

The Potion Mistress

by a_bees_buzz

There is trouble brewing at the Potions Guild and a possibly-not-so-ancient mystery to be solved. Hermione is determined to find the answers, and that includes working out why all paths seem to lead to Severus Snape.

WARNING: Contains DH spoilers

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 4

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A/N: Heartfelt thanks to the wise and wondrous Bambu345 for her beta work on this story.

After two long days of processing the dead and sorting out the living, quiet finally settled over what was left of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry, Ron and Hermione made their way out of the Great Hall and sat on the stairs looking over the rubble. Harry rested his tired frame against the balustrade whilst Ron played with a pile of the loose emeralds that were still rolling around. Hermione had been staring at the ground with a puzzled expression when she suddenly sat up.

"What is it?" asked Ron.

"I just realised. Snape."

"You're right. His body's probably still in the Shrieking Shack," said Harry, looking up wearily. "No one but us knew he was there."

"I'll tell Neville," offered Ron. "He's been running the morgue."

"No, Ron. I think we should go," said Hermione, getting to her feet.

"Why?"

"I'm not sure, but I have a suspicion."

"Care to tell us what it is?"

"Not really. Let's just go check."

"Do you need me?" asked Harry. "I'm a bit knackered."

"No. You rest here. Ron and I can handle it," she said as they left the castle.

Snape's body was exactly where they had left it, lying on the floor, his neck and shoulder covered in the dried blood that stained the floor.

Ron looked around the room. "Do you think Voldemort left something here?"

"No. It's Snape."

"What about him?"

"He's not dead."

Ron knelt over the body. "Yeah, he is. No pulse and stone cold. That's dead."

"Think, Ron. What do you smell?"

"Nothing."

"What has every other dead body you've seen in the last day smelt like?"

"Shit." Ron grimaced at the memory.

"Exactly. Dead bodies lose their... contents. His hasn't. How do you explain that unless he isn't really dead?"

"How did you know?"

"I didn't know, but I suspected. Remember the speech he gave us first year? The very first thing he ever said to us? Potions can bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death...."

"Blimey. You think that's what he did?"

"I think he knew, or at least suspected, that Voldemort would try to kill him. I think he was prepared for it."

When they got the body of Severus Snape back to the Hogwarts infirmary, Madam Pomfrey confirmed Hermione's suspicion. "He has no life signs, but neither is his body decaying. It's as if he had taken the Draught of Living Death, but the standard antidote is having no effect."

"What about the snake venom? Could that be interfering with the antidote?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know why it would, but we can try it."

Antivenin potion and Blood-Replenishing Potion were both administered intravenously. His colour improved, but they still could not wake him.

Frustrated with the lack of progress, they retired to the Headmaster's office, where Acting Headmistress McGonagall presided over their discussion. "Tell me again precisely what happened."

Madam Pomfrey and Professor Slughorn listened carefully as Harry recounted the events surrounding Snape's apparent demise.

"It couldn't have been the Draught of Living Death," explained Slughorn. "He would have had to have taken it just before the snake struck. I'm quite certain Voldemort would have noticed." With the Dark Lord's demise, the fear of his name had rapidly faded.

"What if he found a way to vary the potion to make it become active when it encountered Nagini's venom? Or when his life force began to ebb? Is that possible?" asked Hermione.

"For Severus? Quite possibly. He was, after all, a Potion Master."

"Don't you mean, Potions master?" Ron asked.

"That's what Albus always called him. No. Severus Snape was a Potion Master. The only one I ever heard of who left the Guild or, as it's properly referred to, the Ancient and Noble Association of Alchemists and Brewers. I actually trained there for a few years myself. Even made Journeyman. Quite a respectable rank, Journeyman; there's not many that make it. I've quite a talent for potions, you know. But Potion Masters, they have more than just talent. Genius. That's what it takes. If Severus wanted a potion that could lie dormant until death called, he may well have been able to brew one."

"But he wouldn't have brewed it unless he thought someone would be able to wake him up. There wouldn't be any point. So there must be something we're not thinking of," said Hermione.

"That's true enough," replied the Headmistress. "But unless we can think of it, there isn't anything we can do for him."

"He'd have left a clue, don't you think?" asked Ron. "Maybe we just need to find it."

"That is an excellent suggestion. You may start with this office, as it was his until a few days ago. If there is nothing here, then I will give you access to his quarters."

A day later they had torn apart both the office and his quarters, but failed to find anything.

"Do you think Slughorn knew more than he was saying?" asked Ron. They were sitting in the Gryffindor common room, enjoying the comfort of familiar surroundings. With all the students home until the school could be reopened, it had become their private meeting space.

"I doubt it," Hermione replied primly. "He's not very good at hiding things, is he? I can't imagine how he ended up in Slytherin."

"You never did like him, did you?"

"I like him even less now. The way he kept referring to Professor Snape in the past tense, it was almost as though he wanted him to be dead."

"Probably just jealous 'cause Snape did better than he did at that Guild he was talking about."

"Maybe. He seemed quite proud of having been there at all. The way he talked about it made it sound like even being admitted is an honour. When this is all over, I'll have to find out more about it."

"Yeah, well. We gotta save Snape first."

"Yes." Hermione sighed. "Think. There must be something he expected us to think of. He knew we'd be here..."

"Except me," interjected Harry from the sofa he was lying on. He'd been so quiet, the others had thought he might be asleep.

"That's true. He thought you would be dead. That was the whole point of sharing his memories with you, to tell you that you had to die to defeat Voldemort. It wouldn't have occurred to him that you'd be able to come back. Does that help us at all? Is there anything that's different because Harry's alive?" She turned to Harry. "Let's go over

everything you've done since you came back to life."

"Well, I killed Voldemort."

"Very funny. You know what I mean."

They talked their way through everything that had happened from the moment that they had left the Shrieking Shack.

"Hold on, there." Ron interrupted just as Harry began to recount the experience of being on the receiving end of the Killing Curse for the second time in his life. "Go back a second. What did you say you did just before he killed you?"

"I dropped the ring with the Resurrection Stone."

"I'll bet Snape never expected that."

"That's a good point." Hermione leaned forward excitedly. "He knew what the Stone was from when he tried to heal Dumbledore's hand, but would have expected you to have the Stone on you when you died. Then, when it was all over, Ron and I would have been the only ones to recognise its importance. We would have had it or at least known where it was."

Harry sat up. "The stone can bring back the spirits of the dead, though it doesn't actually bring them back to life. But he's not really dead. He's in that in-between place, where I was when I met Dumbledore. If we call his spirit back, it might find its way into his body."

"Do you know where you left it?" asked Hermione.

"No. But I think I can find it," he said, getting up from the sofa and leading them to the castle grounds.

"There." Harry pointed to the spot where the triumphant procession of Voldemort's forces had left the Forbidden Forest. "There were giants with us. They just crashed their way through everything in their path. We can follow their trail back."

In the light of day, it didn't take long to find their way to the clearing where Harry had offered his life to Voldemort. The ring with the Resurrection Stone was there, trodden into the ground, but still visible, right where Harry had dropped it.

At Harry's insistence, Snape was moved to a private room. "I want to do this alone."

"Sure thing, Harry," said Ron.

"We'll be right outside," added Hermione.

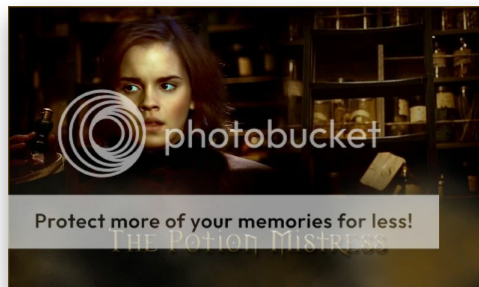
Pulling up a chair, Harry sat down beside the bed and took a long look at his old Potions master. He saw traces of the lonely, sad boy who had befriended a Muggle-born witch, the man who had tried to protect his mother, the teacher who had pushed him in ways that he had never understood and the hero who had allowed his soul to be torn in the hopes of saving another's. Then Harry turned the stone three times and watched as Severus Snape slowly twitched and shuddered his way back to the land of the living.

Chapter One: A Birthday at the Burrow

Chapter 2 of 4

Sometimes, you just have to get away and catch up with old friends, even if things at work are getting a little bit strange.

A/N: Beta work by the wise and wondrous Bambu345 and the insightful and stunning sshg316. Art work by the incredibly talented moonjameskitten. Each of them, in their own distinct way, inspires and improves my work beyond measure.



"Hermione! You made it!"

"It was a close thing, but I haven't missed one yet. Happy twenty-fourth, Harry." She struggled her way through the Burrow's crowded sitting room to give him a hug. "Where's the birthday girl?"

Having birthdays a mere twelve days apart, Harry and Ginny held joint celebrations, which Molly always insisted on hosting. Not that Harry resisted; he enjoyed the familiarity of the first real home he'd ever known, even if the sofas and carpet were a bit shabby and the space a bit tight. At least it was summer, so half the guests were outside in the garden where the buffet had been set up under a swarm of floating candles.

Harry grimaced. "She left early. Apparently the baby doesn't like parties."

"Poor Harry," Hermione replied mockingly. "It's only the first trimester, and it's already ruining your life."

"Hermione, dear. When did you get here?" Molly pulled her into a tight, motherly embrace before starting in. "This short hair, it's really not very becoming, is it? Oh, well. I suppose it can't be helped. Not yet, anyway." She looked around the busy room. "Now, where is that son of mine? Charlie? CHARLIE!"

"It's all right, Molly," Hermione replied with an indulgent smile. "I can find him myself. There's no hurry."

"Nonsense. You two don't get nearly enough time together. Now you stay right here and I'll go get him for you." Turning, she spotted the man himself heading towards them with an embarrassed look on his face. "There you are. Look, dear. Hermione's here."

Molly watched, beaming like a headlamp, as Charlie approached.

"Hiya, Curly." His offhand tone was belied by his embarrassed expression.

"Hi yourself." Hermione, as usual, refused to be bothered by Molly's meddling.

"Oh, go on. No one minds if you give her a bit of a kiss." Molly pushed Charlie at Hermione, and he dutifully gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

"Well, I'd hardly call that a proper kiss," sniffed Molly. Fortunately, her attention was drawn away by the tinkling of broken glass coming from the kitchen.

"I gather she still expects wedding bells?" Hermione asked.

"Apparently we're getting married the minute you finish your training. I've tried telling her, but you know what she's like when her mind's made up."

Hermione shrugged. "We'll deal with it when we have to. Or rather, you'll deal with it. I fully expect to be barred from the Burrow forever more after disappointing not just one, but two of her precious sons."

"Hey, don't count me in there," said Ron, having caught the last part of their conversation. "I wasn't disappointed. We gave it a good go." He slung an arm around Hermione's shoulder and kissed her cheek.

"More of a disastrous go, the way I remember it." Charlie grinned at the memory of the monumental arguments that had characterised Ron and Hermione's brief attempt at dating each other.

"True. But we're still friends," said Hermione. "And Ron is happily married to Luna. That should be what counts."

"In your eyes, maybe, love," replied Charlie. "But when it comes to Mum, there is a world of difference between her 'should be' and yours."

By the time people started leaving, Hermione had been pretty well caught up on the developments in everyone's lives since her last visit, a few months earlier. Minerva had told her about the progress of the final reconstruction projects at Hogwarts. George and Ron had raved about the popularity of their new line of free-elf-made toys, Fleur had bragged about Victoire's accomplishments, and Hagrid had described the latest developments in the treaty negotiations with the centaurs. Even Kingsley had found a moment to ask how her studies were going, to which she gave her usual, innocuous reply. When all the other guests had left and the rest of the family had gone to bed, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Charlie cleared a space out of the party detritus on the old, well-worn kitchen table and sat and talked.

"Tell us what you've been up to," said Harry.

"Well, you remember I wrote you that I'd passed the exams to become a Journeyman."

"Yeah. Those exams sounded like killers," said Ron. "What was it, eight potions at once?"

Hermione waved a hand dismissively. "That was the easy part; it's just a matter of getting your timing right. The oral section was much more difficult. They really try to trip you up with trick questions there. Anyway, now that I've made Journeyman, I have to find a research project. So I've been looking through the official Guild records to see what kinds of projects have been done, and I've found some of the strangest things."

"Strange like people who breathe in too many potion fumes go berserk, or strange like Death Eaters meetings in the Guild Hall?" asked Charlie with a grin.

"The latter. Though thank you so much for that first one. It's nice to finally know what you think of my current profession."

Charlie just kept grinning.

"Not actual Death Eaters, right?" You could always count on Harry to be interested in anything with even a hint of intrigue, especially if there might be Death Eaters involved. Charlie and Ron exchanged a knowing glance, refilled their glasses and sat back to watch the interrogation.

"No. At least, I have no reason to think so. There are just things that don't make sense. For example, there are currently twenty-one Potion Masters. There used to be twenty-five."

Harry's brow furrowed as he considered the implications. "Are you saying someone's been killing off Potion Masters?"

"No. They've all died of natural causes. But they aren't being replaced. There hasn't been a new Potion Master named since the 1970s."

"So what does that mean?"

"There have always been twenty-five, ever since the Guild was founded in the ninth century." She took a sip of her drink and nodded her thanks as Charlie topped up her glass. "And here's another thing. The Guild Hall itself is a powerful magical object, kind of like the way that Hogwarts Castle is. Well, they keep telling us that the Hall has been losing its powers for centuries, but it hasn't. I checked the accounts of Ascension Rites...."

"What are those?" Harry fired off his questions as if Hermione were a suspect. There were times when Hermione wondered if being an Auror wasn't making Harry a bit paranoid.

"Ascension Rites," she explained, ignoring his brusque manner, "are the rituals they perform when a new Potion Master is Called. Anyway, the ceremonies all involved really visible displays of magic by the Hall. There was a ceremony in 1938 that seems to have been just like all the others, but at the next ceremony, in 1946, there was nothing. I don't think the power has been fading. I think something happened in those eight years that damaged it, maybe permanently."

"Which would put whatever happened right around the time of Grindelwald," Harry declared excitedly. "There was a lot of Dark Magic being used during that struggle; that might explain it. But that's nearly sixty years ago. Whatever it was, it's long since over and done with. Why should it matter now? And why would anyone lie about it?"

"First of all, sixty years isn't that long. Remember, Harry, these are wizards, they live a long time. Whoever caused the damage is probably still around. But the thing is, I don't think it is over. What if the damage is getting worse? The Hall Calls the Potion Masters. What if the reason there haven't been any new Potion Masters is that the Hall is breaking down and no longer has the power to Call them? In another fifty years, there won't be a Guild anymore. Oh, and there's one other thing. Severus Snape."

Harry looked puzzled. "Severus? What does he have to do with this?"

"Remember how Slughorn said Severus was a Potion Master? He wasn't. At least there's no record of it. But there's more than that. I couldn't find any record that he was ever at the Guild at all, and I know that's wrong. It was his letter to Potion Master Dunford that got me the trial for my apprenticeship in the first place. So I know he was there, but he's not in the official records."

"Have you asked Dunford?"

"Not yet. He can be pretty touchy about anything which even hints that his House isn't perfect. I'd need a lot more evidence before I'd dare ask him about such a glaring irregularity."

Ron chuckled.

"What?"

"I just think it's funny that you've found a big mystery and Snape's in the middle of it. It's like his whole life has been one intrigue after another."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Do you still see him?" she asked Harry.

"Not as much anymore. He hasn't needed help in the last couple of years, and he's still not the friendliest of blokes. Do you remember how pissy he was the first time I showed up on his doorstep?"

Returning from the dead, as it turned out, took a considerable toll on the body. Harry's departure had been brief enough that the effect had not been immediately noticeable. In the last stages of the second Battle of Hogwarts and the days that followed, he had attributed his weariness to the strains of the events themselves. It was not until nearly a week later that he recognized that something was wrong.

Severus Snape had spent three full days beyond the veil, so his debilitation was far more obvious. Whilst his mind was unaffected, he had neither strength nor stamina and was barely able to manage the trip to and from the loo on his own. Nevertheless, he refused to stay in St Mungos and frightened off every carer that dared to darken his doorstep. Six weeks into his recovery, Harry showed up at his house.

"What do you want?" Severus struggled to rise to his feet and confront the intruder, only to fall back into his armchair.

"I'm your new carer."

"That's absurd," Severus sneered. "You can barely care for yourself."

"Which is why I'm here. I'm useless for anything else until I'm stronger, but I can manage to make sure you're doing your exercises and take care of our shopping."

Harry's cocky attitude grated on Severus. "'Our?'"

"I'll be living here."

"I forbid it."

"Then throw me out."

Severus glowered. "You know I can't."

"And you know that I don't want to stay here with you any longer than I have to. The minute you are able to take care of yourself, I'll leave, which should be all the incentive you need for a speedy recovery. Until then, you're stuck with me." Harry sat back, grinning in that smug way he knew would drive Snape mad. "Which, by the way, I'm really hoping won't be any more than a year and a bit. Ginny'll be graduating then, and I'd rather not have to bring her here."

Ignoring the presumption embedded in that last comment, Severus asked, "Why you?"

"Because we have a lot to talk about."

Severus stiffened. "We said everything that was needed when you woke me."

"No. I said everything that you needed to hear. You still haven't told me what I need to know."

Despite Severus' best efforts, they had talked. Harry was not only relentless, but utterly ruthless in bringing to bear whatever weapons he had at his disposal.

"What, precisely, do you think that you are doing?"

"Batting my mother's eyes at you."

"Insolent brat."

Harry grinned. "Yes. But you still love her, don't you? How can you deny her only son?"

"Because you are not your mother," Severus snapped.

"Is that why you hate me? Because you weren't my father?"

"What? No!" Severus finally looked directly at Harry. "Is that what you thought? That I desired your mother for myself?"

"Yes, of course. Didn't you? The Pensieve...."

"The Pensieve is a deceptive device. Every human observation is coloured by the perceptions of the observer. In the Pensieve, the distortions are doubled, compounding those of the owner of the original memory with those of the individual experiencing the memory."

"Are you saying you didn't love her?" Harry was genuinely confused.

"No. But there are many kinds of love. Tell me, Potter, do you love Miss Granger?"

"Ye-es," he offered, hesitantly, as if sensing a trap.

"And if she were to die, leaving behind a child, would you feel the need to protect that child?"

"Of course." That was a safe question.

"Then you understand."

"No, I don't." It was neither a trap nor an explanation. "You hated me. And in the Pensieve, you tried to talk her out of liking my dad, and then you told Dumbledore it was all for her. If you weren't in love with her, then what did all that mean?"

"It meant that I loved her. In much the way that you love Miss Granger." Severus stopped there, hoping that the look of bafflement would clear from Harry's face. It didn't. He sighed. "There was one difference. You have many friends. Lily Evans was my only true friend, the one person who ever cared for me without an ulterior motive. Her memory is as precious to me as the sum of all your friendships are to you."

"But you were jealous of my dad when you thought she liked him."

"No. I was concerned for her. He was too reckless. I feared that, were she to become involved with him, she would end up injured. Or killed."

Harry decided to push his luck. "Have you never been in love?"

"I didn't say that."

"You said she was your only friend."

"It is possible, Potter," Severus responded, his nostrils flared and his head thrown back, "to be in love with someone who is not your friend. And that is my final word on the matter." It was. However hard Harry tried, he never managed to get any more out of Severus on the subject of love or friendship.

"But you do see him?" asked Hermione.

"Now and then."

Ron shook his head. "I can't imagine why."

"Maybe because, after living together for most of a year and checking up on him every few days for another two years after that, we got to be friends."

Ron rolled his eyes. "I've never understood that."

Harry shrugged. "Once he got to know me, he found out I was more like my mother than he'd thought. It helped that he wasn't terrified that I'd get killed every five minutes."

"Is that supposed to be why he was such a bastard to you in school? He was worried about you?"

"Apparently. He's not very good at expressing concern."

Ron snorted. "You can say that again."

"Do you remember the first thing he ever said to me? That first day in Potions class?"

"Didn't he make fun of you for being a 'celebrity'?"

"Yeah. But then he asked me what you get if you add asphodel to an infusion of wormwood."

"Really? Was it a message? All that time ago?" Hermione broke in excitedly.

"I think so. Snape's ... obscure sometimes. You have to read really far between the lines."

"I'm not following this. What's the deal with asphodel and wormwood?" asked Charlie.

"It's the base for the Draught of Living Death," said Hermione. "The very first question that Professor Snape ever asked Harry was whether he understood the potion that would save his life the one he needed us to recognise."

"But why ask Harry? He thought Harry would be dead by the time he needed it," asked Ron.

"Not then. That was before he had that conversation with Dumbledore." She turned to Harry. "Do you think that he was already preparing, all the way back when we were first years?"

"Yeah, I do. I think he'd been preparing since the day my parents were killed," replied Harry. "Though I'm not sure whether he knew about the Stone that long ago. I can't get him to talk about any of that stuff."

"That's amazing, if you think about it, spending all those years expecting Voldemort to return, expecting him to kill you and knowing that your only chance to survive it is if a bunch of students who don't even like you can piece together a set of really obscure clues," said Hermione, leaning forward and speaking even more animatedly than usual. "Can you imagine what the temptation must have been to just tell someone, or to leave a note or something? But he never did because he knew it would risk the whole plan. That's real strength of character."

Charlie laughed. "You do know that you don't have to convince anyone anymore, right? Everyone knows he was a hero."

"I know," she replied, blushing a little. "It's just, every time I think about it" She turned to Harry. "How is he doing now?"

"He's fine. Really. For the longest time we weren't sure whether he'd ever recover fully, but he has. He's healthy, and his magic is as strong as ever." He gave Hermione a quizzical look. "Is that why you came here? You want his help in solving those mysteries of yours?"

"No! I came here for your birthday." Her feigned indignation matched his teasing.

"But you do want to see him," he replied with a smile.

"Eventually, I might. Not yet. I need to know what to ask him first, and that's going to take a lot more research. There is one favour you could do me, though."

His smile broadened. "What's that?"

"I need to get into the Guild archives, and I can't get permission to use them without explaining what I'm up to."

"So you want the cloak."

"Just for a little while. Would you mind?"

Harry chuckled at her transparency; Hermione was incapable of subterfuge. "There's not much point in owning it if it's just going to sit on a shelf. I'll send an owl with it tomorrow."

"Thanks, Harry. You're the best."

When the conversation finally wound down, Charlie walked Hermione outside. "Want to come back to my place for a bit?"

"I can't. The House Mistress gets up pretty early. I have to make sure I'm in before she notices me missing."

"You know, it's ridiculous for a twenty-four-year-old woman to have bed checks."

"Yes. But they don't exactly know I'm a twenty-four-year-old woman, do they?"

"Next Sunday then?"

"Unless I get in trouble about tonight. I'll let you know."

She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and a squeeze of his bum before Disapparating.

Chapter Two: A Journeyman's Life

Chapter 3 of 4

Hermione is eager to get on with her investigations, but her obligations as a Journeyman have to come first.

A/N: This story is immeasurably improved by the beta efforts of Bambu345 and sshg316. I also want to thank Kribu for her generosity in sharing her knowledge and photographs of Tallinn.

And sshg316 made this gorgeous banner:



A note from the publishers: Due to the unexpectedly broad readership this story has enjoyed, we have decided to issue a special edition for the Muggle market. The story itself is unchanged, but the noted historian, Calpurnia Bagshot, has added notes at the end to explain some of the less familiar aspects of our culture and history to our Muggle readers. As a half-blood, raised in both the wizarding and Muggle worlds, she is an ideal interpreter, and her recent work on the history of the Potions Guild was widely acclaimed in the wizarding world for both scholarship and readability.

Despite the time difference, it was still dark in Tallinn when Hermione Apparated back after the party. Even so, she was cautious, taking no chance of being caught out at night without permission. Making her way quietly past nondescript concrete housing units and into the Muggle old city, she followed the winding cobblestone roads to the Muggle town square and up the side-street to the building that housed the old apothecary. Two pulls to the left and three to the right on the curved brass handle and the brightly painted outer doors swung open. Climbing the steps into the building, she passed the locked door of the apothecary and made her way down the hallway to an alcove tucked neatly behind the bend in a winding staircase. Once inside, where she would be invisible to anyone casually walking by, she traced the whorls of the rosette embedded in the wall once clockwise, twice counterclockwise opening the archway to the magical town square, the second lobe of the heart of Old Tallinn.

While the Muggle town square shone brightly with the light of electric bulbs, the magical one was dark. It had once been lit by the glowing facade of the Guild Hall Hermione knew that much but since the magic of the Hall had faded, the square that surrounded it, lined with the great Guild Houses, depended on the whims of the heavens for illumination.

Using a Silencing Charm and a Disillusionment Spell to cross the square without being noticed, Hermione let herself into Dunford House and wearily climbed the stairs to her room. At the House, days started early, and she had barely an hour to rest before having to drag herself back out of bed.

Hermione struggled sleepily into her clothes, fumbling with the buttons of the fine, linen chainse shirt and the high-necked, button-up tunic that was the uniform of all brewers. As a Journeyman, her tunic was a doublet in the blue and white of her House colours, with slashed sleeves showing the fabric of the shirt beneath. Boots and black trousers completed the outfit, along with the Glamour that kept her sex a secret. She poured a blob of her own conditioning formulation into the palm of one hand, rubbed her hands together to warm it and then finger-combed it through her hair. It wasn't nearly as effective as Sleakeazy's Potion, but it took much less effort to apply, didn't make her smell like a girl and tamed the worst of the frizz. With her hair cut short, unless she put something in it, her head looked like a giant dandelion puff at the slightest hint of humidity. When her best friends in the world had been a pair of teen-aged boys, she'd never noticed that they were as vain in their own ways as teen-aged girls, but she'd learnt quickly when she started living as one.

First thing every weekday morning, Hermione and the other Journeymen met with Potion Master Dunford in the gather room. They slumped half asleep on the comfortable sofas and overstuffed chairs of the House's informal sitting area to discuss the day's plans while the House Mistress directed the apprentices in getting the morning meal organised. Being a weekday, it was nothing more than a simple *petit dejeuner*, but with so many people to serve, it was still a logistical exercise. That day, as usual, the

apprentices spent an hour doing housecleaning before they went to the lower-lab to prepare ingredients under the supervision of the House Mistress. Like all well designed potions labs, it was located underground, where fumes from botched experiments could be easily contained. Dungeons were, of course, ideal, but the Guild Houses had deep basements, descending several floors below the ground, that served just as well.

As a Journeyman, Hermione was excused from most household duties. Instead, she started her day with a seminar on the relative merits of different methods for stabilising the essences of rapidly-deteriorating botanicals, after which the Potion Master supervised the Journeymen in the upper lab as they applied the methods to a variety of ingredients and then discussed the outcomes of their experiments. Hermione offered up a silent *thank you* to Severus for having taken her through the same exercise years earlier; her foreknowledge of the subject saved her from making foolish errors when her attention wandered due to exhaustion.

She was spending yet another of her scarce days off brewing yet another batch of Pepperup potion for Harry and Professor Snape, when it occurred to her that it might be more effective if she used Mandrake root instead of chopped ginger. It wouldn't last as long, of course, but at the rate the two men were consuming the restorative, that was hardly an issue. Pepperup was the only thing they had found that affected their energy levels, granting Professor Snape the strength to get out of bed for a few hours each day and extending Harry's ability to function. The potion worked that day but was useless by the next after the Mandrake root began to decay. She had to take a few hours off of work to brew them another batch. By the time she was finished, Professor Snape had a shopping list for her.

"I don't understand. Most of these would be useless in a restorative potion."

"Principles, Miss Granger. If you are going to experiment with altering potion recipes, you must understand the principles."

On her next visit, while the Pepperup was brewing, she brought an armchair into the potions lab in the basement of Professor Snape's house. He sat and watched her prepare Mandrake root in three types of infusions, two suspensions, and four emulsions. The following week, it was Screechsnap, which she further prepared in both dried and desiccated forms while they discussed which form of the Mandrake would work best in a restorative potion. On the third week, she repeated the exercise with sneezewort while they altered the Pepperup, using one of the infusions she had prepared the week before. The new formulation was successful, noticeably increasing both Harry and Professor Snape's alertness. It wasn't a cure, but it was something.

"Congratulations, Miss Granger."

"I didn't do anything. My efforts were a disaster. All the credit goes to you."

"On the contrary. The creative impulse was yours. With proper training, you might have become a competent brewer."

She hid her elation at the compliment unheard of praise from the one teacher she had never before managed to impress storing it away for later and focusing on the qualification instead. "Might have?"

"You are too old and of the incorrect sex and parentage."

She decided, at that moment, to prove him wrong.

Hermione finished off her last infusion of Mandrake root by the grace of Severus' earlier teaching and then skipped dinner, claiming that she had just had an idea for a research project that she wanted to make some notes on before she forgot it. The House Mistress looked at her askance, but Dunford waved her away, excusing her from both the main meal of the day and the after-dinner discourse.

"Inspiration must never be wasted," he declared to all and sundry. "It is a precious gift that must be treasured." The apprentices and Journeymen all accepted this declaration with solemn faces, but the House Mistress snorted and her daughters giggled. The girls knew well that their father had never in his life allowed mere inspiration to tempt him away from the table.

Hermione dragged herself up to her room and managed two full hours of sleep before she was awoken by the spluttering indignation of a plastic dwarf, scolding her for oversleeping. The previous Christmas, Harry had bought memorabilia from the Muggle films of Lord of the Rings books for all of his gifts. Hers had been a Gimli figurine, Charmed to function as an alarm clock. The extra rest had served her far better than food would have, and she faced the afternoon's tasks in considerably better shape than she had the morning's. This was a good thing, considering the risks inherent in her duties that day.

Supervising the junior apprentices was generally recognised to be the most dangerous of the Journeyman's responsibilities. The senior apprentices could be counted on not to spill, corrode, explode or flame anything they were not supposed to. While the potions the juniors brewed were not all that complex, they were still early enough in their training that accidents were a regular occurrence. On the days she spent watching over the juniors, Hermione vacillated between playing at being Alastor "Constant Vigilance" Moody and Severus "Curse the Dunderheads" Snape.

Fortunately, Hermione was teamed that day with Claude Pyrites, who was on journey from the House of Chatillon. Hermione found the term "journey" somewhat comical, considering that Chatillon was just next door, but a Journeyman has to journey for learning, no matter how short the actual distance. When an overly vigorous bubble created an orange-tinted cloud of smoke which hovered over the workbenches, he merely sniffed the air and said, "A hint of somnolent quandong overlaying deep notes of Asian Pepperberry and musky groundnut, with just a wisp of dried Murlap."

"Are you a Nose?" asked the wide-eyed apprentice, looking up from his frantic efforts to clean every last splattered drop from the floor before the Potion Master noticed the disturbance. It was rare that Dunford looked into the lower lab unless his attention was drawn there by the sound of an explosion or a cry of distress, but there was always the chance that he would glance down from the balcony-like upper lab to see what was happening below. Even the newest apprentice knew better than to risk appearing incompetent in front of the Potion Master; an apprentice who failed to impress would soon be sent home in disgrace.

"But of course! I am French, and all Frenchmen are Noses."

Hermione had to hold the counter to stop herself from knocking over the cauldron in her efforts to suppress her laughter. Claude loved mocking the pretentiousness of his countrymen, particularly those at the Guild who seemed to be indoctrinated at birth with the belief that they alone possessed the finesse to create the super-refined cosmetic potions which were the speciality of Chatillon House. He had an ability to skewer that particularly French form of smug superiority that had always irritated her about Fleur. Coming from a plump, plain boy with a snub nose and a pathological inability to keep either his tunic or his face straight, it amused rather than annoyed. Besides which, while Claude was a talented brewer and a good friend, he was hardly a Nose. That talent, the ability to detect every ingredient in a potion along with the method of brewing by scent alone, was nearly as rare as Invisibility Cloaks.

They had met some months earlier when Hermione had been on one of her journeys, studying at Chatillon House to improve her understanding of the ways that potions act on skin for use in treatment of scarring. It had been her suggestion that Claude include Dunford House in his training. Despite his House affiliation and the wishes of his family, the young man was less interested in improving the looks of the wealthy than in seeking the possibilities of longer term solutions to serious appearance issues. The specialty medical training provided by Dunford House would help him make face creams that did more than just soothe away the occasional spot of dryness brought on by excessive exposure to tropical sun. Hermione had found a kindred spirit in the deeply studious but sardonically amusing Journeyman.

Nevertheless, she couldn't help the occasional envious glance to the upper lab where the rest of the Journeymen were directing the senior apprentices. Supervising the senior apprentices was both less hazardous and more interesting. Despite their greater skill level, the seniors got much higher levels of supervision, with one Journeyman directing no more than three apprentices in their brewing and the Potion Master wandering from group to group, keeping a sharp eye on their work. As each group finished, the Potion Master himself evaluated their potions, carefully labeling and recording all those of acceptable quality; a House that could not reliably produce quantities of salable potions would soon find itself in dire financial straits. A senior apprentice who produced a first-rate potion was treated as a Journeyman for the remainder of the day, with no further obligations, while the rest joined the junior apprentices in cleaning up the lab and preparing and cleaning up after tea.

Still feeling her lack of sleep from the night before, Hermione spent her free time before tea resting and went to bed again directly after the evening meal. She promised herself that she would begin her research on the mysteries of the Guild the next day.

The next day, however, the usual routine of the House was broken, and Hermione had no time to get away and begin her research. The morning tasks were much like those of the day before, but just when they were preparing to sit down for dinner, chaos erupted. A runner from the Reval Hospice burst into the front hallway to announce that there had been a fight between the Houses of Sunjata and Mbele. This was hardly an unusual occurrence. Members of those particular Houses fought often they shared one of the fiercer rivalries within the Guild but this fight had been more serious than most. Instead of a backstreet brawl, the confrontation had taken place in the wizarding town square itself. While the members of Dunford House had been in the potions labs and the kitchens, all located well below the street level and sheltered from outside noise, members of the belligerent forces had called in reinforcements from their own Houses. What had started as a simple street-fight turned into a wild free-for-all. In a typical encounter, the absence of wands meant that injuries were simple rather than magical, but this time there was sufficient confusion to cover the use of weaponate potions.

Before the runner even finished his report, the House Mistress had sent her daughters to the kitchens to put away the food and begun to distribute the formal, summer-weight cloaks. Emergency or not, the House of Dunford would make their showing at the hospice in full House colours.

As they all made their way to the front hall, J.J. grabbed Hermione by the arm and announced, "We'll take the senior apprentices."

"Good. Everyone else, team up five junior apprentices to a pair of Journeymen."

There was a rapid shuffling as groups formed, followed by more shuffling as the Potion Master made certain one of the Journeymen who had trained under him was paired with each of the Journeymen visiting the House on journeys. There were several dirty looks sent J.J.'s way. At the hospice, Hermione soon realised why.

Within moments of entering the main doors of Reval, the sight of the injured lined up waiting to be processed had several of the junior apprentices running back outside to vomit in the street. Visits to the hospice always left Hermione with mixed feelings. While she hated the reminder of the fragility of the human body, it did her good to observe the shocked responses of the juniors to the sight of damaged flesh; she treasured their innocence. This was, however, her first visit since becoming a Journeyman, and she was surprised to realise just how much effort was involved in supervising those innocent juniors. The senior apprentices were accustomed to the sights and sounds of the hospice and needed nothing more than instruction and crowd management, but the other Journeymen had to cope with periodic episodes of panic, fainting and vomiting. J.J.'s quick manoeuvring had bought them the easiest assignment for the days to come.

Hermione exchanged a quick smile with J.J., nodding her thanks.

"Gotta take care of the new kid," he said with a cheeky grin.

Justin Johnson had been her first friend at the Guild. He was an irrepressibly cheeky American, with a cheerfully mischievous disposition and a knack for staying half a step ahead of trouble. A few years ahead of her, he had taken inordinate pride in her accomplishment and claimed full credit for himself when she made Journeyman just one year after he did. Since then, he had made sure they regularly teamed up together.

Hermione followed as J.J. led their group around the hospice, observing in all the wards where combatants were being treated. As specialists in medicinal potions, the members of the House of Dunford were expected to be familiar with the uses of their potions in the treatment of actual injuries, and this fight provided a rare opportunity to observe the actions of salves for burns and deep-bruising and potions for bone knitting, skin regeneration, pustule reduction, personality stabilization and inhalation illness.

As Hermione and her group made their way through the wards, they stopped at each bed where the Healers were working, quizzing the apprentices on the ways in which the various healing potions (most of which had come from their House) were being used. Injuries from weaponate potions were particularly difficult for Healers to identify, as potions were not designed to be splashed on the skin in uncontrolled dosages. The delicate precision required to use potions correctly, without incurring unfortunate side-effects, meant that, when deliberately used incorrectly, most potions could be weaponised.

Finding appropriate treatments depended first and foremost on identifying the potion used. Fortunately, or rather, unfortunately, the Healers at the Reval Hospice were quite familiar with the range of poisons that were the speciality of Sunjata House. The sentience potions of Mbele House, however, had far more unpredictable effects. While simple mind-stealing compounds were easy to identify by the Confunded state of the victims, discerning between overdoses of Far-Seeing potion and Stabilitas-serum, for example, was far more difficult. Beyond that, when potions were used as weapons, side effects, such as burns and allergic reactions, could be as deadly as the intended uses.

As they turned a corner in the corridor leading to the burn ward, Hermione caught sight of someone sneaking into a supply closet. Signaling J.J. to go on without her, she went to investigate. A junior apprentice from the House of Sunjata, identifiable by the bright yellow and red House colours of his sash and the sleeveless grey tabard-style tunic that marked his rank, was attempting to rub a salve into his own back, just above the shoulder-blade, where some sort of burning potion had melted through the fabric of his clothing and left a nasty-looking blister on the skin.

"Why don't you let a Healer have a look at that?" she asked the startled boy, noting the deep, almost blue-black skin tone and fine bone structure that was typical of the West Africans who made up Sunjata House. It was one of the oldest Houses, founded in 1325 by a witchdoctor from the court of the wizard-king Mansa Musa, and it kept to the old ways.

"They're too busy," he explained nervously. "I was told to wait, but it really hurts. This way is quicker, and I don't need to bother anyone."

Hermione checked the salve. "This is for infections, not burns. Wait here and I'll get you something better." She wondered as she set off to get the salve what the boy's real motives were. Hermione was well aware that she was not the only member of the Guild who had to hide their true identity. Some were over-age, others Muggle-born. Most Potion Masters looked the other way, but Sunjata House was known for its strict adherence to ancient custom. It was one of only three Houses that never sent nor received Journeymen, keeping its secrets to itself and accepting only pure-bloods from West Africa as apprentices. Whatever this boy was hiding, the burn was not serious enough that she would force him to submit to the kind of professional medical care that might reveal his secrets to the Master of his House.

It was a simple matter to get a sample of the appropriate salve. When Hermione rejoined her group, she gave J.J. a wink, letting him know that she was up to something. He hung back as she led the apprentices to a loaded medicine cart, opened a jar of burn salve and scooped out a fingerful.

"Who can explain what the colour and luster of this sample tell us about how this has been stored?"

As soon as the question had been answered satisfactorily, J.J. directed the apprentices toward the end of the ward, allowing Hermione to slip away without anyone noticing that she hadn't cleaned her finger. When she got back to the supply closet, the injured apprentice gave an audible sigh of relief.

"I don't know how to thank you."

"No need. Just try to be careful."

"I will."

The members of Dunford House spent the better part of four days at Reval, observing the progression from emergency care through to the healing of minor injuries and the beginning of longer-term treatment programs. During mealtimes, Dunford alternately lectured and quizzed his charges on the ways in which the activities at the hospice demonstrated uses of the various potions. While it was certainly more exciting than the usual routine, it also meant that Hermione had no chance to get away on her own, and when the Guild Hall was locked that Friday evening, Hermione had still not managed to sneak in to get materials to start her research.

Despite her disappointment, Hermione appreciated that the Guild had adopted the modern notion of the weekend; less than a generation earlier, they had still followed the more traditional practice of granting days off from training only for Guild activities and holidays. With regularly scheduled weekends that included entirely free Saturdays, Hermione could schedule her leisure activities, starting with her weekly martial arts class in Muggle Tallinn, followed by shopping (for books, more often than not), games

with her House-mates, excursions to museums and whatever else caught her fancy, while still being able to slip away for an hour or two every couple of weeks to see Charlie. Saturday evenings, most of the House members went out, but Hermione generally stayed in and read.

The second weekend in September, however, was far from typical. It was an intake weekend, and the entire House spent all day Saturday preparing for the likelihood of new arrivals on the morrow. Bedrooms were prepared, lab stations stocked and set up, inventory taken of surplus House garb, formal wear checked over and laid out, and the entire House given a thorough cleaning and polishing. Hermione's favourite part was the airing of the bedding; she thought the entrance hall looked wonderfully festive when draped in the traditional Estonian blankets, with their bright colours and rich embroidery.

That evening, she had just settled down to read in the gather room when J.J. came over and lounged casually on the floor by her feet.

"You gonna be reading long?" he asked her.

"Meaning that you want to know when I'll be in my room so you can sneak back in through my window," she replied, rolling her eyes. "I don't know why you don't just ask properly."

He threw her a cheeky grin. "It's more fun this way. Besides, your eye-sockets need the exercise."

Hermione flipped through her book, assessing how long it would take her to finish reading it. "Two hours, I'd say. Two-and-a-half at the most."

"Awesome. See you then."

She shook her head in mock despair as he bounced out of the room. J.J. was a handsome lad, with big blue eyes and a winsome face that could charm the birds from the trees. The problem was, he knew exactly how good he looked and wasn't above using it to his advantage with the young women of Tallinn. It was, in fact, his penchant for flirtation that had led to their first real meeting.

Hermione's room was tucked under the roof, giving it a slanted outer wall that left precious little headroom, but it was also one of the rare side rooms with a window. It was just a narrow dormer, and it only looked out onto the roof and dormer windows of the next House, but it did let in daylight, for which Hermione was very grateful. J.J. had his own reasons for being grateful for Hermione's window.

It was her tenth night at Dunford House. She was reading in an old armchair she had managed to scrounge from the attic and fix up using transfiguration spells. Suddenly, a body hurtled through her, thankfully open, window.

"Quick. You've got to hide me!"

"Under the bed. That's traditional, I believe."

He eyed the low bed with its flowered yellow cover. "Are you kidding? How am I supposed to get under that?"

"Don't worry, you'll fit."

Sure enough, he slid under with ease, finding himself in a surprisingly large space, surrounded by stacks of books and boxes. He managed to get out of sight just in time before an enraged looking, red-faced man stormed into the room opposite, looked around, and then marched up to the window. "Have you seen the little bastard?" he demanded.

Hermione carefully marked the page in her book and set it aside before replying, giving her a moment to assess the situation. The man glaring at her through their windows must be Potion Master Chatillon, which made him a powerful man in the community and someone she should try not to offend. On the other hand, J.J. was a member of her House, and it was clear that House loyalty was highly valued. "I'm sorry? Who did you mean?"

"That American boy. Calls himself Jason or some such thing. Have you seen him?"

"Oh. You mean Justin. Senior apprentice, tall, sandy brown hair, blue eyes?"

"That is the one. Which way did he go?"

"I'm sorry. I haven't seen him since dinner. He didn't come this way."

She waited until the retreating Potion Master had slammed the door behind him and she could no longer hear his angry stomping. "You can come out now."

J.J. emerged looking not at all chagrined. "Cool bed. How'd you rate a Charmed storage space?"

Hermione shrugged. "Aren't they all like that? It didn't occur to me it was anything special." She was, of course, lying. Having been forewarned by Severus that joining the Guild would mean giving up her wand, she had brought an extra with her, which she had duly handed over when she was accepted into the House. Her true wand she kept strapped to her left forearm, where she could draw it out with ease if the need arose, but well-covered by the long, billowing sleeves of the apprentice's garb. It had come in quite handy in arranging her tiny room to suit her liking for order, keeping most of her belongings tucked away neatly, not to mention concealing her regular clothing and feminine items. She mentally kicked herself for being so careless as to have revealed her secret hiding place. At this rate, she wouldn't last six months before being forced to leave the Guild.

J.J. didn't seem to have noticed her moment of uneasiness. "Thanks for saving my ass. That was a close one."

"Do I want to know what I rescued you from? Or will it make me an accomplice to something that will get me into trouble? I'd rather not be expelled after less than two weeks."

"Would you believe me if I said I've been robbing banks?"

"Since you're dressed in House colours and not carrying a bag of loot, probably not."

He was one of those people who chuckle with their whole bodies, his head thrown back and his shoulders and belly shaking. "I love that dry English wit. You'll be fun to have around."

Hermione just raised an eyebrow.

"Nothing terrible. I was just goofing around with a girl."

"Goofing around?"

"Yeah. You know. More than eye contact but less than sex. I wouldn't go that far with a Potion Master's daughter, they'd string you up by your balls if they caught you. Just

having some fun." He kicked off his shoes and lay on her bed, propped up on one elbow. "English, huh? Did you meet them? I mean before it all happened. You know, Harry Potter and his gang. You would have been at Hogwarts with them."

"For a couple of years." The Guild only accepted apprentices between the ages of twelve and fourteen old enough to have taken a year or three of Potions classes, where an aptitude might be discovered, but before the bad habits of lower quality training had a chance to take root. At Severus' suggestion, she had chosen to appear as a fourteen-year old boy. That way, she could be expected to have some skills and would not be required to relearn everything from the beginning. The letter Severus had sent to Dunford, who he himself had trained under, said that Herman Gage had demonstrated an outstanding skill with potions in his first three years at Hogwarts. Other than the change of name, that was, of course, true. They ran a slight risk of discovery if Dunford were to check too closely into events at Hogwarts over the past three years; Severus had only been the Potions professor for the first of those years, having been headmaster the second and incapacitated the third. The last thing Hermione wanted was to be questioned about her Hogwarts years. "I knew who they were. Everyone did."

"Did you get to see any of the war? Were you there when it happened? The big battle?"

"They sent all the younger kids away before the fighting started."

"Still. You were there. What was it like?"

"Why?"

"Are you kidding? It's only the most exciting thing that's happened in the magical world in years. We followed it in the papers, me and my Dad. Read everything we could find, even put colored pins in a map of Britain for every Death Eater sighting."

This was going to have to be stopped, and quickly. Leaving the war behind her had been one of Hermione's reasons for coming to Tallinn in the first place. She shifted uneasily in her chair and looked away furtively. Not too furtively, as if she had something to hide, just enough to seem uncomfortable. "It was ... more exciting from the outside, I guess. I ... don't like to talk about it."

"Oh, shit." He sat straight up. "I'm sorry. You probably lost someone or saw horrible things. I can't believe I'm such an idiot."

"It's all right."

"No. It's not. Look. I like you. I don't want this to be a thing." He got down on one knee on the floor and put his right hand over his heart. "I swear by our House that I will never ask you about the war again. Okay? You can't ask for more than that, right?"

"No, you can't," Hermione replied, trying desperately not to giggle. It reminded her of that comedy show her dad liked, where John Cleese went around saying "Don't mention the war!" She didn't think an American would get the joke. "Are you always so ... dramatic?"

"Pretty much. My sister says it's a pity I'm straight since I'd make such a great drag queen." He held out his hand. "Friends?"

She held out her hand. "Friends," she replied.

"Now. About your name." He jumped back onto her bed, losing his balance as the wooden-slat base bounced more than he had expected. Hermione held her breath, hoping he wouldn't notice yet another of her Charms. She really hadn't planned on having company in her bedroom.

"What about it?"

"Look, I don't know about England, but in the rest of the world? Herman is not a cool name. We're going to have to come up with something else. You have a nickname?"

"Some of my friends call me *Curly*." She pulled at one of her short curls. While some wizards wore their hair long, it was rare among young boys, and Glamours could only do so much. The long tresses she had never managed to control were finally gone, cut off above the shoulder at a length that would work as well in her disguise as a boy as it would for the grown woman she planned to be during her holidays. "For these."

"Yeah, I can see that. *Curly*. Though, you gotta watch out that it doesn't turn into 'Girly'. Some of the boys can be pretty mean, and you're a bit on the small side."

Hermione smiled. "I'm not worried. I can hold my own."

"Course you can." His grin was wide and infectious. "Besides, you'll have me on your side. Between us, we'll take 'em all on."

The very first free afternoon Hermione had, she rented a flat in Muggle Tallinn to store her personal belongings.

...

Sunday mornings were reserved for Guild business. More often than not, that meant a boring convocation, and intake days were only a little different. On the second Sundays in September and March, the town square was filled with applicants hoping to join the Guild. The Houses dressed in formal robes and marched to the Guild Hall in formation. Mounting the front steps, they filed in under the motto of the Guild, carved in stone over the great doors, "SOLVE ET COAGULA Separate and Join Together," and took their stations around the walls, standing facing the empty benches that had been lined up in the centre of the Hall. Having only been founded in the fifteenth century, Dunford House had a place about halfway back from the end of the Hall where the ornately carved and inlaid ebony Seat stood on its dais.

As the applicants entered and took their seats, Hermione remembered her own excitement on the day she had first arrived at the Guild. Looking at the wide eyes and occasional greenish skin-tone of the young boys filling the benches before her, she couldn't help smiling.

"Hey. Look at that one, at the end of the bench." J.J. elbowed her, whispering rather loudly. "Want to bet he passes out before the first speech is over?"

She eyed the young applicant carefully. It was true he looked paler than most, but his hands were fisted tightly in a gesture of determination that she recognised, and as she watched he lifted his head to look up at the brightly painted ribs of the vaulted ceiling. "You're on. The usual?"

"Deal."

Silence fell over the Hall as the aged and fragile Guild Master slowly made his way to the Seat. Hermione had only heard him speak once, and that had been a querulous inquiry as to when he could leave that day's ceremony. The Bearer of the Staff, who was also the Master of Algorab House, acted as his proxy in welcoming the applicants.

The first time Hermione had heard the welcoming speech it had sent shivers down her spine and inspired her to do everything in her power to succeed at the Guild. By now, having heard exactly the same words twice each year for five years, she could have recited it herself. It was still a good speech, but she felt no need to listen. While protocol dictated that they stand perfectly still, so as not to shame their Houses, nothing forced her to actually listen.

"Welcome to the Great Hall of the Guild of the Ancient and Noble Order of Alchemists and Brewers. You stand here this morning, among the lucky few who have been permitted to set foot in this Hall. By nightfall, you will either have been welcomed into our ranks and granted that right for life, or be barred from this hallowed space

forevermore. Ours is, indeed, an ancient and noble heritage. The origins of the study of alchemy are buried in the mists of time.

"In China, it is traced back to 2737 B.C., when the Chinese Emperor Shen Nung was boiling drinking water over an open fire, believing that those who drank boiled water were healthier. Some leaves from a nearby *camellia sinensis* plant floated into the pot. The emperor drank the mixture and declared it gave one "vigor of body, contentment of mind, and determination of purpose." While today we think of tea as a beverage, to the ancient Chinese it was a potent potion. From those simple beginnings, they delved into the medicinal potential of the flora and fauna of their land, discovering the myriad ways they can be processed and preserved to enhance their different properties.

"In India, where wizards still constitute a distinct social class and live among Muggles, the practice of alchemy is recorded in the earliest writings of the Rigveda and the Arthashastra. The Indians delved deep into the ground, seeking out the rare earths that hide beneath the surface. While their potions were, for the most part, simple concoctions, Brahmin brewers developed the knowledge of the uses and qualities of metals, building the lexography of cauldron functions we still use today.

"In ancient Egypt, it was the province of Toth, the ibis-headed god of wisdom, and they called it Khem, a word that meant the earth and all things that come from it. Like the Chinese, their efforts were focused on the plants and animals, and from the rituals of their faith emerged the first insights into techniques of brewing, uncovering the meanings of stirring patterns and the effects of light and season and time. When the wizard warrior Alexander led his people into Egypt and left it to the rule of his brother wizard, Ptolemy, the brewers of the temples of Toth shared their knowledge, and the Greeks called it khemia.

"It was among the followers of the seer Mohammed, though, that alchemy first took the name al-khemia and the form we know today. The Muslims were great collectors of knowledge. They brought together the processed ingredients of the Chinese and the techniques of the Egyptians in the cauldrons of the Indians, discovering new principles of brewing and vastly expanding the catalog of known potions.

"But Alchemy came late to the great states of Europe. For centuries, brewers suffered persecution by the Roman papists, condemned as heretics for seeking knowledge that lay beyond the covers of the one book they deemed as Truth. Our Guild was founded in that time of Darkness. In the year 801, when the wizard hunter Charlemagne was newly allied with the Latins, three brothers fled the Frankish king's oppressive regime and took refuge in this city. They joined the local brewers and formed a secret society, sworn to preserve the knowledge of our craft from the ravages of the ever-expanding Muggle church. So secretive were they that even their names are not known to us, for it was not until 989 that the Guild of the Ancient and Noble Order of Alchemists and Brewers was formally incorporated under the protection of the elders of the city and the Great Hall was built.

"In the early days of the Guild, the members lived within this very building. They brewed in the cellars that now house our archives, slept in the spaces above us that are used today for offices, and ate their meals in this very room. But it was in 1182, under the guidance of Gerard of Cremona, the great wizard who brought the alchemical knowledge of the Muslims to Europe, that it first achieved"

Hermione stifled a yawn. It was the same speech that had sent shivers of delight and awe through her very bones on the day of her induction into the Guild, but after five years and nine renditions, even the part about the Crusader attacks had become profoundly boring. To its merit, the forty-eight minutes remaining in the speech (she had timed it on several occasions) provided her first opportunity for quiet thought in days.

She made use of the time working out her strategy for researching the Guild's present troubles. If she wasn't mistaken, Harry had identified an important correlation. The Guild Hall had been fully functional before Grindelwald's rise and crippled ever since. Had Grindelwald's supporters been active in Estonia? How could she find out? She began mentally reviewing everything she knew about Grindelwald, starting with his childhood association with Albus Dumbledore and ending with his death, and realised to her astonishment just how little she knew of that time period. She had scored an Outstanding in History of Magic in the special NEWTs that Minerva had arranged for her to take, but both the exams and Flitwick's instruction had focused on earlier periods. Having spent most of the week chomping at the bit to get into the Guild archives, she suddenly realised that she needed to start with a basic history text.

Having made a decision, her thoughts drifted, and she began mentally cataloguing the tasks for the coming week. Intakes were serious matters, and neither brewing nor training took place for a full week after while the new apprentices were integrated into their Houses. A similar period of adjustment occurred each June and December when those who believed themselves ready stood for promotion examinations. It was critical that these processes go smoothly, or the Houses would not be prepared for the rituals of rank claiming that occurred on the eves of the great Collection Days each solstice and equinox.

The afternoon of an intake day was one of the rare occasions when the apprentices were free while the Journeymen worked. As soon as the after-dinner cleaning was finished, the younger boys ran off to enjoy themselves in the city, while the older members of the House undertook the serious business of evaluating and processing the applicants who were lined up outside their door. Most had known to bring food, but there were always a few who came to their interviews both nervous and hungry.

For her first experience of the intake process from the inside, Hermione was assigned to escort duty, spending the afternoon shepherding one group of applicants after another through the stages. The object of her bet with J.J., a wide-eyed Scottish boy, was in the first group of three that she brought into the House. Having survived the welcoming ceremony at the Hall, he seemed to be getting his second wind and managed to look nearly confident as his paperwork was reviewed by a pair of Journeymen. Nearly all of the applicants had the appropriate letters of recommendation and certification of their age and pure-blood status; those few who did not were politely escorted back out to the town square.

The rest proceeded to the lower lab where they were asked to brew a simple Calming Draught. This was a far more difficult hurdle. Here, one Journeyman watched and assessed their brewing technique while another peppered them with questions designed to test their knowledge of basic ingredients and methods. Those whose knowledge was insufficient were encouraged to reapply in the next round, but failures of technique merited entry in a black-covered ledger. Those names would never be considered again. Of the first group Hermione brought through, the Scot was the only one who made it to the interview with the Potion Master.

Potion Master Dunford looked over his papers. "Tasgall? That's an unusual name, a brewers name. It means 'cauldron of the gods', if I'm not mistaken."

The boy stood perfectly straight with his hands clasped in front of him as he replied. "Aye, sir. Tha' it does. Me da were here when he were a lad. Always meant me to follow in his footsteps."

"McIslay ... yes, of course. Made Journeyman, if I recall correctly."

"Tha's right. Has his own apothecary in Glasgow now."

"Well, when you write home to tell him you've been accepted, you can give him my best."

"I'll do tha', sir. An' thank ye."

Leaving the new apprentice with the House Mistress to turn over his wand and be assigned quarters, Hermione went back for her next batch of applicants. As always, there were far more of those lined up in front of Dunford House than they could reasonably accept, and, likewise as always, Potion Master Dunford accepted more than he should. When Hermione had joined the House, she was considered unlucky to have a room whose slanted outer wall cut down on her space. Now she was envied, as the full-sized rooms were shared between three, if not four, apprentices, and most of the Journeymen were forced to double up.

The next day, J.J. paid his debt by covering for Hermione while she slipped away. Donning Harry's cloak, she made her way across the town square to wait at the side entrance to the Hall. While it was not uncommon for Journeymen to be sent to the Hall on errands for their Houses, she had no valid excuse for going there that day. When a Journeyman from another House left the building, she nipped in before the door swung shut and made her way to the Guild library beneath the main Hall. Not having much time, she grabbed a few general texts on the history of the Guild and wizarding Tallinn and snuck back to Dunford House without being missed.

Calpurnia Bagshot's notes on the history and culture of the guild:

(1) The old apothecary was built in 1422 to serve both Muggle and wizarding communities and is the oldest continuously operated apothecary in Europe. Having entrances just off both town squares, it served for hundreds of years as one of several conduits between them. With the passage of the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy in

1692, the shop was split into two parts, connected by a doorway that was invisible to Muggles. In 1710, when the city was conquered by Russia, the elders of wizarding Tallinn decided to further restrict access their world and closed down all other approaches to the wizarding city. At that time, the secret door was moved to the hallway to enable passage outside of store hours.



(2) Meals in Dunford House follow the late medieval traditions.

Petit déjeuner is a simple breakfast, consisting of nothing more than tea or coffee (with juice as a modern addition), breads (rolls, croissants, toasted muffins) and spreads such as butter and jams.

Dinner is the main meal of the day, served sometime after midday. At Dunford House, Russian service would generally be used, meaning that large platters of food would be placed on the table, from which diners would select their own food. On a usual day, there would be three courses: fish and soups first, then meats and pies, followed by fruits, cheeses and sweets. A classic Russian service was designed for smaller tables and involved particular foods within each course being placed at designated corners. In a Guild House, where everyone ate at a single long table, the foods would be interspersed much as they are for Hogwarts feasts. Following the meal, the Master would lecture on some aspect of the craft and quiz the Journeymen to test their knowledge.

On formal occasions, a more formal French service is used, in which individual dishes are carried around the table and presented to each diner in turn. At this type of meal, there are five courses. First: fish and soups. Second: prepared meat dishes, such as ragouts, chops and stews. Third: roast meats and pies. Fourth: game and vegetables. Fifth: fruits and sweets.

Tea is the evening meal, also referred to in some places as High Tea. It involves a buffet of cold dishes such as sliced meats and sandwiches, with perhaps a few hot dishes like eggs, vegetables or flavored rice.

(3) Reval Hospice was built at a time when the city itself was known as Reval, named by the Danish who claimed the city in 1219. Until then it had been known as Kluvan, named for the infamous Kalevipoeg, a near-mythic Dark Wizard whose murderous rampages, in which he killed wizards and raped their widows, were [tragically misrepresented by the Muggle peasant-writer Kreutzwald in the nineteenth century as heroic rescues of innocent maidens taken by sorcerers](#). Amongst witches and wizards today, the name of Kalevipoeg is remembered only in the most horrific of children's tales.

(4) Mansa Musa was the ruler of the Mali empire from 1312 to 1337. It was during his famous hajj to Mecca that he first heard of the Most Noble and Ancient Guild of Brewers and Alchemists and sent his chief witchdoctor as an emissary to Reval to learn the secrets of the witchdoctors of the pale northerners. The emissary brought his apprentices with him and founded the House of Sunjata, named for the great-uncle of Mansa Musa who was the first wizard-king of Mali.

Sunjata's father, Maghan, had been a Muggle king of the Mandinka people. A prophecy told him that if he married an ugly woman, their son would be the greatest king the land would ever know, so he took the witch Sologon to wife. When Maghan favoured Sologon's son Sunjata (or Sundiata), even though he was a cripple, Maghan's first wife became jealous and had both mother and son banished from the court. Soon after, the Mandinka were attacked and the royal family wiped out. As he grew, Sunjata's magic compensated for his physical impairment, and he avenged his father's murder, taking back the kingdom of his birthright and expanding it into a mighty empire through a combination of military prowess and magic. He became known as the lion king, and his legend is still celebrated in West Africa by Muggles and wizards alike.

As the only House not named for its founder, the House of Sunjata was never renamed, keeping its original appellation throughout the centuries instead of taking on the names of its successive Potion Masters. It was also unique, at the time of its founding, as the only wizarding Guild House which shared space with a Muggle Guild House. Starting in 1399, when the Brotherhood of the Blackheads was established, the Houses of Sunjata and the Blackheads resided in a single building, with matching entrances on both the wizarding and Muggle town squares. This situation continued until 1599, when the Songhai wizards who had taken over from the Mali, were crushed by a Muggle force from the North. As the people of West Africa turned against their one-time wizard rulers, the wizarding community of West Africa made the decision to sequester itself, retreating into hidden cities buried in the depths of the Sahel. By 1607, the House of Sunjata chose to follow the practice of their homeland and severed their connection with the Brotherhood of the Blackheads. Today, the only remaining reminders of that nearly forgotten connection are engraved into the tympana over the doors of the two Houses: matching portraits of the lion king himself, which you see here:





(5) It is rare that a historian can find a record of a personal artifact that figured in the story of one of their subjects in the days before they achieved fame. In my research of the material culture of the Guild, I discovered that a photograph of the very bed cover that the Potion Mistress slept under as an apprentice and Journeyman has been posted to the internet as an example of traditional Estonian design. The bed in the photo is not the one she slept in, but is of a similar character. It is available at the following web address:

<http://search.fotki.com/?link=wqbdwqtdwdrqtdxwrskqtkrks&k=tallinn&p=94>

Chapter Three: Too Close to the Fire

Chapter 4 of 4

A woman with a secret is always at risk of exposure, and Hermione knows a thing or two about being burnt.

A/N: I am incredibly lucky to have an amazing team of friends helping me with this story. Bambu345 and Sshg316 are brilliant betas who clean and polish my prose and story. Kribu generously shares both her knowledge and photos of Tallinn, including several of the images below. And now, Camillo1978 has added her skills as a Britpicker to mask my blatantly American use of language. Any remaining errors are entirely my own fault.

Rising before the sun, Hermione moved quickly and silently through the dark House. Years of practice made it possible for her to manoeuvre undetected to the rear entrance, from where she made her way through narrow, cobble-stoned back streets to the apothecary and on to Muggle Tallinn, following the same path she took every weekday morning. Stopping at her flat long enough to change and grab her hand-weights, she Apparated to the far end of Pirita Drive, where it met the river, and began to run along the tree-lined walkway that followed the road, measuring her distance by counting the lampposts as she passed them.

Ever since that horrible night in Malfoy Manor, Hermione had felt the need to be able to defend herself, not just with a wand, but with her own body. As soon as her schedule had permitted, she had taken up karate, joining two different dojos and practicing on her own whenever she found a spare hour. Realistically, she knew that no degree of skill or martial prowess would have saved her from the torture, but she would have made it cost those Death Eaters a bit of pain first. Besides, realism had little to do with it; the classes made her feel safer, more in control, and since she'd started them, her nightmares had been less frequent.

Martial arts techniques alone, however, were not enough. She felt the need for both strength and stamina. Running gave her those.

It also gave her something else, something that came in very handy in maintaining her disguise at the Guild. Within a few months of beginning her exercise regime, she had stopped menstruating. The long months camping out with Harry and Ron had left her almost lean enough to pass for a boy without using a Glamour. Strenuous exercise and eating parsimoniously kept her natural curves from coming back, while the extra strength helped to maintain the illusion of masculinity.

The first greying hints of predawn were beginning to lighten the sky when the road left the sea to take her through Kadrioru Park and into the city. She continued running until she reached her flat, where she showered and changed back into her Journeyman's garb before heading back to the House.

"I'm not late, am I, House Mistress?" Hermione was usually very careful to get back to the House before anyone was up and about, but she'd been thinking about her research into the Guild's history while she showered and had lingered longer than usual.

"Not at all. I was just about to sound the wake-up."

The House Mistress, along with her daughters, knew all about Hermione's early morning workouts. The life of an apprentice was stifling for a teen-aged male, and in the absence of parental influences, it was the House Mistress' responsibility to make sure the boys didn't get into any worse than the usual sort of trouble in their free hours. Hermione had learnt this the first time she was caught sneaking back into the House in the early morning.

"Come with me."

To Hermione's great surprise, the House Mistress led her, not to the Potion Master as she expected, but down to the kitchens.

"You're a coffee drinker in the mornings, aren't you?" the House Mistress asked unnecessarily, as she poured two cups, adding only a dollop of skimmed milk to Hermione's, exactly as she preferred it.

"Yes, Mistress." Hermione was startled to realise her habits had been observed so closely.

They perched on the high stools that surrounded the massive workbench. The previous afternoon, Hermione had spent a long hour peeling potatoes at that very bench. Now that it was clean, she could see how the wood was softened and worn from years of scrubbing. "So am I. It's a good start to the day."

This was obviously Hermione's cue. "I like to start my day with a run."

"Very healthy. Is there a particular reason why you want to keep it secret?"

Somehow, Hermione suspected that neither "To stop my vaginal bleeding," nor "To keep my real body from being too much different from the one you see," would be

acceptable answers, and "In case I have to flee for my life from the monsters that populate my nightmares," would only raise more questions.

"I'm small for my age. Sometimes I get picked on. If no one knows that I work out, then I'm always a little stronger and a little faster than the bullies expect me to be."

That evening when she went to bed, there was a key on her pillow with a note reading, "Back door".

Heading up to her room, Hermione let out a sigh of relief. If the House Mistress had noticed that she was freshly showered and dressed for work, not for exercise, there would have been a lot of awkward questions. It was going to be a difficult enough day as it was without starting things off with an interrogation.

If the day before intake was one of mad preparations, Intake Week itself was one of military-like precision. Those twelve days every year, six each during the Spring and Autumn Intakes, were the only times anyone other than sworn members penetrated the interiors of the Houses. As a Journeyman, Hermione was now one of the people responsible for making sure that they learnt no secrets they could take with them. For the next six days, she would be taking turns with the other Journeymen, shepherding the new kids around the House and answering their questions. The trick, she'd been told, was to make them think she was just there to help them adjust to Guild life.

Before breakfast, the entire House collected in the gather room, where the furniture had been pushed against the walls, leaving space for them to line up in their ranks. Having only recently attained Journeyman status, Hermione stood in the second row, most of her view of the proceedings blocked by her taller, more senior colleagues.

One after another the Potion Master called the names of the new applicants and welcomed them to the House.

"Tasgall Mclslay."

Hermione smiled as the little Scottish boy stepped forward. He reminded her of Colin Creevey at that age, all wide-eyed eagerness and wonderment.

"Have you come to this House of your own free will, with no motive other than to learn what we can teach you and to join in our communion?"

"That I have."

"Do you come unfettered by other obligations, free to take the oath that will bind your loyalties to this House, this Guild and the sacred traditions of our Profession?"

"Aye, I do."

"Journeyman Gage."

A muted reaction rippled across the room.

Hermione squeezed between the two Journeymen in front of her to stand in front of Dunford.

"Will you take this applicant as postulant, to guide in the ways of our House, our Guild and our Profession?"

"I will," she replied.

Dunford turned to Tasgall. "Journeyman Gage is your Alder. You will look to him for guidance in all things and serve him as he requires. He will be responsible for your training, it is on his word alone that you succeed or fail, and you will owe him your fealty for so long as you both live and serve the Ancient and Noble Order of Alchemists and Brewers. Do you accept this service?"

"Aye, I do."

A shiver ran down Hermione's spine. Postulants were usually assigned to more senior Journeymen; it had not occurred to her that she would be made Alder so early in her career. Up until that moment, there had been no one who would suffer adversely if her deception was revealed. Now there was another career tied to hers, giving her obligations she might not be able to fulfil. Not that her own Alder had ever done much for her. He'd left the House to open his own Apothecary a scant few months after she was assigned to him, and she'd only seen him since then when he'd shown up to play his role in her ascensions. Not that she minded. Crivens was a nice enough man, and she didn't begrudge him his tenth share of the tithe she paid the House.

As a newly assigned Alder, Hermione's week was spent with Tasgall, making sure that he was never allowed to so much as visit the loo on his own and monitoring every space he entered, every word he overheard, and every conversation he held. Of course, she had to do this without frightening him with a false impression of an overly regimented life-style.

While the rest of the House went into breakfast, Dunford pulled Hermione and the other new Alder, a Canadian called Davvy Grieg, aside. "Watch how the others manage their postulants, and let me know if you have any trouble. Whatever you do, don't panic. The worst that can happen is that a postulant needs to be given a light Obliviation. Grieg, you'll have observed this process before, correct?"

Davy nodded.

Dunford turned to Hermione. "It's early for you, but I think you can handle it. Prove me right." With that, he went into the refectory, leaving Hermione no more confident in her task than she'd been before his little pep talk.

"Nothing like being thrown straight into the deep end, eh?"

She smiled wryly at Davvy. "Headfirst with my hands tied behind my back."

"You'll be fine, keener like you."

He'd called her that before, Canadian for 'swot' she gathered, but this time there was a bit of an edge. Not that she'd let it bother her. If he resented her for being made Alder so quickly, that was his problem.

Being Tasgall's Alder was time-consuming and more than a little stressful, but it did mean that Hermione was exempt from overseeing level exams. These were given during Intake Weeks to avoid any actual brewing in front of the postulants that might reveal proprietary techniques and recipes. Starting after breakfast on Monday morning, the apprentices admitted in the last intake reported to the upper lab for the first stage test. For five days, Hermione supervised Tasgall and others in preparing the ingredients needed for the tests, while nervous apprentices marched up the steep stone stairs as their names were called, remaining in the upper lab for as many stages as they could pass before trudging wearily back down.

By the time she left Tasgall in the kitchen under the House Mistress' supervision to help prepare the evening tea, Hermione's fingers were sore from being twisted together behind her back, the tendons in her neck hurt from tensing her shoulders, and she had a headache of monumental proportions. She barely managed a half-smile as she entered the gather room along with the other Journeymen to wait till dinner was served. Lined up on a side table was an array of full potion vials.

J.J. laughed at her expression. "Step right up! We've got pink for pain," he said waving a particularly lurid vial in her direction, "blue for bruises, and oddly enough, purple for tension. Pick your poison."

"One of each, please," she answered, collapsing into an armchair. "How did you know?"

"Not me. The House Mistress left them for us. What? Tell me you didn't think you were the only one who got stressed by all this."

Before Hermione had time to answer, Grieg entered the room and headed straight for the tableful of vials.

"Praise Merlin I'm in Dunford House," he said.

"Why?"

"Oh, that's right. It's your first time. Healing house, healing potions. They don't have these at some of the others."

Hermione jumped on the chance to hear about the other Houses, and the hour sped by in a welter of anecdotes. After tea was finished and Tasgall safely ensconced in the warded dorter where postulants stayed until they became full apprentices, she returned to the gather room with one of the books she'd found in the Guild library, its cover disguised with a simple charm to prevent any awkward questions about how she'd got it. As she settled in for a quiet read, J.J. draped himself across the back of her armchair.

"You know, you'd be much more comfortable reading in your own room."

Without lifting her head from her book, she replied, "By which you mean that you'll be sneaking out and want to be sure my window will be open when you get back."

J.J. had long since moved on from Chatillon's daughter but he still found it convenient to return from his trysts via Hermione's window, making it much less likely that his nocturnal activities would be noticed by the House Mistress. While Hermione had tried using the window as an exit once herself, her fear of heights had driven her back to her room before she made it to the street.

"Of course. Will it?"

"You can go out for an hour but not much more. I need my sleep tonight."

As it happened, she was back in her room in well under an hour. Whoever had written the book she'd chosen was prone to long, irrelevant recitations of widely known historical facts, and she'd learnt nothing useful. Instead of reading, her thoughts drifted back to the day she and J.J. had become friends.

It was her second week in the Guild. Ever since the night he'd hurtled through her window, J.J. had taken to showing her around, playing a sort of older brother, mentoring role. It was Saturday afternoon, their free time, and he'd promised to take her to the best sweet shop in Muggle Tallinn.

"You're going to love it," he said as they made their way through the back streets. "They do this awesome treacle fudge that ..."

As they rounded the corner, his voice trickled off. There were three boys lined up across the cobbled road, dressed in the red and white of Karsten House. It only took Hermione one glance to see that they bore the collar pips of senior apprentices and that they were all a bit flushed. The reek of firewhisky explained why.

"Brought us fresh meat, did you, little Dunny?" asked the one in the middle.

Hermione shifted her feet into a wider stance as she noted two more, similarly dressed boys, moving in behind them.

"We're not looking for trouble. Just headed for Katariina passage," J.J. answered in a casual tone. "Tell you what. I've got a few extra florins this week. I'll treat you all to some fudge."

"Fudge?" asked the leader. "You think we'd eat Dunny fudge? Maybe we'd rather pack it ... in your little friend's arse!" He reached for Hermione, only to land hard on the uneven stones as she grabbed his arm and flipped him over her shoulder.

The next few minutes were chaos, as the four other Karsten House boys attacked. Hermione took one more down with a roundhouse kick to the side of his head, but couldn't recover her balance in time to stop another from throwing her to the ground. As she scrambled to her feet, J.J. landed hard on top of her, knocking her back down. He was up again and swinging with his fists as she caught her breath, then she lashed out with her legs and brought his opponent crashing down. By the time she got back up, the others were regrouping.

Grabbing her by the sleeve, J.J. said, "Run!" and they took off for the Apothecary and out into Muggle Tallinn. J.J. led her away from the town square, through the Katariina passage and out the nearby Viru gate, where he collapsed on the nearby grass. "We're safe now. Hansas aren't allowed out of the old city; afraid all the modern stuff will taint them."

Hermione breathed in the scent of the flowering white lilac by the gate before asking, "'Hansas'?"

"Karsten House is one of the last of the old Hansa Houses, from back when the Guild was just the Hanseatic League. Most Houses changed hands long ago, but Karsten's kept itself 'pure'." His sarcastic tone left little doubt of his feelings about that sort of purity.

"I see. Should we tell the City Watch?"

J.J. sat up and crossed his legs. "You're going to have to be more careful. Guys don't do that, going to the cops when no one got hurt. It's a dead giveaway."

Hermione kept her composure, but her heart was racing. "I don't know what you mean."

"Back there in the fight, when I landed on you, there was something that shouldn't have been there. Two somethings."

Glamours could hide appearance, but short of living on Polyjuice, there was nothing she could do to disguise her breasts from touch. "Are you going to tell anyone?"

He stared out at the busy roadway in front of them. "Did I ever tell you who my favorite is, of all the war heroes?"

"Harry Potter, of course."

"Nah. Most people go for Potter. Me? I've read everything I could get my hands on about Hermione Granger. At the end of the war, when everyone else was celebrating, do you know what she did?"

"Why don't you tell me?"

"She worked with burn victims. Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom and all the others went around getting awards and making speeches, but she didn't do any of that stuff. Too busy saving lives. She's kinda my inspiration. I mean, brewers, we don't get famous, but what we do? It saves lives. No big limelight, no fancy awards, just, you know, making a difference. Like she did. That's real heroism, for me anyway." He stood up and stretched. "My sister studied here. Just for a few years, until she couldn't hide her shape anymore. She's as good as me any day, maybe even better. Someday they'll have to change the rules. Until then, you should meet my tailor."

"I beg your pardon?" The sudden change of subject caught her off guard.

"My tailor. He's amazing. My sister swears she got a full extra year in because of his cutting. He could make Dunford look built, if he tried. It should be safe now; I'll take

you to his shop."

As they walked together, Hermione's thoughts drifted back to that time just after the Battle. She'd been overworked and short-tempered and too cranky to bother with all the festivities, despite Harry's best efforts to drag her out for some fun. It hadn't felt heroic; more like drudgery.

"So, what's your real name?"

J.J.'s question broke her from her reverie. "I'd prefer not to say. I don't want to be rude, really I don't? But it's going to be difficult enough pretending as it is I think I need to keep it up all the time. The more you know about the real me, the more likely it is that one of us will slip up. Do you mind if we act like I really am Herman? Even when it's just the two of us?"

"I guess not. Makes sense. One question though."

"What?"

"The way you fight. It's a bit strange for a witch. Was that because of the war?"

So much for not mentioning the war. Hermione picked her words carefully. "You can't always count on your wand in a fight; they're too easy to drop or get broken or taken from you."

"You were right in it, then?"

"It was everywhere. Everyone was in it. And that was two questions. As much as I don't want to talk about who I am, I really, really do not want to discuss what happened in the war. I know how interesting you find it, but that's only because you didn't live it. If we are going to be friends, you are going to have to respect that."

"Yeah. I can do that."

Hermione breathed a quiet sigh of relief. J.J. was a nice kid, and she could see them becoming good friends, but he was also the greatest threat to her secret.

...

"So, who was it this time?" Hermione asked as he clambered into her room a few hours later.

"A Muggle girl, no one you'd know."

"Run out of witches, have you?"

"Nah, but they gossip too much. As long as I only see Muggle girls, Cassie won't find out."

"Cassie? Tell me you are joking. That is the one witch you cannot 'goof around' with. Ever."

Cassiopeia Dunford was the very sharp-tongued youngest daughter of their Potion Master.

"You think I don't know that? She'd dismember any guy who just tried to use her and leave the pieces in the town square."

"Then why do you care if she knows who you're seeing? You've never cared before."

"Because I'm not planning to use her. I'm twenty-one now; it's time to start thinking about settling down, and I plan to settle down with Cassie."

"But you're still sneaking out to see Muggle girls."

"Hey, I'm twenty-one. I have needs. Besides, it's my last chance to play the field; Cassie won't let me get away with anything once we're together."

Hermione just shook her head. "If you get together. She sees right through you, you know."

"That's what's so great about her." He looked at Hermione speculatively. "You know, it's about time you started dating. Unless you're planning on being a guy your whole life. Nineteen is a bit late to be starting."

"I should think so, considering you started using my window as your personal entrance when you were sixteen."

"So. What about it?"

"Sorry, J.J., you're not my type."

He threw her pillow at her. "Not me, you idiot. But seriously, how are ever going to date when you're disguised as a boy."

"Don't worry, I've got it covered."

"How?"

"There's someone. I see him on my afternoons off."

"Who?" J.J. asked disbelievingly.

"No one you know. He's not in the Guild."

"So, tell me about him."

Not bloody likely, thought Hermione. There was no way she could explain to J.J. that she had a highly satisfying, friendly, casual sexual relationship with a thirty-something-year-old man. Somehow, it had never occurred to J.J. that she could be disguising her age as well as her sex.

"He's someone I know from back home. A friend of the family." That was not entirely untrue. While Charlie wasn't actually a friend of her family's, she was a friend of his.

J.J. hesitated. "I ... wasn't sure you still had a family."

"Of course I have a family. Where do you think I spend all my holidays?"

"I didn't know. Not that I haven't wondered, but you're always so close-mouthed about anything to do with your past."

"I have two parents, both living. No siblings. A bunch of friends."

"Why don't you ever talk about them?"

"Because there's nothing to say. They are incredibly ordinary. Now get out and let me get some sleep."

Not that she could sleep. J.J. had reminded her twice that day of the world she'd left. As she lay in her bed under the flowered yellow blanket, the memories came flooding back.

In the aftermath of the Battle of Hogwarts, a group of Death Eaters escaped into the Forbidden Forest. They hid out there for a few days, then descended on Hogsmeade in the early hours of the morning when the villagers were sleeping off the effects of their celebrations. Surrounding a group of houses, they set them on fire, a constant stream of Incendios countering the Aguamenti of those trapped within, keeping the flames going as their victims burned. It was an act of sheer hatred, directed at no one in particular. By the time Aurors arrived, there were four dead and the Healers thought it unlikely any of the other fourteen would survive their injuries.

Severe burns were, of course, a rarity in the wizarding world. The Aguamenti spell was one of the first taught in the sixth year at Hogwarts, at an age when young wizards and witches could reliably count on having enough control to keep a stream of spell-magic steady, and the lesson was repeated several times to ensure thorough familiarity. As a consequence, burn treatment was given low priority in magical medical training.

The injuries of the unfortunate survivors of the attack in Hogsmeade were, thus, far beyond the capabilities of the Healers of St Mungo's, and the already overcrowded hospital, struggling to cope with those injured in the battle itself, could not find space for patients they could not treat. And so, the barely living charred bodies were gently floated to the infirmary at Hogwarts to be kept as comfortable as possible in their final hours as they waited for death to claim them.

These plans were made with the best intentions, but without full command of the facts. There was, in fact, one magical facility that did advanced work on severe burns: the clinic at the dragon reserve in Romania. It was only minutes after the first burn victim was brought into the Hogwarts infirmary when Charlie Weasley burst through doors and started giving out orders. "No pain relief! Sorry, Madam Pomfrey, but you're going to have to trust me on this one. Paralyze them to stop them writhing around and doing more harm, then make sure they're breathing nothing but pure oxygen." He showed her how to adapt the Bubble-Head Charm to the purpose, then turned to Harry and Hermione. "Burn paste. We're going to need a bucket of it. Someone start brewing."

"I'm on it," said Harry. He and Hermione had been visiting Professor Snape or, rather, had been trying to convince Professor Snape to acknowledge their presence. It hadn't gone well, and Harry was eager to be of some use.

"No, wait. You ..." Hermione struggled for the appropriate words.

Harry almost managed a smile. "Are pants at potions? Don't worry, I didn't mean me. I'll just get it organized."

"While you're at it, organize someone to get to a Muggle apothecary. We'll need as much as they can get of these, as quickly as possible." Charlie quickly scrawled a few lines on a bit of parchment.

"I can do that," Hermione offered.

"Not you, love." Charlie winked. "I've got other plans for you."

Those plans turned out to involve assisting him in the work. "I keep hearing how brilliant you are at Charms here's your chance to prove it. Think you're up for a challenge?"

"Yes. But ..."

"But what? I don't have time to waste here."

Hermione squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. "I can do precision work, but ... I've got out of practice ... and it's ..."

"Spit it out, love. What's the problem?"

"I'm having trouble with the stronger spells. Anything that takes real power. If you need that, you should find someone else."

Charlie gave her shoulders a quick squeeze. "Not a problem. You'll be right."

The first victim brought in must have been hit face-on with a wall of flame. Lain on its back, the body looked like nothing more than a human-shaped charred mass. Hermione couldn't even tell if it was a man or a woman. Charlie worked quickly, filling a bath with lukewarm water, then he gently lifted the patient into the bath and immersed them completely, the Bubble-Head Charm making breathing tubes unnecessary.

"Now the real work begins," Charlie said. "Normally, I'd have you do the body work, but that takes a bit more effort. So you're stuck with the tricky part." He placed the small pot of burn salve Madam Pomfrey had on hand beside her and cast a charm that projected an image of the patient's respiratory system directly above the bath. Nearly all of it was blackened and immobile, with just patches of pink tissue contracting and expanding in time with the harsh wheezing sounds. "Nothing but Wingardium Leviosa. Use it to lift out a bit of the paste and, using the image as a guide, slide it along the nasal passages."

As the pea-sized globule entered the patient's nose, its image appeared in the projection, allowing Hermione to see where she was moving it. The pearlescent paste soon turned dark, but in its wake was a path of clean, pink flesh.

"When the ointment gets too dark to see through, dump it in the bucket by your feet and get a new bit," Charlie directed, his attention focused on keeping the bubble and projection charms functioning and gently displacing the water, keeping a clean buffer around the patient's body and collecting the foul, blackened liquid at the bottom and sides of the bath.

It got more difficult as Hermione worked deeper in the lungs. Without pain relief, the patient's breaths were ragged and uneven, making it difficult to keep the ointment in contact with the surface. It was nearly half-an-hour later when Seamus Finnegan staggered in, holding aloft a carrier bag with the distinctive, bright blue Boots logo. "Ran all the way to gate. Apparated there'n back. Ran back here," he gasped.

"Without stopping to remember that the anti-Apparition wards are still down," Madam Pomfrey noted as she took the bag from him and began sorting through its contents.

"Bloody hell." Seamus collapsed dramatically on the floor, rolling away just in time to dodge as yet another victim was brought in.

"Did you get everything?" Charlie asked.

"Not quite. Pharmacist wouldn't give me any antibiotic without a prescription, even Confunded."

"Mr. Finnegan, tell me you did not perform a Confundus Charm on a Muggle pharmacist," Madam Pomfrey demanded.

"Had to, didn't I? They ask questions when you get this stuff." He held up a red packet, crossed with a yellow lightning bolt. "When pain strikes, hit back with the power of Solpadeine!" Figured this was the stuff; looks like it was made for Harry." He turned to Charlie. "I got some antiseptic. Can you use that 'stead of the antibiotic?"

"It'll do for now. Good thinking. Now, go talk to an Auror; they'll go easier on you if you explain before they catch you."

Following Charlie's instructions, Madam Pomfrey thinned the antiseptic ointment and poured it into the bath, then added a potion and several packets of the Solpadeine to a large vat of sterile water. Hermione paused briefly in her work to watch as the nurse efficiently measured out cups of the solution and performed a spell to transfer them into the stomachs of the patients.

"What is that?"

"The potion? It's a simple nutritive. I give it to all my patients who can't eat for themselves; you've had it a time or two yourself. The powder is some kind of Muggle pain relief, I just hope it will work," Madam Pomfrey replied shaking her head.

"They'll need more of that solution every hour," Charlie instructed. "Need to keep their fluids up."

It took most of an hour before the lungs were clear, by which time Hermione could begin to see hints of reddened flesh beneath the external charring of what was now clearly a male figure. The treatment was slow and laborious, though nothing was as bad as that first half-hour when Hermione had avoided looking at the pain-stricken eyes of her patient. The Muggle medicine did its job, making everyone just that little bit more comfortable. Keeping the patient suspended in the bath, the antiseptic solution circulating, and the image of the airways projected were all simple spells, but managing all three at once took a bit of concentration and a fair amount of power. Hermione tried it once, switching roles with Charlie, but she didn't have enough power to keep all three spells going at once, so she stuck with applying the healing potion within the lungs. It was a complicated and delicate process, but less draining. Meanwhile, Madam Pomfrey arranged for nurse-trainees from St. Mungo's to perform the constant rounds of purifying the patients' oxygen and refilling their stomachs with solution.

The first few times each patient was treated, the globules of ointment blackened quickly and needed replacing after covering no more than a scant square inch of tissue. Once the initial cleaning was finished, however, the damaged surfaces quickly became clogged with scabs and pus, requiring regular repetition of the treatment to allow unfettered breathing. To ensure that they were not disturbed in their work, Hermione and Charlie carried out the procedures in the only private room the Hogwarts infirmary possessed the same room that, for security reasons, Severus Snape resided in.

It was their fourth day of treating patients. The work required intense concentration, so they rested for a few minutes between each case.

"Why do you use Muggle medicines? Don't potions work better?"

Charlie paused in his stretches, letting his arms swing free and swivelling his torso back to face Hermione. "Normally, yeah. But when they're this bad, you can't. It overloads their systems and they go into shock."

"But potions are more effective." She was clearly not going to accept his word as definitive. "It just doesn't make sense."

"Think, Miss Granger. How are potions different from spells?" The voice was weak and raspy, but unmistakable.

Peeking cautiously around the curtain that divided the room, Hermione replied. "Professor Snape? We didn't mean to disturb you."

"I am not disturbed, I am bored. This conversation holds some slim promise of distracting me from my otherwise fascinating occupation of intensively studying the ceiling tiles. Now, answer the question."

Hermione opened the curtain partway as she considered the matter carefully. Obviously, he wanted more than the simple distinction between the process of incantation and the application of a physical substance. "I'm not sure. They both involve the use of magic, though the methods of delivery are different."

"Just the methods of delivery? What else is different?"

It took a moment before she got it. "Spells work on anything. They can be used to levitate inanimate objects or attack Muggles. Potions only work on people or creatures that are magical."

"Precisely." There was a polite silence while he wheezed. When he got his breath back, he continued. "What does that tell you?"

"That potions are not magical in and of themselves? They only affect the magic of others?"

"Astounding. It seems, Miss Granger, that there is more to you than book learning. Now, finish the thought."

Flushed with pride at the first compliment she had ever received from the Potions master, she focused intently on the original question. "Charlie said the patients go into shock if they have potions for their skin damage and pain as well as for the internal damage. If the potions stimulate the patients' magic, and these are patients who are already very badly weakened, then multiple potions would diffuse their magical energy."

"Exactly. By using Muggle treatments on the skin and for pain, we're focusing the magical energy on the critical organs." Charlie completed the explanation.

Snape nodded. "It is an ingenious method. In the last war, there were attempts to deal with severe burns by treating only the organs, but the patients invariably experienced severe infections. It seems that Muggle medicine can stave off those complications without draining magical energies."

"That should be points to Gryffindor, don't you think?" Hermione asked Charlie, carefully not looking at Snape.

"Five points for Miss Granger. No more."

"Oi! That's a bit stingy. It's my method," Charlie replied indignantly.

"I will grant you five points each ... if you allow me to observe the procedure."

Charlie and Hermione exchanged grins. "I think that can be arranged."

As the patients improved, Charlie gradually introduced a series of potions targeting the worst problems first. The lung-cleansing process was still needed, but only once or twice a week; in between, they gave treatments to heal the skin and re-grow lost ears and fingers and such. If the patients behaved themselves, that was.

The day Hermione returned to the infirmary from yet another funeral service only to smell cigarette smoke clinging to the skin of a middle-aged male patient and discovered traces of black in lungs that had been nearly healed just days before, the strain and exhaustion caught up with her. Charlie was speechless in his admiration as she raged for a full twenty minutes without once repeating herself or resorting to the use of either hexes or bad language. By the time she had covered the general idiocy of smoking,

the particular idiocy of a burn victim getting a mate to smuggle fags into an infirmary, and the criminal idiocy of the other patients who had witnessed his behaviour and failed to report him, even Snape was impressed enough to comment.

"Really Miss Granger, I had hoped that you'd outgrown your habit of disappointing."

Turning on him with a glower, she demanded to know just what, precisely, he thought he was on about.

"You show great promise as a Healer, but your bedside manner is abominable. I'm afraid you shall have to pursue some other career," he explained.

She was never certain if it was his words or the flat, almost bored way he said them that snapped her out of her fit. All she knew was that one moment she had been shaking with the force of her righteous indignation and the next she was laughing for the first time in weeks.

Charlie put an arm around her, saying, "It was a hell of a performance though. Nearly put Mum to shame there."

Even Snape managed a chuckle when the deservedly maligned patient escaped from the room without waiting to get into his gown.

The mood was broken when Madam Pomfrey stepped into the room, bringing the senior mediwizard in charge of Snape's case with her. There had been innumerable tests and consultations over the past weeks, many of which Hermione and Charlie had heard through the curtain, but the grim looks on the Healers' faces were new.

Charlie went and fetched the next patient, and they worked quietly on their side of the room, trying not to let too much of their attention be drawn to the murmuring of voices from behind the now-drawn curtain. It was fortunate they were on the last treatment of the session and that it turned out to be a quick one. They were just cleaning up for the day when the shouting started. Hermione and Charlie had barely enough time to exchange worried glances when they heard the mediwizard declare he would not be spoken to in that manner. As he stalked past them and out of the room, Hermione peered around the curtain to find Snape and Pomfrey locked in a struggle.

"Will you get out ... of ... my ... way." Severus was gasping to get out the words.

"No, Severus. I will not."

Chest heaving, he collapsed back onto the bed from which he had not been allowed to rise. "So. I am a prisoner here."

"Of course not. But I will not allow you to further endanger your health "

"I have no health to endanger. As there is nothing further you can do for me here, if I am not a prisoner, I am entitled to return to my home."

"And how do you plan to accomplish that, eh? You can barely get out of bed."

"Madame Pomfrey? If the professor would permit it, Charlie and I would be happy to help him to his quarters," Hermione offered.

"Don't be ridiculous, girl. I have no interest in spending one more minute in this castle. I will convalesce in my home, not some draughty pile of rubble, barely held together by aging spells and wishes."

"Dammit, Severus!" Madam Pomfrey was upset enough to raise her voice, an unprecedented event in Hermione's experience. "It's not convalescing when there is no hope for improvement. You need to be cared for, not wasting away on your own."

"Am. I. Free?"

Poppy Pomfrey shook her head, concern etched on her already strained features.

Hermione tried to help Snape out of his bed, but he brushed her aside. "Please, sir. I want to help you."

He grimaced but nodded his acquiescence, and Hermione sent Charlie to get a hover-chair.

"You'll have a full-time carer or I'll drag you back here myself," Madam Pomfrey declared as Hermione and Charlie took her erstwhile patient out of the infirmary.

Snape was quiet, speaking only to give them directions to his house and to lower the wards to allow them entrance.

"Is there somewhere nice we can go?" Hermione asked as she and Charlie left the shabby house at Spinner's End.

"You're hungry?" asked a confused Charlie.

"No. Not a restaurant. Just ... somewhere nice. Somewhere where no one is injured or heartbroken and people who spent twenty years hiding everything good in themselves to help others aren't rewarded with incurable illnesses and I don't have to think about the reports coming out about all the horrible things that happened to Muggle-borns or the mess the Ministry is making of the war crimes trials or ... anything. I'm so tired of it all. Please, Charlie. Is there anywhere nice left in the world?"

"I know one."

He Apparated her to a small, empty, non-descript flat and took her straight to the fireplace. "It's Kogaionon," he said, holding out a pot of Floo powder.

Hermione stepped through the fireplace into a space like none she had ever seen before.

She was in a large room, clearly designed for dining, with long wooden tables and benches, but she barely noticed those. It was the heavily beamed wooden walls and ceiling that caught her attention, covered as they were in bright paintings of scenes from stories of dragons, both historical and mythic. She picked out a panel depicting the crimes of the dragon hunter Christians call Saint George, another of Tiamat giving birth to the first dragons, and even, along one beam, a Hungarian Horntail chasing an egg-carrying wizard with a familiar scar, who turned and waved at her before whipping around to the other side of the beam to slip past his pursuer.

The dozen people sitting in small groups around the room were all staring at her when Charlie stepped out of the fireplace behind her.

"It's all right," he said. "She's with me."

At that, they turned back to their conversations and drinks.

"This is the reserve." It was a statement, not a question.

"Thought you might like to meet my girl."

He took her out of the common house and along a path that led down a grassy hill and along a woven wooden fence. Hermione counted four gates before they stopped and turned into one. It was the first time Charlie had mentioned a woman, and Hermione wondered what she'd be like. She worked on the reserve, obviously, so she'd be fit, probably pretty tough. Then again, Charlie was a Weasley and as friendly and sociable as any of his clan. Someone like Tonks, Hermione decided, as they came over a small rise.

"There she is. What do you think?"

Hermione froze. Not twenty yards away was a full-grown, Australian Opal-Eye dragon, quietly sunning herself. At least, Hermione assumed it was "herself," since Charlie had referred to her as a "she". Hermione was far more interested in backing away without being noticed than in checking for any sort of physical sex markers.

"This is your idea of nice?" she whispered, as she tried to step backwards.

"Trust me," Charlie replied, grabbing her hand and leading her right up to the very relaxed-looking dragon. "This is Illuyanka. You walk up to her and bow, yeah, just like that. Now, you stand right in front of her and let her check you out before you make any moves."

Illuyanka rolled lazily onto her stomach and peered at Hermione, stretching her neck to one side and then the other as she looked the terrified witch over from both sides, before ducking down and rubbing the top of her head against Hermione's shoulder.

Charlie sat beside his familiar, leaving Hermione on her own. "She's accepted you now; you can touch her. Scratch behind her ears, she likes that."

The Opal-Eye's skin was surprisingly warm and soft, and she responded to Hermione's touch with a deep, rumbling sound, not unlike the one Crookshanks made when his tummy was rubbed.

Hermione gasped in shock as a heavily-clawed hand suddenly thrust her to the ground, but recovered when Illuyanka settled her head in Hermione's lap and rolled one, glowing eye towards Hermione's in a clear demand for more scratching. As Charlie lounged against the dragon's undulating rib-cage, Hermione asked, "Why is she letting me do this? I thought dragons were violent."

"Nah. They're only dangerous when they feel threatened or when they're protecting their young. For the Triwizard Tournament? We brought brooding dragons. Kept the real eggs in incubators and gave them enough time with the fake ones that they'd try to protect them."

They sat quietly until the sun began to set and the dragon got to her feet and lumbered off.

"Where is she going?"

Scrambling to his feet, Charlie gave Hermione a hand up. "They sleep in Zalmoxis' Cave. There's a hot spring that runs through the cavern, keeps it warm all year round."

"But, Zalmoxis' Cave has been lost for thousands of years. All the books say so."

Charlie grinned. "Nah. It was never lost, just secret-kept. You'll forget you know about it as soon as you leave."

As they walked back up the hill, Charlie asked, "Nice enough for you?"

"Wonderful. Thank you, Charlie. It was just what I needed. I had no idea dragons could be such peaceful creatures."

"Ready to go back?"

She stopped walking, looking off into the distance at the oddly curved and layered roofs of the huts that dotted the valley. "Not really."

He put an arm around her, a friendly, supportive arm, with just a hint of the possibility of more in the way his hand cradled her hip, his fingertips brushing the subtle curve of her belly. "You can stay if you want."

Turning into his embrace she replied, "I'd like that."

Sex with Charlie was a revelation. Not that she was a virgin she and Ron had celebrated Voldemort's demise and mourned their dead in a night of passionate exploration. It had been everything a first time should be, awkward at first, with a moment or two of embarrassment, then all-consuming. There had been a sense of desperation in the way they'd reached for each other, over and over, as if somehow their coupling would make the victory real and the losses less important, and in between there were tears and reminiscences of the events of the past year. In the morning, sore and tired, they'd shared a smile.

"That was ... a long time coming," Hermione had offered.

He'd smiled again. "You know I love you, yeah?"

"I do. But not that way. It's all right; I don't either."

"It was a great night, though. I'm glad my first time was with you."

"Me too."

Where sex with Ron had been fraught with layers of tension and emotion, sex with Charlie was fun. There was a lot of, "Tell me how you like it," and "Try this," and "What if we?" Mostly, there was a single-minded focus on the pleasure of the moment. It was exactly what she needed.

After five days of escort duty, Hermione had learnt to be grateful for having been made an Alder. While her task had become easier as the days went on, the other Journeymen had become more and more tense.

By Friday, the apprentices all knew their results and were ready to go out and celebrate. Hermione was grateful that each of them had managed to pass at least one stage. An apprentice who failed to progress in a cycle would be given probationary status, if they failed to progress a second time, their apprenticeship ended. While not every apprentice could achieve Journeyman status, it was always preferable when they recognised their own limitations and took their leave with grace rather than being pushed out.

Journeymen, on the other hand, reached the end of the week in a heightened state of anxiety. Those who had not been given postulants to supervise had taken turns administering the examinations, and the final act of the examination drama was the testing of the Journeymen. On Friday afternoon, the apprentices were released early and given the evening off; tradition dictated that those who had advanced the greatest number of stages bought the first rounds, while the applicants, despite their tender years, were expected to indulge in at least a taste of the local brews. Meanwhile, the Journeymen waited nervously in the gather room and prepared to be grilled. They had long since mastered the most intricate techniques of brewing and potion assessment, now it was their skills in assessing brewers that were being measured. The Potion Master had sat in on the apprentices' exams to observe, not the apprentices, but their examiners. With that done, he interviewed each Journeyman in his office, one after

the other, asking each to identify the strengths and weaknesses of every apprentice in the House.

Not having been part of the examination process, Hermione would only have to give her general assessment of the various apprentices, as well as her impression of Tasgall. Nevertheless, the procedure would be the same, and she would still be evaluated on her performance. Hermione had very little idea of what to expect, although she rather suspected that J.J. had indulged in a touch of artistic license when describing the process. If J.J. was to be believed, and Hermione was quite sure that he wasn't, the exam began with the kissing of the hem of the Potion Master's robe, the entire interview was conducted with the Journeyman on his knees with his forehead pressed to the floor, and every poor answer was rewarded with a stinging hex. She'd managed to keep a straight face until he started in on the proper way to exit when the exam was finished (crawling backwards while intoning "Thank you, master").

Davy had snorted. "As if anyone could ever make me grovel."

Privately, Hermione thought of a few who could, but those thoughts didn't belong inside the Guild.

In the event, she found herself sitting comfortably in a leather armchair, sipping tea, and having a perfectly civilised conversation. Dunford's questions were probing, and she had to choose her words carefully, but having survived nearly a year of private tutelage with Severus, it was nothing she couldn't handle.

"There is one more brewer I'd like to discuss, sir." They had completed the roster of the apprentices and applicants, but Hermione wasn't quite finished. "Claude Pyrites."

Dunford frowned. "I hope you don't expect me to share with you my assessment of his work in this House that information is only for his ears and those of his Master but if there is something you think I should know before making that assessment, I'm happy to listen."

"It's not about his assessment, not really, though it is related. The thing is, he has such a talent for healing potions, and he's not at all interested in cosmetics. Isn't there some way he could stay here? Switch Houses?"

"Ah. Sadly, there is nothing I can do." He held up a hand to forestall her protest. "I agree that his talents are not ... as suited as they might be to his current House, but there is currently no means of changing Houses."

"Currently?" Hermione sat forward in her chair. "If there once was, then perhaps we could find a way ..." The sad expression on the Potion Master's shaking head stopped her. "Sir?"

"The only way that a member of the Guild can change their House allegiance is to enter or leave the House of a newly named Potion Master. The rule was set in the 17th century, when a Potion Master was murdered by one of the Alchemists of his own House. It seemed the two had been competitors since they had apprenticed together, and the Alchemist could not bear to serve his rival. There was some fear that an unpopular appointment would result in an empty House, so the rule was set to work both ways; there will always be dissatisfied apprentices willing to chance a new master, allowing the new Potion Master to make up for his losses."

"Then, in the ... current circumstances," Hermione knew better than to explicitly mention what those circumstances were; the subject was never openly discussed "perhaps there should be a new rule. Wouldn't that make sense?"

Once again shaking his head, Dunford replied, "In the ... current circumstances, as you put it, such a rule will not be needed long, will it?"

"No. I suppose not."

With a wry smile, Dunford asked, "Have you chosen your next journey?"

While there was no set rule, most Journeymen spent no more than every second quarter at their own Houses. As much as they owed service to their House, it was the role of a Journeyman to journey.

"Xie," Hermione replied firmly.

"Interesting choice. What is your reasoning?"

"Doesn't every Journeyman want to journey to Xie?"

"Many, not all. And I'll need a better answer before I'll submit a petition," he answered sternly.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione replied. "I believe there may be unexplored medical potential in the work of Xie House. The experiments I've been running, mixing Muggle technologies with traditional potion brewing suggest interesting possibilities, but the Muggle methods mute the effect of magical ingredients. With the power of "

"Enough!" Potion Master Dunford frowned at Hermione. "You know that I have my doubts about that line of research."

"Yes, sir."

He swept his fingers across his lips and grasped his chin. "You are the most promising brewer to enter this house in twenty years. I tell you that, not to flatter you, but as a warning. The last to show such promise insisted on following his own path against my advice, and was lost to us. You know of whom I speak."

Hermione nodded. In all her years at the Guild, this was the first time that Dunford had in any way referred to Severus Snape.

"I will allow you this attempt under one condition. Give me your word that if it fails, you will give up this foolishness."

"You have my word."

"Then I will submit the petition."

...

Calpurnia Bagshot's notes on the text:

[1] Our Muggle readers may be interested to know more about the devastation of the wizarding population of Europe. The following is a general survey of the matter, taken from the introduction to my recent book, *Voldemort Redux: The Second Fall of the Dark Lord* now in its second printing by Obscurus Books:

The 20th century devastated the European wizarding world. Wards and spells that kept Muggle and wizard apart for centuries crumbled under the onslaught of modern warfare. No Disillusionment Charm could stop a bomb or a rampaging squadron of tanks. The innate tendency of magical folk to hide in plain sight, to gather in hidden corners of capital cities, left them vulnerable as war followed war. The greatest destruction came during what the Muggles refer to as the Second World War.

As they had always done in times of turmoil, wizards and witches by the tens of thousands collected in the great schools of London, Dresden, Thessalonika, and Warsaw, and in the Great Hall of the Arithmetic Guild of Zara, and were wiped out as their cities were destroyed. Rural populations, by and large, survived intact the wealthy families with private estates and those who chose quiet lives in remote hamlets but urban ones were decimated, with only the occasional borough, like London's Diagon Alley, escaping the carnage. The only children left were those at the elite academies situated in the isolated fortresses of Beauxbatons, Durmstrang and Hogwarts. Only a few of the major, urban wizarding districts survived, most notably: the Ile Centrale of Paris, located between the Ile de la Cite and the Ile Saint Louis; the Reussplatz of Lucerne; and the Alchemist's Quarter of Tallinn.

As each wave of Muggle destruction ebbed, it was followed by a secondary destruction, one from within the world of magic. The majority of the survivors were those who had already chosen to spurn modern trends and cling to tradition. Few remained of the older mixed-blood families and the Muggle-borns were virtually eliminated. It was this distinction, the brutal severing of the magical community, which spurred the movement for a return to purity. The purebloods began to believe that it was their very purity that had saved them from the carnage. Thus was born the notion that wizardkind must purge itself of Muggle-borns and half-bloods.

In the waning days of the Muggle Second World War, they found a leader in Grindelwald, who preached that Muggles were too dangerous to allow any contact between the Muggle and the magical, and that the wizarding world would only survive as a segregated, pure community. Frightened witches and wizards, terrified by the carnage they had already witnessed, followed him in an orgy of 'cleansing'. Secret tribunals worked around the clock, judging only one crime, that of 'fraternisation with Muggles'. No evidence was required beyond an accusation by a pure-blooded wizard or witch, and only one sentence was ever given out: death. By the time of Grindelwald's defeat, the damage wrought by wizardkind on itself had so severely compounded that of the Muggle war machines that the magical community was nearly wiped out. Across Europe, a vibrant, progressive, magical population of nearly a million souls was reduced in two generations to less than a hundred thousand.

In Eastern Europe, a third wave of destruction came with the Soviet invasions of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Few of the wizarding neighborhoods that survived the initial incursion made it through the sovietisation of the grand, ancient capitals. As elegant, period architecture was bulldozed to make way for concrete blocks, the secret places tucked into the interstices of crenellated cornices were crushed, and their owners made homeless. A new leader arose who promised to keep witches and wizards safe from this latest, rising tide of terror. He called himself Voldemort. His base was not, however, in the East where the horrors were greatest, but in Britain, where distance encouraged perspective. Those who opposed him found a leader in a hero of an earlier age, the great Albus Dumbledore who had led the struggle against Grindelwald. Like all great conflicts, there were moments of despair and moments of heroism, but unlike most, this one was ended by a mere babe.

[2] The secrecy that shrouds the dragon reserve is legendary. From the beginning, when Harvey Ridgebit first proposed the creation of the reserve in 1927, he had hoped to make it an exclusive haven for the magnificent creatures, limiting their human contact to only reserve workers. His request was refused by the members of the Special Committee for the Control of Dragons of the International Confederation of Wizards, made up of the heads of the various departments and bureaus responsible for magical creatures throughout the wizarding world. They insisted that free access by committee members was imperative to ensure that the dragons were properly cared for and that management of such a valuable resource not become corrupted. As the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy had, since 1750, made the concealment of magical creatures a strictly national affair, it was only the seeming impossibility of controlling dragons and preventing them from both revealing themselves to Muggles and crossing national boundaries that had permitted them any sort of international dealings, and they were determined to make the most of the opportunity. While they were all scrupulously exacting in their efforts to capture and deliver all dragons within their territories to the reserve, they were far less scrupulous in their use of their inspectorial authority.

As Ridgebit had expected, "inspections" quickly became frequent occurrences, as members of the Committee brought large entourages of cronies and business associates to ogle the animals. As junkets became more elaborate, they began to strain the finances of the reserve, with guests demanding to be wined and dined in a manner befitting their status. Worse, visitors began to encroach on the dragons themselves. No longer content with merely seeing the animals, "inspectors" and their guests began to insist on entering the enclosures for up-close encounters. When the Norwegian representative insisted on being taken for a flight on dragonback, Ridgebit refused, insisting that he would close the reserve and eradicate every dragon from the face of the planet before he would condone such madness.

The matter was taken to the full Committee, but even as they debated ousting Ridgebit and replacing him with a more malleable director, the matter was taken out of their hands with the eruption of a mass outcry following the infamous Ilfracombe Incident. With so many people entering the reserve, its location had become an open secret in the elite circles of magical society. Inevitably, there were a number of incidents when young people (mostly wizards and generally heavily intoxicated) on dares found their way into the reserve and attempted a variety of interactions with the dragons. Needless to say, most of these incidents ended badly. Severe, and very public, punishments were instituted in an effort to discourage such folly, but it was the deaths of two wizards and a witch that turned public opinion in favour of Ridgebit. The three, all students at Durmstrang, had been attempting to "liberate" a Welsh Green by releasing it in Brecon Beacons. They had made it as far as Devon when the enraged dragon escaped from its confinement and attacked its captors, then fled to a nearby beach. The resulting mayhem required the casting of the single largest Memory Charm ever performed, covering the entire Muggle population of the village of Ilfracombe. By the time the uproar died down, the reserve was secured beyond the power of the Committee to interfere.

Today, the only ways in or out of the reserve are through a very small, tightly controlled set of nodes on the Floo network or to fly on dragonback. To further protect against trouble, should the wards somehow fail, no photographs have ever been taken at the reserve. At the request of the Potion Mistress, however, the current director of the reserve indicated to me buildings of a similar style outside the reserve in order to allow you, dear readers, to create a mental image of the sights that the Potion Mistress was privileged to see.

Sorina Ridgebit, Harvey's wife, has been the designer for the reserve since its creation. A native of Romania, it was she who first suggested the location, on the sacred mountain Kogaionon, hidden from Muggles by the Romanian magical community since the time of the Roman conquest and the beginning of the persecution of the old ways. Under her guidance, traditional Romanian forms, today most commonly seen only in churches, were used for all the structures. An example of the wave pattern of the common house roof can be seen here:



Strong anti-flammation spells are woven into the wood of the buildings, as well as the fences and gates of the paddocks, which resemble these:



Sorina herself decorated the walls and ceiling of the common house in the painting style seen below, albeit with very different motifs:



[3] While unknown to most Muggles, Zalmoxis is nearly as famous among wizard-kind as Merlin. A Thracian wizard, as a youth he traveled to Greece where he was trained by Pythagoras, the founder of the Arithmantic arts. Upon reaching his majority, he returned to his homeland to serve his people. Never a ruler himself, he advised rulers, settled disputes, and used his magic for the protection and welfare of his people. After years of toiling in vain to resolve their constant intra-tribal disputes, he sealed himself inside a cave on the holy mountain of Kogaionon, warning his people that if they did not mend their ways he would never return. When the Dacian Alliance was formed, three years later, he emerged from the cave and served many years as the chief advisor to the ruling council. Long after he was gone, his legend grew amongst the people, until they came to believe that he had died during his sojourn in the cave and been reborn as a god. For centuries, the Dacians sacrificed their noblest warriors to Zalmoxis, believing that in death they would serve Zalmoxis and bring his blessings to their people.

The cave has a later role in history, as the local wizarding community tells the tale of a visit to the region by a beautiful young witch who lured Muggle men into the cave, from which they never emerged. After she left, the remains of the Muggles were found embedded within the living rock of the cave walls, and Zalmoxis' writings, which had been preserved by his descendants for hundreds of years, were gone. This story coincides with the known travels of Nimue in the region, and it is believed that it was there that she learnt the secret to the spell she used to trap Merlin. Unfortunately for historians, in the Middle Ages, the cave became the residence of Hungarian Horntails, and any physical evidence of her experiments was obliterated.

[4] Solpadeine, a low-strength, over the counter mix of paracetamol (acetaminophen) and codeine phosphate, is manufactured by GlaxoSmithKline, a major pharmaceutical company that traces its origins to the humble Plough Court pharmacy, established in 1715 by Silvanus Bevan. What is not well known is that Bevan's maternal grandfather was, in fact, a Potion Master. When young Silvanus turned out to be a Squib, his parents defied the tradition that would have had them cast him out and instead apprenticed him to a Muggle pharmacist. As his business expanded, through his grandfather he recruited other Squib sons of Guild-trained brewers, a practice that has continued through all the incarnations of the company, as a consequence of which no child of a Guild member has been abandoned in at least two centuries. There are, of course, some who find their careers elsewhere, such as Xiaolong Xie, Squib son of Potion Master Jiaolong Xie, who changed his name to the more Muggle-sounding Xiaoliang and currently heads the Xie research group at Harvard University.

The distinctive packaging of Solpadeine, with its Gryffindor colours and lightning-bolt motif, was designed as a tribute to Harry Potter's role in the first defeat of Voldemort:



[5] Some of the locations mentioned by the Potion Mistress are easily accessible, even to Muggles.

From Pirita Drive, one can see the old city of Tallinn rising above the modern port facilities. During the summer months, when the sun rises early in the far north, the Potion Mistress would have enjoyed this view during her morning runs:



When Pirita Drive turns away from the sea, it passes through Kadrioru Park:



Katariina Kaik, or the Katriina passage, leads from the Muggle town square of Old Tallinn towards the city walls:



Muggle authorities have separated the old city from the new, circumscribing the walls with neat lawns:



In spring, a white lilac blooms just outside the Viru Gate:

