

Saving a Death Eater

by Bambu

Post-Deathly Hallows plot. While Harry is immured in the headmaster's office, sunk into Snape's memories, Hermione is spurred into action of a different sort.

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Chapter 1 of 6

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Spoilers: Deathly Hallows.

Disclaimers and Author's Notes: None of the characters or the Potterverse is mine, belonging to JK Rowling and her assignees. However, I claim only the order of the words and the concept behind this idea which neatly slots into the canon timeline. For my story's purposes, I rely on book canon rather than film canon, although on occasion, a hint of film canon will slither in.

The first chapters were beta read by the amazing SnarkyWench and A Bees Buzz, and they have my enduring thanks. There has been a long hiatus, during which these wonderful women have turned their attention to other facets of their lives.

I've been incredibly fortunate to have the amazing Subversa and Annie Talbot offer to sit on my shoulder, correct mistakes, and prod me in the right direction if I should find myself lost for these last chapters!

Finally, I just couldn't leave this alone, so two hours after reading the last book of the series I was the fifteenth person to get the book after the midnight release I put fingers to keyboard. Read at your own risk.

~o0o~

Fred was dead.

Hermione Granger could hardly believe it as she clung to Ginny, both young women sobbing.

The din in the in the Great Hall of Hogwarts, where triage and assessments were taking place as Voldemort waited for Harry's response to his ultimatum, was diffused somehow as Hermione attempted to re-adjust her shifting world view. It was something she'd learned to do these past months, but it hadn't been easy.

With a hiccupping sigh, Ginny gripped Hermione tightly and then released her, turning toward a visibly shaken and crying Ron.

Blinking furiously, Hermione looked up toward the Charmed ceiling; it was cloudy, with billowing black clouds.

Billowing.

The word reminded her of Snape.

Snape.

He had behaved unexpectedly in the Shrieking Shack, as if he were trying to escape his Dark master. Snape hadn't seemed *evil*, he'd seemed almost *desperate*.

Hermione had recently grown quite familiar with evil ... and desperation.

Without conscious thought, her fingers brushed the thin scar along her throat, where Bellatrix Lestrange had sliced her skin at Malfoy Manor.

Brown eyes rested briefly on the side-by-side bodies of Tonks and Remus Lupin, fresh tears stung Hermione's eyelids, and she blinked rapidly. Poor little Teddy Lupin. He would grow up without parents.

He would have an excellent godfather in Harry.

Harry.

Where was Harry?

She whirled, her eyes searching for his familiar frame.

In the near distance, Luna Lovegood stooped over a heavily bandaged Lavender Brown, and further along the line of the injured, Madam Pomfrey was bent over someone, her wand arcing and swishing in a blur of motion.

Across the room, Michael Corner and Parvati Patil carried another body through the entrance.

Abruptly, Hermione left the grieving Weasleys to wend her way to the matron's side.

"Hermione?" It was Cho Chang. Her once-sleek hair was unevenly singed on one side and she was missing an eyebrow, but her chin was stubbornly set.

"Yes?"

"Do you think Harry"

"Yes," Hermione replied, repressively. "I think Harry will do exactly what's necessary to defeat that . . . that . . . You-Know-What. If you'll excuse me."

Without waiting for a reply, she slipped past the other witch and within three steps entered the Hogwarts matron's field of vision.

The matron's wand jabbed into a final stop above the vacant-eyed expression on Terry Boot's face. A thin sheen of pale green enveloped his body. "There, there, Mr. Boot." Pomfrey soothed her unresponsive patient. "All will be well."

Poppy Pomfrey raised her head, and Hermione was shocked to see the older witch's haggard expression. She looked exhausted.

A groan rose from a nearby wizard, and Pomfrey's voice was more than impatient when she spoke. "What is it, Miss Granger? Where are you hurt?"

"It's not me," Hermione said. "It's "

"What? Who? I haven't much time."

"It's . . . it's Professor Snape," Hermione replied, her voice quavering. "I think he's dead."

Madam Pomfrey's fingers flew to her mouth. "No." She moaned the word, but then, she seemed to comprehend the essential point. "*Youthink?*"

"He was bitten by You-Know-Who's snake, and then he bled, and he..." Hermione glanced at Terry Boot's face, "...he looked an awful lot like Terry."

Pomfrey grasped her arm, eyes narrowing. "Are you sure?"

"Yes -- I think so."

"Where is he?"

"Pardon?"

"Snap out of it, Miss Granger! *Where is Severus Snape?*"

"In the Shrieking Shack."

The matron grimly set her shoulders. "That's in Hogsmeade. We haven't a moment to lose. If he is as you say, then he's in shock and stasis as a result of Nagini's venom."

Pomfrey efficiently surveyed the row of patients before grabbing the arm of a passing witch. It was Padma Patil. "You, Miss Patil, monitor Mr. Boot, and ask Mr. Goldstein to seal the wound on Mr. Macmillan's leg. I will return as soon as possible." She snapped her wrist in a familiar flick and swish. "*Accio* broomstick!"

Hermione's brain caught up with the situation. "No. Madam Pomfrey, you don't have to go to Hogsmeade to get to the Shack. There's..."

"The tunnel beneath the Whomping Willow has been sealed off."

"We opened it just now . . . before..." Conflicting responsibilities warred within Hermione, but with Harry off doing something and Ron in a huddle with his grieving family, she had to do what she could to help Professor Snape, if there was any chance he remained alive.

Too much about his conversation with Voldemort had been inexplicable; it had given her second and third thoughts about Snape's real allegiances. Remembering the earlier scene in the Great Hall, when the massed houses had elected to stay or stand, her thoughts swirled without much cohesion, yet settled on the fact that Hogwarts had been relatively safe for the students. Snape, who knew that some of the staff belonged to the Order of the Phoenix, had done nothing to reveal those anti-Death Eater loyalties.

At that moment, a Nimbus 2000 hurtled through the Great Hall and Hermione made her decision. "I'll take you there, Madam Pomfrey, but we must hurry. I haven't much time."

They straddled the broomstick, the matron in front. Wrapping one arm around Pomfrey's waist, Hermione rapped her wand hard on each of their heads to Disillusion them.

"What in Merlin's name?"

"There are still Death Eaters on the grounds," Hermione informed the older woman.

"Oh. I haven't been out of the castle," Pomfrey replied as she launched them into the air.

Their flight was wild; they dodged debris and straggling survivors making their way into the Great Hall.

Pomfrey didn't bother to go through the broken front doors of the castle, instead angling the broom through the wide, jagged hole in the stone wall itself where it had been torn by the fist of a marauding giant.

Heart pounding, Hermione heard Pomfrey mutter a spell before calling out, "Hold tight, Miss Granger!"

The broom lurched and Hermione's head snapped back at the explosive burst of speed.

Scant seconds later they were at the Whomping Willow, its remaining limbs agitated and flailing. Hermione wasted no time in using Ron's earlier trick, levitating the same twig to the same knot on the tree's trunk.

It was dark in the tunnel, but the two women moved swiftly. Pomfrey hiking her cumbersome skirts up to her hips enabling her to crawl faster, bloodying her knees in the process.

The loamy smell of dirt filled Hermione's nostrils, tickling her senses; the clean scent lasting until she followed Pomfrey into the fusty, still dimly lit room of the Shrieking Shack. Snape was laid on the filthy floor, vacant black eyes staring at nothing, a jagged tear in his seemingly bloodless neck.

"Oh, Severus!" Poppy cried, dashing to the wizard's side, her wand flicking in a frenzy of motion.

A shimmer of the palest green extruded from the tip of her wand, extending to cocoon Snape's entire body, draping like cling film over him: pallid face, dirty hair, stained hands.

She crooned at the mortally injured wizard like a mother Ridgeback with one hatchling. "Could you not have been more careful, little man?"

Hermione cast several protection spells on the room before sinking to her knees at Snape's side, her hands hovering above him, wanting to help, but afraid to touch. In the deep recesses of her mind, where she'd come of age this past year, she wondered what exactly Poppy Pomfrey knew, or where her allegiance might lie. And then Hermione scoffed at her own suspicion.

"What can I do?" she finally asked, gripping her wand and listening with that extra sense which had been honed after months on the run for intruders.

Pomfrey's hand shot out imperiously. "A glass. I need a glass, girl."

Within seconds the former student had conjured one and placed it in the older witch's hands.

Hermione watched in sheer fascination as Pomfrey rummaged in a pocket within her robes. From the depth of her arm Pomfrey was shoulder deep. Hermione correctly surmised the capacious pocket was similar to her own little beaded bag, and that the matron carried a number of remedies on her person at all times.

Withdrawing her hand, Pomfrey held two vials in her palm. The first, Hermione recognized as a Blood-Replenishing Potion, and the second, from its color, she thought had something to do with poisons.

Keen blue eyes noted her interest. "It's antivenin, Miss Granger. It's risky, but it's specifically formulated against that vile serpent of He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named."

"Oh? Oh! You mean . . ."

"I mean that creature has been known to strike without provocation." Pomfrey's hands flew, pouring and measuring ingredients into the small glass Hermione had conjured. "Severus did his best to keep the students out of harm's way whenever that filth was in the castle."

"Then Professor Snape isn't " Hermione couldn't finish the question.

"A loyal Death Eater?" Pomfrey spared a glance at the younger woman before raising the blended concoction in the air, eyeing its murky consistency with a cool professional eye. "No. Indeed he is not. He had only two confidantes in the school. Two of us he trusted with his deepest secrets. Well, only two living. I'm honored to be one of them. Albus, of course was the other, but for years, the Bloody Baron has also known the truth about Severus' sacrifices."

Suddenly, Hermione cocked her head as if listening for something attempting to breach her enchantments. There was nothing. Yet.

"Here, Miss Hermione you'll have to help me. Raise him."

Hermione's eyes flew wide. "Lift him you mean?"

"Yes." Pomfrey's patience was thin. "Raise him up so I can get this potion into him."

Hermione slid forward, placing her hands on Snape's black-clad shoulders. Her hands slipped right through the green spell-field, an electrical hum of magic coating her skin. "Like this?"

"Higher. Brace him against yourself and angle his head back."

Awkwardly, Hermione tugged and pulled at his body she refused to consider him *dead weight* until he was practically cradled in her lap, his head lolling against the crook of her arm. She was startled to find his clothing wet, and involuntarily her eyes strayed to the ragged gap in his neck, her stomach churning.

Her hands were covered in his blood.

Hermione had seen some horrifying things over the past several months, but this was different. More personal.

A tingle of magic crept along her limbs until she and Snape were enveloped, limned by the pale green field, as if they were a single entity.

Pomfrey muttered, "It's not the answer, and I'm afraid he'll have to negotiate with the unicorns to purify his blood if this works. Where we'll find a . . . never mind."

"A virgin?"

Pomfrey's blue eyes met her inquiring gaze. "Yes. He'll need a virgin to intercede on his behalf if this works."

Hermione nodded briefly. "When it's necessary, I'll help."

Then she cradled Snape's head as Pomfrey coaxed his mouth open. The mediwitch muttered an incantation in a language Hermione had never heard before, and the potion swirled into iridescent silver.

Instantly, Pomfrey poured the thick liquid into his mouth. Some of the potion spilled across his thin lips, running in a thread-like rivulet down his chin, over his jaw and into

the jagged tear of flesh. Where the glowing liquid touched skin it was quickly absorbed, the wound sealing in the potion's wake.

Hermione was amazed anew at the power of directed magic.

Pomfrey's fingers worked on Snape's neck, coaxing the muscles to work, to urge the potion down his throat and into his stomach.

Torchlight flickered as the hum of magic increased in the room, and all the hair on Hermione's arms stood on end.

"Come on, Severus!" Pomfrey chanted. "Come on, little man. You said this would work. It's your own bloody potion!"

After what seemed an eternity, Hermione felt a change in the magical field surrounding her and she tightened her arms around her former professor. Tilting her head, several tendrils of her hair catching the torchlight in a halo of burnished copper framed her face and his.

Electric tension rippled through his muscles, and her breath caught in her throat.

Those depthless black eyes were no longer empty and staring; there was something *someone* there. Hermione's heart raced, and unable to tear her eyes from his face as cognizance illuminated his expression, she watched in wonder as he slowly blinked, his eyes turning to hers.

A furrow appeared on his brow.

She was aware of Pomfrey casting further spells, casting a Patronus which she directed to Healer Pauling at St. Mungo's, but Hermione couldn't look away from Snape.

He swallowed, Adam's Apple bobbing. "L-lily?"

And there was the answer.

The answer to the one question Hermione had never dared ask, nor thought she would ever know. Gently, she murmured, "No, sir. It's Hermione Granger. But you will be all right."

He stared at her for a very long moment, then his eyes moved past her, finding Madam Pomfrey. The matron was openly crying while conjuring a stretcher, and Snape watched her briefly, his face impassive, then his eyes snapped back to his former student.

Hermione stared at him, unashamedly crying. It was as if she'd never seen this hawk-faced man before.

Once more her paradigm evolved; this time, to a world in which Severus Snape was not a coward, not a Death Eater, but just a man who had loved a woman and had spent most of his life attempting to expiate his sins.

Tightening her grip on him, Hermione bent her head, her eyes never leaving his, and whispered, "She would have been very proud of you. I promise to do whatever I can to help Harry finish this."

"All right, Miss Granger..." Poppy Pomfrey rose to her feet, levitating the stretcher, "...I'll wait until my friend arrives and we'll take Severus directly to St. Mungo's." She reached through the magical field to pat Snape's arm.

He turned his head toward her, something which clearly took great effort. He still wasn't speaking, but Pomfrey didn't seem disturbed by that fact. "We'll do our best to fix you up. Miss Granger has agreed to mediate with the unicorns if necessary, and I think your antivenin has done the trick."

Suddenly a tremor shook the dilapidated house.

Hermione gasped.

Black eyes and blue stared at her.

They were near enough to the Forbidden Forest that when giants moved the earth shook beneath the Most Haunted House in All Britain.

"I must go," she said. "I think Harry's done something rash." What might have been a paroxysm rippled through Snape's chest, and Hermione cried out. "Professor? Are you all right?"

But it seemed that, despite everything, Snape had a bit of gallows humor, and as much as his weakened state would allow, he was laughing.

Pomfrey's wand glowed amber and then turned a deep green. "Don't do that again, Severus," she scolded.

"It . . . seems..." he paused for a breath, and the two witches hung on every fought-for word "...Granger . . . has a . . . gift . . . for . . . understatement."

Despite the urgency, Pomfrey chuckled and Hermione smiled at Snape. It was the first honest smile she'd ever given him, and his eyes seemed riveted to her mouth.

The house shook again, but it didn't halt the misty white form of an owl flying through the half-hanging, broken door. It hooted its message, "On our way with a team. I will find you. Be safe, Poppy."

"I must go," Hermione announced, and shifted beneath Snape. Surprisingly she hadn't minded holding him. One of his hands grasped her wrist feebly. She looked into his dark, fathomless eyes. "You know I have to. Harry needs help even if he doesn't think he does."

Snape closed his eyes in acknowledgment.

"Miss Granger, surely..." Pomfrey began to say.

"I have other obligations." With her free hand and a non-verbal spell, Hermione levitated Snape off her lap. The separation of the magical field between them was a sharp pain and Hermione sucked in air, blinking rapidly against the startling loss. She noticed Snape, too, blinking his eyes and his lips pinched as if in pain. Then, with great care, she moved him to the stretcher which the mediwitch directed beneath his body.

The shack shook once more, detritus falling from the cracks in the ceiling.

Hermione sprang to her feet, rubbing her prickling legs to get the feeling back in them. She cast a quick cleaning spell which only succeeded in removing some of the blood soaking into her clothing and skin.

Then, rounding the stretcher, she strode toward the door where she turned for a last look.

Snape and Pomfrey watched her, their expressions grave.

"I won't forget about the unicorns," Hermione said. "Be safe."

She squeezed back into the confining tunnel, anxious to find Harry and Ron, hopeful that the night might end the way it was meant to be.

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Midnight Comes

Chapter 2 of 6

Hermione faces the aftermath of the Battle for Hogwarts

Saving a Death Eater

By Bambu

Author's Notes: Standard disclaimers and thanks may be found in chapter one. However, I'd additionally like to thank Lillithj for allowing me to use one of her gimmicks (although we use it in very different ways) in this chapter. It was a perfect bridge.

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Chapter Two: Midnight Comes

Hermione averted her eyes from the mullioned windows of the Gryffindor common room, avoiding the sight of raging bonfires dotting the school's grounds where Magical Law Enforcement and Healers continued their grim tasks of succoring the wounded and tallying the dead.

Night had fallen, and she desperately needed some rest before facing *thead hoc* inquest under the Interim Minister the following morning.

She glanced at the base of the boys' staircase where, a few minutes before, Harry had given her a bracing hug, thanked her for everything, and then shuffled up the stairs with Neville and Seamus following close on his heels.

Two Hit Wizards, hand-picked by Shackbolt himself, were not to be outdone by the war-toughened youths and followed quickly behind.

Ron had already returned to the Burrow.

The Weasleys had left mid-day, and Ron's last comment '*It's a family thing, Hermione. You understand, yeah?*' had unintentionally delivered the deepest wound she'd received during the Battle of Hogwarts.

For the first time in a long time, Hermione had nowhere to go.

She wasn't a Hogwarts student, and in any event, the girls' dormitories had been damaged during the fighting. Her family home was empty, and had she mustered the fortitude to stay in the house without her parents, she simply didn't have the magical energy to Apparate that far, nor would she risk an illegal Portkey in the heightened security surrounding the school. Yet, remaining in the common room under the appraising eyes of the rest of the Hit Wizard squad was guaranteed to keep her sleepless.

Serendipitously, Minerva McGonagall arrived at that moment.

"Here you are, Miss Granger. Hermione." The older witch's voice trembled with weariness and emotional depletion; yet her posture was straight. The gash on her cheek, sustained during the fighting, had been neatly sealed. A slender scar would remain, but she would bear it proudly. "I've come to offer you a bed, or at least a place to sleep." She smiled at Hermione's surprise, and continued briskly. "My quarters are secured and I have a very comfortable sofa in my sitting room."

"If it wouldn't be any trouble, Professor, I'd like that very much." Briefly, Hermione swayed on her feet.

Ingrained habit propelled McGonagall forward before she aborted the gesture; however, her tone changed as she asked, "Is that *blood*?"

"Where?" Hermione quickly scanned the common room. Someone had attempted to create order from chaos: One sofa had been shredded by an unnamed jinx, and the cozy corner in which Harry, Hermione, and Ron had spent many of their happiest hours as students was a pile of splintered wood and battle debris.

"On you, Miss Hermione." McGonagall huffed. "Your robes are simply saturated."

"Oh!" Hermione turned startled eyes toward her own clothing. Her robes were in sorry shape, testament to the near-misses and direct impacts suffered since her hastily applied Cleaning Charm in the Shrieking Shack, the right sleeve saturated with dried blood.

For a wonder, Hermione was whole and reasonably unimpaired.

It was that precise moment when her body let her know in full measure that it hurt everywhere, and she blinked to clear her suddenly blurry vision. It wasn't the same as an all-encompassing Cruciatus; nonetheless, Hermione practically staggered as a wave of pain settled heavily upon her. With one hand on the back of the only undamaged chair in the room, she steadied herself. "I think I'm alright, Professor."

"Yes, well, you are standing. There may be no room in the hospital wing, but you should see Madam Pomfrey nonetheless."

Dirt-encrusted fingers flew to Hermione's mouth as hours' old memories bludgered their way to the forefront of her thoughts and she recalled dragging the matron to the Shrieking Shack in an attempt to save Snape's life.

"Madam Pomfrey's here?" Hermione's voice grew shrill as question after question poured forth. "Isn't she at St. Mungo's? Why isn't she at St. Mungo's? What's happened? Why isn't she with..."

Movement in her peripheral vision reminded her they weren't alone and she abruptly stopped speaking. She turned her head, slipping one hand into her pocket and wrapping it around her new and unfamiliar wand as her eyes met the avid interest of a blue-eyed Hit Wizard across the room.

McGonagall said, "Madam Pomfrey's needed here."

Hermione bit her lip against blurting out the truth, and when the putative headmistress laid her hand comfortingly on Hermione's injured shoulder, Hermione flinched and gasped.

"Miss Granger! You *are* injured. Come with me."

The intense throbbing of her re-opened wound sped Hermione's footsteps in McGonagall's wake through the portrait hole and to the hospital wing. Avoiding the worst of the castle's damage, they took infrequently used halls.

Hermione stumbled a

"You should have been seen to hours ago," McGonagall said as Hermione stumbled, keeping pace. "Why didn't Molly..." The professor didn't complete her sentence; they both knew why Molly Weasley hadn't behaved like her usual, competent self.

The rest of the short trip was made in silence.

When they reached the infirmary, McGonagall turned to Hermione. "You know where my rooms are. I don't know when I'll return, but I've adjusted the security wards to recognize you."

"Thank you, Professor."

"Yes . . . well." The older woman brushed a stain from the sleeve of her teaching robes at some point after the battle, she'd changed from the tartan dressing gown she'd worn while fighting - then turned to meet the rapidly approaching mediwitch.

"Take care of her, Poppy," said as she departed; her attention already on the next most urgent task.

Madam Pomfrey swiftly led Hermione to an improvised examination room; the day before it had been a supply closet. The room's walls were lined with shelves, all of which bowed under the weight of medical supplies and linens.

Hermione slipped atop a transfigured bench, clenching her teeth against the sharp, throbbing in her shoulder. As if a dam had broken, the presence of all her other wounds flooded into her consciousness, until she was drowning in deferred agony.

She whimpered when Pomfrey sliced through her clothing.

"I need to expose the wound, Miss Granger."

"All right." Hermione was shocked by how thin and weak she sounded.

Penetrating blue eyes examined Hermione. "Perhaps I should have said wounds."

"I think so. I wasn't aware I didn't feel them ... before," Hermione explained.

"That's often the case in the heat of battle." He cast her severing charm on the major seams of Hermione's clothing. "There has been sufficient time for the material to have stuck to your skin in a number of places." She pinched her lips, and then said, "This is going to sting."

Hermione closed her eyes. "Can Is there a way to numb..."

"Not until I see what I'm dealing with."

Bracing herself, knuckles white from the strength of her grasp, Hermione said, "All right. I'm ready."

An unpleasant few minutes ensued.

When Pomfrey had finished, Hermione stood in a puddle of cloth the former bits and pieces of her clothing.

A number of wounds had been re-opened by its removal.

Hermione was entirely too tired to care that she was standing nude in front of the mediwitch, submitting to a thorough inspection with only a single whimper when Pomfrey debrided the edges of her shoulder injury.

Once the inspection was complete, Pomfrey levitated a tray to the heights of various shelves, collecting a number of bottles, salves, and other healing paraphernalia before the tray descended to hover at her elbow. With pursed lips, she applied Burn-Healing Paste to various scorched patches of Hermione's skin and one eyebrow, used a Suturing Charm on several Slicing Hex marks.

The mediwitch talked while she worked.

"You're too thin."

Hermione opened her mouth to defend herself and Fleur Weasley, who had done her best over the past several weeks to balance the depredations of the many preceding months.

Madam Pomfrey's pointed finger gave Hermione pause.

"Don't give me that look, Hermione Granger. I know you've been evading capture for months, and you've kept yourselves alive quite remarkably." Brushing a lock of hair off her forehead, Pomfrey plucked a small brown bottle from amongst its neighbors on the hovering tray. "But now it's time to look after your health."

She handed the small bottle to Hermione. "It's a nutritive supplement. I've already given one to Mr. Potter. I'll want you both to take another dose tomorrow. I have the recipe for the potion in my files if you'd like to brew it yourself. You're certainly qualified. I want you and Potter to take it weekly until you've returned to full vitality."

Obediently, Hermione swallowed all of the mint-flavored syrup, licked her lips to get every drop, then rolled the small vial between thumb and fingers. "I wish we'd had this last winter. I've never even seen a reference to a potion like this before."

"You wouldn't have, would you?" Pomfrey replied. "It's one of Severus' own devising. He's always been on the thin side; it's that nery constitution of his." She chuckled and shook her head. "He said he created it to avoid my mollicoddling."

She paused, her wand halting in mid-swish, a bandage froze in the act of folding itself into thirds. Pomfrey's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, I do hope he'll recover."

"Has something else happened? Is he--"Hermione's fingers dug into the smooth leather of the examination table.

"No! No." Pomfrey hastily reassured her. "He's alive. However, his injuries are quite serious and that bloody snake - pardon me - the venom will be difficult if not impossible to counteract."

While she bandaged Hermione's wounds, the mediwitch explained that Snape had been safely and surreptitiously taken to St. Mungo's where he was being carefully guarded. "Not by the Aurors, Hermione. My friend Brian is tending him. He's a superb Healer, and Severus is in excellent care. However, we can't keep his survival a secret for long, and he'll need more protection in the long run."

Despite the small, private room, Hermione cast *Muffliato*.

"Where did you learn that? Pomfrey's tone of voice demanded an immediate answer.

Casting another guideline across the gap between youth and maturity, Hermione confided, "We learned a number of spells from one of Professor Snape's books."

"He gave you one of his books?" Pomfrey's eyes widened considerably.

"Professor Slughorn gave it to Harry last year..."

Pomfrey nodded her head while rummaging in her basket for another bandage. "Then Dumbledore knew about it; undoubtedly he got it from Severus."

"I don't think *Professor Snape* knew about it until after Draco Malfoy" Hermione bit her lip, shifting uncomfortably on the thickly padded examination table while being careful not to flex her shoulder.

"When Potter hit Malfoy with that dreadful hex? Was that one of " Pomfrey nodded to herself. "It would have been. I remember Severus' school years quite clearly; I'd simply forgotten that particular spell."

"He's really brilliant," Hermione said, "and some of his spells have helped us enormously. I'll have to remember that when I talk to Harry and Kingsley Shacklebolt in the morning. I hope we can help the Professor. Harry, especially, will want him to be taken care of."

Pomfrey *tsked* her disbelief.

Hermione leaned forward, earnestly. "I know they've never liked each other, but Harry will do his best to protect him . . . and after today, I suspect he'll be able to make good on his word."

Hermione then winced as the mediwitch pressed the final, and largest, bandage against her shoulder blade, magically sealing it to her skin. "Don't make the mistake of thinking Potter's influence will have immediate results," Pomfrey warned.

The final battle may have been won, but it didn't mean there weren't those who might seize an opportunity to hurt her or her friends in the uncertain days ahead.

"No." Hermione acknowledged the warning. "Kingsley's influence should be enough. At least, in the beginning." Flexing and raising her left arm, she tested her range of motion, gritting her teeth as the shoulder felt as if it were on fire. "Thank you for your help, Madam Pomfrey."

Flicking her wand, the matron animated the pieces of Hermione's robes, and stitched them back in place. "I told you to call me Poppy. You're no longer a child and I think we can dispense with the formalities. Don't you?"

Hermione smiled. "I didn't want to presume, but . . . thanks, Poppy . . . for everything. You've done a remarkable job when I know you must be exhausted."

"Fortunately..." the older witch pulled a clear vial containing a fluorescent lilac liquid from her pocket, "...this has kept me on my toes. It's a short-term energizer, and no, I shan't give you any. What you need is rest. It's a wonder you're still on your feet."

Within moments, Hermione had been ushered from the examination room and turned in the direction of the faculty wing.

The teachers' living quarters were situated at the back of the castle, farthest from classrooms and communal areas of the school. As a result, the professor's rooms had escaped relatively unscathed from the insurgency.

However, to Hermione, each weary step caused her muscles to burn and her joints to ache.

Pausing at McGonagall's door, she glanced at the next door along the corridor. It led to the faculty bath. While turning in at her former Head of House's rooms was terribly tempting, there was no way Hermione was going to sleep with the stench of other people's blood clinging to her.

She shuddered.

No way at all.

The door was unlocked and Hermione slipped into the staff facilities quietly. Torches flared to life along one wall, illuminating the spacious room, reflecting off gilt-framed mirrors lining another.

Unsurprisingly, the room was empty.

Nevertheless, Hermione cast *Homenum revelido* confirm she was alone, then she secured a *Colloportus* around the entry.

Half the size of the Prefect's bath, this room was far more luxurious. A multi-colored variety of plush towels was stacked neatly atop a small chest near the capacious tub, and six vanities nestled between seven highboys lining one wall, four of each bore house insignia. Hermione presumed those were for the private use of the Heads of Houses. Unlike the Prefects bath, this one which could seat four or five people comfortably had a single faucet.

Hermione crossed to the recessed pool and tapped the faucet's downspout with her wand. The pipes coughed and spluttered, echoing in the otherwise silent room before water poured forth in a steaming cascade.

A soothing floral scent perfumed the air.

Hermione twisted her hair into an untidy knot atop her head, slipping her wand into the mess to hold it in place. The grimy shoes she'd worn for months went flying as she kicked them off before shucking her robes and stepping from the material as it fell into a pile atop the warmed stone floor.

Ruefully, she noted the numerous healing marks and bandages covering her skin, from bandaged right knee, to the bandage on her left elbow. The worst, of course, was her shoulder injury, but that she couldn't see without a mirror.

Hermione shrugged, aborting the gesture halfway.

It hurt too much.

Briefly, she reconsidered her choice to bathe.

The water was steaming and fragrant. She was two footsteps from submerged bliss, seconds from her first real bath in months.

She made her decision, and raised her left leg to tug her filthy sock from her foot.

A slender gleam of light drew her attention to her ankle.

A *smudge*, she thought, but it was too shiny.

Looking again, Hermione's stomach lurched and her heart raced as her exhausted adrenal glands managed a fresh influx of stimulant. Now that she was focusing her attention on it, she could *feel* the hum of magic emanating from the silver strand's location.

Frantically, Hermione grabbed for her wand the wand they'd captured from Bellatrix swirled it, and called out, *Lumos!*"

Even as bright light flared from the walnut tip, Hermione's hair tumbled into her face, and she pushed it from her eyes.

Dropping to her right knee, she lowered the wand toward the shiny strip of silvery blue which completely wrapped her left ankle as if it had been painted there.

Her weary mind flailed for an answer.

No Dark magic had registered during Pomfrey's diagnostic, nor could Hermione recall being hexed in the foot during the fighting.

Carefully, she cast two Dark Arts revealing spells Fleur Weasley had taught her during her recent stay at Shell Cottage.

The results were negative.

Hermione's relieved sigh was loud above the sounds of the magically filling bath.

She briefly considered and dismissed the idea of finding or waking McGonagall; Harry was asleep, Ron and the Weasleys had left, and anyone else Hermione might have adjudged trustworthy were either dead her mind wailed at the loss of Tonks and Remus or on the brink. Snape.

The thought of her former professor clued her in.

The shiny anklet was identical in color to the memories which had poured from him in the Shrieking Shack.

Could this be one of those memories? Might she have acquired it when Snape had first been wounded? Or even later, when she'd returned with Pomfrey to save him?

With minimal reluctance, Hermione touched her finger to the silvery substance.

It was slick and impenetrable. There was *no give*, no purchase for her to wedge a fingernail beneath, much less a wand.

If it was one of Snape's memories, then she hoped to return it. Until such time, she would be careful of the precious memory.

Unexpectedly, Hermione shivered; the room's chill reminding her of her naked state.

She would still bathe, but cautiously.

Hermione sat on the edge of the bath, hooking her left foot, ankle, and calf above the ledge, resting it on the stone lip of the pool. Then she lowered herself onto the second step.

She inhaled deeply, savoring the rosemary and white birch scented water, and after several minutes, tension released from long-abused muscles.

When she yawned so widely her jaw popped, Hermione proceeded to scrub herself clean with extra care to the area around the bandages at shoulder, wrist and knee. Before washing her memory-marked foot, she braced herself at an angle, and then scrubbed the unblemished skin.

When catastrophe struck, it was her hair's fault.

Tilting her head back to rinse the shampoo from her matted hair was a miscalculation. Exhaustion disoriented her and she tumbled into the deeper part of the pool.

Her ankle -- with its silvery blue attachment -- followed the course of Newton's Law and was immersed before Hermione could recover her balance.

"No!" Her chest heaved in a convulsive sob.

Snape's memory strand floated off her skin, thinning and spreading itself across the surface of the water as it turned the bath into an actualized Pensieve.

Before she recovered her bearings, Snape's memory filled her consciousness, embracing her in the totality of her immersion. She could no longer feel her real life surroundings, the warm water of the faculty bath, or the chilled skin of her drying shoulders.

In fact, she was no longer in the faculty bath.

Instead, she was in a circular room. One she recognized. She had been there earlier that day with Harry and Ron, when the portraits of past headmasters and headmistresses had congratulated Harry on his accomplishments.

Hermione ignored a momentary twinge of bitterness that her sacrifices and Ron's -- hadn't been mentioned at all. Also unmentioned were the many who had suffered for the cause, and to Hermione's mind, none as dearly as the man they had believed dead in the Shrieking Shack.

In this memory, however, Voldemort's appointed headmaster was seated at his desk, bent over a stack of paperwork. Lank hair framed his face, highlighting the sallowness of his skin and the prominence of his Romanesque nose.

"Snape!"

Hermione whirled, recognizing the voice.

Phineas Nigellus Black's sneering countenance slid into view, pushing Dilys Derwent from the center of her own portrait.

"I beg your pardon, Phineas," she said, affronted. "You could have asked for frame space."

"Bugger off, you silly cow! I have a report to make."

Huffing, the former headmistress slipped from her portrait.

When Black looked out at Snape, Hermione suddenly remembered her nudity. One arm flew across her breasts, the other acting the part of a fig leaf, her face heating with embarrassment. She glanced at Snape; he had set his quill down and was rising to his feet.

Hermione scrambled behind a guest chair as Snape walked past her he might not know she was there, but it was extremely disconcerting when he was close enough for his robes to brush her feet.

Naturally, he didn't register her presence at all, and the conversation regained her attention.

"Don't get your robes in a twist, Phineas. What is the nature of your report?"

Black sneered. "That stupid boy has left."

"Which one?" Snape demanded.

"Weasley."

"The wretch!" Snape scowled, pacing a circuit on the thick rug in front of his desk. "Potter needs him. What about --"

"The Mudblood?"

Several of the other portraits gasped in outrage, and Snape whirled to face Black, his eyes narrowed, flags of anger flying high on his cheekbones. "Do not use that word!"

"Still pining for your one true love?"

Faster than Hermione could track, Snape's wand was in his hand and pointing at the portrait. "If I didn't need your information, Phineas Black, you would be transfigured into a coat rack and placed in the Hufflepuff Quidditch shed . . . permanently."

The former Slytherin headmaster rolled his eyes. "Fine, fine. The girl is still there, but she's sobbing her heart out."

Snape traced his lips with his forefinger. "Yet another who plants their affections in fickle and undeserving fields."

"I didn't think you liked the Mu--- Miss Granger."

"Liking has nothing to do with recognizing that she is instrumental to Potter's survival." Snape resumed his pacing, the lines in his face as deep as if they had been chiseled into his skin.

Hermione stared at him, mouth agape.

Snape asked, "What of Potter? Is he, too, *sobbing his heart out*?"

"He hasn't said a word in hours. I think he's gone to sleep."

Suddenly the room began to blur and spin. Before Hermione panicked, it righted itself.

Once again, Hermione was in the headmaster's study. Only this time it was early morning and it was stormy outside. Lightning caused a strangely nightmarish strobe effect in the large room; otherwise, nothing appeared to have changed from the earlier memory.

Snape's head rested in his hands, elbows digging into stacks of parchment atop the desk.

After a moment, Hermione moved closer to him, slightly shocked by her own daring. It might only be a memory, but she was still naked and in a room with a grown man one who'd never been kind to her.

As she neared the desk, a house-elf popped into sight, weighed down by the tray he carried. Snape's head snapped up, and Hermione gasped.

He looked exhausted and ill.

"Oh, Professor," she murmured in dismay.

"Kreacher has brought Master Snape his breakfast."

Hermione spun to face the house-elf.

"I didn't ask for breakfast." Even Snape's voice that precise instrument of invective bore the results of his stress, breaking on the last word.

"No, sir didn't." Kreacher snapped his fingers and the parchments beneath Snape's elbows were whisked into a tidy pile at one corner of the desktop. "Master will need to be strong to face what is coming."

"What do you mean?" Snape asked sharply. "*What* is coming?"

Unaware of Snape's scrutiny, Kreacher replied with unaffected aplomb, "Harry Potter is coming, and Master Snape must be prepared."

"Where is he?" Snape demanded. "Where is Potter?"

Kreacher's shoulders bowed. "Kreacher knows not. Kreacher cannot find him. Harry Potter must summon Kreacher to his side."

"And are you for or against him, elf? As I recall, you were most recently fawning over Bellatrix Lestrange's feet."

Orb-like eyes fixed on the headmaster, and Hermione recognized a reproving glare when she saw it.

"Do not play games with me, wizard," Kreacher said. "We know where your loyalties lie."

The chair fell backwards with a crash as Snape leapt to his feet, wand raised aggressively. "Who is *we*?" Snape shouted. "And where *dgour* loyalties lie?"

The old house-elf straightened to his full diminutive height, his hands gnarled with age and long years of hard service clenched in tiny fists. "Kreacher stands with . . . with Harry Potter. Master Potter is helping Kreacher avenge Master Regulus."

Snape stared at the house-elf for several hard thumps of Hermione's heart.

"How utterly ironic," he said, at last, "but I believe you're telling the truth."

"Kreacher would not lie to Master Snape. Kreacher sees how carefully Master Snape walks his line. Kreacher learns from Master Snape."

Throwing back his head, Hogwarts' headmaster uttered a harsh bark of laughter, then flicked his wand to right his chair. His tone was sardonically amused when he spoke. "Put the tray here, Kreacher. It seems I have an appetite after all. Is there more you can tell me? When did you last see Potter? Was Granger with him?"

The old house-elf wrung his hands, saying dolefully, "Master Potter and his friends left the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black together. It is said in the kitchens they went to the Ministry of Magic."

"They were there." Snape's eyes glinted with malicious glee. "They wreak havoc wherever they go. It's a wonder they haven't been captured yet."

The house-elf bobbed his head. "Kreacher hasn't seen Master Harry or the others again, and I made such a lovely bit of steak and kidney pie, but" his eyes narrowed and the nervous wringing of his hands ceased "that nasty wizard, Yaxley, arrived and spoiled everything."

Snape nodded as if adding pieces to a half-worked puzzle. "Were they prepared?"

"Master Harry had his father's cloak, and the Mud- Muggle the girl had her bag never without that bag, she was."

"And Weasley?"

Kreacher scoffed, and then Snape asked, "Did Miss Granger take any books with her when they left?"

"Take? Was *she* stealing?"

Snape waved his hand dismissively, and muttered, "It had to have been her. Neither Potter nor Weasley would consider it."

Kreacher stood respectfully at attention, leaning slightly in the headmaster's direction as if to catch the merest pearl of wisdom dropping from his thin lips.

Snape added milk and sugar to his tea before taking a drink. When he finally set his teacup back in its saucer, he asked, "Did Miss Granger bring any books with her to Grimmauld Place?"

Kreacher snorted. "The girl was always reading one book or another. She spent most of her time in the library."

"A number of those books were mine," Snape said, quietly, thoughtfully. He reclined as far as the chair's tolerance would allow, steeping his hands with elbows resting on the leather arms. "Granger would've found several of them useful, and if she's taken them with her, I consider it a worthwhile loan."

He straightened, his black eyes alighting on the wizened house-elf. "Are you able to return to the house without being captured?"

A crafty expression brightened Kreacher's face. "Unless Master Harry forbids me, I can go anywhere."

"Excellent. I want you to see if Miss Granger took er, borrowed a certain book. Check the house for *Secrets of the Darkest Art*"

Kreacher instantly popped out of sight.

Snape speared a sausage, and the room blurred.

Hermione's thoughts were nearly as blurry as the surrounding environment.

Amidst the confused whirl, a glimmer of satisfaction radiated from a single thought. She had made the right choice in trying to save Snape.

When the Pensieve memory settled once again, Hermione stood in a large and comfortably furnished bedroom. Upon inspection, she realized it was Snape's and he was in bed.

Hermione's opinion of Snape had evolved over the years with each new and sometimes confusing revelation. Until earlier that day, she had never really considered him as a man. Yet, standing naked in his Pensieve memory, she was confronted with a new paradigm as she stared at the man leaning against his pillows with a book propped on his knees.

Snape was thin, and shiny black hair dusted across his pectorals, narrowing to a point at his abdomen. Hermione's fascination with slender trail of hair was abruptly interrupted as Phineas Black's voice called from the other room.

"Snape! Snape!"

Snape shouted, "In here."

"They've been taken!" Phineas Black slipped into the painting hanging across from Snape's bed, color leaching from the landscape to form his intrusive body and face. "

"What?"

"Potter and the others," Black said urgently, "they've been captured."

"What!" Snape sat bolt upright. "When? Who took them?"

"Greyback and his misbegotten gang of Snatchers."

Hastily, Snape leapt from the bed. "Shite!" he swore when his feet landed on the cold stone floor.

"I'm trapped in Granger's bag," Black said.

Snape sprinted to his armoire, the door opening to his need and a set of robes levitated toward him. He grabbed the fabric with one hand, prepared to drop the flannel Pyjama pants he wore with the other, and then he stopped mid-action.

Black said helpfully, "They're being taken to Malfoy Manor."

Snape swore more creatively than before. His shoulders slumped.

Hermione noticed his knuckles were bloodless against the black cloth his hands gripped.

"I can't leave the school," he said heavily, dropping his robes across the back of a tufted armchair. "Did Greyback get all of them, Black? Potter? Weasley? And ... and Granger?"

"Yes. All of them. But that little witch is a clever one. She hexed Potter before they were apprehended. He's presently unrecognizable."

"Bollocks! It's too soon." Snape commenced pacing an oval path on the rug at his bedside. "There's nothing I can do from here."

"I have no portrait at the manor," Black said, "but I might visit my niece in the morning room."

Snape raised his head to look at the portrait of his Slytherin predecessor. "Let me know what you learn."

Black disappeared from the landscape, but Snape continued to pace, his stride quick and ceaseless.

After a few minutes, Hermione was emboldened to slip closer to him. He was still considerably taller than she, but at close range, she noticed his hair was wet from a bath and his eyes glittered like black diamonds as he calculated the intelligence he'd been given. "Escalate the time table . . . Weasley'll be useless . . . loses his head when his emotions are involved . . . Granger . . . at least she's learned to think on her feet."

He whirled, reached for his robes once again, and grabbed his boots from the floor.

Pensieve mist whirled around Hermione, leaving her shivering in the now-cold bathwater.

Her eyes stared at the Hufflepuff armoire, glazed and unfocused.

Hermione's teeth began to chatter, and she scrubbed her face with her hands. She had no idea how to reattach the strand of Snape's memories, but couldn't remain in the tub indefinitely.

Cautiously, Hermione stepped from the water.

Luck was with her.

Like quicksilver coalescing, Snape's memories slicked across the surface of the tub encircling her left ankle as if it had never been dislodged.

Hermione sighed deeply with relief.

While dressing in a set of self-sizing, dark green robes she found in one of the unmarked highboys, Hermione considered the memory strand. Perhaps it had gravitated to her because of content; all the memories related to her in some way or another.

A smile curved her lips as she towel-dried her hair. Snape thought she had learned to think on her feet.

By the time she felt the tingle of McGonagall's security wards in recognition, Hermione was practically asleep on her feet. The previous forty-eight hours had exhausted her. When she closed her eyes, the only image she saw in her mind's eye was the naked torso of Severus Snape leaning against the headboard of his bed, reading a book.

~o0o~

A New Day

Chapter 3 of 6

Hermione finds solitude behind the great clock face, and Harry joins her.

Saving a Death Eater

By Bambu

Author's Notes: Standard disclaimers and thanks may be found in chapter one.

Chapter Three: A New Day

~o0o~

Pale pink fingers of light inched across Hogwarts' scarred grounds, tenderly assessing the earth's wounds and illuminating the jagged, gaping holes in the castle's stone edifice.

Standing upon a rubble-strewn floor behind the Main Tower's clock face, Hermione stared at the aftermath of Voldemort's cataclysmic demise. There were no more Healers on the grounds, only the red robes representing Aurors conducting their grisly duty.

Here and there lay dead trolls, their large bodies dwarfed by the bodies of equally dead giants dotting the landscape like misshapen carbuncles on a hag's feet.

Hermione had been standing there since the first pale striations of dawn streaked across the remarkably clear May sky. Awakened by nightmares, she'd known the futility of attempting to sleep again, and so had wiped the tears from her face and risen from McGonagall's sofa, quietly folding the bedding before creeping from her former professor's suite of rooms.

"Couldn't sleep?" Harry asked quietly, as if loath to startle her, but she had felt his *Muffliato* engage and known it for his -- just before he had spoken.

"Nightmares." She faced him, anxiously eyeing his pale and drawn face. "What about you? Did you sleep?"

"Not really. Too much on my mind."

As one, they glanced out the window, and listened to the inexorable tick of the huge clock.

Then Harry's dark head bowed and his glasses glinted briefly, obscuring his eyes. "I found myself wishing we still had the tent."

"Me, too."

Their tent had been abandoned the night they were captured and taken to Malfoy Manor.

She turned her hands over and spread her arms, indicating the room, the castle, the school. "I don't really know where to go after this."

"You'll always have a home with me," he said staunchly, coming to her side, and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with her. When he leaned against her she leaned back.

"Thanks." Hermione spoke around the tightness in her throat. "I feel the same way about you."

"We could go to Grimmauld Place."

"Grimmauld Place would be ideal, except we don't know who's been there or what they've left behind if anything."

"Yeah." Harry shrugged. "And I don't want to intrude on Ron's family. Not even Shell Cottage. It's just..."

"They need to be together now."

"Yeah," he said again.

"Harry, what about the Ministry? I know Kingsley's Minister *pro tem*, and we agreed to talk to him this morning, but" Suddenly she turned around, peering into the hazy room behind them as if looking for something or someone. "Where are your Hit Wizards?"

"I left them in the common room. I used my dad's cloak to slip past them." He grinned slyly.

Genuinely amused, she smiled. "It really is quite useful."

After a brief pause, he said quietly, "Somehow I knew you'd be here."

"I thought it would be private."

Incongruously, Harry's stomach growled at that moment and his cheeks flushed.

"Didn't you ever get a sandwich?"

"Loads of them," he said, "but despite Fleur's best efforts, we've a lot of meals to make up for."

Eyeing his gaunt face, Hermione nodded even as her own shrunken stomach griped about its empty state.

"Let's talk while we eat."

He nodded.

Then she said thoughtfully, "I don't think we should go to the Ministry at all, even if invited. What if Umbridge is still there?"

They both remembered the grisly souvenir embedded in the toad-faced witch's office door.

"Please, Hermione," Harry whinged, "I want to eat breakfast."

"Right. Sorry." She bit her lip for a minute. "Do you know if Kreacher made it?"

"I can't believe I forgot," he exclaimed. "*Kreacher!* Are you there, Kreacher?"

There was no response, and Harry skimmed his fingers through his hair in distress.

"Wait!" she exclaimed. "He can't hear you. Hold on." With a flick and swish of her reluctant wand, she dismantled Snape's anti-eavesdropping spell. "Try again."

"Kreacher!"

Pop!

"Yes, Master?" The old Black family retainer appeared immediately. A bandage was wrapped neatly around his head, covering the remains of one ear, and the rest of his limbs were a map of sticking plaster and bandages, but his smug expression made light of the injuries.

"I'm very glad to see you, Kreacher," Harry greeted him with a gust of a relieved sigh. "Are the others all right?"

Kreacher bowed his head in reverence. "Too many perished, young Master, too many."

Hermione's fingers flew to her mouth, reminded forcefully that she had just seen him the night before in Snape's memories. "I'm sorry for your losses, Kreacher, but it's so very good to see you."

Wide protruding eyes flicked in her direction, but the house-elf's new-found tolerance for her remained. "Miss is very kind."

Harry's stomach made a twisting, groaning sound again. "I hate to ask"

Kreacher's unblemished ear bobbed. "If I might suggest, you and the young miss should eat here."

Alarmed, Hermione asked, "Is there something wrong?"

"Reporters!" Kreacher fairly spat the word, and to Hermione's experienced ear it sounded suspiciously like the way he used to say Mudblood. "They're on the grounds."

"We'll definitely eat here then."

Kreacher bowed awkwardly. "I will return shortly."

Harry stopped him. "Thank you."

"No," the aged house-elf replied. "Thank you, Harry Potter."

And then he disappeared.

Suddenly, Hermione swayed on her feet before sinking to the floor. Her robes created some padding for her knees, especially the bandaged one, but dirt streaked the green skirts.

"Hermione!" Harry's voice rose in panic, and he leaped toward her, his hands gripping her shoulders.

"It's all right, Harry." She leaned into the strength of his hands. "Really. I'm still tired and quite hungry."

He scolded her. "Don't do that again!"

She giggled at the unexpected role-reversal and her fingers flew to her mouth. "Oh!"

Bottle green eyes narrowed. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Hermione giggled again and it turned to laughter, and then, suddenly, the glass wall between her intellect and her emotions shattered. Her laughter turned to deep, despairing sobs.

Harry dropped to his knees, wrapping her in a fierce hug.

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione wailed. "I'm sorry! It's just too... too..."

"Too much?" Harry's voice sounded strained.

The two friends knelt on the filthy, rubble-strewn floor, tightly embracing while grief, horror, and fear sliced into their hearts like so many metaphorical shards of glass.

Providentially, Kreacher returned the moment Hermione's sobs became hiccups. He was accompanied by two other house-elves, each as copiously bandaged as their vigilante leader, but their enthusiasm was unflagging.

In short order, the assistants had retrieved a table and two chairs from somewhere in the castle, set the table with linen and china, and placed a standard Hogwarts breakfast atop the unblemished white linen.

Eagerly looking for approval, the underlings bowed low waiting for Kreacher's nod. When he gave it they departed with *duapops*.

"Young Master's breakfast is served," Kreacher pronounced as if Harry wasn't huddled on the floor with a sniffing woman in his arms.

"Th-thank you," Hermione stuttered.

The old house-elf bowed low and abruptly disappeared.

Hermione wiped her face, leaving a streak of grime down one cheek. "Sorry."

Harry cleaned his glasses on the underside of his t-shirt. "S all right. I'm not so sure I didn't get your robes wet as well."

She drew in a ragged breath. "Yes, well . . . breakfast should help. And then we need to sort out what to do next."

Harry actually held her chair for her at the small table.

Hermione managed a weak smile as she took her seat.

With still trembling hands, she poured a splash of milk into one of the mugs of tea before scalding her mouth on the first drink. Yet, it was exactly what she needed.

Having regained his composure, Harry spooned sugar over his porridge and tucked into a hearty breakfast.

Hermione finished her tea before addressing her soft-boiled egg and cutting toast into soldiers for dipping.

They were too hungry to engage in conversation, but it was the most civilized breakfast they had eaten since Fleur made croissants and sausages at Shell Cottage a week before.

When Hermione swallowed the last of her toast, she felt equal to facing the day. It would be months before she would come to grips with all that had occurred, but the cathartic release before breakfast had eased her immediate distress.

And considering the sizeable breakfast her friend had put away, his equilibrium, too, had been re-gained.

Harry speared a piece of grilled chop, and returned to the topic of their earlier conversation. "I'm not sure we shouldn't stay in hiding."

"We could go somewhere we can't be traced."

"Grimmauld Place would have been perfect... I mean, I own it, but..."

"Too many people know where it is now. It might not be safe."

Harry swallowed his bite before speaking. "As I said earlier, I don't think Shell Cottage would be appropriate."

"And I'd feel like an intruder at the Burrow."

She remembered the last words Ron had stammered at her the day before. *It's a family thing. You understand* he had said, but his attention had been elsewhere, even then.

The trouble was she really did understand. It was the same issue that had been between them for a very long time. Ron's loyalties were divided; and when it came down to her or his family, his family always came first.

"Yeah. Me, too."

"No! Mr. and Mrs. Weasley think of you like a son." Hermione could see Harry's jaw tightening and his lips thinned into a pinched line. "Harry, what's happened?"

Harry grabbed a piece of toast from the rack and commenced crumbling it into a small, inert mound atop the remains of his meal. *It happened. Fred's dead. He's dead!*

Abruptly, Hermione rose from her chair and circled the small table, holding her hand out to him. Her throat was tight. "It is not your fault he died."

Harry's grip was hard and he sighed heavily. "Do you think they'll see it that way? Did you *see* them before they left? What about Mrs. Weasley? God, Hermione!"

Hermione crouched down, maintaining their eye contact and her grasp of his hand. "They're a very close family, and - I'm not sure I can give you advice here. I mean, look at me. I don't even know where my own parents are. I I don't even know how to find them."

"Aren't they in Australia?"

"That's where they went initially, but I have no idea where they've gone from there. I deliberately know nothing beyond their flight to Sydney."

He angled his head like a curious cat. "But why?"

"If I'd been subjected to Legilimency I might have revealed where Mum and Dad were," she said very quietly, but his hand tightened, grounding her. "It isn't that my parents were a high priority to the Death Eaters, but I wanted to keep them as safe as possible."

He said softly, "I would've done the same for my parents, even if it meant never seeing them again."

Her eyes clouded with tears and she blinked rapidly. "Thanks."

At that moment, a pale beam of sunlight shone through the numerals on the clock face, illuminating the pair of friends.

Hermione took a calming breath and changed the subject. "I think it's a mistake to come out of hiding if that odious woman is still running Muggle-born Registration, or even if it's still in effect. I mean, they could arrest me -- us! As far as we know, we're at the top of the Undesirable list, no matter what we you have accomplished here."

"I hadn't thought of that. What about Ron? Shouldn't we warn him?"

"I don't think he's on the list. Remember the Spattergoit?"

"But they knew it was Ron at the Malfoys."

"True, but there hasn't been any indication the list has changed since then."

Harry shrugged. "And we don't actually know, but I assume Mr. Weasley will take care of it." He rose to his feet, pulling her with him. "I definitely don't want to stay here. At least Rita Skeeter hasn't found us yet."

Hermione shuddered at the thought before brushing off her skirts.

Impatiently, Harry pulled his repaired wand and cast a cleaning charm on her robes.

She blushed sheepishly, then held up the curved, dark walnut wand she had used since they had broken into Gringotts. "It doesn't really like me. Remember what Mr. Ollivander said? I don't have its allegiance."

"At least he offered to make us all new wands for helping him escape."

Hermione shuddered at the memories of her time at Malfoy Manor, and sheathed Bellatrix Lestrange's wand in her sleeve before returning to the main topic. "We can send him an owl once we decide where we'll be."

"It'll be safer if we can't easily be found," Harry said.

"I quite agree." Hermione took her seat once more and poured another cup of tea. "It's all well and good to say the war is over, and I don't really know what's in our immediate future, Harry, but I have to stay here. At least for a little while."

Harry turned his chair and straddled the seat, resting his chin on the high ladder-back and facing his friend. "Why?"

"There's something you should know, but we have to keep it a secret until it's safe to tell." She bit her lip. Some part of her wanted to hold onto the memory of what had happened with Snape, as if it were too precious to share.

"What's going on, Hermione?"

"It's Professor Snape."

"Snape? Oh, Merlin! We have to retrieve his body. We can't just leave him in the Shrieking Shack."

As if intent and action were one, Harry sprang from the chair and strode toward the door.

"Harry, wait!"

Hermione, too, leaped from her chair, knocking it to the floor in an effort to reach him. She grabbed for his arm, but snagged his threadbare shirt, tearing the thin fabric, although neither noticed.

"I've already been there."

"You have?" Harry was clearly shocked. "When? Why didn't you tell me? Did Ron go with you?"

Hermione dropped her hand from his arm and tilted her chin. "No. Ron doesn't know. I couldn't bring myself to ask him to leave his family then. I asked ~~erm~~ prepare yourself.

Professor Snape isn't really dead."

"What!" The color drained from Harry's face. "But but ... all that blood. The memories. We saw him!"

"I know, but he isn't dead. I he Poppy Pomfrey came with me and she she's amazing, Harry. She saved his life." Hermione began to twist her fingers, her knuckles whitening with the force of her own grip. "I can't believe I've wasted all this time. I should've gone there straight away."

It was Harry's turn to keep Hermione from bolting from the room, and her robes swirled about her legs, brushing the tops of his holey trainers as he held her in place, turning her to face him. "Where? Where is Snape?"

"Professor Snape, Harry," she chided.

"Professor Snape," he replied reflexively before coming to the germane point again. "Where is he? I don't want him to suffer. You can't imagine what he's gone through or the risks he's taken."

"I can, actually."

"I want to see him."

Without conscious thought, Harry pulled Hermione toward the door.

"Wait a moment." She fluttered her free hand toward the rest of the castle. "I don't want to talk about this out there."

Harry halted but didn't release her arm, almost as if he were afraid she would leave him behind.

Hermione placed her hand over his, fingers releasing his grip, but she didn't let him go, instead she twined her fingers in his. "They took him to St. Mungo's late last night."

No!" he cried out. "They'll he'll be sent to Azkaban."

"He was in critical condition." Hermione turned to face him. "There was no other choice if he was to live. Poppy made the arrangements, and I trust her."

Harry grudgingly nodded. "I want to see that he's all right."

"Aside from you, he's the reason I stayed here last night. I promised to help him if he needed it."

"You? I mean, I know you're willing to help, but what can you do that the healers can't?"

Hermione blushed to the roots of her hair. "I . . . er . . . If necessary I could intercede on his behalf with the unicorns."

"You'd take their blood?" He was aghast and dropped her hand. "Hermione! You can't! Quirrell did that and..."

"No!" She pleaded for his understanding. "Don't you remember what we learned in Hagrid's class? When a unicorn offers part of itself willingly the results are essentially

polarized."

He stopped, his expression stern but receptive. "That doesn't explain why it has to be you."

Hermione flushed. "It's because I'm still a virgin," she whispered.

"Oh!" Cheeks flaring red, Harry avoided looking directly at her. "I see. Well." He cleared his throat. "Well. We should go to St. Mungo's then."

"Let's go to the hospital wing first. That way we can find out about Professor Snape, and I'd like Poppy to check you over anyway to make sure you're all right."

"She saw me last night and I'm fine." He shrugged, then glanced at her sharply. "Poppy?"

"She asked me to call her that. Yesterday, when we were in the Shrieking Shack."

"Oh. How? When?" Harry shook his head, running his fingers through his messy hair. "I don't even know what to ask."

"What if I tell you the details after we find out how Professor Snape is? But, Harry..." her eyes gleamed with unexpected humor, "...you should see Poppy fly! She's amazing on a broom."

Harry's eyes widened in surprise, but then he stepped past her and reached for the door knob. "You'll definitely have to tell me. Later, though. We still have to meet with Kingsley, and I don't plan to let them separate us either. I've learned my lesson about that."

Hermione would have cocked an eyebrow, but she didn't know how. Instead, she crossed her arms and glared. "Have you?"

Harry had the grace to look chagrined. "Mostly. What if I promise never to face another dark lord alone? Will that do?"

The lightness of the question didn't quite work, and Hermione shuddered in spite of their recent victory. "I fervently hope not."

"Sorry. It was my half-arsed attempt at gallows humor." He shrugged. "I don't think it's funny when you've actually been resurrected."

"No, I don't suppose it is." She managed a smile, relegating any gore-tainted memories to the back of her mind. "Are you ready to go now?"

Harry glanced around the room. "Yes. You know, we could ask Kreacher to bring Kingsley to meet us in the hospital wing. We should be safe there, don't you think?"

"As safe as anywhere in the castle. Let's decide after we learn about the professor. I think he should be our top priority."

"Definitely. First Snape, then Kingsley, and then we find somewhere to hole up. I think we should try your house first. It's been uninhabited for nearly a year. We can check whether it's livable, and if so, we'll put security spells up. We could use a *Fidelius*, but who would we use as a Secret Keeper?"

While Ron was the most obvious choice, neither Harry nor Hermione could forget that Ron had walked out the previous winter.

"We can decide later," she said, nodding as if to convince herself. "And once we know where we're going to be, we'll send a Patronus to Kingsley and one to Ron. If we can't use my house we'll stay at a Muggle hotel." She paused for a moment, retrieving her hand from Harry's. "I have some money at Lloyd's, but most of my savings were at Gringotts."

"By now they must know it was us who broke in, but we should be able to come to some agreement with them; after all, Neville did use the sword last night."

"True. Then we can't be accused of stealing it. But we did break in, and we took Hufflepuff's cup." She bit her lip.

"We'll sort it out. Let's go. The hospital wing isn't far from here. Remember third year?"

Hermione managed a reminiscent smile for the days when their disasters came in smaller, if no less life-threatening, moments. "It only takes about thirty seconds at a dead run."

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, but we don't know what's between here and there yet."

Unusual movement on the school's grounds drew Hermione's attention to the clock face and beyond. Pointing her finger, she asked, "How many reporters are out there?"

Harry passed her to look through the window, and the muscles of his jaw worked. "More than there were people defending the castle. I'm not talking to them."

"Certainly not today." Hermione came to stand beside him. "Think we can squeeze under your dad's cloak?"

"Great idea."

Before she could ask where it was, Harry pulled the filmy material from the back pocket of his jeans. Like a Muggle magician's trick, the more cloth that emerged the more there seemed to be until, with a flick of his wrist, the entire shimmering cloak hung in his hand.

"Sometimes," he said, grinning, "the simplest magic is the most -- er -- magical."

"True." Hermione took a last look outside, and turned her back on the increasingly crowded scene. She slanted her eyes at him. "*Expelliarmus*, Harry?"

His face colored and his hands wrapped in the invisibility cloak. "Well, I just couldn't"

"I know. I'm sorry I asked." She bit her lip, castigating herself for trying to make light of death.

"You don't think it was stupid?"

"No! I think it was very *you*." Hermione leaned up -- after all he wasn't much taller than she -- and kissed his cheek. "Besides, it means the Ministry can't arrest you for You-Know-Who's death."

"You can say his name, Hermione," he said exasperatedly. "It's "

"No!" She clapped her hand across his mouth. "No, Harry! We can't. Not yet."

"But he's dead!" Harry sputtered through her fingers.

Hermione dropped her hand, wiping it on her borrowed robes. "We still don't know how the charm worked, and it's possible the Ministry or any remaining Death Eaters could track us."

"Right. Good point." His expression was sheepish and he bowed his head. "I'm sorry about that night, you know. I've never told you how sorry."

She turned from him, facing the window beyond which reporters mingled with Magical Law Enforcement officers, angling for quotes, but Hermione's gaze was unfocused.

"It's all right."

"No, it's not." Harry tucked the end of his cloak into his pocket and started to pace, the shimmering fabric trailing through dust and rubble, causing an optical illusion as he walked. "I lost my temper, and I don't think I've ever been as scared as when that unholy bitch started to hurt you."

"I don't think I'll ever forget it," she replied quietly. "I was terrified."

Memories of that night bubbled to the surface of her thoughts, superseding more recent events, and Hermione instantly regretted eating a full meal.

She clutched her stomach and breathed through her mouth to quell her nausea.

"Hermione!" Harry was at her side, concern resonating in every syllable.

So intent on keeping her meal in place, Hermione hardly noticed him helping her to a chair, but she did know when he pushed her head between her legs.

Surprisingly, it helped, and the nausea receded.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Harry said, again and again, hovering by her side, anxious to help.

After a few minutes, she was capable of sitting upright and speaking. "It's not your fault."

"It was. And I should know better than to mention it."

"I understand, Harry. I do. I understood then as well."

Their eyes met, and they both remembered all the times over the years Hermione had cajoled Harry to share his feelings about some of the more horrendous experiences of his life.

"I imagine so," he said, and met her gaze directly. "But I want you to know that you were amazing that night. I think you saved my life."

Her voice quavered. "I was so afraid I'd tell her everything, Harry; it hurt so much."

"She was very good at it."

He rested his hand on her shoulder, and she leaned against his side, drawing comfort and strength from his support. They were quiet for a long moment, remembering, knowing the other empathized.

"Ron was beside himself." Harry spoke softly. "I've never seen him like that before."

Flinching as if alcohol had been poured into any of her wounds, Hermione said, "Let's not talk about Ron."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing really."

Harry snorted derisively. "C'mon, Hermione. Talk to me. You and Ron didn't have another row, did you?"

Hermione leaned away from him and squared her shoulders. She told herself it was past time to put away childish fancies. "As if I would row with him at a time like this. No, he should be with his family right now."

After a long beat during which Harry sought the answers to his questions by staring down into her determined, muddy brown eyes, the great clock struck seven and momentarily deafened them. They both jumped at the interruption.

Finally, he nodded, and said, "I think I understand."

"Yes, you probably do."

Harry stepped back, granting her the space she hadn't asked for. "Ginny wouldn't even say good-bye to me." There was a small tremor in his voice.

Hermione sniffled and blinked furiously, even though she managed not to cry. "Ron told me *his* family needed him."

Their eyes met again, and Harry leaned his upper body forward in a semblance of a courtly bow. "I see. His mistake."

Without another word, Hermione rose to her feet and the two friends hugged each other. Then Hermione shook her head, her newly washed hair tumbling wildly about her shoulders and tickling his nose.

When Harry spoke, she felt his voice rumble in his chest, and briefly thought about how thin he was, how thin they both were.

"I still wish there was something I could do to make you understand how sorry I am about being captured."

"Really?" she asked.

Harry pushed out of her embrace, his expression as open as the first time Hermione had ever laid eyes on him. His affirmative was fervent and hearty.

"There is something," Hermione said, hesitant, in this moment of sympathetic communion, to raise an unresolved issue between them.

"What? Anything!"

"Anything?"

"Hermione!"

She stared through the round frames of his lenses and deep into his eyes. Her heart raced in nervous anticipation. "Promise never to lie to me again."

Harry's mouth fell open. "What?"

"Don't ever lie to me again."

The Boy Who Lived Twice took a step back, almost tripping over the invisibility cloak dangling from his pocket. Instead of falling, the cloak slipped from its partial prison to pool at his feet, forgotten. "Wha--"

Hermione stepped forward, the tone of her voice ringing against the stone walls. "When Ron left us we were alone. Just you and I, with no one to rely on except each other. And you lied to me ... several times."

Harry backed up, stuttering, "I-I'm sorry."

Coming to a halt a scant meter before him, Hermione said softly, "I know you are. What hurt the most was that you didn't trust me."

"I do!" he protested.

She glared at him.

Harry stepped forward, his expression pained and his voice thick with suppressed emotion. "More than anyone else in my life."

The rigidity of her shoulders softened and Hermione's heart rate settled. "Don't do it again, Harry."

"Never," he vowed.

She bent to pick up the cloak and handed it to him. "All right."

Harry took the cloak, but caught her fingers in his, gripping tightly. "I promise, Hermione," he said forcefully.

She squeezed his hand in return. "I believe you."

Harry unfurled the Deathly Hallow which had been passed down through generations of unsuspecting Potters, and draped the cloak over Hermione and himself.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes and no," she replied, eliciting a harsh bark of laughter from him.

Together they walked away from the giant hands of the Hogwarts clock. Falling into step as if they'd practiced for months, as indeed they had, they opened the door to the third floor corridor leading to the hospital wing.

Harry cleared his throat and squeezed her hand. "Ready?"

"Yes," Hermione replied. "Let's go find out about our new world."

"And save Professor Snape."

~o0o~

Elevenes

Chapter 4 of 6

Hermione and Harry visit Snape at the Hippocratic Ward, meet with Shacklebolt and then become more involved in the Snape's recovery.

Saving a Death Eater

By Bambu

Author's Notes: Standard disclaimers and thanks may be found in chapter one, but I'd like to add my thanks to JRRT for the snappy chapter title.

~o0o~

Chapter Four: Elevenes

To Hermione's dismay, the hospital wing was a hive of industry.

With directed urgency, a number of unfamiliar green-robed Healers strode between the supply closet, Poppy Pomfrey's office, and their patients. Those most severely injured were hidden behind portable screens magically enchanted to minimize the risk of infection. There was a violet hue to some screens, identifying the most critical patients.

Harry grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her between two unoccupied beds.

As she followed his lead, she wrinkled her nose against the stringent scent of Cleaning Charms tainted by the odor of necrotic tissue. The sweetish stench was one she would never forget, and had she been able to identify it sooner, she and Harry would've kept clear of Bathilda Bagshot.

When they squeezed between one of the screened beds and the window behind it, Hermione whispered, "What are you doing? The office is across the room."

Pulling her close to the wide patch of stone wall between two windows, Harry pressed his mouth to her thick bushy hair to reply. "I've been in here often enough to know how to get around without drawing attention. All right?"

Hermione nodded, and they slipped past several healers and junior attendants like an insignificant draft of air.

The office door was open. Hogwarts' matron was seated behind her cluttered, time-scarred desk, jotting notes on a wide expanse of parchment.

Later, Harry would comment on the fact she color-coded her notes just like Hermione, but immediate concerns subdued the kernel of amusement the two friends would share.

At first glance, Poppy Pomfrey appeared the same practical mediwitch who had tended their wounds since they were children. Yet when she lifted her head, she looked as if every second of her life had etched itself into the lines of her face.

Hermione gasped at the change twenty-four hours had wrought.

She might be careworn and exhausted, but there was nothing wrong with Poppy's reflexes.

The instant she heard the gasp, her wand was in her hand and a nonverbal revealing spell hit Hermione and Harry before he pulled the Deathly Hallow from their heads.

"Bloody Merlin's testes!" Poppy exclaimed.

Hermione hastily shoved Harry inside the room and closed the door behind her.

"Don't ever, ever do that again, Potter!"

"Sorry, sorry!" Harry apologized, stumbling into the wood-slatted guest chair. "We didn't mean to scare you. We didn't want anyone to see us."

The matron picked up a small crimson vial from between stacks of parchment, and with sudden concern Hermione asked, "Shouldn't you be resting, Poppy?"

"Don't get cheeky with me, young woman. I know my tolerances well enough after all these years." She grimaced as she drank the sludge-like heart tonic Hermione had recognized.

"I doubt you've had to deal with quite the same stress-levels as this year and- and ..."

"You may be a bright witch, but my health is not a topic up for discussion." Absently, Poppy rubbed her neck with one hand, massaging the stiff muscles. "I assume you've come to inquire about Severus."

"Yes, but it's not the only reason we've come." Harry was distracted by Hermione transfiguring a chair from the empty wastebasket. When she sat, he returned his attention to the mediwitch. "We I would like to ask a favor."

Weary eyes betrayed her curiosity, and Poppy said dryly, "I imagine you will be able to ask any number of favors of any number of people, Mr. Potter."

Harry blushed a deep beetroot red, and it was his friend who answered in his stead.

"I don't know if you've seen the number of reporters on the school's grounds?" When the older witch stared at her with blank incomprehension, Hermione explained. "We'd like to avoid them, and we're supposed to meet Kingsley Shackbolt today."

Harry leaned forward, asking, "Is it possible to have that meeting here?"

"Here?" Poppy's eyes widened in surprise before her expression morphed into a frown. "There are gravely injured people here. This is not a place..." She looked from him to Hermione, and then to the closed door behind them. "I can see why you'd think it suitable. No one will question the minister's visit to the injured, and the reporters will respect his wishes. That's rather cunning of you, Potter."

His chuckle held no amusement. "I've had to learn."

"I imagine so." She opened the middle desk drawer and swept the empty vial into it before rising to her feet and smoothing reddened hands down her white pinafore. "Well? When will he be here?"

"We don't know." Harry shrugged. "We didn't want to assume it would be all right with you."

Poppy's hands halted mid-stroke. "Do you mean to tell me that no one knows where you are?"

"You do," Hermione said. "Besides, we wanted to learn about Professor Snape first. Is he- did he-?"

"Yes, he made it through the night." Poppy's fleeting smile was genuine and quickly replaced by a tightening of the muscles at the corner of her lips. "I won't bandy words with you, however; his condition is critical."

"Oh, no!" Hermione's fingers flew to her mouth.

"May I see him?" Harry asked, as if greatly daring. "Kingsley can wait, but I'd like need to see Professor Snape. I don't want to leave things the way ... you know, just in case."

Poppy came from behind her desk. "I can take you to see him, but I must have your wand oath first."

Harry tensed and rose to his feet. He looked to Hermione, sharing an entirely visual discussion with her.

She, too, rose to her feet.

Poppy watched and waited patiently.

Finally, Hermione turned toward the older woman who had crossed the line between authority figure and friend. "We'll only agree to a limited oath, Poppy. You can't expect"

"All I require is an oath of confidentiality." She nodded at Harry. "The healing profession has its own secrets."

The tension level in the office immediately eased.

Harry's eyes glittered behind his glasses. "I understand secrets. Probably better than most."

Raising his wand the one recently repaired by the Elder wand he had mastered he pointed it at his heart. "I, Harry James Potter, solemnly swear not to breach the confidentiality entrusted to me by Poppy Pomfrey and the Healers at St. Mungo's."

A flash of white sparks flew from the tip of the holly, circling mid-air before disappearing beneath his clothing and marking the skin surrounding his heart. To the unknowing eye, he would merely appear to have an odd placement of freckles.

Hermione repeated the procedure. Her face a study in concentration and will, she wielded the walnut wand, overcoming its unyielding nature. Turquoise sparks of energy burrowed into her chest. Her breath whistled painfully through stiff lips.

"Did it hurt?" Poppy stepped closer to the younger woman, eyes narrowing.

The tension was back in the room. Magic held in an expectant pause.

"Yes," Hermione replied through gritted teeth while massaging her scar.

Poppy drew her wand. "It shouldn't."

Harry stepped in front of his friend. "It's where she was hexed by Dolohov."

"That old wound?" Poppy sidestepped Harry to look at Hermione. "Why haven't you said anything?"

"Other than when I was cursed, it's never hurt like this." Hermione sighed with relief as the matron cast a soothing anodyne. "Thank you. I suppose I'll be very careful what oaths I make in the future."

"See that you are," Harry retorted. "Can we go now? I don't want to wait too long. Someone is sure to find us."

"Good point." Poppy flicked her wand at the office door, locking and warding it, and then she removed the caduceus pinned to the lapel of her robes before holding it out to the others. "It's a Portkey."

"Oh?" Harry asked.

"It's the only access. If you two hadn't taken the oath and didn't fit the criteria, we wouldn't be having this discussion."

Hermione angled her head. "Criteria?"

"There are stringent regulations regarding the Hippocratic Ward, which is where Severus is being cared for. Despite what the Ministry might decide, no one is refused care. Healers take Unbreakable Vows, and in the past there has been Ministry interference. We've learned from our mistakes," she said, grimly triumphant.

Harry nodded his approval. "Good."

"Mr. Potter?"

"I know about Ministry interference. And... do you think you could call me Harry? You call her..." he pointed at Hermione, "...by her name."

"I'll see what I can do ... Harry." She rolled her eyes. "I suppose that means you should call me Poppy." She, too, pointed a finger at Hermione. "After all, that one does."

Hermione's smile was brief. "What criteria do Harry and I fulfill?"

Fingering the gold symbol of her profession, Poppy replied, "Neither of you want to see Severus incarcerated or prosecuted, and as he has no family...."

"Let's go," Harry said, stepping closer to the mediwitch.

"We should send a message to Kingsley." Hermione waved her acquired wand with a flourish, and conjured her Patronus. "Will an hour be sufficient?"

"I should think so. According to Brian, Severus hasn't regained consciousness again."

Hermione happy thought faltered at the news; her otter Patronus vanished in a faded hint of silvery mist.

She failed to produce her otter a second time.

Before Harry could call forth Prongs, Poppy called out, "Kreacher!"

Pop

"Yes, Madam?" the house-elf bowing deeply, only then did he notice the others. "Master Harry. Miss Hermione."

Poppy fiddled with the brooch in her fingers. "Kreacher, will you take a message to the minister for me?"

"With haste or leisure," the old retainer replied.

Hermione marveled at the changes in the Black family retainer.

Harry leaned toward Kreacher. "Will you ask him to meet me, privately, in Madam Pomfrey's office in an hour? Explain about the reporters."

"With haste then." Bandages tilted at that rakish angle, Kreacher sketched a bow and winked from sight.

"Can we go now?" Hermione asked anxiously. "I really want to see the Professor."

Harry smiled knowingly.

The expression irritated Hermione. "He's not a cause, Harry! He's you know what he's gone through. I want him to be all right. I want to save someone who deserves it!"

Harry wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "Sorry. I didn't mean to imply... I know you want him to be all right. So do I."

"Shall we go then?" Poppy asked, proffering her caduceus pin again.

When all three had all touched the precious metal, they were whisked into the void for a disorienting stretch of time, and then, like a top, they spun into the sterile reality of linoleum, green robes, and antiseptic surroundings.

For a brief, panic-stricken moment, Hermione thought they had been led into a trap. There were no windows and no doors to the chamber in which they landed. Its size rivaled the Great Hall at Hogwarts. Without question, she knew there was no way in or out without escort or by Portkey.

Poppy patted Hermione's arm. "It's a precautionary measure."

Hermione swallowed; her throat was dry. "It's disconcerting."

"No one is denied the right to leave. It would quite literally kill a Healer to keep someone here against their will."

Harry hadn't said a word, but his bottle green eyes were round and he gripped his holly wand tightly.

He and Hermione cautiously dropped their guards. Nether was completely at ease. Their years in the wizarding world had stolen that luxury.

In one corner of the expansive room, a small group of green-robed Healers congregated around one bed.

Poppy marched in that direction; Harry and Hermione followed so closely they almost stepped on the hem of her robes.

Like ever widening concentric circles, recognition rippled through the room as if Harry had been dropped into a pond like a pebble. The few patients who were awake looked in the direction of the boy savior and his companions.

Hermione said nothing, but she stepped closer to Harry both to lend and accept silent support.

They passed a gaggle of junior healers who said not a word, but whispers broke out as soon as they had passed.

Poppy spoke quietly. "I would chastise them, but there has been very little good news of late."

The cluster of Healers surrounding Snape's bed parted for the new arrivals.

An older, full-bearded man who physically reminded Hermione of the embodiment of Santa Claus greeted Hogwarts' mediwitch with easy familiarity.

"I expected you this morning, Poppy, but not your illustrious company. I recognize Mr. Potter and Miss Granger, of course, but I've never had the pleasure of an introduction."

"You and your formalities, Brian." Pomfrey huffed indulgently. "Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, may I present my friend and colleague, Brian Pauling?"

Hands were shaken all round, and introductions extended to the other Healers.

If given a test on the subject, Hermione wouldn't be able to name anyone other than Pauling; her attention kept straying to the critically wounded wizard whose pallor was as white as the sheets covering him.

Expecting thick bandages, she wasn't prepared for the sight of Snape's livid, damaged flesh from the gashes made by Nagini's fangs. Tiny plastic tubes drained fluid from the open wounds. The underlying muscles fought against the corrosive venom aided by repetitive Healing Spells. Absorbent pads floated above the wound site, magically wicking away any fluid leaking onto Snape's skin. When saturated, the pads disappeared, replaced by fresh gauze.

Swallowing hard and hoping her breakfast would remain in her stomach, Hermione assessed what she could see of the rest of the patient. Snape was gaunt and his muscles twitched intermittently. After a quick glance, Hermione stared at his face, settling on the full, sensual mouth which was normally pinched into a thin line of disapproval.

To see him like this, vulnerable and on the verge of death, hurt.

Ignoring the niceties of further introductions, Hermione stepped to the foot of Snape's hospital bed.

Behind her, Harry asked several questions about Snape's treatment and prognosis.

Hermione watched in fascinated horror as Snape reacted to the sound of his former student.

Each time Harry spoke, Snape shifted. A grimace pulled at his mouth, and his wounds oozed, gauze pads fluttering like butterflies over carrion.

When Harry asked a particularly lengthy question, Hermione slipped to the long side of Snape's bed to soothe him, just as she had in the Shrieking Shack. "Shhh, shhhh. It's all right, Professor."

The unconscious man stilled at the sound of her voice.

When Harry replied to Healer Pauling's comment, Snape wrestled with his sheet.

Hermione's hand hovered above the thin fingers plucking at the white fabric. "You might not know this, but Harry won. He's safe."

Again, Snape stilled at the sound of her voice.

"What's happening?" Harry asked at her side, his voice unintentionally loud.

It drew the biggest reaction from Snape yet. He tangled in the sheets and began to thrash, a keening whine rising from his mouth.

Brian Pauling drew his wand, but Hermione's reaction was more effective.

"Shut up, Harry!" she snapped. Then, in an entirely different tone of voice, she crooned to the unconscious man. "Hush, Professor. You're safe. You're in hospital, but it's a secure ward."

The thrashing and keening stopped, and once again, Snape oriented on her voice.

"It's Hermione Granger, sir." She pressed her advantage and laid her hand upon his, feeling tension and fear expressed through the taut energy focused there. At her touch, his hand went limp. "We'll take care of you," she whispered. "You succeeded, sir. You've saved the world."

From the other side of the bed, Poppy avoided the complicated charms work on Snape's throat, and cast a charm which refreshed his linens. "You're safe, little man. I'll see to it, and Miss Granger ... Hermione, will intervene on your behalf with the unicorns."

Hermione shot the older woman a questioning look, but said staunchly, "I'll do whatever I can to help you, Professor ... Severus."

Snape angled his head, as much as possible, in Hermione's direction.

Unseen by the objects of their thoughts, Poppy shared a significant glance with Pauling. Her expression turned thoughtful as her eyes darted between Snape and Hermione, Hermione and Harry, and Snape and Harry.

Standing at Hermione's side, Harry practically vibrated with his need to participate.

She used two fingers to clamp his lips shut the moment he opened his mouth. Never taking her eyes off Snape, she spoke in hushed tones. "Don't speak, Harry. It makes him uncomfortable."

"I... sorry," Harry mumbled through her fingers.

She pinched harder. He grunted in pain but she felt his head nod.

Neither noticed the amused glances the others exchanged.

Hermione leaned close to Snape's ear. "I *will* help you, sir. In the meantime, please just rest and let the Healers take care of you."

Snape settled into a more restful sleep.

With a small, satisfied smile, Hermione patted his hand gently before turning to face a host of interested observers. Pauling grinned at her, then gestured for her and Harry to follow him. As one, the four moved beyond Snape's hearing.

"Well, young lady, you seem to have a salubrious effect on our patient. You may return. However, Mr. Potter, here, seems to have quite the opposite result."

"I know. I know." Harry's expression turned glum. "He hates me."

"No, Harry." Poppy stepped beside the young man she had cared for like few others; the man in the hospital bed being one of the select few. "Severus doesn't hate you."

You represent his perceived failures, and until he's awake enough to realize that he's succeeded beyond his expectations, his subconscious concerns will rule him."

"What can we do?" Hermione looked at Snape and then turned toward the mediwitch.

It was Brian Pauling who answered. "If the current course of treatment doesn't prove efficacious, we will have little choice but to accept your offer to intercede with the unicorns. The next few hours are critical."

Hermione's cheeks, flushed at Poppy's first mention of the unicorns, flamed afresh. "I can't be the only..."

"Your virginity isn't the issue," he said. "You are the only one with a personal relationship with the victim."

Harry gawked at Hermione.

Her eyes were wide and shocked. "P-p-personal relationship? I we he was my teacher!"

"You were instrumental in saving his life, and instrumental in Mr. Potter's success." Pauling rolled his hand in Snape's direction. "As his reactions attest, he trusts you enough to calm at your presence, and you *care*, Miss Granger. You care whether he lives or dies."

"Of course I care!"

The healer spoke gently. "There are very few who do."

Hermione bit her lip and tilted her chin. "Just let me know what you need."

Harry stood at her back. "Me, too. I'll even keep my mouth shut around Snape."

"Excellent. I'll contact you either way."

Healer Pauling finally acknowledged the presence of one of the junior healers who had been impatiently waiting. "Yes, Nightingale? What is it?"

He accepted a scroll from the young woman, whose birdlike mannerisms suited her perfectly. Then he nodded at Harry and Hermione, shared a brief silent exchange with Poppy and walked away with Healer Nightingale.

After a quick look in the patient's direction, Poppy extended her hand with the caduceus. It took only a touch of the brooch to return the three to her office.

No one had missed them.

While awaiting the arrival of the interim Minister, Poppy ordered refreshments.

Within moments, the two house-elves who had assisted Kreator with Harry and Hermione's breakfast arrived with tea and biscuits.

The three newly bonded friends drank their tea and nibbled on a variety of freshly baked delicacies, passing the time discussing the Chudley Cannons. Poppy was an avid fan. When she raised the hem of her robes to reveal a pair of bright orange stockings, Harry laughed heartily.

Hermione's shoulders relaxed at the sound.

Ten minutes later, a small bell high levitated off its shelf and began to chime. Poppy took a last sip of tea and set the cup back on its saucer. "I must apprise Minerva of our patients' progress. I expect I'll see you when I return."

Their chorus of, "Yes, Poppy," drew a laugh from her, and she ruffled Harry's hair as she departed.

Hermione nabbed a shortbread biscuit from those remaining. Harry poured himself another cup of tea.

Exactly on time, Kingsley Shacklebolt arrived in the hospital wing. He strode through the double doors with four Aurors, and Harry's chastened Hit Wizards at his heels. Attired in formal robes, intricately embroidered hem gathering dirt from the stone floor, the minister for Magic *pro tem* slowed his pace when he caught sight of his quarry.

The older Hit Wizard in his retinue glared at Harry.

"Why aren't you at the Burrow with Molly and Arthur?" Kingsley demanded, pausing at the foot of an unoccupied bed.

His paternalistic attitude irritated Hermione; she tapped her foot. "We thought it more appropriate to allow their family to grieve in private."

Taken aback by the tone and content of her statement, Kingsley's mouth dropped open.

Harry stood at her back. "I'm sure they're relieved of the burden."

Hermione glanced over her shoulder at him in surprise.

He continued to speak. "Mr. and Mrs. Weasley have been awfully kind to me, and I know they would let me..." he waved his hand to indicate his best friend "...and Hermione stay with them. But they've done enough, don't you think?"

"That's quite decent of you." Shrewd brown eyes assessed the young heroes; neither quailed under the former Auror's inspection. "I'll make arrangements for a safe house." He turned to speak with one of his entourage, a fey witch with golden hair.

Hermione felt Harry's annoyance; she could practically feel the magic exuding from his pores. "Thanks, but Harry and I already have plans."

Kingsley paused in mid-sentence, his attention refocusing on Hermione. "And what would those be?"

"I'm not sure it's safe to discuss," she said, offending every law enforcement official in the room, but caring little about it. She'd seen far too much in the past six years to worry about who she offended when Harry's and her safety was at stake.

The minister *pro tem* was not the least offended. His eyes sparkled with irritation. "I don't like your insinuation, Hermione."

"And I..."

Harry interrupted her heated rebuttal. "We're going to Australia!"

"What?" Kingsley asked, startled.

"That's right." Hermione recovered quickly. "We're going to Australia as soon as we can make the arrangements."

"You're leaving the country?" The minister's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Of the two, Harry was the more accomplished liar, and he merely shaded the truth. "We're going to see Hermione's parents."

"I was under the impression they lived in Bristol."

"They went to Australia last summer. It was important they stay safe." Hermione bit her lip on any further explanation. It had always been a failing of hers telling everything she knew about a subject.

"And how long do you plan to be there?"

Harry brushed imaginary lint off the sleeve of his robe. "We haven't decided yet."

"I see." Kingsley clearly understood all the implications of what had not been verbalized. "There are some details to work out before you would be free to leave the country." Before either of the young people took offense, he explained, "Your testimony is necessary for the Death Eater trials, and there are certain legalities which need to be addressed."

Hermione and Harry exchanged a glance, remembering their breakfast conversation, and Harry straightened from his lazy stance while Hermione stepped away from him slightly.

Recognizing the potential for violence, Aurors and Hit Wizards instantly deployed themselves around the room. The fey blonde fairly oozed behind a privacy screen.

"Is there some reason to think we might be detained?" Hermione tracked the Aurors' movements as she spoke, her hand gripping her wand, but her arm remained at her side.

"Not after today."

"Why today?" Harry asked bluntly.

"I rescinded the Muggle-born Registration Act this morning. Dolores Umbridge awaits her trial for crimes against humanity. She sits in Azkaban prison, in one of its newly emptied cells."

Hermione had no sympathy for the vicious and bigoted witch. "I hope she's been arrested for murder."

Kingsley's smile resembled a successful predator. "There are more than four hundred twenty individual counts of murder and a further five thousand, six hundred counts of unlawful imprisonment. Some members of the Wizengamot want to charge her with inciting genocide."

"It couldn't happen to a nicer person," Harry said, clenching his fist, a white scar reading *lies* barely perceptible against his pale skin.

"Yes, well ... the Wizengamot held an emergency session last night. We were lucky to reach a full quorum after the Veritaserum testing." The big man chuckled mirthlessly. "It seems we are in search of a score of trustworthy leaders of society to sit in judgment of their peers."

"You used Veritaserum on the Wizengamot?" Hermione asked in astonished admiration.

His bald pate shone as he grinned. "And every senior official in the Ministry of Magic. My team..." he waved his hand indicating the magical law enforcement personnel, "...was quite busy last night. In future, I would appreciate it if you would tell them where you're going, Harry."

Sunlight reflected off Harry's glasses and the expression in his eyes was impossible to see. "I do not appreciate being treated like a prisoner!"

Hermione put a hand on his arm, and he snapped his mouth shut. "What he means *Minister*, is that we've some experience at keeping ourselves safe."

The minister snorted in genuine amusement, his earlier foreboding expression gone. "Demonstrably."

"Thank you," Hermione replied. "While we appreciate your position, and are grateful for your care, we prefer to be responsible for our own safety."

Kingsley stepped toward Hermione, and the hem of his Ministerial robes swept the floor. He was no longer amused. "My team has been carefully chosen."

"In the past..." Hermione started to say.

Harry bluntly cut across her more diplomatic tone. "My experience with the Ministry hasn't been all that good ... nor with past Ministers."

Kingsley Shacklebolt stared at Harry for a long, considering moment, and then he turned that sharp-eyed look on Hermione. Neither one quailed under his assessment.

The muscles of his jaw flexed and bunched. He nodded curtly and crossed to his entourage. The golden-haired Auror stepped from behind the privacy screen sliding her wand into a quick-release holster up her arm.

"You can wait in the hall."

Grudgingly, the team complied with their minister's order, but the senior Hit Wizard leveled a lethal glare at Harry and Hermione before he passed through the hospital wing's doors.

Once they were gone, Kingsley gestured toward Poppy Pomfrey's office and followed Hermione and Harry through the door. "I'll concede your point, Harry," he said as the door closed behind him. "But you must see my side the Ministry's side. Things are unsettled at present."

Hermione snorted at his gross understatement and then blushed. Harry laughed aloud.

"All right..." Shacklebolt flicked his wand in a familiar, yet surprising motion, and cast a silent *Muffliato* before he continued to speak, "...it's a bloody mess. Everything is pear-shaped. The economy's in the toilet. Almost four thousand Muggle-born wizards and witches are homeless and their assets have been frozen or absorbed into the ministry's coffers not to mention the thousands of galleons which somehow found their way into Umbridge's and her cronies' personal vaults."

"I'd say that was shocking, except it isn't." Harry ran his fingers through his hair.

Hermione settled herself in the chair she had so recently vacated. "Umbridge is a horrid woman. It doesn't surprise me that she was stealing on top of what she did to all those people."

Harry gestured to Kingsley to take Poppy's solid desk chair. As he sat, the former Auror said, "I wish I could say we'd found a Dark Mark on her arm."

"She's finally proved the adage about giving someone enough rope," Hermione mused, and then her eyes widened as she heard what she had said. "Sorry. I don't mean to imply that what she did to people's lives I didn't mean to be so offhand about it."

"It's all right, Hermione," Harry said. "We understand what you meant."

Kingsley sighed heavily, and braced his ankles on the edge of Pomfrey's desk. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. It was easy to see the bluish circles of exhaustion beneath his eyes. "In a nutshell, Pius Thickenesse was a puppet minister, and his regime was an accounting nightmare for the goblins."

"I can imagine." Hermione poured herself another cup of tea for Kingsley. When he nodded, a clean cup and saucer appeared on the serving tray. Hermione smiled and poured.

Adding three sugars to his otherwise plain Earl Grey, Kingsley said, "Which is quite fortunate for you."

"How so?" Harry asked, before grabbing two of his favorite biscuits from the magically refilled platter. He popped one into his mouth.

"It means I was able to talk them down from their decision to arrest you, Hermione, and Ron Weasley as bank robbers." He held up a hand. "Regardless of your reasons, you three broke into Gringotts and stole from one of their high security vaults. The fact that you could do so has created consumer confidence issues more damaging than those of six years ago."

Hermione and Harry exchanged a significant glance, remembering Harry's comments at breakfast and Professor Quirrell's unsuccessful attempt to steal Flame's Philosopher's Stone their first year.

Never slow on the uptake but nevertheless startled by the friends' silent communication, Shackbolt straightened and blurted, "You were children! You couldn't have been involved with that robbery attempt!"

Hermione answered his implicit demand for information. "Of course we weren't involved. However, we know who was and what they were after."

"Who? What? Why do... How do you know this?"

Harry chuckled at the minister's spluttered questions. "Now the participants are all dead, including Professor Dumbledore..."

"Dumbledore!"

Hermione giggled. "No, it wasn't Professor Dumbledore, but the contents of the vault were his, and we..." she gave Harry an affectionate smile, "...Ron, Harry, and I, stumbled onto the mystery in our first year."

"Professor Quirrell was the failed thief." Harry supplied the answer to Shackbolt's first question.

"Quirrell? Quirinus Quirrell?"

Hermione nodded. "He was attempting to steal Nicolas Flame's Philosopher's Stone."

"Surely Dumbledore told you this?" Harry asked.

"No," Shackbolt replied, his eyes narrowed. "No, he did not. Albus kept his machinations carefully concealed. I knew Quirrell had met an untimely demise, but nothing about ... this."

Hermione sent Harry a sympathetic look as he shifted uncomfortably. He said, "I'd rather not discuss it if it's all the same to you."

Smoothing her robes with nervous fingers, Hermione introduced a new topic. "What are the goblins going to do about us?"

Suddenly the prospect of life in Azkaban for cause rather than as an accident of birth as Umbridge had intended seemed quite plausible, and Hermione swallowed hard.

"It isn't as if we could explain at the time," Harry said, "and we'll pay for any damages we caused."

"I know you will." Kingsley's approval was easily read on his expressive face. "In fact, based on that premise I began quiet, preliminary negotiations with Tightfist two weeks ago."

"Tightfist?"

"A member of the governing council of goblins, and coincidentally, a senior director at Gringotts. You are aware a number of Gringotts' goblins were killed that day."

Hastily, Hermione set her teacup down; it rattled in the saucer. "No!"

"We didn't..." Harry's posture stiffened.

"We know. It happened after your escape." Kingsley looked at Harry and then Hermione. "We've come up with a workable solution, provided you agree."

"It depends on the terms." Hermione said before Harry committed them to an untenable course of action.

"In my capacity as Minister for Magic, I have already granted the three of you immunity from any crimes you might have committed as a necessity to overthrow Voldemort." Kingsley leaned back in the chair. "However, before I introduce the Letters of Amnesty to the Wizengamot, I want you to tell me why you broke into the bank."

Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance, and he said, "It started with the sword."

"Gryffindor's sword?"

"Yes." Harry leaned forward. "You see the one in the Lestrangle vault was a fake."

Hermione nodded. "Professor Snape had the real sword. He and Professor Dumbledore kept it hidden until Professor Snape delivered it to us after Christmas."

Kingsley leapt to his feet, the heavy oak chair falling to the floor with a crash. "Snape? Severus Snape gave you Godric Gryffindor's sword?"

Harry stared at the shocked man, and shook his head. "I told everyone he was on our side all along."

"I know what you said, Harry. I was there; I just didn't really believe it." Kingsley pinched the bridge of his nose.

"What?"

"Why not?" Hermione blurted.

"I thought it was a battle tactic. Something you said to distract your opponent."

Noticing Kingsley didn't say Voldemort's name, and mindful of her earlier conversation with Harry, Hermione glanced at her friend pointedly.

He nodded. He, too, had noticed the minister's omission.

A throat being cleared reminded them of his presence.

Hermione shifted in her chair, but realized there was good humor lurking in his dark brown eyes.

Harry resumed his explanation. "Snape was working for Albus Dumbledore all along. And when he killed Dumbledore who is quite happy where he is, by the way it was both an act of mercy and performed under duress."

"This is all well and good. Wait. Dumbledore is happy? How do..." Kingsley shook his head, "...never mind. While I'm pleased to know Snape wasn't a traitor, he's not the topic at hand."

He began tracing the well-worn grooves in the desktop with a fingernail. "Gryffindor's sword is back where it belongs even if its ownership remains in dispute. However, according to Tightfist, another valuable was removed from the Lestrange vault, but no actual money. Coupled with your innocence in the goblin deaths, the fact you didn't take any gold is what allowed me to negotiate terms in your favor. It leant credibility to my claims that if you hadn't been forced by the exigencies of your quest one which has benefitted the entire wizarding world to break into the vault, you would never have done so."

"And has the benefit of being true. We would never" Hermione said forcefully. "It was awful."

"I can imagine. Now tell me about the item you removed."

Hermione and Harry were silent for several very long beats, during which Hermione listened to the pounding of her heart while she weighed the pros and cons of revealing the existence of the Horcruxes. Ultimately, she decided the minister had shown remarkably good faith in negotiating with the goblins and arranging amnesty for her, Harry and Ron.

"I think he should know, Hermione. We've lived too long with too many secrets."

"I had reached the same conclusion," she replied. "It's your story to tell, Harry."

"It's *our* story to tell," he said staunchly.

She smiled. "Mine's only a small part."

He snorted. "Yeah, the part where you kept my sorry arse alive and in one piece!"

The smile dropped from her face as if it had been hit by a Killing Curse, and her voice was very, very small when she spoke. "Except yesterday."

Harry took her hand and squeezed it tightly. "It was two days ago now, and I promised not to do it again, didn't I?"

"I'll hold you to that promise, Harry James Potter!"

Kingsley cleared his throat. "I don't mean to interrupt, but ... I do mean to interrupt. What are you talking about?"

Harry leaned forward in his chair. "What do you know about Horcruxes?"

"Fuck me!"

It was the most Kingsley said for the following hour as Harry retold the salient points of his own quest, with frequent edifications from Hermione. The former Auror listened intently, occasionally rubbing his palm across his head, fingers scrubbing non-existent hair.

Fortunately for him, Poppy Pomfrey returned to the hospital wing as Harry finished his summation, and her proximity triggered the charms on the closed door.

Hermione scrambled to her feet to let the matron into her own office, and she conjured a chair for the older witch. "Thank you, Hermione, but I'll stand."

"We won't be able to keep the rest a secret," Harry said. "We'll need Kingsley's help."

That roused the man from his reverie, and he rose to his feet. "There's more?"

"It isn't our story to tell," Hermione said.

Both she and Harry glanced at the matron, and another silent conversation ensued while Kingsley's patience thinned to nonexistence. "Just what sort of secret are you keeping, and Poppy..." he was building to a very real anger when Poppy nodded.

Hermione blurted out, "Professor Snape survived."

"What?" Kingsley glared at Poppy Pomfrey.

"Don't give me that look," she said, her voice crisp. "You would have done the same."

After a tense moment he grudgingly replied, "Perhaps."

"Severus' condition is critical."

Kingsley swore. "Damn! Granting amnesty to three young heroes was as easy as a Summoning Charm compared to the dilemma Snape's continued existence poses."

Harry stood up. "He deserves it just as much, or more."

"The details can be discussed at a later time." Poppy stepped to Hermione. "For now, I need Hermione."

"Of course." Hermione rose to her feet.

Shacklebolt gestured for Harry to sit back down. "That's quite all right. Harry can answer my questions."

"No, actually I can't." Harry met the older man's look with an equanimity unseen in teenagers. "I made a promise to Hermione."

The minister and the mediwitch reacted to that statement in different ways. Poppy frowned.

"I beg your pardon," Kingsley said. "I hadn't realized you were a couple."

"And you still haven't!" Hermione retorted.

Harry laughed, real amusement behind his guffaws. "You've been . . . reading . . . too much Rita Skeeter, Kingsley."

"We've never been a couple." Hermione grinned at her friend.

"And while we're not a couple..." Harry took his stand next to Hermione, "...we are a team. And if she needs to do something to save Snape's life, then I go with her."

With a smirk, Poppy said, "Unless you're a virgin as well you won't be able to go with her."

Harry's answering blush eliminated the necessity of his answering the question, but Kingsley's rebuke filled the embarrassed silence. "Poppy!"

"There's no time to be prudish, Kingsley. I need Hermione's intercession with the unicorns."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "No one else would offer?"

"You know security around him is very tight, and of the ... eleven ... who know about him, only you pardon, Harry only you two are qualified to approach the herd. And only you, Hermione, will be able to ask a boon."

"Has something changed in the last hour?" Hermione's fingers plucked at the skirt of her robes.

"The treatment they instituted failed about ten minutes ago."

Kingsley swore.

"Let's go." Harry reached for the door, Hermione at his side.

"Healer..." Poppy clamped her lips over Pauling's name, "...my friend has begun to brew the potion, but they need an entire horn if they are to save Severus."

Harry said, "I remember where the unicorns are. It should only take half hour at the most."

"There are no more unicorns in the Forbidden Forest."

"Poppy?" Two voices said her name with identical intonations of shock and query.

"There there was a thriving herd," Hermione stammered.

"V-V er ... the Dark Lord apparently thought they were a delicacy, and the Carrows hunted with impunity. I've rarely seen Severus so upset as when those wretches brought in the stallion. Severus was hung over for two days; he claimed he had been celebrating."

"But if the herd is gone, what will we do?" Hermione practically wailed, and then abruptly shut up as she realized just how vested she was in keeping Snape alive.

"There are other herds in Britain." The minister pursed his lips. "Unfortunately, it will take time to find them. I'll get someone here from the Beings and Beasts Division. How soon does Pauling need the horn?"

The color drained from Poppy's face. "H-how did you know?"

Kingsley laid a hand on her shoulder. "Pauling spoke to me last night about a new patient who might require additional security. I had no idea it was Snape."

The mediwitch finally answered his question, but there was a tremor in her voice. "He needs it urgently, but don't worry. There's a herd in the New Forest."

"Isn't the New Forest near Wiltshire?" Hermione asked, her tone a little shrill.

Harry explained, "The Malfoys live in Wiltshire, and they didn't invite us for tea last time we were there."

Pomfrey's mouth set in a grim line, and she said, "If you were held under the Cruciatus curse for any length of time, it would explain the reaction you had earlier. It isn't related to your scar at all."

Hermione shrugged the question off. "Please tell us about the unicorns. How will we find them? The New Forest is a popular Muggle destination."

"Every time he was summoned, Severus took a detour. He placed Security Spells around the New Forest herd. I believe he managed to negotiate with the herd stallion, *before* he was gored."

"Gored?" Hermione frowned. "Does that mean he was or wasn't a..."

Pomfrey waved her hand dismissively, dismissing the question of Snape's purity. "The stallion was testing his merit, and the wound was cauterized before Severus left. Each time Severus was summoned he added a layer of security to the herd's territory."

"Then how do we find it?" Harry asked.

"I have a map and the Secret Code." She looked at Harry obliquely. "I imagine you'll know what the code word is, Potter."

He murmured, "Lily."

She inclined her head. "There's no time to dally. You'll need a Portkey to the glade." She pointed a finger. "You, Kingsley, make me a Portkey."

Meekly, the Minister for Magic said, "Yes, Poppy," before his natural commanding tone reasserted itself. "However, I insist that my Aurors accompany them."

"Unless they're virgins they'll be killed outright, and it could hurt Hermione's chances of convincing the herd to sacrifice one of its number to save a human's life."

Kingsley pursed his lips. "Good point."

Exasperated, Hermione said, "Harry and I can take care of this. We're quite familiar with forests."

Harry snickered quietly at her side. "Yes, we can recognize twenty-two varieties of edible mushrooms."

Despite her anxiety, Hermione managed a dry reply. "And I don't plan to eat another one ever again."

"Maybe in a couple of decades."

"Maybe," she rejoined, and opened the door. "But we're wasting time. The sooner we go, the sooner we'll be back."

"You'll come directly back here?"

Hermione tilted her chin at the paternalistic tone. Before she could say a word, however, Harry spoke. "We aren't children."

Kingsley snapped his mouth shut, but then said, "You are a living symbol of our deliverance."

"We can discuss symbols, living or otherwise, later," Poppy put her hands on Harry and Hermione's shoulders, and guided them toward the front of the hospital wing.

By the time they reached the Entrance to the school, after detouring around three shattered staircases and numerous piles of debris, some of which had already been shifted out of the middle of the hallway, the minister stationed Harry's Hit Wizards in the Entrance Hall and created a two-way Portkey.

"Good luck," he said, and then dangled a tidbit in front of them. "When you return, I should fill you in on your two-year internship at Gringotts."

"What?!"

"Two years from the date of the receipt of your NEWT results, you'll work for Tightfist at Gringotts as recompense."

"After we return from seeing my parents," Hermione said, unwilling to compromise even if it meant a stint in Azkaban.

Kingsley bowed his head. "I can make that adjustment."

"Good." Harry nodded in agreement.

"Let's go." Hermione shoved the Portkey, an old-fashioned man's handkerchief, into Harry's hands.

They were spun out of sight in an instant.

~o0o~

A Harsh Light

Chapter 5 of 6

Harry and Hermione encounter unicorns, and then work with Pomfrey and Pauling to save Snape's life.

Saving a Death Eater

By Bambu

Author's Notes and Disclaimer: Standard disclaimers and thanks may be found in chapter one.

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Chapter Five: A Harsh Light

Proving that competence had a great deal to do with a smooth landing, neither Harry nor Hermione were jostled in the slightest when they arrived in a sun-dappled glade in the midst of the New Forest. The whisper of Harry's mother's name faded in the quiet morning. And yet, hard-learned lessons were not easily ignored, and the two friends immediately stood back-to-back to survey their surroundings, their wands held loosely in their hands. Not as a threat, but neutrally defensive.

"For a forest, it's not bad," Harry said, eliciting a nervous giggle from Hermione.

"True," she agreed, looking at the enclosing trees, some of which were as old and gnarled as any she'd ever seen. "And listen to that."

He cocked his head. "What?"

"Birds. I can hear birds chirping."

"There are birds in the Forbidden Forest and in the Forest of Dean."

"I've never heard birdsong in the Forbidden Forest, Harry, and I was far too busy fishing or scrounging for edible fungi ... or just plain afraid ... to notice during our camping trip."

"It's not like the Forbidden Forest though, is it?"

"No," she said, relieved. "It isn't. It's well ... friendlier." She took a few steps toward the corpse of a fallen tree, one sheared off at head-height by lightning, and as if to negate her comment, a trumpeting scream rent the air, stilling the cheerful birdsong. Hermione spun, wildly, looking for the attacker, her wand pointed in the direction of the threat, but she checked her movement when the largest stallion she'd ever seen dropped stiff-legged from his rampant challenge.

The unicorn pranced into the glade, nostrils flaring as if in anger, but in reality *scenting* the invaders to his domain. His coat was not the pure white Hermione expected. Indeed, shimmering hints of a rainbow gleamed in the lustrous coat, a trick; perhaps, of the differential refraction of light waves, or perhaps, a representation of the inherent magic in this most magical of all creatures. The stallion's hooves were a darker ivory and his eyes were the palest blue she had ever seen. For a fleeting second, she noted they were the exact same shade of Draco Malfoy's eyes, but then she forgot about her childhood nemesis as the stallion lowered his silver horn at Harry's midsection.

"No!" Hermione screamed, racing to stand between Harry and the unicorn. "Please. We've come to you for help. Professor Snape has been badly injured, and he might die without it."

The stallion snorted and pranced forward. Hermione trembled violently and gripped her wand tighter so as not to drop it from her suddenly sweaty hand. Although the danger was real, Hermione still noted the spiral horn wasn't properly silver; instead, it held the luster of mother-of-pearl.

At her back, Harry's inarticulate fear and anger bubbled from his mouth in an odd sort of gargle, but other than standing so rigidly Hermione could feel the inner strength it took to keep him still, he did nothing. The stallion stood firm, his eyes staring deeply into hers.

"Please," she whispered. "Please help."

The stallion lowered its magnificent head until his horn pointed directly center circle of the wand vow she had taken so recently. Hermione trembled but held her ground. And then, ever so slightly, the stallion *leaned* forward.

The second the nacreous horn touched her, Hermione screamed. It was as if she were lying at Bellatrix Lestrange's feet again, being cursed and kicked and carved once more. It was as if Antonin Dolohov had risen from the grave to cast his silent, lethal, purple-tinged hex in her direction.

It was too much.

Hermione's knees buckled and she sank to her knees; Harry's panicked shout so indistinct she couldn't understand him. And yet, as if she had been Legilimized by Dumbledore, Voldemort, or Snape, himself, memories of the past year flashed through her mind in a crisp timeline progression that would have taken days for her to organize. Her last cognizant image was of Severus Snape lying in his hospital bed, her own desperate, pleading voice looping around her plundered memories in an endless refrain: *Please, please help.*

Then darkness swooped to claim Hermione.

Harry's frantic voice roused her, and she opened her eyes to an occluded sky, thunder clouds jostling one another, ready to throw down into an all-out brawl. Hermione blinked, trying to remember what had happened. Her mind was tender, the result of an alien magical presence she instantly identified as the stallion's. When she sat up, Hermione closed her eyes until her dizziness and nausea passed.

Then she looked for the stallion, but he was gone. The full encounter tantalized the periphery of her mind, shimmering like jewels cast upon a sunny meadow, each waiting to be discovered and treasured.

For the moment, however, she took in her surroundings, absently noting the lack of birdsong as she saw the mare lying within arm's reach. Hermione whispered the name, "Amandaria," that knowledge a gift of the stallion's mental invasion. The bump where Amandaria's horn had been detached no longer gleamed with magic, but was instead lackluster grey against her snow-white coat. The dainty creature was dead.

Tears welling in her eyes, Hermione leaned toward the unicorn, but at that moment she realized Harry knelt on the far side of the mare. He held Amandaria's softly gleaming horn in one hand, and his other hand pressed against his side, blood trickling from between his fingers, saturating his shirt, staining his jeans, and nourishing the glade's loamy floor.

Surreal fantasy shattered in the face of a more urgent reality.

"Harry!" Hermione scrambled to his side. "My god, Harry!" She raised her wand to heal him, but he shouted, "No! Hermione, you can't!"

"What? Why ever not?"

"We need it. We need my blood for the potion to cure Snape. The stallion explained. While you were ... er ... out."

"Explained?" She shook her head, as if to shake a memory loose. The truth of what Harry said sparkled at the edge of her consciousness. "What happened? Tell me what happened."

He grimaced. "Can it wait 'til we get back? Bleeding here!"

"Sorry! Where's the Portkey?"

"I used it." His cheeks flushed pink, and he wiggled his elbow, drawing her attention to his wound, and the Portkey handkerchief he used as a rough sort of bandage.

"Oh, god! How long have I been out?"

"Long enough for me to feel a bit light-headed. Can we talk after they take my blood and we give them the unicorn horn?"

"Of course it'll wait. Have you kept pressure on the wound? Have you..." She pressed her hand against his fist, touching the bloody handkerchief, and listening to Harry grunt in pain. "Sorry," she wailed even as they were whisked from the glade.

They landed awkwardly in in Hogwarts' great entry. Pomfrey cried out in dismay and Shacklebolt's easy smile of triumph faded as he saw the blood seeping from beneath Harry's and Hermione's hands.

"Let's go!" the Minister shouted. At his shout, his dedicated team of Aurors and Hit Wizards converged upon them. "Poppy!"

"You aren't coming." Pomfrey's eyes narrowed, and she waved her hands at the Aurors. "Neither are they."

"Nonsense," Shacklebolt replied forcefully.

"You know the rules, Kingsley. You can't come, and they..." she pointed accusingly in the direction of a Hit Wizard "...certainly shall not."

Shacklebolt's face darkened with anger, but Hermione interrupted the argument, snarling. "Harry's bleeding! I don't care who comes or not, but stop rowing, please, and let's go!" By this time, she had one arm wrapped around her best friend, and he had begun to lean heavily against her, his jaw clenched against the pain.

The reminder of Harry's state quashed Shacklebolt's anger in less than a second. Pomfrey said nothing, her mouth pinched tight, but she removed her brooch from her lapel and offered it to Hermione and Harry. Hermione placed Harry's shaking hand on the pin, holding it in place so they both touched the delicately worked metal. Then Pomfrey snapped out, "Potter must be seen to immediately."

"I'm coming with you," Kingsley said, his chin jutting forward pugnaciously. "I fit the bloody criteria, Poppy. Severus has been a friend of mine for twenty years." His glance fixed his fey-faced Auror as if he'd cast a stunning spell, and he barked an order. "I will return as soon as it's feasible. No one is to know what has happened."

He reached for the Portkey.

When the four landed in the private ward, Brian Pauling and a team of healers awaited them. Within moments, Harry was laid out on the bed nearest Snape, and a mediwizard used a carefully applied Surgical Hex to cut away Harry's saturated shirt before debriding his wound. The others scurried about their tasks with quiet efficiency, and Brian Pauling joined Kingsley Shacklebolt next to Snape's bed to have a quiet discussion before the interim Minister departed.

Hermione stared at the jagged hole in Harry's abdomen and her mental landscape shifted. Suddenly transported to the final battle, she stared at a fallen Death Eater. She had never seen the result of an Entrail Expelling curse until that moment. The man could have been anyone she might pass on the street -- middle-aged, slightly balding -- but he wore Death Eater robes, and his silver mask had been pushed off his head as he desperately pressed his intestines back into his gaping abdomen. He had died shortly thereafter, and Hermione had been carried past him by the inexorable tide of fighting.

In the private ward of St. Mungo's, Hermione wrung her hands, hovering at the foot of Harry's bed.

The St. Mungo's staff, intent upon their tasks, treated her as if she was a piece of the furniture, but Poppy Pomfrey draped a blanket about her shoulders and handed her a small glass filled with deep green liquid. "For shock," she said quietly before returning to Brian Pauling's side.

Forming the base of a U between Harry's and Snape's beds was a stone slab worktable. Freshly brewed Blood Replenishing Potion simmered gently in a number seven cauldron, its fumes rising in lazy swirls in spite of the surrounding activity. Adjacent to the simmering potion, a very small silver cauldron sat upon an unlit burner. Arrayed in orderly fashion along the table-front were a series of potions ingredients.

While Hermione drank the Calming Draught, she mentally catalogued the ingredients she recognized: pomegranate seeds, some form of powdered horn (which she would later learn was rhinoceros), goldenseal, and nettle as well as willow bark, but her eyes were drawn to the unique goblet from which Snape would drink the hopefully life-

saving potion. It was a hollowed-out unicorn horn, its pearlescent sheen gleaming in the brightly torchlit room.

As Pauling and Pomfrey worked with swift efficiency, Hermione's adrenaline-flushed anxiety succumbed to the soporific effects of the Calming Draught. She stopped shaking, and then she removed the blanket, draping it over the foot of Harry's bedframe. She kept watch over him, noticing that his eyes were closed while the healer worked to repair the damage the unicorn stallion had caused. Periodically, her eyes darted to the adjacent bed, to Severus Snape's pale, unconscious face. His wounds hadn't noticeably improved, and he was frequently restless, his limbs twitching as muscles spasmed against the incursion of Nagini's venom. His expression was a rictus of pain so intense it penetrated his subconscious, and Hermione's heart ached as she watched.

Occasionally, she observed Pauling as he prepared and tested the bloodied unicorn horn Harry had shoved in his hands. He brushed his graying hair off his forehead with restless fingers and his mouth was held in a tight, concentrated line. While Hermione watched, he poured a flagon of water into the silver cauldron before levitating the unicorn horn into it. Within seconds, the water was boiling furiously, and he nodded his head in satisfaction.

Fascinated, Hermione watched as Pauling removed the horn from the boiling water with a pair of silver tongs. All of Harry's blood had been removed from the softly gleaming horn. Pauling picked up a silver tool which, to Hermione's Muggle-born eyes, resembled the micro-grater her mum used to shave parmesan cheese, but this one was smaller. While holding the horn with the tongs, he grated the blunt end of the sacrificial horn until a small pile of shavings heaped into a glass bowl. Then with a flick of his wand, Pauling cast *Incendio!* and the shavings caught fire.

Expecting the disgusting odor of burned bone, Hermione was extremely surprised to smell a sweetish, not unpleasant smell. When Healer Pauling nodded his head again, she bit her tongue against the numerous questions clamoring to be asked. For now, she marked Pauling's movements, even as she moved to the foot of Snape's bed and laid one calming hand on a restless foot struggling beneath the covers. Snape calmed under her touch.

For his final test, Pauling took the horn and traced a small circle on the stone slab. Hermione remembered Ron saying something once about unicorns and spiders and how he wished he'd had a unicorn horn to draw a circle about his bed so spiders couldn't get to him at night. Thus, she half-expected it when Pauling placed a spider in the middle of the circle he had traced. The eight-legged creature skittered across the worktop, but it recoiled from the invisible boundary as if repelled. Again and again it tried to escape; again and again it was rebuffed. Pauling finally took pity and scooped the spider back into a narrow test tube. He handed the tube to one of his assistants.

Hermione was a little irked that he hadn't taken hers and Harry's words for the authenticity of the horn, but approved of his caution. He was, after all, attempting to save Snape's life, and if it took an additional ten minutes, then it was worth it if Pauling was confident of his results. Hermione had learned enough about magic to understand that assurance mattered.

While he began to macerate the herbs in the horn-boiled water, Pauling picked up a pestle to mash the pomegranate seeds, and Hermione became aware that Pomfrey was at her elbow. The mediwitch's fingers neatly and accurately wrapped around Hermione's wrist, feeling for a pulse. "Good," she said. "Potter's had his Blood Replenishing Potion and his wound has been sealed. Now, let's see to you." She led a reluctant Hermione to the bed adjacent to Snape's.

"I'm all right," Hermione protested.

"Let me be the judge of that, please. Harry has paid the stallion's price, but we need to know what price he extracted from you."

Large brown eyes turned toward the older witch. "Price?"

Wand quivering in her hands, Pomfrey replied, "There is a price to pay for everything, my dear. Here..." she gestured the bed, "...hop up here, Hermione, and remove your robes."

Hermione paused in the act of getting on the bed, balancing awkwardly on one leg. "Sorry?"

"I need to see where the stallion touched you."

"But " She hopped all the way onto the bed.

Pomfrey stepped closer. "Did you expect the unicorns to offer the life of one of their members without equal recompense?"

"Yes. Or no. I'm not really sure; I imagined goring Harry was more than enough."

"That was the price *he* paid."

Unaccountably wrong-footed, Hermione defended herself. "I've never read about this before."

The older woman flushed. "Nor would you have had the opportunity. Those sorts of books aren't kept in the library not even the restricted section. Too many romantic idealists would misunderstand. Before Dumbledore took the post as Headmaster, the unicorns negotiated a compromise with Armando Dippet. The Care of Magical Creatures curriculum was altered and several books on the subject were removed from the library entirely."

"Really? Why?" Hermione's curiosity was piqued anew.

"Let us just see what has happened, shall we?" Pomfrey ignored Hermione's questions and secured privacy screens around them. "Disrobe please."

As soon as she unbuttoned her borrowed robes, Hermione gasped. She stared at her chest with shocked fascination. No longer did she sport a reddish seam of scar-tissue bisecting her torso. The scar from Dolohov's curse had subsided into a flat, thin, line of opalescent silver.

So bemused was she that she paid little attention to Pomfrey's examination, but after a time, the woman's murmuring and the removal of the thick bandage on her wounded shoulder blade broke through Hermione's pre-occupation. "Well?" she asked.

"Very well indeed." Pomfrey smiled as she fingered the fully healed wound site.

Hermione twisted her neck, trying to see behind her. "What does that mean?"

"I'll tell you bluntly. You've been blessed. The stallion has claimed you."

"Claimed me?" Hermione's voice shrilled on the first word.

Pomfrey gestured toward Hermione's chest. "This is very rare. To my knowledge this hasn't happened more than twice in my lifetime, but the stallion has accepted you as one of the herd."

"He has? Really?" Hermione stared at the other woman, but then recovered her wits. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"If you are ever in trouble, real trouble, you only need touch your scar and call for help to be instantly transported into the middle of the herd. They will protect you as one of their own."

Hermione fingered the flat silver scar. "But why?"

"I cannot say." Pomfrey performed a Freshening Charm on Hermione's robes before handing them to her. "The stallion obviously found you worthy."

"But you said there would be a price?" She stepped into the robes, slipping her arms into the long sleeves. "All that happened was the stallion touched me with his horn and Legilimized me."

"That's not quite all." Heightened color stained the matron's cheeks. "There is some foundation to the stories of virgins and unicorns."

"What do you mean?"

"Great Florence Nightingale! You're not usually this dense, Miss Granger. Use your head."

Bristling, Hermione replied, "Our Care of Magical Creatures text seemed to have skipped this part, and as none of the other reference books in the library contained any reference to this sort of circumstance, you unjustly accuse me!"

Tucking her wand into the narrow sleeve sewn into her robes, Pomfrey braced her hands on her hips. "You're no longer a virgin," she said baldly.

Hermione's jaw dropped.

"The stallion took your hymen as recompense, claiming you in the process."

"Oh ... my ... god." Hermione gasped for air and frantically tried to remember everything and anything from her encounter with the impressive stallion.

Pomfrey sighed. "My apologies, Hermione. I tend to forget you're Muggle-born. There was nothing prurient about the procedure. The process is painless and magical, and the only reason there are jokes about stallions and their horns is that they must be touching you with it in order to alter your body in any way."

"Oh. I see," Hermione said faintly. "That explains it."

"Not entirely." Waving her wand, Pomfrey remade the rumpled bed. "I have a book in my office which will help you understand more fully. You've been offered a unique honor. You're bound to the herd for life and I trust you will be responsible about it."

"Of course I will." Fastening the last of her buttons, Hermione asked, "What will I have to do?"

"The book can explain far better than I. I haven't read it since I was in advanced training, and I don't like to misinform you."

"All right. Does this mean Harry's been marked by the herd as well?"

"It's possible, although his exchange will have been a bit more direct. He may not have any lifelong obligations as you were the one to ask for the herd's sacrifice."

"What about Professor Snape?" Hermione asked, leaning to the side, peering around the nearest screen to look at the man in question.

"Severus' life, too, is bound to the " Pomfrey broke off mid-sentence, her face a study of intense concentration.

"Are you all right?" Hermione laid a hand on the elder witch's arm.

The matron shook her head. "Sorry. Just a stray thought about the stallion's obligations to his herd. Did you say you and Potter weren't a couple earlier?"

"Yes." Hermione frowned at the non-sequitur. "We're not a couple. He and Ginny Weasley might reach an understanding at some point though."

"Good. Good." Pomfrey nodded her head, as if agreeing with herself, and then said briskly, "We're finished here. Shall we see how Brian is progressing?"

"Yes!" Hermione helped banish the screens, and returned to her position at the foot of Harry's bed. He lay flat on his back, a thick dressing wrapped from waist to jutting hipbones, but his eyes followed her movements as best they could from his position.

"Come on up," he said, patting the mattress. "I can't do anything for at least an hour, so you'll have to tell me what's happening."

Carefully Hermione perched on his bed, finding space next to his knees, and for the next fifteen minutes, she related what Pomfrey had told her about the unicorns while keeping a running commentary of Pauling's progress. "And now he's added your blood to the potion for Professor Snape."

"He explained while Madam Pomfrey was with you. My blood will purify any it comes in contact with, and by adding it to the potion for Snape, it will cleanse his blood."

"Then why did they need me at all?"

Pauling replied when Harry had no answer. "You were the emissary, Miss Granger, and yours was the willing sacrifice. In offering yourself to the stallion, you essentially exchanged your life for the mare's. The herd has not grown weaker as a result of her loss, but has been balanced by the addition of yours. We might have purified the patient's blood with Mr. Potter's donation, but without the sacrificial horn we couldn't have made the Healing Potion, which I assure you will be necessary to seal Snape's neck wounds. That sacrifice occurred because you bonded to the herd."

It was too much and too little information to satisfy Hermione, and she planned to borrow that book from Pomfrey at the earliest possible opportunity, and then visit Flourish and Blotts for good measure.

"I'm sorry, but I don't quite understand why there's a problem?" Harry awkwardly turned on his side to better see the Healer. "Mr. Weasley was bitten by the same snake and I know it took some time to heal, but he did heal."

Pauling glanced at Snape. "It's different this time. The snake was ovulating."

"What?" Harry asked.

"It was fertile?" Hermione's voice rose in alarm. At the sound, Snape flinched in his bed, and she immediately slipped off Harry's bed and crossed to Snape. She touched the pale skin of his hand. "Sorry, sir -- Severus. Everything's all right. Healer Pauling is making a potion to heal you. You will be fine."

Once again, Snape stilled under her gentle touch, and keeping her hand in place, Hermione turned her head toward the Healer, expecting further elaboration. His keen eyes were fixed on the sight of Hermione's hand lying atop Snape's, but Hermione refused to be intimidated by it.

At the other side of the workbench, Pomfrey had ceased her efforts. "Pregnancy hormones?" she asked.

Pauling nodded. "Yes, Poppy. In sufficient quantity to inhibit the wound's sealing."

Pomfrey shook her head, her expression even grimmer than before. "Will it work?"

"I beg your pardon," Hermione interjected, "but will you please explain to those of us who don't understand?" She noticed Harry's lips twitch at the tone of her voice; he knew just how much she hated to be ignorant.

"My apologies, Miss Granger," Healer Pauling replied. "The snake, as you said, was fertile, and had it survived, would most likely have laid an egg or two sometime in the next few days."

Although unconscious, that information quite clearly made an impression on Snape's brain as he shuddered ... in exactly the same way Harry did on the adjacent bed. Hermione smoothed her fingers across the back of Snape's hand as she considered the awful possibilities which had been averted by Neville's bravery.

"In any event," Pauling continued, most of his attention focused on the powdered nettles he added pinch by pinch to the simmering potion in its silver cauldron, "fertile females produce a specific hormone, glycoprotein the Muggles call it. In humans, it occurs during pregnancy and is excreted through urine it causes, among other things, a breakdown in connective tissue. In this case, it was delivered in the venom, and the wound cannot seal. The longer the hormone remains present in his body the more damage it will cause."

"I see. I assume the purifying aspects of the unicorn horn and Harry's blood will flush the hormone from the professor's body."

"That is my supposition."

"Supposition?" Harry asked quietly. "You haven't done this before?"

"It is a sound method, and it should work."

"But...?"

Pomfrey stepped next to Pauling, addressing Harry, "We believe it will work. If we didn't we wouldn't "

"Are there other options?" Hermione asked, her eyes tracing the gaunt lines of Snape's pale face. The mediwitch's heavy sigh was answer enough, when Hermione flicked her eyes in Harry's direction she saw his shoulders slump in resigned acceptance. She squeezed Snape's hand. "How soon will the potion be ready, and how is it administered?"

Pauling turned to face her. "He'll have to drink it."

"Can't you just Apparate it directly into the wound or his stomach or something?" Harry asked.

"The magical components of the potion would be reduced to insignificance in the case of the former, and the body needs to assimilate it through digestion rather than having it applied topically." When a timer dinged, Pauling turned his back on his audience, and counted seven deosil swirls of his wand over the potion, bringing it to a pre-boil, before he used a glass stirring rod to count out eleven clockwise rotations. Then he said, "In just a few more minutes we can administer this remedy. Without your assistance, Miss Granger, Mr. Potter, I can assure you that my patient would not survive."

Hermione's eyes overflowed and she brushed angrily against her tears, irritated that she was so easily overset.

"It's only fair," Harry said quietly, and oddly enough, Snape didn't react to the sound of his least favorite student's voice.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"That we repay his saving our lives by our saving his."

A genuine smile stretched the stiff muscles of Hermione's face. "You are so right, Harry."

He grinned.

In quiet anticipation, they watched the potion's rising fumes writhe in the cooler air of the large room, and then Pauling left to make his rounds, with a quiet command for them to remain in place until his return. Hermione barely moved from her protective position at Snape's side as a junior Healer arrived to refresh the charms on Snape's bandaging and hovering gauze, then he added two packs of ice to the wound site. Afterwards, he, too, left for other duties.

Pomfrey had levitated a chair into the space between the two beds and her head had fallen back, a soft snore showing her exhaustion had finally overtaken her.

"Hermione," Harry said, only to be shushed by his friend.

"Quietly," Hermione whispered. "Madam Pomfrey's asleep."

"Oh," he whispered back. "All right."

"I think it's the first time since the battle actually," she said.

"That long?"

"She has this potion which helps, but I imagine it's worn off."

"Probably."

"What did you want, Harry?"

"I wasn't just stalling Kingsley. You know ... before. About Australia."

"Oh." She plucked at the coverlet beneath her fingers, and Snape's arm moved restlessly. "You weren't?"

"No. I've been thinking a little."

Rather than tease him, she listened. "All right."

"I'd like to go with you."

"But ... but ... what about Ginny?"

Harry angled himself onto his bent elbow, and looked at her directly. "If that's going to work, Hermione, then she'll understand why I won't let you go to Australia alone to look for your parents."

"Thank you." Hermione flushed. "I know Ron won't want to leave his family at this point, but I hope he understands that I need to find Mum and Dad. They're important too."

"Of course they are. I'm sure he'll understand." His face clouded, "At least, I hope he does."

"You don't think he will?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "It's that honesty thing I promised you. I would like to think he would, but Ron doesn't always consider other people's needs."

"That's a very mature attitude, Harry."

He grinned. "It seems being dead does that."

She giggled, and her fingers flew to her mouth to cover the sound, but it had roused Snape slightly, and his eyes moved beneath his eyelids. "Shhhh, shhhh." Hermione soothed the unconscious man, and when he settled, she kept her voice soft. "So, tentatively, we have a plan?"

Harry lay back on the bed, his head resting against the pillows, his black hair a polarized contrast with the white slipcover. "Your home, the Burrow, and Australia."

"Then NEWTs, if they'll let us take them, and Gringotts before career." Hermione leaned her hip against Snape's bed.

"NEWTs?"

"I want to earn my way."

"I don't think I want to go back to school. How could we, after this year?" Before she could say something, Harry continued, "Can you imagine only being allowed out once a month, or pretending that we haven't lived as adults for a year. Pretending we're children for another year isn't going to make what's happened go away."

After a long moment, Hermione said, "That's rather insightful." Absently, she traced the tendons on Snape's hand, the bluish veins which stood in relief to the smooth expanse of skin. "In general I agree with you, but without our NEWTs there are a lot of positions we couldn't even apply for. You couldn't be an Auror, if that's what you still want to be. I would be just another Muggle-born trying to take advantage of my celebrity, and there are bound to be people who will assume we've been given whatever post we choose based on favoritism. I want to prove that I've earned my way."

"I want to be something other than the Boy Who Lived."

"Twice," she teased. "You're the Boy Who Lived Twice."

Harry groaned and Hermione stifled a laugh at his expense.

"There are always private tutors," Brian Pauling said, quietly interjecting his thoughts into the discussion as he carefully lifted the sleeping Hogwarts matron from her chair. He settled her onto the bed where she'd examined Hermione, tenderly tucking a blanket over her sleeping form.

Hermione and Harry exchanged a knowing look. If Pauling and Pomfrey weren't a couple, it wasn't because Pauling didn't care deeply.

The senior Healer moved to his place at the work table, checking the viability of the healing potion. Giving it a final stir, he nodded in what appeared to be an habitual mannerism.

"Tutors?" Hermione asked when was finished.

"There are many students who never step foot inside a magical school. They are homeschooled through their NEWT levels, although they rarely surpass the marks of those in more formal training. However, I suspect you and Mr. Potter would both be exceptions to the rule. The advantage of private tutoring is that you can progress at your own pace. The Ministry holds NEWT testing twice a year, in the fall at the Ministry, and in the Spring at Hogwarts."

"That would be an ideal solution." Hermione's mind reeled at the information and the possibilities it opened for her and her friends. "Don't you think so, Harry?"

"It suits me perfectly."

At that moment the timer squeaked once more. In the universal manner of good physicians who put their patients' well-being before their own, Poppy Pomfrey awoke. She scrubbed at her face with her hands and threw the blanket off her before she got off the bed. "Thank you, Brian."

"It was that or listen to you complain about a stiff neck, and I've heard you whinge."

She ignored the jibe, asking instead, "Is it time?"

"It is."

Hearing those words, Hermione squeezed Snape's hand once more and stepped across the narrow aisle to Harry's bed. He attempted to rise, but with a groan flopped back on the pillow.

"I told you twelve hours, Mr. Potter, not one, or three, or four," Pauling scolded. "I meant it regardless of the shenanigans you and your friends have entered into over the years. Unicorn-induced blood loss isn't something to take lightly. It could kill!" He broke off, suddenly flustered.

Harry's smile was small but forgiving. "I understand, sir. I won't try again." And he was docile as Hermione angled his torso against a small stack of pillows.

Other than a small frown at Hermione, Pauling had no comment about the abrogation of his orders. "Poppy, stay close." Then, surveying the large room, he gestured peremptorily. "Flaherty. Come."

A red-headed junior apprentice reacted like an owl to its master's summons, practically sprinting between the rows of beds to reach Pauling's side. Pomfrey masked her grin at the younger man's zeal, and Hermione was suddenly struck by his eagerness and how it reflected on her younger, more desperate to please, self.

Before Flaherty reached them, however, Pomfrey said, "Severus is a very private man, Brian. Please remember that. I am perfectly willing to assist."

"Poppy, you're far too senior" He didn't complete the thought, at least verbally, but when Flaherty arrived, pink-cheeked and bristling with energy, Pauling gave him a mundane task to place several shielded screens around the two beds and work tables. From Flaherty's dejected expression, it was clear he had hoped for something more, but he complied with his superior's request. As he worked, his keen, interested eyes flicked from Harry to Snape to Hermione, never in succession, but serially, like a visual mantra, as if he were memorizing every detail.

When Harry glared at him, the young healer blushed, finished his tasks and departed without looking back.

The sudden escalation of tension penetrated Snape's unconscious slumber, and his eyelids twitched, sooty black lashes fluttering like butterflies' wings, delicately brushing his skin, but they were the calmest part of him, for it appeared that every other muscle in his body flexed, and the gauze circling his gaping wound sped up, until pieces of saturated material were blinking from sight quicker than they could be counted. Alarms flared in a colored array above his bed, and a persistent whine rent the quiet industry of the ward.

"It's all right, little man. All will be well." Pomfrey stepped close to Snape's head, and attempted to smooth his hair from his face.

Snape struck out blindly, one of his arms hitting Pomfrey in the chest.

He was the source of the whine. The high-pitched agony in his tone tore at Hermione's heart and she hurried to the far side of Snape's bed where she grabbed for the hand scrabbling at the drain tube. Without conscious determination, she cradled Snape's hand against her breasts and crooned, "Hush. You're safe, you're safe. I know you're in pain, but you will be healed."

Pomfrey had recovered from Snape's staggering blow, and held onto his other hand tightly, shushing him with her own soft murmurs. Pauling attempted to pull the matron from her position at Snape's side, whispering urgently in her ear. The usually unflappable Hogwarts matron blushed and turned her head. While Hermione was at the wrong angle to actually see a kiss, she was certain one had been bestowed.

In good conscience, Hermione turned away from the intimate moment and was rewarded for her efforts. Snape's eyes were open and he was staring at her. Her smile could rival that of Molly Weasley the moment she had learned Bill would live after Greyback's attack.

"Granger Hermione?" Snape asked, his voice cracked and hoarse, and little more than a whisper.

Ignoring the quick intake of breath from Pauling, and Pomfrey's cry, "Severus!" Hermione bent forward, her long hair framing her face, effectively acting as a curtain between her and Snape and their audience. "Yes. I promised you would be safe. You are, and you're going to be well."

He stared at her for a long moment, then his eyes closed, and he lapsed back into unconsciousness.

When she lifted her head, Hermione found three pairs of eyes watching her, only Harry's expression was unfathomable. The others were ... smug.

Pauling nodded and said, "I'd like you to assist as well, Miss Granger."

Hermione tightened her grip on Snape's arm and said, "Anything."

Pauling stepped back to the workbench. "We need to levitate Snape's torso to give him the potion, but from what Poppy's told me, I would like to use a slightly unconventional approach."

"Sir?"

"You might as well call me Brian under these circumstances."

"Fine. You'll call me Hermione and Harry ... Harry." Hermione nodded in Harry's direction, where, against orders, he had managed to adjust the pillows even more so he was practically sitting up in order to see more clearly.

Pauling opened his mouth, but the patient said, "I'm mostly lying down," and Pauling's scold turned into a rueful chuckle. "Poppy was right about you."

"Er ... is that bad or good?"

"Do not get out of that bed for another four hours and we'll call it good."

Harry grinned and settled further against the pillows, grimacing as his movement pulled at the healing muscles in his abdomen.

After that, Pauling ignored the young savior, and returned to the preparation of the healing and repairing potion. Steam rose from the silver cauldron, displaying a rainbow-like iridescence. It spiraled into a vaporous replica of the very horn which had given the potion its cohesion.

While Pauling measured a precise dose into the hollowed-out unicorn horn, Hermione and Pomfrey repeated their actions from the Shrieking Shack a mere thirty-six hours before. Pomfrey levitated Snape's torso, and Hermione tucking her hair into a hasty knot at the back of her head -- climbed onto his bed, shifting to brace her back against the institutional bed-frame. When Snape was lowered against her, an upwelling of tenderness threatened to close her throat, and she wrapped her arms around him, carefully avoiding the drain-tube and hovering gauze, but she leaned close enough to murmur indecipherable nothings into his ear, just as she had done when she and Pomfrey had first saved his life.

Administering the potion was messy, but over before Hermione realized it. Snape had stiffened and cried out only once ... when Pauling had massaged his mangled throat so that he would swallow. Pomfrey talked to Snape during the entire process, explaining what potion they had created, including the list of ingredients and how each would affect him.

Later, Hermione would remember that the pomegranate seeds had been added for fertility and others for virility, but at the time, all her attention was focused on Snape. She would never know what she said, exactly, but she did know that he remained calm for the most part and soothed easily when the worst was over.

She refused to move, claiming that Snape needed all the solid rest he could get. Pauling and Pomfrey left her alone and they cleared the work table of all but the potions they would administer over the subsequent twenty-four hours. After a short time, Harry closed his eyes and fell asleep, Pauling and Pomfrey left the private enclosure, and Hermione watched over Snape until her heavy eyelids shut and she dozed fitfully. She roused to assist with each successive dose of the potion.

It was only when Harry stood at her side that she realized her legs were numb and she had been cradling Snape in her lap for several hours.

"Let's go home," Harry said.

With the realization of elapsed time, exhaustion slammed into Hermione like a rogue Bludger. "Will he be all right?" she asked anxiously.

"They believe so. It'll take several weeks and some intensive physical therapy."

She fingered lank strands of black hair, tucking it behind one finely shaped ear. "But he will recover?"

"They think completely." Harry shifted from foot-to-foot.

"Good."

"Let's go home, Hermione."

Wide, stricken brown eyes met his. "I'm no longer sure where that is, Harry."

His expression softened. "I understand."

"I know you do." Her smile was apologetic. "Help me move Severus," she said quietly, ignoring Harry's sharp glance, but focused on moving the sleeping man. Once she was off the bed, she rubbed her legs and stamped her feet to bring the feeling back into them.

"How can we leave? Poppy's already gone."

Harry held out a caduceus pin. "Healer Pauling gave me this while you were asleep. It seems he feels he can trust us, but we can only keep it as long as Snape's here. Once he's released, we have to return the pin."

"That was nice of him. I don't know if Professor Snape would like us to come back, but I'd like to." She fussed for a few minutes with Snape's covers, and then Harry grew impatient. "Quit stalling, Hermione. I'm knackered and so are you. We still need to set up wards at your house."

"And go shopping. There won't be any food and I'm starving ... again."

He grinned suddenly and teased her. "You're getting to be as bad as Ron." When she shot him a look he apologized, and then said, "It was funny."

"Yes, yes, I'll concede that it was funny, but let's go before I lose my nerve about going home entirely."

He held out his hand, and the silver pin gleamed softly in his palm. Hermione took a last look at Snape and placed her hand over Harry's before they were spun out of sight.

Behind them, Severus Snape slept peacefully under the combined healing influences of expertise, sacrifice, and affectionate care.

~o0o~

The Sun Sets

Chapter 6 of 6

There are meals, and meetings and a cranky patient.

Saving a Death Eater

By Bambu

Author's Notes: Standard disclaimers and thanks may be found in chapter one. I know it's been a long time since I've updated, and I'm afraid my only excuse is that I got distracted by real life, by original fic, and by other stories. This is the penultimate chapter in my tale, and I already have an outline and a very, very rough draft of the seventh chapter.

My thanks, once again, to Subversa and Annie Talbot for stepping in with beta reading.

I do hope you enjoy.

~o0o~

Chapter Six: The Sun Sets

They almost slept through Tuesday.

At dusk, a familiar corporeal lynx delivered its message about their meeting at Gringotts.

Hermione glanced at the clock, leapt from her bed, and scrambled into jeans and a clean shirt. "Harry, wake up! We have to go shopping," she shouted while shoving her feet into filthy, too worn trainers.

"Hermione?" Harry staggered into the doorway of the guest room, the floral wallpaper an incongruous backdrop for his rumpled self.

"We've practically wasted an entire day. Hurry or we'll miss dinner."

She had said the magic word: dinner.

Within five minutes, they were exiting the front door of the Grangers' home, resetting the protection spells as they left.

Fortunately, commerce in the Muggle world catered to a community who routinely stretched their daylight productivity into the arms of a new day.

Apparition made it easy to reach Harrods with time to spare.

Harry's eyes widened at the opulence of the storefront. "A little bright, don't you think?"

She tugged on his arm, leading him into the store.

"C'mon, Harry."

Harry kept looking over his shoulder as they passed gaudy and lavish displays.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Are we being followed?"

Hermione stopped so suddenly Harry bumped into her.

A fashionably dressed woman crossing the aisle wobbled on her stilettos to avoid crashing into them. Her expression reminded Hermione strongly of Narcissa Malfoy as she had been at the World Quidditch Cup almost four years before.

"Sorry, Harry, but I want to get to the restaurant before it closes, and it's upstairs."

"All right."

She tugged on his arm again. "The escalator's this way."

"So, what's for dinner?"

"It's useless to try the steak house or any of the continental restaurants. You have to book those in advance. I thought we might have pizza."

They queued up for the escalator just in front of a mother and daughter who were clearly having a day out together.

"Brilliant. It's been..." Harry blinked in thought, "...a long time."

As they strode off the escalator, Hermione smiled. "We'll shop for clothes after."

"Clothes?"

The mother-daughter team giggled at Harry's expression as they went their separate way.

"But, Hermione," he said, pulling her close, his hand gesturing, "how will we pay for all of this? I don't have..."

"It's the reason we're here. I have a card."

"A card?"

"A credit card, Harry. I'll explain later. Just for now, though, it's all right."

"Okay."

She beamed at him and turned right. They passed the travel goods and luggage display to their left, and Hermione nodded significantly at Harry.

"We'll stop there later. Right now ... ah ... here we are, right next to The Tea Room." Already her mouth watered for the melty, cheesy goodness of Napoli inspired cuisine.

As they entered The Pizzeria Harry inhaled deeply. "I love pizza."

Hermione led him to the only two open stools at the bar.

Their luck held for the rest of the evening.

Hermione flinched as sunlight speared through the curtains of her bedroom window, awakening her from her first nightmare-free sleep in many months. Rolling over and turning her back to the window, she rubbed her face as if erasing the last gossamer filaments of dreamland.

The aroma of crisping bacon permeated her room.

Harry's up, she thought as she threw off the duvet and climbed from her childhood bed. The room's solid maple furniture and little girl linens made nary an impression on her; her mind busy compiling the list of people and places she and Harry would visit that day.

She grabbed the pale yellow cardigan draped over the back of her desk chair before padding downstairs where she found Harry cooking a proper fry-up in the kitchen. He, too, was barefoot, and his tousled hair belied the fact he'd been awake for at least an hour.

His easy familiarity with her Muggle kitchen was a sharp, visual reminder of how his blood relatives had mistreated him. Hermione had known Harry's treated him poorly, but she hadn't learnt the breadth of his family's abuse until Ron had abandoned his friends.

The Dursleys had been a convenient target for her anger, and she had plans color coded and diagrammed for retribution. Harry had shrugged it off as insignificant in the face of their desperate need to seek and destroy the Horcruxes while remaining in hiding. As she had done so frequently in the past seven years, Hermione had followed his lead.

That morning, however, with golden sunlight frosting his messy black hair, and the memory of his innocent enthusiasm at Harrods, the reality of Harry's early life pierced Hermione's awareness as surely as a Diffindo could slice through human tissue.

Her throat seemed tight. "Harry."

He turned from the cooktop, tongs expertly held in one hand, his welcoming smile faltering when he caught sight of her expression. He took one step toward her. "Hermione?"

"Sorry," she said, waving him off. "It's just... I've never..."

"You've seen me cook before." He was clearly bewildered by her reaction.

"I know." She shrugged, unable to find the words to express her thoughts, but discovered a smile for him instead.

Grease splattered and sparked from the pan, and Harry hissed. Nodding at the pan, he said, "Let me get this sorted."

"I'll set the table." Before grabbing the cutlery, she opened the refrigerator she had charmed to keep cool, and surveyed their recent purchases. "Cranberry or orange?"

"Orange," he answered, lifting two rashers of bacon from the pan. "Scrambled or fried?"

"Scrambled." In the cozy breakfast alcove, she opened cupboards and drawers, selecting two plates, glasses, and sets of flatware. She carried her bounty to the round table where she had eaten since being a toddler.

For a moment, she smoothed her fingers across the no longer dust-covered cherry wood surface.

This was the heart of her home.

It had never bothered Monica Granger that she was merely a serviceable cook. What had been important was the family who participated in meal times, lazy Sunday mornings reading the *Times* and *The Daily Prophet*, or simply keeping one another company as they waited for take away delivery to arrive.

Hermione suddenly felt like weeping.

"Hey." Harry stepped behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist, hugging her tightly.

"Hey," she replied. Her chin quivered.

"It'll be all right."

"Will it?"

"Hermione, you helped me survive Tom Riddle. Finding your parents will be a doddle in comparison."

"I'm not even sure where to begin."

"We'll think of something."

"We?"

Harry stepped back, turning her to face him. "Absolutely," he said. His eyes shone clear and bright, and utterly convincing. "Do we have to go over this again? You're not generally a slow starter."

Hermione sniffed wetly. "No. I'm just it's thank you. The idea of searching for them is ... rather daunting."

He nudged her with his elbow. "Yeah. A bit, but we'll manage. You'll see."

"Thanks, Harry."

"No problem." When his stomach growled, he asked, "Aren't you hungry?"

"Famished."

Having an abundance of food had been something of a rarity in recent months. Despite having pizza the night before, the two friends ate eggs, bacon, grilled tomatoes and toast with eager, gustatory delight.

Afterward, while Harry showered and dressed for the day, Hermione tidied up.

"Ready?" he asked, stepping into the room, dressed in the black trousers and crisp white shirt they'd purchased at Harrods.

She looked at her too-small yellow cardigan pulled over an overlarge t-shirt and her bare, knobby knees below. She fingered her wild hair and giggled. "Not likely."

Harry's answering grin faded as he noticed the faint glimmer of Snape's memory strands wrapped snugly around Hermione's ankle. "What's that?" He pointed to the silvery cuff. "It looks like ... but it can't ... can it?"

"Uh ... er"

"I promised I'd never lie to you."

Hermione bit her lip. "I don't know how it happened, but you're right. They're exactly what you think they are."

His eyes widened until they looked like polished emerald cabochons. "You watched them? *Them*? As in more than one? How is that even possible? Wait! When did you see them?"

"It was an accident." She fidgeted nervously. "I fell in Professor McGonagall's tub."

"The tub?" He frowned. "It's not supposed to work like that. Is it?"

"I don't know, Harry. It just did." Her chin came up. "It's not as if I've had much time to research the phenomenon."

He managed to look sheepish and determined at the same time. "Still. It could've been dangerous. What if you'd drowned?"

"That's why I kept my leg propped on the side of the ruddy pool they call a tub!" she said heatedly, but then she flushed. "It's why I fell. I was rinsing my hair and lost my balance." Harry suddenly laughed, and Hermione huffed. "Honestly!"

"Talk about arse over elbows," he said.

She pursed her lips; nonetheless, they quirked in amusement. "It probably looked hilarious, but it was a rather odd experience."

"I imagine. It's bizarre enough when you're Bloody Hell! You were naked..."

"It was quite embarrassing." Her cheeks flushed at the memory. "At first, I hid behind things until I realized no one could see me. That's when I understood what was happening."

Harry shuddered. "It must've been completely mad. Wait. You didn't say whose memories they are? And how'd you get them?"

"Honestly, Harry. Whose do you think they are?"

His jaw dropped, and he whispered, "Snape? They're Snape's?"

Hermione nodded, her hair bouncing around her face with the movement of her head.

"I thought we got them all."

"I really don't know much about the way memory transfers, so I can't really say."

"You're going to tell me what you saw?"

The question was practically a demand, and Hermione fingered the hem of her cardigan before answering. "No, actually."

"No?" His jaw set stubbornly before he asked, "Why not?"

"For the same reason you haven't told me everything *you* saw." It was Harry's turn to flush, and then she delivered the *coup de gras*. "It's an invasion of his privacy. And like you, I won't betray him that way."

He nodded. "It's bad enough I used the information to taunt Vol...er that evil dead guy."

Hermione snorted at Voldemort's new moniker, and the snort morphed into laughter. Harry joined her, and they laughed until their sides ached.

After a minute, Harry removed his glasses to wipe his eyes. "How long do you need to get ready? We really should be going."

"Eep!" She dashed from the room, calling out, "Ten minutes?"

"Remember that pin," he shouted. "We'll need it later."

"It's on the kitchen counter," she yelled before slamming the door to her bedroom.

Twenty minutes later, they Apparated to the perimeter of the Burrow's charmed security shield. It was a mild and sunny day, with frothy white clouds scudding across the clear blue sky, and chirping birdsong from the Weasley orchard.

Hermione remembered her last stay with the family a joyous occasion terminated by the ill-timed appearance of Death Eaters. Her heart constricted for the family who had welcomed her with such affection in her adoptive community.

Harry called a greeting to the house.

When he received no reply, Hermione moved into a defensive position.

Pulling the walnut wand she now carried, she whipped the end in a familiar swirl, conjuring the merest whisper of misty white before it dissipated like vapor from a number four cauldron.

She sighed deeply at her failure, but unsurprised at the wand's intransigence.

Closing her eyes, Hermione dredged up a stronger mental image before trying again.

This time, ethereal smoke undulated from the tip of the wand, coalescing into the distinctive gamboling form of her Patronus. She smiled at her success relieved beyond measure she could still cast this finicky and challenging spell after the events of the last month and sent the smoky white otter leaping in the direction of the house.

"Harry!"

Within seconds, Molly Weasley opened the back door with more force than necessary; it slammed against the side of the oddly shaped structure, rattling the windows, and waking the ghoul in the attic.

Hermione followed Harry as he wove through the garden's uncontrolled weeds toward their hostess.

"Where have you been?" Molly asked. "I've been so worried."

Once Harry crossed the threshold, she directed him to a seat beside Ron at the dining table. It was only then she seemed to notice Harry wasn't alone. "Oh, Hermione, dear." The older witch was momentarily nonplussed. "How nice of you to visit."

Before Hermione could reply, Arthur Weasley stepped into the homey kitchen. Hermione was so shocked by his appearance she choked on a gasp. His shoulders were stooped, but as his wife looked in his direction he straightened.

It hurt to see the couple foundering, and Hermione attempted to bridge the gap in conversation. "Thank you, Mr. Weasley, for letting us meet you here before going to Gringotts."

Arthur managed a weak smile and patted her arm. "Of course, of course."

Choosing a vacant chair at the table, she sat directly across from Ron. He had yet to look her direction. He seemed very distant, and she didn't know what to say.

Close behind her father, Ginny skidded into the kitchen, a whirlwind of kinetic energy. Upon spying Harry, she practically levitated across the room, taking the seat next to him and reached for his hand. From the strength of her white-knuckled grip, Hermione would be surprised if Harry didn't bruise.

She averted her eyes, and as they had countless times in the past three years, they strayed in the direction of the redhead seated across from her. Ron's cheeks were hollow and his shoulders slumped in dejection. He stared at the empty chair where Fred had usually sat, his expressive face as still as if he had been hexed into immobility.

Fred's loss was catastrophic.

Fred.

Remus. Tonks.

Sirius. Cedric.

Poor Colin Creevey.

There were too many to enumerate.

Hermione blinked rapidly to maintain some semblance of composure. She stared about the long-familiar room, seeking a distraction to subvert her overwhelming urge to cry until she had no tears left.

Along the far wall, dishes washed themselves in the deep sink while Molly bustled between table and stove. She appeared not to have slept since before the Battle of Hogwarts, and Hermione feared the older woman might collapse if she were to stop moving. When Molly added three sugars to Hermione's tea, the younger witch said nothing about its excessive sweetness, simply turned the cup to avoid the chip in its rim.

"Tea, Harry dear?" Molly asked, swishing her wand and directing the teapot to fill the Chudley Cannons mug she had levitated to his place at the table.

"Yes, please, Mrs. Weasley," he said, smiling at her.

She affectionately ran her fingers through his dark hair, ruffling the fringe obscuring his lightning bolt scar.

Hermione raised her head to watch the exchange only to gasp in shock.

Harry whipped his head in her direction. In the filtered natural light let in through various window panes, Voldemort's most famous memento shimmered on Harry's brow. "What?" he asked urgently.

Before Hermione could speak, a wide-eyed Ginny exclaimed, "What happened to your scar?"

"What?" Harry asked again, his hand reaching to his forehead, fingers tracing the newly ridge-less scar.

"It's silver," Ginny said. "It's shiny."

Harry angled his body toward Hermione, his gaze dropping to the opalescent tip of Dolohov's curse mark peeking out from the neckline of her pale blue blouse.

As if someone had cast *Lumos* in her brain, comprehension illuminated the answer to Harry's unvoiced query. She whispered, "You've been claimed."

Ron finally stirred from his emotional torpor. "What the bloody hell is going on?"

Harry said nothing, but he and Hermione indulged in one of their wordless conversations, confirming their decision not to mention Snape's survival. Their short-hand communication never failed to provoke Ron's jealousy.

Hermione bit her lower lip, deep in thought.

Ron looked away from the tableau of his friends, focusing on his sister instead. A deep flush painted her cheeks, and she scowled at Hermione.

Arthur Weasley's attention shifted, sharpened while his wife's befuddled expression divulged her present inability to connect too few dots into a cohesive picture.

"What do you mean 'claimed'?" Ron asked belligerently. "By who?" His blue eyes darted between Harry's forehead and the opalescent scar on Hermione's chest.

He reminded Hermione of when he had been under the influence of a dark-tainted Horcrux. She couldn't look at him; it was quite simply too painful.

"Each other?" he asked loudly.

Ginny shrieked.

Whether her reaction was from outrage or a perceived loss of possession of the Boy Who Triumphed Hermione couldn't determine. She was too busy attempting to stem the tide of Ron's budding acrimony. "Ron, no."

"No, Ron..." Harry leapt to Hermione's and his own defenses. "It was the unicorn."

"A unicorn marked you?" Arthur's question sliced across the conversation.

"Hermione said 'claim!'" Ginny pointed out in a shrill voice.

Arthur pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose; it was an habitual gesture for the thoughtful man. "If you were claimed by a unicorn, then it was..."

"The stallion," Hermione answered quickly, shying away from Ron's accusatory expression.

"Holy Mother of Merlin!" Molly's hand flew to her bosom, covering her heart. "What a blessing! Do you know what this means? I haven't heard of such a thing in ... I can't remember when."

"Molly," Arthur attempted to quell his wife's inappropriate enthusiasm.

Ginny plucked at Harry's arm, desperately trying to draw his attention.

Ron's expression was so jealous and resentful, it unnerved Hermione. She set her teacup on the table with a shaky hand.

"Oh, Arthur, this is wonderful." Molly beamed happily at her putative son. "If you've been claimed by the unicorns, Harry dear, then you must be..."

"A virgin. They're both virgins." Ron stated flatly.

"Both? Oh, my!" Molly dabbed her eyes with a capacious handkerchief she pulled from a pocket of her apron.

Ron seemed unfazed by his mother's transports of awe and delight.

"You're a virgin?" Ginny asked Harry. She dropped her hand from his arm, and it fell uselessly into her lap.

Harry, being Harry, shrugged. "I was."

"Was?" Ron lowered his head.

His posture reminded Hermione of a hippogriff about to charge. "You see..." she stammered, "...when the stallion agreed to help us, it meant the death of... of ...one of the herd."

"Amandaria," Harry said softly. "The filly's name was Amandaria."

"I remember." Sorrow crossed her face, its shadow lingering when she looked at Ron. "Of course I agreed. I didn't know about Harry the claiming until now, but the stallion accepted the sacrifice of my ... er ... our," she stammered again, blushing brightly, covering her discomfort by resituating her teacup, "virginity in compensation. According to Poppy Pomfrey..."

Ron's sullen expression darkened and he snarled at her. "I don't give a toss what Pomfrey says. What you're saying is you've been lying to me for years."

"What?" Hermione rocked back in her chair. "I have not!"

"You misled me."

"I never..."

"Vicky." His head with its glossy, burnished copper cap of hair Hermione so admired bobbed in a synchronized cadence as he mocked her.

"Ron." Harry stood despite Ginny's efforts to keep him seated and at her side. His shoulders and spine were rigid, and he raised one hand in a quelling gesture.

"You were there, Harry. You know what she did."

"I didn't do anything." Hermione abandoned the teacup, and frustrated by having to plead her innocence again, she spoke sharply. "I've told you and told you Viktor's nothing more than a friend."

"You're lying!" Scorn curled Ron's lip into a sneer.

Hermione bit her tongue on the diatribe dancing on its tip waiting for a cue to enter the fray.

At arm's length across the table, Harry put his hand on Ron's shoulder, only to have it shrugged off. "Piss off, Harry. You always take her side."

"There aren't any sides."

It was only a matter of time before Ron would go off like a Weasleys' Wizard Wheeze. Molly and Arthur appeared to be stupefied, even if no one had pulled a wand or cast a spell.

Ignoring the hurt Ron seemed to casually inflict upon her with too-frequent regularity, Hermione leaned forward, willing him to listen. "You're not making sense. There was never anything between Viktor and me, other than friendship."

"There was," he said, obstinately. When he glanced at his sister, she shook her head frantically. "Ginny told me. Harry was there."

"What?" Hermione stared at Ginny as if boils had sprouted across the redhead's brow, forming the letters *L I A R* before turning large, wounded eyes upon her dearest friend. "Harry?"

"No! Not Harry," Ron bellowed, slamming his hand on the scarred wooden table top, rattling the dishes and cutlery. "Look at me!"

Hermione jerked against her wooden chair before leaping to her feet, her hand automatically reaching for her wand. The knowledge that the only wand she currently possessed was Bellatrix Lestrange's stayed her hand.

"Enough!" Arthur shouted above the din; it had the momentary effect of halting an increasingly explosive atmosphere. Molly stood next to him, wringing her hands in

distress.

Harry took the opportunity to scoot around the table. When he reached her side, Hermione nodded at him gratefully. She was outnumbered and utterly bewildered by the turn of events.

But Ron wasn't done; his tone of voice was as cold as the December night he had abandoned his friends. "You always defend each other. I should've known you'd never choose me. It's always been Harry."

"I don't understand." Hermione's voice was high and thin. "Ginny, what did you say?"

"Does it matter?" Ginny asked.

Harry gave her a hard look. "Only if you didn't tell the truth."

Ginny stared at Harry, mouth agape. Slowly, she too, rose to her feet. "I...I... er...."

"Ginny?" Hermione asked.

Ron leaned aggressively against the table, shoving it in Hermione's direction. Instinctively, she stepped back, watching her chipped teacup tip off its saucer, spilling too sweet tea onto the scarred wooden tabletop.

Without conscious volition, she and Harry reached for their wands, fingers flexing... then relaxing as they waited the command to fight. Hermione trembled with the sudden influx of adrenaline.

Absently, Molly flicked her wand to clean the mess, but she stepped closer to her children. "What's going on? Tell me right now."

Ginny stared at the focus of her long-time obsession as she replied. "It doesn't matter now."

Harry's shoulders slumped.

Ginny's eyes narrowed, and she turned a vindictive face toward the girl she had wronged.

"Ginevra Weasley..." Molly's interruption deferred a scathing tirade guaranteed to hammer the final nail on the coffin of an outgrown friendship, "...do you mean to tell me you lied to your friends?"

Ginny shrugged. "Not really."

"Not really?" Arthur asked quietly, both hands resting on his wife's shoulders. Molly leaned back into Arthur as if for strength.

Defiantly tossing her hair over her shoulder, Ginny gestured toward her brother. "Ron was being a prat. I forgot Harry was even there."

"That's no excuse," Molly said, shaking a finger at her youngest child.

Arthur nodded. "Anger is never a reason to lie."

As parents scolded their daughter, Harry threw his arm around Hermione's trembling shoulders.

Ron interrupted the family lecture. "Gin's right. It doesn't matter."

"What, dear?"

"Hermione and Harry are together." His tone was brittle, cutting. "They've been *claimed*."

Hermione flinched.

Harry's arm tightened around her. "We aren't," he said. "Hermione's my best friend. I thought she was yours, too."

For the first time since she and Harry had arrived, Ron really saw Hermione, saw the hurt and confusion on her face. His entire demeanor altered in the space between one heartbeat and the next; his face paled. "I thought I thought..." his clenched fist rested on the tabletop, and he extending his long fingers, turning his hand until it lay in supplication, "...well, anyway.... I..." he looked into Hermione's eyes, "...it's why I went with Lavender. If Ginny didn't tell me you and Krum were together, I never..." he gestured, "...you know."

Hermione's eyes filled with tears.

Molly chose that moment to intervene. She stepped out of Arthur's supportive embrace, and pulled a chair out from the table, taking a seat and smoothing her hands across the homespun fabric of her faded skirt. She nodded approvingly when Ron and Ginny settled back into their seats, and frowned when Harry and Hermione remained standing. "You're much too good friends to let a little misunderstanding come between you. I'm sure you'll sort it all out over the summer. If not, there'll be plenty of time when you're back at Hogwarts in the fall."

Neither Harry nor Hermione said anything, but Ron knew them well. "I know that look," he said. "What's going on?"

Hermione was reluctant to speak, and at her side, Harry kept silent.

"Go on, then," Ron jerked his head up as if by the action able to pull the words from her mouth.

"I didn't think now was the right time to talk about it," she said quietly, but shored up her courage and tilted her chin. "I'm going to Australia..."

As fast as the flick of a wrist and a nonverbal incendiary hex, Ron's anger re-ignited and he was back on his feet. "What about Fred's funeral?" he shouted. "What about the others? You're just going to leave? Run away?"

"It's not running away, Ron!" She stepped from the safety of Harry's embrace. "I need to find my parents. I've told you this."

"How soon are you going, Hermione?" Ginny asked eagerly.

Hermione could barely conceal her repugnance at the younger witch's obvious ploy.

"We're leaving Monday next," Harry said, stepping close to Hermione.

Disgust marred Ron's features. "Of course you are."

Arthur stepped into the kitchen, a traveling cloak draped over his arm. None had noticed his brief withdrawal. "Right. We don't have time for this now. We can sort it out later. We have to leave for Gringotts. It doesn't do to keep goblins waiting."

"I'll meet you there," Harry nudged Hermione with his shoulder, but he didn't spare Ginny or Ron a look before spinning on the balls of his feet and Disapparating.

Hermione gave Ginny one long look before she, too, spun into the dark constricting space between destinations.

Diagon Alley was surprisingly busy when Hermione joined Harry at the top of the marble steps leading to the premiere wizarding bank. There was a celebratory atmosphere permeating the air as witches and wizards hailed one another in friendly and eager fashion.

Within seconds, Arthur and Ron appeared.

"We'll wait for Kingsley here." Arthur handed a homespun wizard's cap to Harry. "Put that on. There's no telling what the public's reaction would be if you're recognized. Hermione, pull your hair back. There's a good girl."

As they complied with his father's directions, Ron said nothing, turning his back on his friends.

Hermione could feel the seething resentment roiling just beneath the surface of his silence. It reminded her too forcefully of those terrifying and desperate days before he had abandoned her and Harry to their impossible quest.

Experience had taught her there was nothing she could say to soothe or cajole him from his fit of pique. Any attempt would be scorned and ultimately futile.

Worse, and with irrevocable finality, she decided it wasn't worth the effort.

At eleven, the enormous brass clock in Gringotts' tower tolled the hour just as Arthur turned to Harry. "You never mentioned why you and Hermione went to the unicorns."

"No," Harry replied, "we didn't."

Arthur raised his brows quizzically. "Do you need help?"

Ron snorted derisively, and Harry shot him a quelling look.

Hermione's smiled with genuine affection. "Thank you for asking, but the situation's been handled."

Any further discussion was aborted by the arrival of Kingsley Shacklebolt and his Hit Wizard cohort. The quintet ascended the bank's broad steps to meet those awaiting them. Two of the hit wizards nodded curtly toward the young savior; they had been assigned to his protection detail when he had slipped past them at Hogwarts.

On the sidewalk below, passersby took notice of the *de facto* Minister for Magic and his entourage. Arthur Weasley was a well-known wizard, and speculation about his young companions began word-of-mouth passage the length of Diagon Alley.

The moment the first ripple of gossip encroached upon her finely tuned senses, Hermione's fingers wrapped around the handle of Bellatrix's wand. Her eyes met Harry's. He nodded, and she looked for secondary escape routes.

Fortunately, the new minister's Auror skills remained battle-honed. He acted swiftly, motioning Harry to precede him into the bank before offering his arm to Hermione. He nodded at Arthur as he stepped past the uniformed goblin, through the burnished bronze doors.

There was a brief, comedic moment when Ron and one of the Hit Wizards juggled for last position, but the older wizard outmaneuvered the teen to bring up the rear-guard.

By the next morning, Rita Skeeter's acid-etched pen would offer a number of interpretations for the appearance of Harry Potter and his best pals at Gringotts.

None would be accurate.

The Minister's group was escorted through the vast, public marble hall and beyond, to a large conference room with impressive paneling and imposing furniture. Hermione had never understood why goblins chose such enormous furnishings when they, themselves, had such small statures.

"Thank you," she said to Kingsley when he held a chair for her. The others arranged themselves along one side of a large oval table of very dark, but highly polished wood.

Harry chose the seat to her right while Ron sat at the opposite end, as far from them as possible.

They didn't have long to wait.

An inner door opened for the oldest goblin Hermione had ever seen.

Seven goblin guards dressed in full regalia entered the room first, their polearms thudding on the floor as they marched. Behind them came a small goblin who wore an Elizabethan collar on his red velvet suit. It was this goblin who bowed unctuously to the new Minister of Magic before clearing his throat. "Director Tightfist will see you now," he intoned in plummy, high court English.

The senior bank official sauntered to the head of the table, magisterial robes trailing in a wake. Tightfist's wizened skin had taken on the patina of tarnished copper, complementing the sheen of his acromantula silk robes.

He greeted Kingsley as one would greet a respected ally. "Gringotts is gratified Minister Shacklebolt accords this matter its due. It is well-omened for profitable exchange."

Kingsley nodded, and light from the wall sconces shone off his bald head. "The ministry intends to bring this matter to an equitable and mutually beneficial conclusion."

Tightfist sat in what would be referred to as the seat of power in a Muggle boardroom, and Kingsley proceeded to introduce his party.

When it was her turn, Hermione nodded politely.

Tightfist's piercing scrutiny reminded her of Snape's commanding classroom presence, and she lowered her eyes in case Legilimency was a goblin skill. The old goblin chuckled before acknowledging his introduction to the Savior of the Wizarding World.

As the remainder of their party was introduced, and having been reminded of Snape, Hermione wondered how soon it would be before she and Harry could escape to the Hippocratic Ward.

Her attention was claimed once again, when Tightfist launched into an outline of the proposal which had been forged without her knowledge, and she listened carefully to details that would affect her future.

She frowned at one point, and waited for further clarification. It wasn't forthcoming, and Hermione squirmed on the horns of an ethical dilemma.

Integrity won.

"Excuse me," she interjected when Tightfist paused for breath.

Sharp black eyes seemed to skewer her to the chair, and Kingsley stiffened beside her.

Heart hammering in her chest, Hermione soldiered on. "Is it possible to amend the terms of the proposed internship?"

"Hermione..." Kingsley's tone was censorious; however, Tightfist raised a clawed verdigris-coloured hand, and the Minister held his tongue. "Miss Granger?"

"Perhaps I've misunderstood," she said, "but I believe our internships commence from the date we receive our NEWT results?"

"You are correct." Tightfist replied in his distinctive, clipped fashion. "You have an objection?"

"It's not that. Perhaps the wording might be changed slightly."

From his place at the far end of the table, Ron leaned forward to glare at her.

Tightfist's eyes flicked between the two humans, and he canted his head at an angle. "What do you have in mind, Miss Granger?"

"What happens if one or all of us don't sit for the NEWTs? Wouldn't that void the agreement?"

Kingsley sucked in a sharp breath.

From the corner of her eye, Hermione saw his hand grip the arm of his chair tightly, and she spoke before he had the opportunity. "I know some wizards and witches have successful careers with only OWL results." Deliberately, she did not mention Fred or George Weasley. "I want er I can't speak for Harry and Ron," she said, "but I'm sure they feel much as I do. If for some reason I'm unable to take my NEWTs, I want to respect the arrangement you and Minister Shacklebolt have so generously worked out."

She ignored the seething irritation practically radiating from where Ron was seated. Fortunately, Arthur was not a foolish man, and he would handle any inappropriate reaction of his son's.

Tightfist smiled.

It was a rather frightening sight, but Hermione knew she had done the right, if not the easy, thing.

Harry shifted in his seat but remained silent.

Abruptly the senior director rose to his feet. "Wait here," he said, and exited through a previously hidden door in the dark paneling behind his chair.

The goblin guards came to attention, polearm blades wickedly sharp. The Hit Wizards remained seated, but none doubted their heightened attention.

Kingsley leaned toward Hermione, speaking so quietly no one but her could hear him. "I would place my honor in your hands any time."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"No. Thank you." His smile was entirely sincere.

Silence reigned in the conference room for ten minutes before Tightfist returned to his place at the head of the table.

With his manner resembling deference, the senior banking director bowed his head in Hermione's direction.

She smiled at him in return.

"Gringotts," he declared, "has amended the agreement between it and these humans. The term of internship for each of Harry James Potter, Hermione Jean Granger, and Ronald Bilius Weasley, will commence no later than three weeks from the date of delivery of NEWT tests results for the upcoming academic year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, regardless of whether any of the three have sat the tests or not."

"The emendation is acceptable to the Ministry," Kingsley said with all the gravity of a judicial verdict being rendered by the Wizengamot.

"Miss Granger?" Tightfist looked at her. "Does this resolve your concern?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

The senior director traced an intricate runic array on the polished wooden table. He appeared to contemplate the results of his efforts for a long moment before nodding and raising his head. Black eyes speared Ron to his seat before moving on to assess Harry, and then they settled on Hermione.

"It is Gringotts' decision that Miss Granger's internship will be overseen by Copernicus while Mr. Potter and the junior Mr. Weasley will fall under the tutelage of Mr. William Weasley."

At the end of the table, Ron's head jerked up, and Arthur bowed his head in a silent moment's gratitude. He squeezed his son's shoulder out of relief and as a cautionary restraint.

"Curse-breaking is an excellent background for those wishing to enter law enforcement," Tightfist said amiably to Kingsley.

"I couldn't agree more."

"But what about Hermione?" Harry asked. "Why are we being separated?"

Kingsley said, "Harry..."

Harry was undeterred. "She wants to be an Auror, too. Don't you?"

"Can we talk about it later?" she asked.

Harry frowned.

Whether it was at her, or at her deflecting the question she wasn't certain.

"Mr. Potter..." Tightfist interrupted the tete-a-tete, "...Gringotts' decisions are in its best interests. However, in light of recent events, I have been granted the privilege of speaking as I choose."

"I would appreciate an explanation," Harry said.

"Do I owe you an explanation, young wizard?"

"No," Harry admitted, "but I would like one all the same."

Tightfist laughed.

The sound was a cross between a bark and a cough, but Hermione thought it was a little rusty and wondered if laughter was rare for goblins.

"I shall enjoy watching your development under William Weasley's guidance. I have wagered in your favor."

Kingsley chuckled, a warm, rich sound that enticed a snigger from one of the Hit Wizards. "I should like a piece of that wager, Tightfist. My money's on Harry."

Hermione peeked at Ron only to wish she hadn't bothered. He was grinding his teeth. His father's hand remained on his shoulder, but Arthur's fingers were white-knuckled from the force of his restraining grip.

Hermione sighed heavily.

"Mr. Potter, your talents are best utilized in honing skills that will serve your future career in law enforcement. It is, however, Gringotts' choice to utilize Miss Granger's other talents."

Harry clenched his teeth.

Hermione heard them grinding and laid her hand on his forearm. Speaking into the sudden silence, she asked, "What ... er ... who is Copppernicus?"

Tightfist canted his head, assessing her afresh. At length, he said, "Copppernicus is Gringotts' chief Arithmancer."

Hermione smiled in relief. "That would be lovely. Arithmancy was one of my favorite subjects at Hogwarts."

The bank director rose to his feet. "My available time has come to an end. I bid you good day, Minister. Mr. Potter, Miss Granger." He looked at Ron's bowed head. "Young Mr. Weasley."

Rather than exit the way he had entered, the senior director detoured to Arthur Weasley's place at the table. Remarkably, he offered the wizard his hand, and when the befuddled patriarch grasped the aged bronzed claw, Tightfist said, "The goblin nation honors the sacrifices of your family, Arthur Weasley, and offers its thanks for bringing peace to our beleaguered world."

He departed before anyone else could speak.

Arthur's jaw had dropped, his cheeks flamed red. Ron stood from the table, and took a step toward the door.

Kingsley cleared his throat. "Well..."

Hermione was on her feet. "This has taken longer than I expected."

For some reason, this drew Ron's attention, and despite the fact he was already moving in the direction of the exit, he sneered. "Got somewhere to be?"

"We that is Harry and I have some things to do."

Ron scowled. "You've only been to the Burrow once!"

Hermione muttered, "And what a warm welcome I received."

While Ron didn't hear her, Kingsley and Harry did.

Angrily, Harry said, "You're the one who..."

"Who what?" Ron asked belligerently. "Asked my two best friends to ignore me?"

"We didn't!" Hermione exclaimed. "We haven't you ... you..."

"Son, you told them to give you some time. They've only been doing what you asked."

"Yeah. Well." Ron pouted, his arms crossed, his posture sullen. "I didn't mean it."

Hermione's and Harry's eyes met, and with a single warning glance at the Minister, she nodded her agreement.

Harry said, "I don't have to go with Hermione."

"Right."

She had forgotten how churlish Ron could be. His attitude reminded her of being at school when he wanted to play chess or Quidditch rather than accompany her to the library to study.

After the scene at the Burrow, Hermione had no desire to spend more time in his company.

Especially after the scene at the Burrow.

Any hopes she might have cherished where Ron was concerned had been incinerated in a fit of jealousy, insecurity and a spilled teacup.

Yet, for Arthur's sake and for Harry's.... "It's all right," she said. "I can go by myself."

Ron smiled then.

It was a genuine smile; the first since Fred had died.

Perhaps, Hermione thought, there's a salvageable friendship after all.

After that, it was only a matter of moments before Hermione accepted Poppy Pomfrey's brooch from Harry, and he let Kingsley escort her from the bank with a comment about trust and its fragile strength.

When they were back on the top bank step, Harry mouthed *I'll see you at dinner* just before he Disapparated, Ron and Arthur immediately thereafter.

Left alone with the minister and his entourage, Hermione fingered the caduceus brooch.

Kingsley smiled at her. "If I followed any of the subtext, you're about to visit my favorite patient."

"You're very perceptive," Hermione replied, keenly aware of the Hit Wizards' interest, and beyond them, the growing number of people who were stopping to stare at the minister and herself.

Kingsley snorted. "I'm just privy to the secret. No one else would have a clue what you and Harry had cooked up."

"We haven't told anyone."

The gravity of his demeanor was surprisingly reassuring. "Now is definitely not the time for that news."

"I realize that," she said. "Besides, the prognosis remains guarded."

The Minister for Magic gently removed the Caduceus from her hand and pinned it to the lapel of her blouse. "If I don't see you or Harry before you depart..."

"You won't be at Fred's funeral?"

He stared over her shoulder for a moment, seeing only something from a memory. "I'll be there. Still, if we don't have a chance to speak, please send me an owl to let me know of your trip's success."

"You're so sure we'll be successful? That we'll find my parents?"

"I have no doubt."

"I'm glad someone has faith."

He raised her chin with his fingertips. "Hermione, you and Harry along with Ron accomplished what a host of adults could not. I know you will find your parents. They're most fortunate to have a daughter as brave and brilliant as you."

Hermione's wide brown eyes swam with tears.

Kingsley gave her a quick, hard hug. "I have a tight schedule today, and it's time for you to visit a recalcitrant patient."

"Recalcitrant?" He arched a well-groomed eyebrow, and Hermione giggled unexpectedly. "You have a point," she said before activating the brooch.

Her landing was only a matter of a step or two to right her balance and a smoothing of hands over wild hair before she was ready to check on the patient.

To her surprise, Snape was awake, neatly bandaged, and arguing with a mediwitch hovering at his bedside.

She couldn't hear their discussion until she was two beds distant, but she caught the gist: he refused to take the dearly-bought Cornus Potion.

Hermione came to a stop near his neatly covered feet.

He glared at her balefully.

Her tolerance was already frayed beyond salvage.

She gripped the metal frame of Snape's bed as if gripping the shreds of her patience, and asked him in a falsely sweet voice, "Are you quite finished with your tantrum?"

"Go away." Snape snarled at her, his fingers pressing the bandage tight to his neck. There was no sign of blood staining the white.

Hermione stared at the bandage wrapped around his throat, and despite his irritation, her relief broke out in a broad smile.

He sneered.

"The sooner you take the potion, the sooner I'll be gone," she said.

He crossed his arms petulantly.

For the first time in her experience with Severus Snape, he reminded her of Harry. Her friend could sulk like no one else when the mood struck, but after seven years, Hermione knew how to handle those fits of self-indulgence.

She turned to the mediwitch. "How many times has he refused the potion?"

"Each time."

For a moment Hermione lost focus, her mind's eye recalled row upon row of dead bodies in Hogwarts' Great Hall. She shook her head to clear the memory, and setting her jaw, she held out her hand. "May I?"

"But you're not "

Hermione interrupted the older woman. "I'll see that he takes it."

An unexpected source of support came in the voice of Brian Pauling. "Let her try, Fitzsimmons. You may go."

The mediwitch named Fitzsimmons stiffened as if she had been slapped. Then, with evident reluctance, she handed Hermione a small glass vial filled with the softly shimmering dose of life-saving potion before marching to Pauling's side.

They began a furious, whispered discussion.

"Are you going to lecture me about the unicorn's sacrifice, too?" Snape's voice was raspy, the tone fretful.

"What would be the point?" Hermione closed the distance to his side. "You know better than most what Amandaria's sacrifice means."

He glowered and said nothing.

"Will you take this now?"

He clamped his lips shut.

She leaned across the bed, staring into his dark eyes. "I won't ask again, Severus."

Pressing his head against the pillows, Snape stared at the ceiling.

Hermione drew her wand, and non-verbally cast *Incarcerous*.

Vineline cords spurted from the tip of Bellatrix's wand, binding his arms to his chest. If she had used white bandaging, his torso would have resembled a mummy.

Hermione set her jaw stubbornly, and leaned closer. "Drink this, Severus Snape."

His lips remained clenched in a bloodless, tight line.

He refused to look at her.

Without pause, Hermione pinched his nostrils shut.

An outraged exclamation came from behind her.

For a fleeting second, triumph lit Snape's eyes, but when Pauling reprimanded Fitzsimmons and told her to leave Hermione alone, Snape's face glowed with incandescent fury.

In his weakened condition, his resolve lasted fifteen Hermione counted each one silently long seconds.

As soon as his mouth popped open, she tipped the potion onto his tongue.

"Don't even consider spitting it out," she said fiercely. "I won't hesitate to knock you unconscious and pour it down your throat."

He swallowed, but he fairly vibrated with rage.

"I know you're angry," she said. "I know you're frustrated. I... I won't be presumptuous enough to say more, but please ... please ... just"

She turned away from the bed, horrified by what she had done, and overwhelmed by the thought that he might choose not to get well. With shaking hand, she set the empty potion vial on the table where she had watched Brian Pauling work his miracle.

Blinking back incipient tears, Hermione faced Snape once more. "I'm sure you're expecting some sort of maudlin, Gryffindorish lecture about what you feel and how you should think. Well, more maudlin and Gryffindorish than this." She had started quaveringly, but her voice smoothed out. "I won't waste your time. Just please live."

He closed his eyes, dismissing her.

Hermione released his bindings before summoning a chair to sit at his side.

He ignored her.

"I'll wait until the next dose of the Cornus."

Brian Pauling had escorted mediwitch Fitzsimmons to the other end of the ward, leaving Hermione as Snape's only attendant.

Snape continued to stare at the ceiling.

After fifteen minutes, she realized he was sound asleep.

After twenty minutes, she brushed his hair from his face, and looked more closely at his wound site. There was no sign of leakage.

In his sleep, Snape's nostrils flared, and he inhaled deeply. When she moved, he turned his head as if to follow her.

She settled back into her chair, and watched him breathe. Her throat tightened and Hermione let fall the tears she had held back since early that morning.

After thirty minutes, Hermione laid her head upon the side of Snape's bed. Within moments, she was fast asleep.

She woke with his hand in her hair and the accompanying sound of his deep, rhythmic breathing. Carefully, she extracted his fingers from the bushy mass.

He awoke during the process, but neither said a word. Both flushed red.

When Brian Pauling arrived with the next dose of potion, Snape exhibited model patient behavior with such an exaggerated fluttering of eyes that Hermione bit her tongue.

"Thank you," she said. "I'll return in the morning."

Snape rolled his eyes, but didn't gainsay her.

The caduceus pin magically transported her back to Gringotts' top step.

Diagon Alley was contrastingly bright after the Hippocratic Ward, and Hermione squinted while surveying the cobblestone street as she considered what to do next. Her original plans had included Harry and trips to Ollivander's and Flourish and Blotts, but the afternoon was waning quickly; the sun sinking beneath a fog bank and into night.

Someone bumped into her, precipitating her decision.

Home, or what most closely resembled home.

She spun into her Apparation before an elderly witch exclaimed, "Why, it's that Granger girl!"

Harry wasn't at the house, but it wasn't dinner time yet.

Hermione shuffled into the kitchen and filled the kettle. While the water heated, she dug into a drawer filled with menus from nearby restaurants. If she was too care-worn to cook, she refused to expect it of Harry.

In the end she ordered Chinese. "No mushrooms," she said into the phone after having ordered broccoli beef, spicy Singapore noodles, and egg drop soup.

While waiting for the delivery, she changed into a pair of her mum's old scrubs, faded teal in color, and added the cardigan she'd worn that morning.

She pulled out her lists: what clothes to pack, how much money and of what currency to carry, passports and other documentation, the rough itinerary. Restlessly, she crossed things off one list, added them to another.

The events of the day pressed in on her thoughts, rendering them muddled and painful. At least she would no longer need to factor time at the Burrow into her days.

By the time she ate her noodles and nibbled on succulent beef, Harry still hadn't returned from the Burrow.

Instead of worrying for his safety, Hermione's mood deteriorated so that she wondered if he would return at all.

She practically slapped herself for that thought.

And then she simply went to bed.

The day had been too much; as emotionally draining in its own right as the Battle for Hogwarts. Perhaps the death of her erstwhile hopes for a future with Ron had been the

last casualty of that battle and she was reeling from shock.

Hermione left a note for Harry, and put his dinner in the charmed refrigerator, then headed upstairs to brush her teeth and crawl into bed. As she snuggled under her duvet, her last thought was of how comforting it had been to wake with Snape's fingers gently massaging her scalp.

~o0o~