

The Quality of Mercy

by christinex

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Farewells

Chapter 1 of 4

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AN: This story is canon compliant with the exception of the Epilogue to DH and one or two minor plot points from that same book. It takes place approximately five years after the defeat of Voldemort.

One: Farewells

Hermione Granger sat upright in her chair, ankles crossed beneath her, gaze fixed directly forward. It was easier that way. If she stared straight ahead, she wouldn't have to make eye contact with anyone, wouldn't have to see the expressions of shock and sorrow and sympathy that surrounded her.

It had to be a nightmare. Her mind kept telling her that, in a dreary, tired sort of way, as if it were easier to repeat the same old weary denial instead of recognizing the situation for what it was. That couldn't be Ron lying in the casket of gleaming pale wood, a casket that would soon be buried in the earth not far from his brother Fred's resting place. Wizard-kind tended to keep their dead close to home; the Weasleys' burial ground lay a scant half-mile from the Burrow, in a glade surrounded by rustling beech trees. It was a lovely spot she'd allow that much. And she supposed it was important for Molly and Arthur and everyone else that the boys should keep each other company in the small cemetery, which was closely guarded by Muggle-repelling charms to ward against unwanted intrusion.

To one side she could hear Ginny sniffing into a handkerchief as Kingsley Shacklebolt finished the eulogy. Harry sat as still and white-faced as Hermione supposed she herself must be. Perhaps it would be better to let the tears flow, to allow herself to break down as everyone probably expected her to. But it was only through rigid self-control that she'd managed to survive thus far if she began to weep now, she had the feeling she might never stop. Better to sit here with burning, dry eyes, even though her unnatural calm had earned her a few askance glances.

Ginny's pregnancy was just beginning to show, and seeing the curve of her sister-in-law's belly made the self-recriminations rise once again in Hermione's mind. *always thought we'd have plenty of time ... I wanted to get that bloody degree ... and now*

Her thoughts lashed out at her. *And now you have nothing, except memories.*

The agony welled up in her then, a burning ache that seemed to lodge itself in her throat, making it almost impossible to breathe. She took in a deep gasping swallow of air, and Harry looked past Ginny to her. His green eyes seemed almost impossibly bright behind the lenses of his spectacles, and Hermione realized it was because they swam with tears.

Don't look at him, she told herself. Because then you'll dissolve, and you still have the whole reception afterward to get through. Bloody barbaric practice, if you asked her, but it was the custom and therefore something that couldn't possibly be avoided.

She swiveled her head forward again, just in time to see George and Percy and Bill rise from their seats to move toward the coffin, and then Harry pushed past her to join Ron's brothers as the final pallbearer. The four of them lifted the casket and began the slow progression toward the grave site. She could see the strain in their faces and realized they would not use magic for this, their final gesture of respect. No, they would honor Ron with the strength of their arms and backs, nothing more.

All around her people began to stand, and Hermione stumbled to her feet, her limbs dead and numb after sitting for so long. She felt Ginny's hand creep into hers, although Hermione wasn't sure whether her sister-in-law reached out to offer comfort or to seek it. Whatever the case, Hermione clung to Ginny, the two of them supporting one another as the mourners filed off to the cemetery. She saw her parents come up to drop in behind her and Ginny, just as Arthur and Molly shuffled along directly behind the casket, both of them moving like sleepwalkers.

Her own pain seemed unendurable, so Hermione couldn't begin to comprehend what her in-laws must be suffering. They had already buried one son, seen two more maimed and now, to lose Ron to a dreadful accident, years after Voldemort had been defeated, must have seemed like the act of a most capricious and cruel fate. It wasn't fair.

What ever is? a cool inner voice asked. *Life isn't fair. The Weasleys should know that better than anyone.*

Hermione blinked, once, twice, three times in rapid succession, willing away the hot tears that threatened to overwhelm her if she gave them an inch of ground. Just a few hours more, and she could dissolve into a flood of weeping that would surely put the wet summer of several years ago to shame. Just a while longer, and this would all be over

A fresh breeze came from nowhere, ruffling the loose tendrils around her face, bringing with it the scents of dry grass and wildflowers and all the other beauties of late summer that Ron would never see again. She'd pulled her hair back into a careless knot, thinking that having it up would be more decorous than its usual riot of curls, but the stray strands irritated her, made her wish she hadn't bowed to convention. Who cared what she looked like, after all, when her husband was about to be put in the ground forever?

He'd been so damned proud, too, so happy that he could drive a car like any other Muggle. Hermione herself had learned to drive soon after the War ended, mostly because her parents thought it was a useful skill despite their overwhelming support of her wizarding abilities, they'd never been terribly keen on broomsticks, Floo Powder, or any of the other means the members of the wizard world used to get around. And since she could drive, of course Ron had to learn as well. She wanted to blame herself, but she knew logically that Ron's desire to drive had only a little to do with her and quite a bit more to do with his father's preoccupation with all things Muggle.

Besides, it hadn't even been Ron's fault, except that, as usual, he'd forgotten to put on his safety belt. Easy enough to forget, she supposed, when one was overwhelmed with checking mirrors and seat positions and clutches and gauges and everything else driving a car required. If she wanted to assign blame, she supposed she could hand it over to the management of the delivery company that owned the lorry which smashed into Ron's shabby old Volvo. The signal had changed, the lorry driver had slammed on the brakes and they, old and worn, couldn't hold, and the oversized vehicle smashed into Ron's car just as he was pulling out into the intersection.

Everyone had been so kind the constable in the village, the horrified onlookers, even the stricken driver of the lorry, who kept saying over and over, "I tried to stop I tried I did " And Hermione, who had been waiting for Ron to pick her up from the local library, could only nod dumbly and stand by while she watched the ambulance swoop in and take Ron off to the hospital. That was the problem with venturing into Muggle territory, she supposed. Perhaps if they'd been someplace else, he could have been immediately taken to St. Mungo's. Maybe he could have survived...

Not possible, her mind told her, still in that cold, even tone, as she trudged next to Ginny across the small field that separated the funeral area from the actual cemetery. The paramedics said he died almost at once. Might not have even felt anything...

She gave a strangled, hitching breath, and immediately felt Ginny squeeze her hand. Poor Ginny, to lose another brother, and now Ron would never get to see his niece or nephew...

That thought had to be stopped in its tracks. Later, when she was alone, she could dwell on all the might-have-beens, all the moments that Ron should have lived to enjoy, but not now. For now, all she could do was this.

They stopped at the grave, the crowd of mourners giving Hermione and Ginny room to move forward and take their place with the rest of the family. The coffin sat on the bare earth, awaiting its entombment. Just past it, Hermione could see the pale headstone that marked Fred's grave.

The Weasleys had never seemed to practice any religion, and so Hermione hadn't been quite sure what to expect from the service. The eulogy that Kingsley Shacklebolt had delivered and the various other speeches given by family members and friends alike had been secular in nature, and so she expected the final words, spoken by Harry, to follow in that vein. It was with some shock that she heard him say the familiar words of the Church of England's service, the same ones she recognized from her grandfather's funeral:

" ... I am the resurrection and the life, and whosoever believes in me shall never die "

Her friend's voice sounded deeper, more measured, as if reciting those ancient words had somehow helped him cross the final threshold from boy to man. Oh, Harry had suffered unspeakable losses in his life, but losing Ron had been like losing a brother, the final blow delivered long after anyone could have foreseen its coming.

Did Harry truly believe what he said? He had been reticent about his own experience with near-death, but something had happened to him, something that had changed him, made him seem certain some sort of existence was possible beyond this world. If that were the truth if Ron were in heaven or whatever else you wanted to call the afterlife then perhaps the knowledge might make this a little bit easier to bear. Of course she wanted Ron, wanted to be with him, but if she could tell herself that he waited for her somewhere beyond the bounds of the world, that his existence hadn't been cut short forever by the horrendous wreck which had interrupted their lives only four endless days ago, then maybe she could live through this. Maybe.

The breeze whipped tears to her eyes, but this time she didn't bother to blink them away. Someone behind her pressed something cool and slender and hard into her hand, and Hermione looked down to see herself holding a single white rose. A flash of pale hair at the corner of her vision told her it was Luna who had done so.

Harry had finished speaking, and the four pallbearers lifted their wands and gently lowered the casket into the hole in the earth that awaited it. Hermione stepped forward. Faces turned toward her, but she could not make out any individual features beneath the blur of tears in her eyes.

"I will always love you, Ron ... my best friend," she said, the only words she could force past the tightness in her throat. Then she dropped the rose into his grave. It seemed to take a long time to fall.

No need of shovels at a wizard funeral the mourners all helped to fill in the grave, each murmuring the words under their breaths or bringing out their wands to move the earth to cover Ron's casket. Hermione knew she should do so as well, but somehow couldn't bring herself to pull out her wand and assist in transferring the dirt back into the gaping scar in the earth. The sound of the clods dropping on the oak casket seemed louder than thunder, and she wanted to press her hands against her ears, scream at them to stop didn't they know it was Ron they were putting down there in the dirt and the dark?

"Come away, my dear," came Minerva McGonagall's voice at her ear. "They'll finish it for you. Come back to the house."

Unable to speak, Hermione could only nod, then felt her former teacher take hold of her arm and Disapparate the both of them away from the cemetery, and back into the familiar chaos of the Burrow. Dimly she was aware of being pushed gently down into a chair, and then a cup of something warm being pressed between her cold fingers. Strange how her hands should feel so chilled with such a mild summer day outside.

"Drink that," Professor McGonagall said, and Hermione, schooled in six years of following her Head of House's dictates, obediently lifted the cup to her lips and swallowed the warm liquid inside.

Plain tea, she realized. Darjeeling, black, just the way I like it.

"I won't tell you any nonsense about it getting better with time, or that Ron's in a better place," Professor McGonagall said, in the same brisk tones she used to employ in her Transfigurations classes. "Because you know that's all twaddle. Perhaps he is, and aches do tend to become more bearable as the years go on my arthritis has taught me that if nothing else. But you'll have to decide these things for yourself."

Hermione opened her eyes wide and focused on her former teacher's face for the first time. Minerva McGonagall appeared mostly unchanged, although her eyelids looked red, and the lines around her mouth and on her forehead seemed deeper than Hermione had remembered. The Transfigurations professor had stepped in as Headmistress of Hogwarts for the three terms following the end of the War, but then decided to retire, saying she thought she had done enough. Hermione wondered suddenly what exactly Professor McGonagall had been doing for the past few years. Somehow she didn't seem the type for a quiet retirement.

"Thank you," Hermione said.

The sharp blue eyes didn't blink. "For what?"

"For not talking at me, trying to tell me foolish things that don't make sense." She lifted the cup and drank again. "I know it's everyone else trying to work through it in their own way, but I swear, if I hear one more person tell me I should be proud of what Ron accomplished, even though he was taken from me so soon, or how we were lucky to have even the time we did, considering how many people died in the War well, I think I shall go mad!"

"As well you should," Professor McGonagall commented. "People think they're trying to help and often only end up making things worse. Ignore them as best you can, Hermione. Do what you have to in order to keep yourself sane."

Hands shaking, Hermione set the cup down on the kitchen table. Underneath its coating of polish, it was scarred from years of abuse at the hands of the Weasley children. She wondered briefly which rings and scrapes had been left there by Ron. Her voice trembled a bit as she asked, "Any advice on that?"

A look of infinite sadness passed over Professor McGonagall's face. "Let it hurt for as long as you need to. And after that, decide what you want to do with the rest of your life. Just make sure it's something worthy. The world expects nothing less from you."

It was full dark by the time Hermione returned home, to the small cottage about five miles away from the Burrow that she and Ron had chosen as their first home. It was close enough to the Weasleys that Ron hadn't felt as if he were separated from his family, but far enough away that they had some measure of privacy. It had been named Rosedell for as long as anyone could remember, due both to its location in a small dale and the rose garden that surrounded it. The wizard family who owned the cottage were only too glad to rent it to the young newlyweds, and Hermione had always thought she and Ron would be able to spend many years there together, although it could not have held a family much larger than three.

After the funeral, Molly and Arthur pressured her to stay at the Burrow, and her own parents had taken her aside and inquired whether she would prefer to return home with them for a spell, but Hermione had resisted all their efforts and insisted on going back to the house she and Ron had shared. In the end they had acceded to her wishes, but with puzzlement and, in Molly's case, downright hurt. It seemed no one could understand her wish to be alone.

How could she make any of them realize that she would have to come back here someday, even if she hid at the Burrow for a fortnight, or even if she had run away to her childhood home? Sooner or later she would have to face reality and confront the empty cottage which, although none too large, somehow felt huge and hollow with her husband gone.

The Ministry had given her a leave of absence for as long as she required it, but Hermione felt that she would like to return to work tomorrow except for the fact that such a move would surely scandalize coworkers and family alike. That made no sense to her; at least by taking up her duties once again she could try to fill this enormous aching hole in her center. What on earth was she supposed to do with herself, with days that had no occupation but remembrance and regret?

She murmured the words of the candle charm under her breath, and all around the room tapers and pillars lit themselves, banishing the darkness. The cozy, familiar chamber took shape once again, from the chintz-covered couch which Ron had hated with a violent passion to the hand-me-down table and chairs her parents had given them. So many hours spent here as she had curled up on the couch with a book and Ron had played chess against himself, so many suppers shared with Harry and Ginny, so many happy days when the world had seemed a gift and each day a gleaming pearl on a strand that appeared unending.

Crookshanks jumped off the sofa and wound around Hermione's legs, his meow sounding more plaintive than ever. Did the cat somehow know that Ron would never share this house with them again, that he had gone somewhere they couldn't follow? He and Crookshanks had maintained an armed neutrality at best, but perhaps the cat, always sensitive to Hermione's moods, had somehow divined the true reason for his mistress's despondent behavior of late.

"Oh, Crookshanks," Hermione murmured, then sank down onto the couch. Immediately the cat jumped into her lap and began to purr, rubbing his head against her stomach in an unusual display of affection. Absent-mindedly Hermione stroked the soft fur between the cat's ears, trying to let that be her focus, so that she didn't have to think of anything else.

But thought kept intruding. Of course she'd never been able to get her brain to slow down it always seemed to go a mile a minute, churning with thoughts and ideas and memories and plans. It had surprised her somewhat to realize that not everyone went through their entire lives with so much interior dialogue competing for their attention, but sometimes she did wish she could come up with a satisfactory way to shut it off, if only for a few moments.

The reception really hadn't been too dreadful. Harry and Ginny had stuck to her side like faithful cockle burrs, carefully guiding her away from anyone who could be trusted to say the wrong thing or even begin to suggest that if Ron hadn't been so infected with a love of the Muggle world (a love, these people would often insinuate, that extended to her, a Muggle-born), then perhaps he would still be with us today. Somehow Hermione had managed to nod and thank people for coming and murmur the correct things, watching the whole procedure as if it were happening to someone else.

Only Luna had gotten past the wall of glass that seemed to separate Hermione from the goings-on, Luna who always seemed to know to say the wrong thing (or right, depending on how one looked at it). She materialized at Hermione's elbow and said, "I rather imagine Ron and Fred are having a good laugh right now, looking down at everyone's serious faces. Where did you get that tie, Harry?" Then she wandered off, leaving Harry and Ginny to stare after her before giving Hermione a furtive look, as if they weren't quite certain how to react.

The wave of pain was as frightening as it was unexpected. Perhaps it should have been heartening to think of Fred and Ron off in some afterlife together, cooking up some new mischief and amusing themselves with the ritual formality of the reception. But Luna's words made Hermione realize anew that Ron really was dead, that he would never again surprise her with Chocoballs from Honeydukes or steal the covers from her in the middle of the night.

She made an odd sound that sounded halfway between a hiccup and a gasp, then clenched her jaw. Harry had reached out to touch her hand, and she forced a smile and said, "You know, Harry, that really is a dreadful tie. What were you thinking?"

And both he and Ginny, who had looked both apprehensive and sympathetic over what they no doubt thought were going to be impending waterworks, had burst into nervous laughter that earned them more than a few disapproving stares. Well, perhaps it was inappropriate, but Hermione had thought they could honor Ron far more by laughing together and remembering their friend for who he was than going by about sober-faced as Wizengamot members. At least, that was what she hoped.

Mercifully the evening had come to an end at last, and Harry and Ginny Apparated with her back to the narrow lane that wound past Rosedell.

"You could come to London with us," Ginny offered. "I can see why you wouldn't want to stay at the Burrow Mum's smothering would probably drive you mad but we've got room. I still don't like the thought of you being here alone."

Harry nodded. "Really, Hermione, I'm not sure ... "

"It's all right," she said. "I've had enough clamor and sympathy. Right now I just want some quiet."

The moonlight had drained the color from Harry's eyes in the half-dark, they appeared a spectral gray. His face was solemn as he looked at her. "If you're really certain ... "

Hermione said firmly, "I am. Really, I'll be fine. I'm just going to have a cup of tea and go to bed."

Both he and Ginny looked doubtful, but it seemed they were ready to abandon the argument. "All right, then," Harry said. He reached out to give her hand a quick squeeze, and Ginny pulled Hermione into an awkward, lopsided embrace. Then they stepped back, and the night air crackled as they Disapparated.

Her protestations that she would be fine now seemed hollow, full of false confidence. The very air of the empty house seemed to press around her. True, Crookshanks offered a little comfort, gave some reassurance that Hermione hadn't turned into a ghost herself, but the cat's company couldn't hope to fill the searing hole Ron's death had left behind.

She knew she should get up and make herself that cup of tea she'd told Harry and Ginny she'd planned to drink, but suddenly she felt very weary, as if she didn't have the strength for even that simple task. Even the act of lifting Crookshanks off her lap seemed far beyond her.

McGonagall's words echoed in her mind. *Decide what you're going to do with the rest of your life. Just make sure it's something worthy. The world expects nothing less from you.*

What that cause or occupation might be, Hermione couldn't begin to guess. Right now all she could think of was the gaping wound in her heart, the loneliness she had just begun to comprehend. Finally she bowed her head and let the savage tears come, the sobs clawing at her with such violence it felt as if her entire body were being torn in half. Crookshanks fled to the far corner of the couch, watching Hermione with pale, wary eyes.

How could she even begin to think about the rest of her life, when she wasn't sure she could even get through the night?

Discrepancies

Chapter 2 of 4

In which Hermione discovers the numbers don't quite add up ...

Two: Discrepancies

Time passed, as it always does. Hermione held out for a fortnight before returning to her post at the Ministry of Magic. The empty days had become too much to bear after that. If her coworkers wanted to talk, she would let them. After all, she had never spent much time worrying about what other people thought.

Autumn crawled along toward winter. Hermione welcomed the shorter days if she wanted to fall into bed at barely past eight, then at least she could do it in full dark instead of the endless twilight of late summer. And if she went into work early and stayed late, no one seemed to mind overmuch, except Harry, who would often pause on his way out, survey the mound of parchment on her desk, and then give her a faintly disapproving look. But after voicing his concerns a few times and being shot down on every occasion, he had apparently decided that nothing he could do or say would keep Hermione from working through her grief in her own way.

Oddly enough, she often felt nothing, just a strange numbness that allowed her to get up every morning, go through her daily rituals, and Floo into work as though nothing untoward had happened. It was as if part of her mind had decided Ron was just off on extended Auror business, instead of sleeping in the cemetery that bordered on his family's grounds. She didn't want to examine her state of mind too closely for fear of waking the despair that must surely lie beneath the emptiness, like a trap buried beneath a pile of dead leaves. Better to leave it alone.

A week before Christmas she was sent on temporary assignment to work in the Office of Financial Affairs. Her regular post was in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, where she had been working diligently to better the lot of house-elves everywhere. However, one of the innovations Kingsley Shacklebolt had implemented involved the rotation of personnel once per quarter so that they could spend a fortnight in a different section and learn something of its workings.

She came into a somewhat depleted office; Financial Affairs didn't boast a large staff at the best of times, and it appeared most of its personnel had taken extended leave for the holidays. Hermione found herself sharing the shabby little subterranean quarters with only one other person: Lucrece Tibbetts, a pale witch of indeterminate middle age who didn't seem at all discommoded by her compatriots' exodus or the fact that she'd been handed Hermione Granger-Weasley, one of the Ministry's most notorious over-achievers, as her office mate during what should have been the quiet season.

"Well, if it weren't for you, I would have been all alone down here," Lucrece confided in Hermione as she ushered the younger woman to the vacant desk next to hers. "It would be too quiet. One starts hearing things." And she cocked her head and looked vaguely off to her right, as if she'd heard something scrabbling away behind the bookshelf in the corner.

Hermione wondered if Lucrece might somehow be related to Luna Lovegood, then dismissed the thought as uncharitable. "I'm sure it will be fascinating," she said in hearty tones.

Lucrece blinked her pale-gray eyes. "Fascinating? Oh, no, I doubt that."

It's going to be a long two weeks, Hermione thought, *time off for Christmas or no.* Suppressing a sigh, she inquired, "So what should I do first?"

"Oh, erm " The older woman pushed back the sleeves of her dark-blue robes and sidled around the corner of the desk, appearing to eye the neat piles of parchment its previous occupant had left behind. "It looks as if the pension disbursements need to be expedited. Don't want people coming up short at Christmas, do we?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, I suppose not."

"Here's the list." Lucrece unrolled a long piece of parchment and spread it out flat on the desk in front of Hermione. "All you need to do is check the names and amounts against the master list in that ledger there " she pointed at a green-bound book that occupied the left-hand corner of the desktop "and then, once they're verified, send the

list by owl to Gringotts. Any questions?"

Just whether I'm going to be able to stay awake through this Hermione thought, but she only smiled and replied, "No, I'm sure you've explained it quite clearly."

"Well, I'll be right over here in case you do think of something," Lucrece said, then went back to her own disk and sat down. Immediately she picked up an enormous red-plumed quill and began scratching away in another ledger, this one covered in what looked like purple-dyed ostrich.

This time a sigh did escape Hermione's lips, but it was a very small one, and the other woman didn't seem to notice. Flipping open the green ledger, Hermione saw the long list of names, written in a crabbed hand, and hoped that her eyesight would survive the experience.

Damn you, Kingsley, she thought. *And I was doing so well with those house-elf education pamphlets I'd been working on*

But she knew deep down that while it might have been the current Minister's policies which had sent her down here, he certainly hadn't come up with this particular assignment. No, she'd pin that one on Romilda Vane, who worked in Logistics and had never liked Hermione. No sympathy for Hermione's loss from that one. Romilda was still unmarried and looked daggers at Ginny whenever she stopped in to meet Harry for lunch. However irritated Hermione might be by her present situation, she'd never complain. She wasn't about to give Miss Vane the satisfaction.

The list was in alphabetical order, and fairly long; Hermione knew that Financial Affairs handled not only the pensions for Ministry personnel but for Hogwarts staff and faculty as well. It felt odd to see the size of Professor McGonagall's monthly disbursement handsome, but still not quite adequate, Hermione thought, considering all the services the Transfigurations professor had rendered the school and its pupils over the years. Still, Hermione knew that the pensions were based on fixed calculations involving years of service and salary during employment, and surely what Minerva McGonagall received every month was more than adequate for her needs.

Hermione worked her way down the list, finding only a single discrepancy. In the master ledger, one Sub-Minister Muddleston's name was scratched out. "What does a strike-through in the ledger mean, Lucrece?" she asked.

The scratching of Lucrece's quill halted. "For whom?"

"Sub-Minister Muddleston. In the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Dead," Lucrece said cheerfully. "Passed away late last month, I believe. No heirs. Yes, make sure he's taken off the Gringotts list."

Grimly, Hermione drew a line through Muddleston's name on the parchment, feeling an odd twinge as she did so. Probably someone had done the same thing a few months back when Ron had died. She herself now received his pension disbursements, such as they were. He hadn't been employed at the Ministry long enough to have worked up much of a balance.

Her throat felt a little tight, and she swallowed, hard. *You can't let it get to you*, she thought. *You've had almost five months to come to grips with this!*

The constriction in her throat eased somewhat. Taking a breath, she forced herself to move on through the "P"s and the "R"s and the few "Q"s on the list. She came to "S" and then stopped a few entries down, her heart giving an odd little thump at the name she saw there.

Severus Snape.

"Erm ... Lucrece?"

The older woman looked up and laid down her quill. "Yes?"

"There's an entry for Professor Snape on here." Thank God her voice sounded so normal!

"Yes?"

"But he's he's dead!"

"Is his name in the master ledger scratched out?"

Hermione stared down at the page. Severus Snape's name stood out clearly. No strike-through, no attempt at erasing the letters. "Well, no."

"Then it stays on the Gringotts list."

For a second all Hermione could do was gaze mutely at Lucrece's placid features. Was the other witch a complete fool? "But I know he's dead," Hermione said after a brief pause, her calm tone belying her roiling thoughts. "I was there when he died."

"Were you, now?" asked Lucrece with a notable lack of interest. "Well, apparently the Financial Services Office feels otherwise. Go ahead and let it go. There's a good girl."

Hermione decided to let the "good girl" comment pass for the time being. "But it has to be a mistake!" she protested. "How can you be disbursing pension payments to someone who's dead?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised," the older witch said, picking up her quill once more. "I find bobbles and mistakes all the time. What do Muggles call them? Glitches?" She scratched away at her parchment and added, "I've tried to mention that we need a better record-keeping system, that errors slip through all the time. Once I even said that perhaps we should try using a computer, just to see what would happen, but you should have seen the hand-wringing over that! You'd have thought I suggested serving boiled baby for dinner. At any rate, if his name is on the master list, then the Office of Financial Affairs considers him alive. Even if he is dead."

Feeling positively flummoxed, Hermione turned back to the master ledger and the Gringotts list. So they were paying out pensions to a dead man? What a waste of resources! And if Gringotts was sending out owls with a monthly payment (which was how she received Ron's benefits), to whom precisely were those owls going? If there was no one on the receiving end to claim the money, you'd think the owls would return with their parcels untouched.

Mind working furiously, she tried to recall what little she knew of Snape's family. As far as she could remember from her investigations into the Half-Blood Prince's identity, he had been an only child, but perhaps there was a cousin or some other relative who might be receiving his pension funds. Perhaps Harry would know something. He'd made a few attempts to restore the Potions master's somewhat tarnished image, more out of loyalty to Dumbledore than anything else. However, for the most part the wizarding world didn't want to hear it. Even from the Boy Who Lived, the one who had saved them all from Voldemort. Hatred was a hard habit to overcome.

Well, at least she had already planned to meet Harry and Ginny for lunch today. She'd bring up the mysterious conundrum of a dead man receiving pension benefits and see what they had to say on the matter. Looking up from the parchment, she cast a surreptitious glance at the grandfather clock that sat in state in the far corner of the room and sighed once more. It was going to be a very long three hours.

"You what?" Harry demanded after the three of them had seated themselves in a corner booth at the Leaky Cauldron.

"I saw his name on the list of pension disbursements," Hermione answered. "It has to be a mistake, doesn't it? I mean, he couldn't possibly be alive."

Harry's mouth settled into a grim line, and Ginny shot him a half-questioning, half-worried look. When he didn't reply, Hermione said, "Well? Is there something you're not

telling me?"

"No," Harry said, sounding irritated.

At that point Tom came over to take their orders, with Harry appearing almost relieved by the interruption. However, the intrusion was fairly short-lived, and Hermione wasn't about to allow the conversation to get side-tracked.

"I mean, we all saw him die, right?" she asked.

"Yes!" Harry snapped, then paused, looking a little abashed. "Sorry look, that was a terrible night. I mean, there he was, bleeding all over the floor, and then he gave me those memories " Once again his mouth closed tightly, as if he were afraid he was going to betray too much if he continued.

Of those memories Hermione knew a little, although Harry hadn't wanted to talk about them very much. Just that they had contained the evidence which proved Snape really had been Dumbledore's man all along, and that everything he had done had been at the Headmaster's behest. There had been more, she was sure, but careful prying had elicited only a stony-faced statement that Harry didn't want to talk about it. After a while she had given up. Their years of friendship had taught her there was no influencing Harry when he got in one of those moods. She'd thought perhaps one day he would tell her more, but as time wore on and it became obvious Harry wasn't going to reveal any more than he already had, she had tried to convince herself that perhaps it wasn't so important after all. Besides, at the time she'd had more important things to occupy her mind.

"But this Lucrece Tibbetts said it was likely a mistake, didn't she?" Ginny asked, her calm voice helping to ease the tension Hermione had felt begin to crackle between Harry and herself. "After all, we all have personal experience with Ministry mistakes, don't we?"

For a few seconds Harry said nothing, and then he managed a wry smile. "That's the truth."

Hermione knew she couldn't argue with that, although part of her wanted to. Instead, she said, "I was wondering if maybe you knew anything about any relatives that is, perhaps the pension funds are simply being sent to someone in the family."

Harry hesitated again. "I'd say that's a likely explanation, except I don't know anything about him having any family. There was nothing in his memories I mean, he was an only child, and it didn't seem as if he had any cousins or anything like that."

Well, there went that explanation. Hermione wasn't sure whether to be worried or relieved. After a pause, she said, "So you must agree that it's quite odd "

"Oh, I'll agree with that," Harry said at once. Then the green eyes narrowed as he regarded her from behind his spectacles. "What does it matter, really? It's just a simple bookkeeping mistake, right? Why the sudden interest?"

As to that, Hermione wasn't quite sure she could give him an adequate answer. Surely it was merely an error, and all she really needed to do was leave a note for the true occupant of the desk she was using (one Magda Appleby, according to the nameplate which sat on the right side of the desktop) that she, Hermione, had found what had to be a mistake in the master ledger. She really should just leave it for the person whose real job it was to sort out the error and be done with it. On the other hand, how could she possibly allow such a mystery to go unsolved?

Hermione lifted her shoulders. At that moment Tom reappeared with their food and drinks, and she applied herself to her chicken pasty in order to cover her confusion.

"I mean, Snape certainly wasn't a favorite of yours, was he?" Harry asked around a mouthful of chips.

"I didn't have favorites," Hermione said, sounding prim even to herself. "All of our professors had valuable things to teach us."

"Even Lockhart?" Harry inquired, and Ginny giggled and almost choked on her own shepherd's pie.

"Even Lockhart ... although I'll admit he was more a case of learning what *not* to do. At any rate," Hermione continued sternly, "Severus Snape was certainly a very good Potions professor, regardless of the way he behaved, and what with everything he did for Dumbledore, he certainly deserved more than the end he got!"

At her words the sly grin melted off Harry's lips, and Ginny sobered abruptly. Harry looked around, as if worried that someone might be trying to listen in on their conversation, then said, "They never found him, you know."

"What?" both Hermione and Ginny burst out at the same time.

Harry sprinkled some vinegar on his fish and helped himself to a mouthful before replying, "That's what I was told. After the with the cleanup and everything, the Aurors went all over the grounds looking for missing and wounded people. I told Kingsley Shacklebolt where Snape had died, and he sent several people over to the Shrieking Shack to find him and bring his body back to the castle, but when they got there, the place was empty."

"Why on earth didn't you ever tell me this, Harry?" Hermione demanded. Harry's revelations had sent an odd thrill through her, part excitement ... part fear?

"I didn't see how it would matter. The man was gone, and we'd all seen him die. Probably some of Voldemort's Death Eaters went back to the Shack to dispose of the body."

"Or maybe he managed to survive and dragged himself away before anyone could find him?"

Shaking his head, Harry replied, "That's a little far-fetched, don't you think? I mean, you were there. You saw what Nagini did to him. No one could survive that sort of attack without immediate intervention."

Logically Hermione knew that was probably true, but still she protested, "Yes, but he was the Potions master, after all! Perhaps he carried an antidote to Nagini's venom with him. Or perhaps he took a bezoar!"

Harry shot a sidelong glance at Ginny from under his eyelashes, the sort of look that plainly said *Oh, here she goes again!* However, he sounded calm enough when he said, "Maybe that would take care of the poison, but not those quarts of blood Snape left all over the floor of the Shack."

"Blood Replenishing Potion," Hermione said immediately.

"That's our Hermione an answer for everything," Ginny remarked. "Listen, if you put it that way, I suppose it's possible ... barely ... but if he's really been alive all this time, wouldn't someone know about it? How could someone as well-known as Professor Snape just disappear?"

"Was anyone looking for him?" Hermione asked in pointed tones.

Harry and Hermione exchanged another uneasy glance. "Probably not," Harry admitted after a long pause. "People really wanted to put the whole thing behind them."

"Precisely," Hermione said, a feeling of triumph stealing over her. Was it possible? Could that "mistake" in the Ministry's ledger not be a mistake after all?

Ginny looked troubled, and Harry was making a show of not meeting Hermione's gaze. Oh, there were rivers of bad blood between Harry and Snape, no doubt about it, but she had thought he would have gotten enough past that to see this was a real mystery, one which demanded some sort of resolution.

"Look, Hermione," Harry said at length, finally glancing up from the mess he had made on his plate, "it's all in the past. Maybe you should just let it go. Even if Snape is

alive and that's a pretty big 'if' I doubt he's going to be thrilled if someone comes looking for him. Anyone who can stay hidden so well that people think he's dead obviously wants to stay hidden."

"You might think so," Hermione retorted. "Or maybe he's just stayed hidden because no one's gone to look for him." With that she dropped a few coins on the tabletop and said, "I have to go."

Harry looked slightly alarmed, and Ginny set down her fork and gazed at Hermione with worried brown eyes. "Where're you going?" Harry asked.

"To find some answers," Hermione replied, then gathered up her satchel and stalked out of the pub.

Instead of heading back to the Ministry, she made her way into Diagon Alley, marching resolutely toward Gringotts. Of course the goblins who ran the wizard bank were notoriously tight-lipped about the doings of their institution, but her brother-in-law Bill still worked there, and she hoped he might be able to provide some of the information she needed.

Hermione asked for Bill Weasley at the front desk, and after a moment's hesitation the goblin who manned the reception station told her to follow him. They moved past the endless rows of counters to a door which led into another long hallway. About halfway down the corridor, the goblin stopped at an undistinguished door of dark wood, knocked twice, then said, "Visitor, Mr. Weasley."

The door opened inward, and Hermione stepped inside. Bill looked up from his desk, his eyes widening slightly when he recognized his visitor. "Why, Hermione!" he exclaimed, then stood and came around to greet her, pulling her into a quick hug.

Sometime during this exchange her goblin guide had melted away, and the door was shut behind her. Bill lifted a stack of parchment off a chair and said, "Go ahead and sit down." His scarred face showed some surprise at seeing her there, but he still smiled and asked, "So what brings you to Gringotts? Any problems with those investments we got set up for you?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, nothing like that. It's been well, you've been very helpful. I'm hoping you can help me with a few questions."

"Questions about what?"

"Well, erm ... it's about the pension disbursements."

Bill asked immediately, "Are you not getting Ron's?"

"Oh, no nothing like that." Now that she sat here facing her brother-in-law, Hermione found herself questioning the wisdom of her errand. Perhaps it would have been better to go back to the Ministry and plan her strategy from there. But it couldn't be helped now. "No, actually, it's simply that I'm on temporary assignment in the Office of Financial Services, and I'm just trying to get the big picture of how it all works. After we send you the list of pension recipients, what happens next?"

He looked a little puzzled but answered, "That's not really my department, but I'm fairly sure that after we get the list from OFS, we arrange the transfer of funds. Some people just want the money deposited directly into their accounts here, and some get cash brought to them by owl."

Which was the option Hermione herself had chosen, mainly because it was a small enough amount that she used the cash for the odd errand and for pocket money. "So you take a different list to the bank's Owlery?"

Bill nodded. "That's right. We generally send them out the last day of the month so that people will have their funds on the first. But in December the owls go out on the twenty-first of the month, just so everyone has the funding they need for the holidays."

Damn. That was only three days away. Not much time to plan. "So the list goes to the Owlery "

"Along with the money, usually in a pouch or small satchel, depending on the amount. Then the owl flies it to the recipient. It's very simple, really."

Simple on the outside, Hermione supposed. She would have to figure out a way to infiltrate Gringotts' Owlery, discover which owl was being sent to deliver this month's funds to Severus Snape, and then follow it somehow, or, failing that, find some means to intercept the payment herself. All in a day's work. Right.

"Well, that does sound awfully straightforward," she said and smiled. "Just another question, though what if there's been a mistake, and the person the money's being sent to isn't there to receive it? What happens then?"

One of Bill's ruddy eyebrows lifted. "It comes straight back. We'll attempt to make contact by other means, but if we can't, then it's the recipient's responsibility to contact Gringotts and come in to pick up the money himself."

"And if someone's died?"

Almost as soon as she asked the question Hermione wished she could take it back, for a shadow passed over Bill's face, and she knew he must be thinking of Ron. Damn. One of these days her tactlessness really would get her into trouble.

But then Bill's expression smoothed itself somewhat, and he answered, "Again, the owl comes back to us. It happens every once in a while."

"But you discover the error quite quickly, don't you?"

"Of course," he said. Again he frowned. "What's this about, Hermione?"

"Oh, just research," she replied. "You know me always looking for things to keep myself occupied."

He didn't appear terribly convinced, but at least he had the good manners to say, "Well, I hope this has helped."

"Oh, absolutely."

She stood then and, feeling awkward, put out her hand. Of course Bill would have none of it, instead folding her into a clumsy embrace and asking, "We will see you Christmas Eve at the Burrow?"

"I wouldn't miss it," she replied, then gave him a shaky smile and fled back down the corridor and out into the bustle of Diagon Alley. The cool air outside helped to clear her head somewhat, and she reached into her pocket to check her watch. Good, only fifteen minutes late. Somehow she had the notion that Lucrece Tibbetts wasn't much of a stickler for punctuality. Still, Hermione guessed she should hurry back. It wouldn't look very good to be too tardy on her first day in the Office of Financial Services.

And if she were really lucky, Lucrece would give her another mindless task, one that would allow Hermione to concentrate on the next step in tracking down the missing Potions master. Somehow she had the feeling she wouldn't rest until she had some answers.

After all, what else did she have to occupy her days?

Of Owls and Expeditions

Chapter 3 of 4

Hermione has a cunning plan

Three: Of Owls and Expeditions

"All right, Crookshanks," Hermione said, trying to ignore the baleful, yellow-eyed glare the cat gave her, "this really isn't going to hurt."

He swished his tail, the hair along his back standing up slightly.

Did a Transfiguration hurt? She couldn't imagine that it did, or else Professor McGonagall wouldn't have had her students blithely turning mice into snuffboxes and whatnot. Still, that realization wasn't enough to make Hermione feel any better about what she planned to do.

No help for it, though. She raised her wand toward Crookshanks, who let out a startled hiss just before his yellow eyes turned orange and his ginger fur transformed into the mottled brown and tan of a large eagle owl. Although not native to England, the species seemed to be preferred by the Owlery at Gringotts, no doubt because of its size and strength. After all, a smaller owl like Pigwidgeon or even beautiful, lost Hedwig would have had difficulty carrying heavy bags of Galleons to Ministry pensioners.

Crookshanks swiveled his head at her, flapping wings that seemed to take up most of Hermione's small front yard. She stepped backward, trying to avoid getting caught up in the downdraft.

"Listen, you silly cat I mean, owl well, anyhow," she continued, not wanting to look her Transfigured pet in the eyes, "it's not permanent. I just need you to fly over to Ottery St. Catchpole and come back. Ten minutes." *At least this time*, she added mentally. If her plan worked, Crookshanks would have to fly much farther than that.

Her words seemed to calm the owl/cat somewhat; Crookshanks ruffled his feathers, but then settled down, allowing Hermione to approach him. She fastened a leather collar with a gleaming dark stone that hung from its center front to his neck, then said, "Just to the village and back. Do a good flyover, and come straight home."

He let out a tentative "ooh-hu" and spread his wings, giving them a few experimental flaps. After that he launched himself up into the dusky sky of a late midwinter afternoon, heading west. Hermione watched him go, oblivious to the cold that had begun to seep up through the soles of her boots from the muddy slush in the front yard.

If Crookshanks had been an ordinary cat, she probably would never have attempted such a thing. But because he was half-Kneazle and uncommonly intelligent (and part magical to boot), she hoped he would keep his wits enough in altered form to follow the simple directions she had given him. At least she could test the Seeing Charm she had cast on the stone that hung from Crookshanks' neck and the stone's mate, which rested in her left hand.

Hermione opened her hand to stare down at the black stone that lay in her palm. Its surface flickered with strange light, and she focused on it more closely, seeing the bare, wintry landscape flash by beneath the owl's great wings. The images were small but very clear, like something seen through the wrong end of a telescope: a curving ribbon of road, half-melted snow drifts from an unseasonable early storm plowed up against fence posts, then finally the pitched roofs of houses and shops and the tall steeple of Ottery St. Catchpole's church. Perfect.

When she had first begun to think how best to determine where Professor Snape's pension payments were being sent, she'd had the brief notion of Transfiguring herself before she realized that would never work. She was no Animagus; she would not have been able to keep her human intelligence in such an altered form. To her knowledge, no Animagus on record had an owl as his or her alternate state. Perhaps that was part of the reason why owls had been chosen as a means of message delivery the system couldn't be compromised by a witch or wizard pretending to be something she or he was not. But Crookshanks, who was not human, but more than a simple cat ... well, that was an entirely different matter. Although the Transfiguration seemed to have gone well, Hermione still couldn't be certain of her success until her pet returned to Rosedell.

The Seeing Stones were just a variation on the same Charm that enchanted two-way mirrors. It had only taken an evening's worth of study and preparation to get them to work. As she had set about her task, something Professor Snape once said in a lecture returned to her.

"It is not enough to be merely competent, or even talented," he'd remarked. For a second Hermione could have sworn those cold black eyes rested on her, but immediately his gaze had shifted to Harry and Ron, and he frowned. "The truly gifted wizard finds ways to improve on what has come before, to innovate, to advance. Not," he drawled, continuing to fix a malevolent black stare on Harry, "that I expect any such breakthroughs from this particular batch of dunderheads."

Well, she was innovating now. Whether Professor Snape would be glad to hear of her novel ways of using old enchantments was an entirely different story

Crookshanks returned, wings blowing drafts of cold air into Hermione's upturned face. He settled on the ground in front of her and tucked his wings back against his body, then looked at her with an expectant air.

"Well done, Crookshanks," Hermione said. "You've earned a tin of tuna for supper."

The orange eyes narrowed slightly, and she hastened to add, "And some kippers as well." Then she stepped forward, removed the collar from his neck and stuffed it in her coat pocket, and pulled out her wand. Within a few seconds, Crookshanks was himself again.

At once he let out an annoyed meow and stalked over to the front door, where he sat on the mat with an impatient air. Clearly, he wanted to be inside and given his supper as soon as possible.

Well, he had earned it. She opened the front door, letting out a wave of warm air, then followed the cat inside. Let him enjoy his dinner. She had plenty of time to let him know that his next journey would most likely be much, much longer, and that the tricky part was yet to come.

Luckily for Hermione, December the twenty-first fell on a Sunday, so she had no reason to come up with an excuse for not being at work. She did tell Ginny that she planned to go shopping with her mother, and she told her mother she was running errands with Ginny. Since Hermione's mother had no easy way of contacting Ginny (or vice-versa), Hermione figured her absence wouldn't be noted.

A combination of a Hover charm and an Invisibility Charm got her and a Transfigured Crookshanks safely into Gringotts' Owlery; apparently the goblins, while obsessed with security in the vaults below, hadn't done much to safeguard their owls' home base. Perhaps the Gringotts staff weren't overly concerned with the fate of the money once it had been signed out of their care.

Several of the Gringotts owls hooted and moved restlessly as Hermione passed them by, but none of them seemed inclined to do more than that. She had already prepped

Crookshanks, telling him that she would signal as soon as she saw the disbursement for Severus Snape being readied. All she could do was hope that the goblins had a fairly simple procedure and that each delivery would be handed off to the nearest owl, as had been the practice at Hogwarts with the school's owls when students there hadn't had owls of their own.

Bill had told her that the pension payments usually were sent out between four and five in the winter months, to take advantage of the eagle owls' predilection for twilight and nighttime flying. If the journey was fairly short, it might only take one night, but somehow Hermione doubted that Professor Snape if he were even still alive would have concealed himself anywhere near London and its environs. No, the possibility existed that Crookshanks' trip might take several days. She knew her spell would hold, but would her poor cat retain enough of himself over such an extended period to return to her safely? Ever since his first flight she had tested him with longer and longer periods in which he wore the owl form much to his dismay and she thought he would be all right, but one could never be certain.

As she waited in the shadows of the Owlery, trying not to breathe too deeply of the dropping-scented air, Hermione wondered if she had gone slightly mad. After all, what sane person would put her beloved pet through such torments just to find a man who had always rather despised her?

That doesn't matter, she told herself. This isn't about you. It's about someone who sacrificed practically his whole life for the wizarding world, only to be shuffled off into oblivion. That isn't right, no matter how he behaved toward his students.

The thought encouraged her a little, and she settled back in the corner, hoping she did not have long to wait. Almost as if in answer to her wishes, the door opened, and a stooped, elderly-looking goblin entered. He clutched a piece of parchment that Hermione immediately recognized as the one she herself had sent over to Gringotts only a few days earlier. Behind him trundled a self-propelled little cart heaped with sacks and bags and satchels of various sizes.

Surely her heart was beating so loudly the goblin could hear it. Holding her breath, Hermione watched as the goblin began reading down the list of names. Since she had prepared the document, she knew how approximately long they had before the goblin reached Severus Snape's name.

"Malva Smythe," read the goblin, and Hermione tensed. An owl hopped forward to take the parcel the goblin held out. As the owl clutched the small sack, the goblin added, "Stoke Aldermoor," and the bird flew away through the large opening marked "NW" for the compass point, Hermione presumed.

She looked over at Crookshanks, and made a flicking movement with the index finger of her right hand. An unseen current coursed through the chilly air and hit the Transfigured cat square in the chest. He immediately moved toward the goblin. The stone around his neck was mostly hidden by the long mottled tan and black feathers on his chest, but Hermione still held her breath, wondering if the goblin on duty would notice that the eagle owl which approached wore a most uncommon accessory.

"Severus Snape," the goblin said, sounding bored, and handed over a largish satchel without even bothering to look up. "Dunhollow, Yorkshire." Crookshanks took the bag in his oversize claws, spread his wings, and took off through the north window of the Owlery, moving with purpose, as if he knew exactly where to go. Hermione had never been able to discover exactly how it was that owls always knew where to find their assigned destination, but whatever instinct or magical inducement led them unerringly to their objective seemed to be working for Crookshanks as well.

Time to go. Now that the cat was safely away with his burden, she could watch his progress from her own home. Still invisible, she drifted to the edge of the balcony, cast another Hover charm under her breath, and put a safe distance between herself and the Owlery before the goblin in attendance realized that someone besides a parliament of owls had occupied the tower atop Gringotts.

Hermione had planned to Disapparate into her living room, where a small fire waited for her in the hearth. Now, however, since she had been lucky enough to hear the name of Professor Snape's current residence or at least what the Ministry believed to be his current residence she thought it wise to try a little investigation before returning home. If she could somehow discover where in Yorkshire Dunhollow lay, perhaps she could intercept poor Crookshanks before he had to complete his long journey.

But a detour into Flourish & Blotts and a quick perusal of the *Wizarding World Gazetteer* revealed nothing, nor did a hurried scan of *Wizard Haunts: England's Most Magical Places*. Perhaps Dunhollow was a Muggle community, although Hermione couldn't imagine Severus Snape lasting long in such prosaic surroundings. Still, the notion was worth investigating, so she stopped in the closest library branch she could find, surrendered her driver's license and library card (which she'd acquired during her university days), and spent several minutes on a borrowed computer terminal searching every possible spelling of "Dunhollow," a search which turned up nothing. Refusing to give in to frustration, she'd gone to the geography section of the stacks and resumed her inquiry there, but again she found no trace of any name resembling the one the goblin had given Crookshanks. It seemed she would have to trust in whatever homing instinct led the wizarding world's owls to their given destinations.

Dunhollow, Yorkshire. She was not overly familiar with the north of England, but somehow Yorkshire sounded like a fitting hiding place for the dour Potions master. Feeling faintly guilty, she Apparated into her living room and settled down on the couch, then pulled the stone out of her pocket to watch Crookshanks' progress.

He appeared to be moving quite rapidly, his large wings eating up the miles as he flew across great expanses of muddy fields that alternated with woods and winding roads. Dusk had almost given way to full dark. If it hadn't been for the recent snowfall, Hermione would have had some difficulty picking out any detail in what the Seeing Stone Crookshanks wore revealed. Even now the image grew dimmer and dimmer, relieved here and there by the twinkling lights of the towns he flew over and the headlamps of vehicles on the road.

No doubt he would fly most of the night. If she wished to keep watch over him as he made his journey, she'd need a little assistance. So Hermione got up off the couch, went into the kitchen, and made herself a pot of strong tea, adding to that some leftover chicken pie Molly had sent home with her a few days earlier.

The ticking of the clock over the mantel seemed almost hypnotic. Despite the tea, Hermione felt her eyelids begin to slip downward, and she started, forcing herself to pick up her mug of tea and take another bracing swallow. By this point she could see little in the stone except variations of darkness. Probably Crookshanks was now moving over open country, staying away from human habitation. Eagle owls had no real enemies, save human kind; it was better to avoid people as much as possible.

At some point the stone slid from her hand, and her eyes closed. As she fell into the darkness, she had the foggy realization that she hadn't thought of Ron in at least four or five hours

Half-hearted sunlight poked its way in past the curtains, causing Hermione's eyelids to flutter. She blinked, then sat up at once, realizing as she did so that she must have slept the night through on the couch. Her stiff neck complained at once of its ill treatment.

Ignoring the pain, she retrieved the Seeing Stone and stared down into it, worried that Crookshanks might have already reached his destination. However, the image that met her gaze was of a deep pine wood with no sign of human life anywhere. It appeared that the Transfigured cat had flown until dawn was near and had then stopped in the most likely spot. Probably he would rest there for a good number of hours, which meant Hermione had time for a hot bath and a proper meal before Crookshanks resumed his flight.

She spent the day in little commonplaces, tidying the house (which was already impeccably neat), wrapping the remainder of her Christmas presents, working in a desultory fashion on her latest house-elf education pamphlet. After all, it would never do to get too behind just because she had been reassigned to the Office of Financial Affairs for a few weeks.

All too often, however, she would look down into the stone, compelled to see if anything had changed, even though logically she knew nothing much could have happened in the five minutes since the last time she had checked on it. Finally, at around three, Crookshanks appeared to alight from the tree in which he had taken refuge and spread his wings once more. After refreshing himself with a freshly caught vole at which point Hermione set down the Stone, feeling her tea and toast lurch in her stomach the Transfigured cat resumed his journey.

He passed over more farmland and roads, then skirted the edge of a largish city Hermione didn't recognize. Here the snow on the ground hadn't quite melted, although the

roads still looked clear. But the country slowly grew rougher, with hills rising from low valleys through which rivers and streams had cut their paths. Finally, just as dusk began to fall, Crookshanks banked to the left, descending into a narrow dale where snow gleamed pale in the shadows and a small ribbon of water wound past a two-story cottage with faded whitewash. Hermione spied a stone chimney, from which drifted a lazy stream of gray smoke.

Letting out another one of those odd "ooh-hu" calls, he glided onto the doorstep and shook out his feathers. Watching him in the Stone, Hermione held her breath. At any moment the door would open, and

and nothing. Even though Crookshanks hooted several more times, the cottage showed no sign of life.

Feeling a bit anti-climactic, Hermione bit her lip and continued to stare into the Seeing Stone. Someone had to be there, after all smoke rose from the chimney, which meant the cottage was inhabited by someone. Although the place looked somewhat forlorn and terribly isolated, it didn't appear abandoned.

A flicker of movement at the periphery of the Stone caught her eye. Then, as she watched, her eyes straining against the deepening shadows in the scene within the enchanted Stone, a tall figure strode across the dead grass of what passed for the cottage's front yard. The man wore a bulky dark coat that effectively obscured his outline, but she would have known that fall of black hair, that hook-nosed profile, no matter what he wore. Severus Snape.

The fingers which held the Stone felt suddenly chilled. Perhaps it was because all the blood in Hermione's body had been drawn inward, to fuel the increased beating of her heart. She hadn't even realized she was holding her breath until she let out a little gasp. So the Ministry hadn't made a mistake after all. Whatever his reasons for hiding himself so thoroughly, Professor Snape was no more dead than Hermione herself was.

He approached the owl on his doorstep in a casual way, as if he had done so a hundred times before. Which Hermione supposed he had, if he'd been getting a pension payment every month for the past five years. Then he bent and took the satchel from Crookshanks. He fished in his pocket for something Hermione couldn't tell what because the image in the Stone was so small and offered it to the Transfigured cat, who appeared to swallow whatever treat Snape had given him. After that, Snape let himself in the front door and shut it firmly behind him.

Crookshanks flapped his wings and flew a short distance away to a twisted-looking yew tree about fifty yards from the cottage. Hermione had instructed him to stay put for awhile after delivering his package, as she had hoped she would be able to retrieve him and spare him the rigors of the return journey. So far her plan seemed to be working. The image in the Stone had been clear enough that she now had a firm idea of where she needed to Apparate. And the yew tree provided enough cover to hide her sudden appearance.

Then what? she thought. *Do I just stride up and knock on his front door? What on earth do I say to him?*

Truthfully, she had been so wrought up in planning for contingencies and trying to make sure that her scheme was workable that she hadn't even stopped to think what she would do if Crookshanks succeeded in finding the Potions master's hidden home. And now that the moment had arrived, part of her quailed at the coming confrontation. It had been an easy escape, a way to occupy her mind, to keep her from thinking about how particularly empty her house felt now that Christmas was almost upon her.

Well, she told herself, *there's no reason you can't do a little reconnaissance first. You don't have to speak to him today, if you don't want to. But at the very least you need to get Crookshanks out of there. It looks like it's going to snow.*

That thought led her to more practical matters. Hermione slid the Stone into the pocket of her jeans and went to retrieve her cloak from the hall closet. It had looked very cold in that hidden Yorkshire dale. After that she picked up her gloves from their resting place on her bedroom dresser and slid them on. She already wore sturdy boots; they would do well enough.

At least she didn't have to worry about summoning up a strong desire to reach her destination no sooner had she fixed the image of the yew tree and the surrounding valley in her mind than she Apparated there, popping back into existence a yard or so away from the tree. Luckily, it stood between her and the cottage.

Cold air filled her lungs, and Hermione could see her breath stream out before her. Even in her warm wool cloak, she knew she couldn't stay out here for too long. She hadn't felt such a biting chill since she'd left Hogwarts six years ago.

"Crookshanks!" she hissed, and almost immediately she saw the ghostly shape of an owl launch itself from the upper branches of the yew tree and settle on the snow-covered ground next to her. He blinked his round, orange eyes at her and ruffled his feathers; clearly, he wished to be rid of his owl form.

The rational part of her mind told Hermione she should Transfigure the cat and get the hell out of there, but curiosity was stronger. "Just a minute more," she said in an undertone. Then she murmured the words of the Invisibility Charm and inched away through the increasing darkness, moving closer to Snape's cottage.

There really wasn't that much to see. On closer observation she noticed that a rough footpath wound its way past the house and disappeared northward along the bottom of the dale. The stream itself had not yet frozen over; she could hear it murmuring and chattering to itself as it flowed through its narrow banks. Besides the cottage, there was a dodgy-looking outbuilding a few yards to the rear of the house. Now it seemed empty, although she supposed if a Muggle were in residence it would have held a car or possibly a piece of farm equipment. That, however, seemed to be the extent of the homestead.

Truly, it was one of the loneliest places she had ever seen. Although Hermione valued her solitude, she couldn't imagine spending five years alone in such surroundings. Even her own cheery little cottage had begun to seem like a prison cell after Ron had died, the Burrow's proximity notwithstanding.

All the feelings she had fought to keep at bay seemed to rise up in her at that thought, and her eyes stung with sudden tears. *Damn it,* she thought, *how long is it going to be like this? How long before I can feel like a human being again?*

"Let it hurt for as long as you need to," Minerva McGonagall had told her. The question was, did Hermione still need the hurt? How long would it take before she truly believed she had grieved enough for Ron?

Perhaps one can never grieve enough, she reflected, watching the smoke rising from Snape's chimney and feeling the freezing earth beneath her feet send its chilly touch up through the soles of her boots. *But perhaps I can give myself permission to let it go at last. Just because I don't cry myself to sleep every night doesn't mean I didn't love Ron. And surely if he loved me as much as I loved him, he wouldn't want me to spend the rest of my life in misery.*

She looked upward then, watching as a dim little star broke clear of a cloud bank and twinkled bravely against the black sky. Somehow, seeing it heartened her. The stars would always be there, no matter what happened down here on earth.

Abruptly, the front door to the cottage banged open, and Hermione took a step backward. Severus Snape stood there, his outline very black against the glow of the candle- and firelight within. Although she could not make out his features, she could almost see his eyes narrowing as he stared out into the darkness.

Had he heard her Apparate onto his property? She wouldn't have thought so, seeing as she had been many yards away from the house proper when she had done so, but perhaps he had the place magically warded. If that were the case, it was definitely time to get out of here.

She turned to flee back toward the yew tree, but somehow found that her legs wouldn't obey her. To her horror, she looked down to see multiple thin cords wrapping themselves around her calves, then winding up her legs and binding her arms against her sides. She stumbled and fell against the snow-covered ground.

Almost immediately, Professor Snape was standing over her. Hermione heard him murmur the words to dispel her Invisibility Charm, and the tip of his wand glowed blue as he held it closer to her face. His black eyes glittered in its reflected light, and then she saw the thin lips lift ever so slightly.

"Well, Miss Granger," he said, "I'm curious to hear your excuse for this latest round of trespassing."

Old Wounds

Chapter 4 of 4

These things never go quite as expected....

Four: Old Wounds

Of all the ways Hermione might have imagined her first meeting with Professor Snape, she was fairly certain that none of them would have involved her lying on her back in the snow, her legs bound with magical cords, while she stared up into the Potions master's contemptuous face.

She said the first thing that came to her mind. "That's Mrs. Granger-Weasley."

His expression didn't change. "Indeed." Then his lip curled, and he added, "You could have done better."

Outrage boiled through her at his words, but in a way that was good if she were busy being furious with Severus Snape, then she wouldn't have time to stop and think about how frightened she actually was. Instead of making an angry retort, she said, in what she hoped was a properly irritated voice, "Are you going to take these cords off, or do you expect me to lie here all night?"

Without replying, he flicked his wand, and the cords unwrapped themselves from her legs and somehow slithered their way back into the slender ebony stick. It was a nice trick, even though Hermione didn't much appreciate being on the receiving end of it.

In icy silence she stood, then brushed the snow off her damp jeans. Of course the good Professor couldn't be bothered to give her a hand up. She had always continued to think of him as Professor Snape, even though he had served a year as Hogwarts' Headmaster. However, since she had spent that year wandering around looking for Horcruxes, the notion of "Headmaster Snape" had never really sunk in.

"And how is Mr. Weasley?" Snape asked, still with that disdainful lift to his voice.

She shot the Potions master a look as baleful as any he might have bestowed on a blundering first year. "Dead."

For a few seconds Snape did not reply. Then he said, in ungracious tones, "I suppose you had better come inside."

"Don't do me any favors, Professor," Hermione replied, wishing she could inject as much scorn into speaking his title as she currently felt. "I'll just retrieve my owl and go."

"Ah, so that's how you did it." He looked up in the direction of the yew tree where Crookshanks still sat. "Infiltrated the Gringotts Owlery?"

"Yes," she said curtly, then called out, "Crookshanks!"

The Transfigured cat flew down toward her and landed a few feet away. He cocked his head and gave Snape a wary look. Without speaking, Hermione drew out her own wand, then restored Crookshanks to his former feline glory.

"How clever," remarked Snape, in a manner which suggested he thought her ploy was anything but. At once Crookshanks' eyes narrowed, and his ears flattened against his head.

"Not clever enough, apparently," Hermione said, bending down to pick up the cat. He let out a rusty meow but appeared resigned to being held. "I'll just be going "

"Not so fast." The Potions master fixed her with a slit-eyed look of his own. "I think you'll find it impossible to Disapparate so close to the house. Inside, if you please." If possible, his mouth thinned even further. "I would like some answers."

Feeling fairly trapped, Hermione lifted her chin and then stalked past Snape and through the open front door of the cottage. Inside it was much warmer, thanks to a generous fire in the hearth. The interior of the little house was as plain and humble as its exterior, although, as she noted right away, scrupulously clean. The ground floor seemed to consist of one largish chamber that opened up into a dining area directly past the living room, with a kitchen at the extreme left. Both the dining area and the kitchen appeared to have been given over to potions mixing or research, as herbs and other dried flora hung from the ceiling in both sections, and the Welsh dresser in the dining room was crowded with all sorts of bottles and flasks in various shapes, sizes, and hues. Apparently Professor Snape's solitude had not been an idle one.

He indicated that Hermione should sit down on the faded sofa which faced the fireplace. Since she didn't know what else to do, she did so, settling herself on the center cushion with Crookshanks on her lap. The cat looked even less thrilled to be there than Hermione herself did and, after some determined wriggling, jumped down and stalked over to the hearth, where he lay down in front of the fire. No doubt he wished to shake off some of the chill from the cold Yorkshire night.

Out of nowhere Snape produced a sturdy brown mug and handed it Hermione, remarking in dry tones, "The universal panacea."

Somewhat mystified, she lifted an eyebrow, then sniffed at the contents of the mug. It appeared to be plain tea.

"Nothing poisonous, I assure you," Snape said, still with that ironic intonation.

Nettled, Hermione lifted the mug and sipped at the tea. It was quite hot, but it did feel good going down her throat. Her damp feet still ached inside their heavy boots. If she'd been in her own house, she would have pulled them off immediately and gotten her stocking feet as close to the fire as possible, but of course she wouldn't take any such liberties here in Snape's home.

"Now that we have the pleasantries out of the way," he went on, moving past her to sit in a threadbare wing chair situated to the right of the couch, "perhaps you would be good enough to explain what you're doing here."

Those were pleasantries? Hermione thought, but she supposed it could have been worse. At least he'd brought her inside out of the cold, and he'd removed her bonds as well. Not that it mattered, she reflected with some bitterness, since he obviously had the place Charmed against unwanted Disapparation. And how like Severus Snape not to offer one word of condolence about Ron, or to even inquire why a healthy young man should have died at the ripe old age of twenty-three. Again she felt anger flare and was glad of it. It was much easier to face Snape armed with righteous indignation instead of shamefaced embarrassment over being caught snooping around his property.

However, she also knew that handing the Potions master a lie would be useless. Hadn't Harry told her what a powerful Legilimens Snape was, second only to Voldemort? Besides, there was nothing shameful about the truth in this situation.

"Following a hunch," she replied at length, after sipping at her tea once more.

Snape scowled. Looking at him, Hermione realized the past five years hadn't been particularly kind. The lines that ran from his nose to mouth looked deeper, as did the furrow between his brows. And as he turned his head slightly to fix her with an unblinking dark gaze, she saw a few threads of silver glimmer in his black hair.

Since he did not seem inclined to speak, she continued, "I've been on a temporary posting in the Office of Financial Services at the Ministry of Magic. Imagine my surprise when your name came up on the list of current pensioners."

"So that was it," he said, and a flicker of annoyance passed over his face. "So much for confidentiality."

"Well, it did take five years for anyone to notice," Hermione offered, but Snape did not appear to be much mollified by her words. "And even when I brought it up, the regular OFS employee who was working with me tried to tell me it was a simple accounting error."

"Which you didn't believe."

"No."

"So you undertook the task of finding out whether the error was no error at all?"

"Yes," she replied, feeling increasingly uneasy. The erstwhile Potions master had continued to speak in cool, disinterested tones, almost as if he were discussing someone besides himself. She hadn't really expected him to fly into a rage, but she would have thought he'd show a little more reaction than this. *Then again*, she reflected, *do I really want to know how angry he probably is?*

That thought only increased her disquiet. He seemed far too calm for a man who had had a five-year exile destroyed by a witch playing amateur sleuth.

Still with a scowl etched into his forehead, Snape turned away from her and stared into the hearth. The dancing flames outlined the hooked nose and cast odd shadows under his eyes. For the first time she realized that he wore the familiar close-fitting coat from his Hogwarts days, although the cuffs looked frayed, and she thought she saw a patch on one elbow. As he shifted, she caught a glimpse of a livid scar that cut its way across his throat. It was mostly hidden by his high collar ... mostly. Looking at that reminder of Voldemort's treachery, Hermione wondered how Professor Snape had managed to survive Nagini's attack and whether she'd ever have the courage to ask him for the truth of the matter.

Finally he spoke. "Why?"

Well, that was a good question. Hermione had been unable to fully explain her motivations to herself how on earth could she ever articulate to Severus Snape her reasons for seeking him out?

She cleared her throat. "It didn't seem fair."

"Fair?" It was amazing how much scorn he injected into that one small word.

"Yes, fair." Gripping the mug of tea, she stared into the fire as well it gave her a good reason for not directly looking at Professor Snape. Crookshanks lay on his back in front of the hearth, paws in the air. He looked ludicrous, and Hermione almost shook her head. Trust a cat to bring you sensibly back down to earth. "I know what you did all those years, Professor. How you spied for Dumbledore, risked your life time and time again it just didn't seem fair to me that you should be forgotten, hiding somewhere and quietly collecting your pension payments, when the whole wizarding world really owes you a huge thanks."

At that comment Snape let out a short, humorless laugh. "I see the passage of time hasn't changed you, Miss Granger. One would have thought the world might have worn away some of your idealism by now."

"That's 'Mrs. Granger-Weasley,'" she snapped. "We're not in Hogwarts any longer."

His mouth twisted. "No, we most assuredly are not. So what happened to the bumbling Mr. Weasley? Did he finally blow himself up with one of his brothers' infernal contraptions? Or did he simply take on a spell he couldn't handle?"

Rage flared again, hot as the center of the fire which burned in the hearth. "You don't know what you're talking about," Hermione retorted. "It was a bloody car accident, and no fault of his, either." She stood abruptly, sloshing a bit of tea on the shabby rug that fronted the couch. "And I don't care if I can't Disapparate from your damned house I'll go ten miles on foot if I have to, just to get out of here!"

"Calm yourself ... Hermione," Snape drawled. "That's a bit less unwieldy than 'Mrs. Granger-Weasley,' although I have always wondered what on earth your parents were thinking when they saddled you with that particular name."

Talk about the pot calling the kettle black, Hermione fumed, and she burst out, "I will not calm myself! Here I was trying to help you what the bloody hell was I thinking? You don't know what it's like you don't know how it feels to lose someone "

"Don't I?" His voice sounded silky, almost indifferent, but there was an edge to the question that somehow made the hair on the back of Hermione's neck stand up. "Now sit down, and don't be a fool."

For a second she considered defying him flinging the half-drunk mug of tea in his face, collecting Crookshanks, and marching out the front door. What could he do, after all? Restrain her bodily, as he had done out the front yard? Possibly, but she somehow doubted it. And although she felt certain of her own abilities, she knew that rushing headlong into a duel with Severus Snape was not the wisest course of action.

Jaw clenched, she sat back down. In frosty tones, she remarked, "I think you should apologize."

"Apologize?"

"For saying such things about Ron."

"I will not."

Hermione glared at Snape, at the harsh features, at the cold, unsympathetic gleam in his eyes. Really, what on earth had she expected? He'd never liked Ron, and he'd hated Harry, for reasons she'd never been able to completely discern. Finally she said, "Then don't expect me to apologize for trespassing."

"I somehow expected you wouldn't. You have about you the gleam of the righteous."

Oh, he was impossible. He deserved this ramshackle cottage, this gloomy dale, the utter exile he had forced upon himself. A man like that couldn't live with other people sooner or later someone would definitely want to kill him. For a split-second she almost empathized with Voldemort.

"At any rate," Hermione went on doggedly, feeling somehow as if he'd gotten the better of her, although she couldn't say exactly why, "my personal life has nothing to do with this. I suppose you had your own reasons for running away, but "

"Running away?" Snape broke in. "Is that what you think this is?"

"Well, what else? If you hadn't gone into hiding, there might have been people who would have vouched for you, people who would explain "

"Indeed? And who exactly did you have in mind as my chosen advocate? Potter?"

Had he been practicing Legilimency? Is that how Snape had known exactly what she had been thinking? "Well, why not?"

A corner of his thin mouth twitched. "For the answer to that question, I think you had better ask the famous Mr. Potter himself."

"I will," Hermione said at once, but inwardly she wondered if she would have the courage to broach such a subject with Harry after he had made it clear on multiple occasions that there were some topics he would never discuss. He had seen more in those memories than Snape's adventures as a double agent, but Harry had never said precisely what. And the few times Hermione had tried to speak with Ginny in private on the subject, her sister-in-law had been most evasive. At the time Hermione had thought it was because Harry had told his wife to keep his confidences in the utmost secrecy, but now Hermione began to think it was more likely that he had never told Ginny anything of substance, either.

"I'm interested to hear how that works for you," Snape said, and something in his tone had altered subtly. It seemed almost that he was laughing at her.

Well, it wouldn't be the first time, she thought, and her cheeks burned as she recalled how he'd said he hadn't seen any difference in her appearance after Draco had hexed her to make her front teeth grow unnaturally long. The unwanted memory made her realize for the first time that she'd come haring out here quite unprepared in a monstrous, pilly old jumper of Ron's, baggy jeans, and muddy boots, without a speck of makeup and her hair pulled back into a vomitous old scrunchie. No wonder Snape had looked at her with such disdain.

"Does that mean I have a return invitation?" Hermione inquired, refusing to be cowed.

For a second he stared at her with almost an expression of surprise. Then his eyes regained their familiar hooded look. "I hardly think so."

"Should I send you an owl?" she persisted. "Crookshanks has shown himself to be quite adaptable "

"No return visits, no owls has it escaped your attention, Hermione, that I chose this place precisely because I did not wish to be bothered? And that I was doing quite a good job of staying away from the world until you began meddling?"

"Quite a good job," Hermione replied, and gave their shabby surroundings a penetrating stare. "So good, in fact, that I begin to wonder why you bothered to save yourself in the first place, if your intent was turn yourself into a ghost anyway." Ignoring the look of cold fury that glittered in Snape's black eyes, she leaned over and set her now-empty mug down on the rug, then rose to her feet. "If you would be so kind as to lift the anti-Disapparation wards?"

"With pleasure." The Potions master stood as well and stalked over to the front door. When he opened it, a flurry of snow blew in.

Hermione called Crookshanks to her, and he came with some reluctance. Of course he didn't want to leave the nice warm fire to go out into the freezing night. She didn't much look forward to it herself, but anything was better than staying here under Snape's malevolent gaze. Really, what had she been thinking? That he would thank her for her persistence, announce himself a reformed character, and follow her back to the Burrow so he could join in on a jolly Christmas celebration? This wasn't some Dickens novel, for Merlin's sake.

With as much dignity as she could muster, Hermione lifted the cat and tucked him into a fold of her cloak, then marched past Snape without meeting his eyes. The cold hit her immediately as she crossed over the threshold, but the sound of the rising wind wasn't quite enough to drown out the emphatic bang of the front door as he slammed it shut behind her.

Bloody bastard, she thought, borrowing one of Ron's favorite phrases. *Can't even comprehend simple human kindness, or the need to right a wrong!*

But she would have to brood on the Potions master's multiple faults later, after she was safely home. As she turned to Disapparate, one part of her mind thought uncharitably that she wouldn't put it past Snape to have left the wards in place, just so she would be stuck out here in the freezing night. His desire to have her gone must have been greater than his need for revenge, however, for almost immediately she ended up back in the familiar warmth of her living room, with the magical fire that never went out until you lifted the Charm that kept it burning and the soft glow of candlelight all around her.

Crookshanks gave an outraged yowl and jumped out of her arms, going into the kitchen and making increasingly urgent mewling sounds. After a few seconds Hermione shook herself and went into the narrow, galley-style chamber to open a tin of tuna for the cat, whose tone made it very clear that he thought himself quite ill-used. Once he had devoured most of the tuna, she added some kippers to the bowl, trying not to wrinkle her nose in disgust. She'd always hated them, but they had been a favorite of Ron's.

As for herself, food was about the last thing on her mind. Hermione went back out to the living room and sat down on the sofa, then bent over and began to undo the laces on her boots in an absent-minded way. At last her feet were free, and she kicked the damp footwear under the coffee table. Better to let them dry there, she supposed, although she'd always gotten on Ron for doing the exact same thing. Then she settled back against the sofa, letting the warmth begin to work itself into her numb toes, as she brooded on how her encounter with Snape had gone so horribly wrong.

Well, how could it have gone right? the reasonable part of her mind inquired. *He always was impossible. Why on earth did you think he would have changed over the past five years?*

True enough, Hermione supposed, but if she hadn't made such an idiot of herself by sneaking around ... if she had just gathered up Crookshanks and gotten herself out of there as she had planned originally

But that line of thought was fruitless. What had been done couldn't be undone, except perhaps with the aid of a Time-Turner. The device Professor McGonagall had lent her had been safely returned, however, and all of the Ministry's Time-Turners had been destroyed during the D.A.'s battle with Voldemort's Death Eaters. No, she'd just have to face the consequences of her actions unaided.

Still, Hermione was forced to admit that she'd botched things pretty badly. Perhaps she could blame some of her blundering on the single-mindedness that had gotten her into trouble on more than one occasion, but she'd also allowed her emotions to get the better of her. Never mind that much of what Snape had said had been calculated to wound she should have known he would choose that line of attack and ignored his jabs.

"Well, I won't let that happen again," she said aloud, and then shook her head at herself. As if there was even going to be a next time. Severus Snape had made it quite clear what he thought of her returning to see him. But the thought of staying meekly away somehow appealed to her even less than facing his wrath should she attempt to force her way into his self-imposed exile once again. What would he do, after all? Turn her into a toad?

Well, that was always a distinct possibility, but Hermione hoped things wouldn't come to such a pass. Maybe it was time to attempt to get more information out of Harry. Of course she'd be seeing him Christmas Eve at the Burrow, but those celebrations were far too noisy and chaotic for her to make an attempt at getting any more confidences out of him, even if he did have a few too many glasses of firewhisky or Molly's excellent but head-turning punch. However, he'd also planned a Boxing Day party at his own home for the members of the D.A. who still kept in touch Harry and Ginny, Neville, Luna, Ernie Macmillan. Susan Bones had attended the previous year, but had sent her regrets for this go-round. It would be a small enough celebration; perhaps Hermione could find an opportunity then to get Harry alone for a private talk.

With another one of those little pangs that seemed unending, she realized this would be the first time she would attend a holiday party alone. At every other gathering it had always been her and Ron. Once again her throat seemed to close up, and she began to question the wisdom of staying here alone at the cottage for the holidays. Perhaps it would have been wiser to have gone to her parents, as they'd encouraged her to do.

It might have kept me out of trouble, she thought, seeing again Severus Snape's cold eyes, the mocking expression on his face. It was quite apparent that his opinion of her hadn't changed much from the days when he called her an "insufferable know-it-all."

Why that bothered her so much, Hermione couldn't quite say. To be sure, she thought she'd done quite a bit of growing up during the last five years, and being relegated to annoying schoolgirl status by a former professor wasn't exactly encouraging. It probably would have been much wiser for her to be better prepared, to have gone to see him in proper robes and neatly groomed, to show Snape she was now an adult and worthy of respect.

The clock ticked away on the mantel. Hermione looked up, surprised to see that it was barely seven o'clock. It felt as if days had passed since she left this room to seek out Severus Snape's hiding place in Yorkshire. Certainly her world had changed since then. It was one thing to have a suspicion and follow a hunch, and quite another to see the evidence of one's investigation before one's own eyes. Too bad that evidence had wanted nothing whatsoever to do with her.

Suddenly restless, she stood and went into the bathroom. As she entered, candles all around her glowed into life in their various sconces and holders. Their combined light was ruthless in revealing the bushy mess of her hair, some of which had escaped the beleaguered scrunchie and hung in straggling tendrils around her face. Without the light cosmetics she usually wore to work, she really did still look around seventeen years old. And was that a dirt smear on her left cheek?

Hermione leaned closer to the mirror and scowled, then turned on the tap and ran a wash cloth under the water so that she could wipe away the offending smudge. That helped a little, but it didn't really matter what she did now it was too late to change what Professor Snape thought of her ...

... or was it? First impressions, as they said, were lasting, but what if that first impression happened to be overlaid by a second, and a third? Her mother had been on her forever to make a few minor alterations to her appearance, but Hermione had always stubbornly resisted, saying she didn't have the time to fuss with such things, and that Ron certainly didn't seem to care on way or the other. But Ron was gone, and perhaps it was time to make some changes.

Suddenly resolved, she went back out to the living room and fished the mobile phone out of her satchel. Rosedell being a wizard cottage, it didn't have a land line, but Hermione had bought the portable phone in London so that she could keep in better touch with her parents. Ron of course had been fascinated by the device she'd also narrowly missed having Arthur Weasley take the thing apart during one of her visits to the Burrow and on more than one occasion she'd had to retrieve it from an odd room in the house where Ron had taken it to look at it more closely. *No danger of that now*, she thought with some sadness.

The phone picked up on the second ring. "Hello, Mum?" Hermione asked. "I've decided to take you up on your offer "