolworthy well.

Magda downed the concoction in one. Though she had taken the cure a month prior, it had not taken effect...largely because she had retched most of the foul tasting brew back onto the floor. It was ghastly from all accounts, but anyone who had become accustomed to drinking the Wolfsbane potion once a month should have had no cause for complaint.

Hermione strongly suspected that Magda had been neglecting her potion for quite some time.

Magda looked somewhat peaky, but a few moments later it appeared to pass. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. It had taken weeks to get the smell of regurgitated potion out of the floorboards.

'Congratulations, Magda, you are a free woman.'

She smiled and extended her hand which the woman ignored, embracing her firmly instead.

'Thank you, love. Thank you.'

Hermione awkwardly patted her on the back.

'Not at all.'

As Magda took her leave, Hermione put the kettle on in anticipation of the usual crowd of visitors. The shelter, now mostly emptied, was quiet except for the bubbling of the water.

'Magda leave, then?' asked Ron, emerging from the curtained partition that separated the kitchen/laboratory from the rest of the shelter.

Hermione nodded in response, sipping her own brew and staring into the middle distance. It had been a very trying day. First had been the inquiry at St. Mungo's to deal with the potioneering incident. The cure was banned from production...that much she had expected to hear. Fortunately it turned out that her celebrity made her more of a political asset than liability so her fears of being turned out and stripped of her licensure came to nothing. Then came the bombshell that she was being put on probation and her storeroom privileges revoked in response to pressure from 'above'. Who, aside from the Ministry, that would be considered above the hospital administrators was beyond her, but she bore the indignity with as much good grace as she could muster. She did still need the job, after all. Then, to cap off her day, just as she was arriving at the shelter to do a bit of figuring on her situation, Magda Dolworthy showed up, looking much worse for the wear and asking if she happened to still have the cure. Despite every inclination to turn the baggage out on her ear for wasting her time, her compassionate nature ruled and invited her in for a second dose. While she attended her, Ron had arrived, ruining her only chance for any peace and quiet that day. She tried so hard not to blame him...which shouldn't have been difficult considering he really had nothing to do with her present difficulties...but resenting him was a temptation she couldn't resist.

At the moment, however, he appeared immune to her scowls.

Ron poured himself a cup of tea as Roman and Remus entered, loaded down with parcels of various shapes and sizes...provisions for the coming week.

'D'you see the papers, Hermione?' Roman asked, throwing a copy of the *Prophet* on the table. 'Apparently you're now banned from producing the lycanthropy cure altogether.'

She tried valiantly not to grind her teeth.

'It has been brought to my attention, yes,' she replied evenly. 'Not that it matters in the slightest. Even discounting the people we've cured, our numbers are lower than they've ever been. If they aren't coming to us for help then we can't help them, potion or not. Magda makes the last of the regulars, and it's not as if every werewolf in Britain doesn't know where to find us. I'm afraid some of them are starting to believe the rubbish that Uriah is spreading...'

'Magda was here? That woman is a menace,' Roman ranted. 'You wouldn't believe how close she came to infecting people when she transformed. It was like she'd never even taken the potion.'

'I think it's very likely that she wasn't taking it. She only came here for the potion the once,' she replied, voice deliberately calm.

'Wasn't she registered at St. Mungo's?' asked Ron.

'If she was I never saw her. The few times she came here she was completely unable to stomach the stuff. Hell, she barely kept the cure down this time.'

'Oh, dear God,' breathed Remus.

Hermione allowed everyone to pause for a moment to consider the implication of their housing an un-potioned werewolf for a year and a half.

'Well, she's not a lycan now, so we don't have to worry about her anymore,' stated Roman, raising his cup.

'Here, here,' chorused everyone.

A moment later, the newly christened Nymphadora ('It's Dora or I'll hex your bollocks off') Lupin walked in.

'Now here's a sober looking lot. Who died?' she asked. She attempted to throw her cloak over a chair and missed. Shrugging in resignation, she poured herself a cup of tea and took a seat beside her husband.

'No one, thank God,' answered Remus. 'Is Harry coming?'

'Dora' took a sip of her tea and nodded.

'Soon enough. Said he had a few things to finish up and we're to go ahead and start without him.'

'Right,' began Roman. 'So what do we know so far?'

'Well, quite a lot, actually,' said Ron, removing a tattered notebook from his pocket.

Hermione's eyes widened. Not only had he prevented her from preparing for the meeting, Ron actually prepared notes. It was galling! Either she was slipping or Ron was finally applying himself. Oh, how she hoped it was the latter.

'You prepared *notes*?' asked Remus.

Ron shrugged his shoulders.

'By all means, proceed then,' said Remus encouragingly.

Ron nodded solemnly and continued, flipping through his notebook.

'Well, so far,' he began, 'we've pretty much established there's some sort of conspiracy between the Ministry and vampires to subjugate all the werewolves in Britain...'

Roman interrupted.

'Hold on a minute. How'd you figure that?'

'Well it's quite simple, really. They hushed up the information on the bodies, held back the cure, and made all those laws. The Ministry has to be involved at a very high level,' he replied.

'Right, go on,' said Remus.

'And it's obvious now that if the vampires didn't kill all those people themselves that they certainly set Worple up to take the fall...only they didn't count on him being quite so mouthy about it. Not to mention the business with Smegma...'

'Smeichari,' Hermione corrected.

'...booting Hermione out of her own organization.'

'Right, we know all that,' said Roman, 'But where do you get the idea that they're conspiring to enslave the lot of us?'

'Who ever is behind this is really *for* the anti-werewolf laws and *against* the cure. If they just wanted all the werewolves out of Britain, why oppose the potion?'

Hermione was impressed.

'Ron, I'm impressed,' she said. 'You've really given this a lot of thought.'

Ron blushed crimson.

'Well, outside of one memorable month you spent as a cat, I've never known you to botch anything you brewed. It wasn't hard to figure that someone had contaminated that batch of potion to get you in trouble. I thought this whole mess was over once they captured Worple but it isn't, and I don't like the idea that someone might have it in for you.'

Hermione swallowed the lump in her throat as everyone stared at her, smiling those knowing smiles, and tried to think of something to say.

The door opened.

'Wotcher, Harry. What's the news?'

Harry entered and sat without removing his cloak.

'How'd the inquiry go today, Hermione?' Harry asked, apropos of nothing.

Warily, she replied, 'Fine. The administration said they knew I wasn't to blame for the bad batch, but that they were under a lot of pressure to discontinue the potion. I've been put on probation and had my storeroom privileges revoked temporarily.'

'You were put on *probation*?' Harry asked, clearly unsettled.

Hermione was not at all comforted by his reaction.

'Yes, but with the way everything has been at St. Mungo's since that incident, it didn't come as much of a surprise. It's hospital politics, Harry, that's all.'

'Did they say anything else about your work over the next few months?'

'Not that I recall, no. They told me to report directly to them tomorrow morning for my reassignment.'

Harry appeared to ruminate on this for a moment before announcing, 'You and Roman are going to be followed beginning tomorrow morning until further notice.'

'WHAT?' they chorused in unison.

'Harry, you can't be serious!' said Hermione. 'It's just a minor inconvenience, that's all.'

'Hermione, can you brew potions while on probation?' Harry asked.

'No, the other staff will have to see to that while...Harry, where are you going?'

Harry stopped just before the door. Without meeting her eyes, he said, 'Maybe someone is just being particularly vindictive in going after your livelihood. There may be a chance, however, that whoever is behind this is concerned that you and Roman may organize resistance to whatever they're planning.'

Hermione paled.

'You seem awfully sure about this, Harry,' said Roman. Harry ran his hand through his hair in an agitated fashion. Kneeling beside Hermione's chair, he lowered his voice to a whisper.

'I intercepted a message this morning, before your inquiry, from Scrimgeour to the administrative board at St. Mungo's. He ordered that you were to be kept busy and isolated over the coming months and that under no circumstance were you to have access to potions equipment or supplies. He also said that additional precautions would be taken if you continued your association with Roman.'

'Harry, you're frightening me. What sort of *precautions*?'

Harry stood and straightened his cloak, looked from Hermione to Roman and strode quickly to the door.

'You're going to be followed until further notice,' he called back over his shoulder.

And with that, he left.

Everyone stayed at the shelter for another hour making small talk and digesting Harry's news. Hermione was accustomed to having to deal with bad publicity. It was far more comforting to think her probation was a result of media pressure rather than from some nebulous villain seemingly afraid of her potions skills. That especially seemed an odd thing to fear. If she had been a famous duelist or a great strategist, *maybe* she could see being perceived as a threat. But as it was? She was a *bloodswoot*, and it had been a damn long time since she'd been in fighting shape. What the hell did these people think she was brewing, biological weapons?

'Hermione, I need to get going, are you sure I can't walk you?' Roman asked one last time.

'Quite sure, love.' Hermione looked into those fiercely caring eyes and was struck by remorse so deep it made her chest ache. 'Roman ... I'm *so* sorry I've dragged you into all of this...'

Roman gestured and cut her off.

'Save it, Hermione. Do you remember when we first met?'

She smiled.

'Like it was yesterday. I was pamphletting Diagon Alley. Well, littering, more like ... and then you saw me from across the street...the first one all day that listened to a thing I was saying! And you grabbed a handful of flyers that blew your way and started shouting at the top of your lungs...'

'War heroine decries Ministry oppression! Scrimgeour was an advocate of Death Eater pacification...don't let him sell your rights away!' Roman shouted in a close approximation of his street voice.

Laughing, she said, 'I'd never seen such a thing! You bellowing at people on the street, getting right up in their faces, confronting them with all that righteous fury! I thought you were making fun of me at first...'

'Never. You were brilliant out there. Reminded me of my civilly disobedient youth.'

'Hermione,' he said softly, 'being a minority means that, inevitably, there will always be choices of fight or flight. But as long as there has ever been the slightest chance that fighting the good fight would spare one soul a single iota of the pain that I've had to endure living in this maddening, Victorian, hypocrisy we call the Wizarding World ... well ... flight has never truly been an option.'

'Nor for me.'

He smiled. 'Then we understand each other. Good night, Hermione.'

'Good night, Roman.'

Alone in the shelter, Hermione quickly assembled the interior wards, eager to get home. Locking the door behind her, she began to put up the exterior wards when she was suddenly covered in a shower of pebbles.

'What the...!' She looked up too late. A sudden, crushing blow to her shoulders forced her to her knees. Hermione lost her grip on her wand and it dropped out of sight. She scrambled to face her opponent, unwilling to keep him at her back while she searched for her wand. A black-cloaked figure leered at her, feral grin displaying an impressive pair of gleaming, white fangs.

Her mind screamed *Accio!* and her wand dutifully found her hand. A point-blank Stunner absorbed harmlessly into his undead body. Panic began to take hold. Before Hermione was able to recall anything in memory that might possibly help, movement behind the monster's left shoulder caught her eye. The vampire saw her glance behind him and turned fast enough for Hermione not to perceive any movement at all. The shadowy figure brandished a wand and slashed at the air as the vampire flew straight up as if pulled by invisible strings. In that instant her breath was taken from her as searing pain flared across her chest and blood began to course down her torso. Weakly, Hermione sank to her knees, as consciousness began to slip away. There was a sensation of falling, but inexplicably she never seemed to meet the ground. In a fleeting moment of lucidity, she became aware of a pair of arms bearing her up and a face that had haunted her dreams and nightmares alike for the last six years. His name was the last thing to cross her lips before finally succumbing to unconsciousness.

'Severus...'
