

The Ransom of Albus Dumbledore

by spiderwort

After the Headmaster's death, Hermione stays at Hogwarts to research magic that the Trio might need to defeat Voldemort. She has a familiar, but totally unexpected visitor who has a horrifying tale to tell: Dumbledore cannot pass into the Beyond because of a mistake Harry made. His soul is trapped and tormented within his tomb--and only someone who is still alive can help him.

Hermione Pursued

Chapter 1 of 29

After the Headmaster's death, Hermione stays at Hogwarts to research magic that the Trio might need to defeat Voldemort. She has a familiar, but totally unexpected visitor who has a horrifying tale to tell: Dumbledore cannot pass into the Beyond because of a mistake Harry made. His soul is trapped and tormented within his tomb--and only someone who is still alive can help him.

Tip...tip...tip.... Her feet trotted along automatically as her thick-heeled shoes beat out a vibrant tattoo on the narrow, wooden stairway. After six years at Hogwarts, the route from the library to the Great Hall did not need Hermione's conscious attention, and that was a good thing, for she had much to think about.

She considered her friend Harry, courageous Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived...who lived on and on, although he had put himself in harm's way so many times trying to defeat the dark wizard Voldemort. Voldemort had killed his parents, and badly wanted to kill him. Harry had quit Hogwarts for good and was planning to head out for a final assault on that supreme villain. It was Harry's prophesied fate to be the only person in the entire Magicosm who had a chance of destroying him and scattering his minions.

Hermione would be with him, if she had anything to say about it, guarding his flank, armed with logic and reams of magical knowledge. She felt a bit short on courage in this role, but she knew at Harry's other side would be his best friend, Ron, and this thought raised her spirits somewhat.

She thought about Ron Weasley...The Boy Who Loved...who loved her, not Lavender Brown, the girl he had snogged almost non-stop their entire sixth year. Hermione cared for him too; she knew that now. But it had taken the assassination of their Headmaster, the great Albus Dumbledore, to finally strip her soul of its petty jealousy, to make her recognize Ron's worth.

From the moment they first met, she'd written him off as an air-headed bumbler. She had cut him dead the first day she met him and continued to ignore his ideas throughout the years she knew him. She had been entirely deaf to his wicked sense of humor and blind to his talent for strategizing. She wondered now how she...for all her vaunted intelligence...had failed all that time to recognize the value of his calmness, his patience, his steadfast loyalty.

She was a different person now, she hoped. Dumbledore's death had changed her, had shocked her into realizing that time was precious, and that one should not waste it nursing wounded pride and an erudite self-image. Within herself, she forgave Ron his trysts with the amorous and clinging Lavender, though she couldn't quite bring herself to tell him so...yet. She consoled herself with the thought that their mindless groping was a kind of experiment, a needed first foray into the world of sexual intimacy...for Ron at least. He was such an innocent.

And she was touched at how it had enhanced his emotional range. During the funeral, he held her with practiced ease, smoothed her tousled hair with a gentle hand, kissed her eyes to stop the tears. She could ignore his comforting presence no longer. Ronald Weasley would be a priority on her list of studies from now on.

The least she could do for him, the very least, was to make sure that he got back those oddments he'd left behind, that she'd gathered up from his room a few days before...a pack of assorted Dung Bombs and the twins' leftover Aging Potion among them. Then she'd tell him that she cared for him as more than just a friend. But right now, duty called...and her growling tummy.

~*~

She turned the corner and dashed down wider stone steps towards the main floor.

Tip...tip...tip...

Hermione.

Tip...tip...tip...tip...tip...

Herrrrrmiione...

She turned her head to glance at the wall as she flew down the great marble staircase. Were the portraits talking to her again? They had all wanted to hear details of the Death Eaters' invasion and Dumbledore's death back when she'd had no stomach for recounting those horrific events. But now all those painted faces seemed wooden or bored or even asleep, although it was nearly noon. Perhaps they had gone into shock as the rape of Hogwarts penetrated their collective conscious. She could hardly sleep herself for the nightmares those memories generated.

One dream in particular haunted her. It was Ron, writhing on the ground in the throes of a Cruciatius curse, moaning "Hermiione , help me. Make it stop, make it--aaaah!" That scene itself was difficult enough to look at, even in sleep: the boy she was only just coming to care for wracked with muscular spasms, his body arched backwards, tense and quivering, like a drawn bow.

But then Ron's face would change suddenly into Dumbledore's. It reminded her of Harry's description of the Headmaster's death the night the Death Eaters invaded the school. She would watch as the aged professor, feeble and transfixed with fear, inched slowly backwards, wormlike, to cringe against a wall. In her dream, she too stood unable to move, as if immobilized herself by that Body-Bind the Headmaster had placed on Harry. But it was not Professor Snape approaching Dumbledore with wand raised to administer the Death Curse that made Albus Dumbledore cower like that. No, in her dream, grotesque gray shapes like zombies advanced on the once invincible Headmaster of Hogwarts, craning and clutching at him, giggling and grimacing, drooling and jerking...

She shook off the hated memory which had actually caused her to stop in her tracks.

Tip...tip...tip...

She must get to the dining room, have a quick lunch, and get back to the library. Ron and Harry had agreed that she should stay behind at Hogwarts to find out all she could about Dark Magic, anything that might help them in their quest to rid the world of Voldemort and his evil network.

Hermione!

Mid-flight, she risked a glance to her left once again. This time she thought she saw a blur of a figure racing along next to her in a group photo of humorless wizards in purple paisley robes. But the photo was pressed behind glass, so the figure was likely just her own reflection. Without further thought, she leaped off the final step and crossed the hallway. Her place was set at the end of the Gryffindor table...the only one in the whole room. All her schoolmates had gone on home, and most of the staff too.

She remembered the mob scene after Dumbledore's funeral: students wanting to pay their last respects, collapsing in grief, weeping openly on each others' shoulders or standing tearless and numb in line waiting to caress the chalk-white bier, to lay a flower or other small memento on it, to whisper final words of thanks, regret, confession, with their parents trying to cut it short, to pull them away from this suddenly dangerous place, the one refuge they had thought safe from the Death Eaters' predations. There had been few at the leaving banquet that night, all of them...even the remaining Slytherins...red-eyed and sniffling, listening to Headmistress McGonagall's halting words of comfort. She had stopped short of saying the school would close, but Hermione knew the words were in her mind.

And now she sat alone in the big room, attended only by an all-consuming sense of purpose. She whispered to her plate: "Salad of greens, please, and consommé and some biscuits...and a small gillywater."

The food did not immediately appear, as it used to. The house-elves in the kitchen below her were still mourning their employer, and their magic had become rather hit-or-miss. The low point had come when she'd ordered liver and onions on Saturday night and got instead a dozen golf balls and two well-used leather uppers. Dobby, her favorite elf and Harry's good friend, did what he could to console the other elves. But most of them had never had such a benevolent master before, and his loss left them bewildered and aimless. So their services...which Hermione was just as happy to do without, since she felt the oppression of their voluntary servitude more than most...were a bit erratic at present.

Now the meal appeared, complete and correct, and she dove into her salad. She was that hungry. The morning's research had had promising results. There were some jinxes and hexes and evil-detection spells that would be useful if they ran into any of the Dark Lord's minions in their quest to defeat Voldemort himself. She had promised to meet Harry and Ron at Bill and Fleur's wedding. There they would make their final plans and she could tutor them on any additional spells she thought would be useful. None of them would be coming back to Hogwarts for their final year, so it was just as well that she was spending a little extra time here, the place that had made a competent witch of her. It would be hard to leave.

After lunch she had to meet with Professor McGonagall. She would never have been allowed to just stay on indefinitely at the school without certain of the staff becoming suspicious of her intentions. So she'd volunteered to help the new Headmistress to clean up Dumbledore's office. It had been left in some disarray after the attack...though not by the Death Eaters themselves. After Aurors had roused the last of the invaders, members of the Ministry of Magic, led by Minister Scrimgeour, had arrived and somehow foiled Dumbledore's safeguards, passed the gargoyle unscathed, and pounded up the spiral staircase to his office. They ransacked the place, looking for clues to Dumbledore's plans to eliminate the Dark Lord, but McGonagall, with Professors Sprout and Flitwick at her back, had driven them off before they discovered anything of importance. And Harry, who knew exactly what those plans were, had refused to cooperate, declaring himself Dumbledore's man and no "poster-child," as he called it, for the regime of the morally bankrupt Scrimgeour.

She started on her soup, which had a comforting steam of chicken and vegetable flavor rising above it. But as she bent over it, spoon poised, she gave a cry of terror. There was a face in the broth, staring up at her, like a reflection, but it was decidedly not her own.

Hermione, it said, quite plainly, the same voice she had heard on the stairway.

She dropped the spoon into the bowl with a clatter, spilling consommé all over the placemat.

Ouch-ch-ch-ch, said the face, quivering in the standing waves set up by the splash.

"Who are you?"

Look closely.

She peered into the bowl. As the agitation subsided, the face of a haggard, lank-haired man came clear. Sirius Black, Harry's godfather! Her heart leapt at the discovery.

But she must be dreaming. Sirius was long dead, killed by his cousin, Bellatrix in a struggle with the Death Eaters at the Ministry the previous year. Hermione felt a brief spasm in her chest at the memory of his loss and winced. It reminded her of the grievous injury she'd sustained herself during the battle.

His face was likewise screwed up, as if in pain.

"Sirius, what...? Oh, I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

Not at all. It was only the noise. Silver on china makes a rather sinus-clearing reverberation, even in the ectoplasmic ether.

"But what are you doing here? Should I try to owl Harry? He's gone home...I mean to the Dursleys..."

No, it's not a good idea for him, or anyone else, to know about this.

"Is it something to do with Voldemort?"

In a way, yes. But it's more to do with Dumbledore.

"The Headmaster?"

He's trapped, Hermione.

"What? You mean he's not dead after all?"

Oh, he's dead all right. I'd better explain. But it's a long story, and this isn't the best place.

"I only have a few minutes to eat. Then I have to go to Dumbledore's...I mean McGonagall's office."

That's perfect!

"Why? Do you want to meet me there?"

Oh, no. Those stuffy old Heads would never let me share their picture frames. But while you're there, you can retrieve something...something very important. It's a kind of list.

"What?"

I can't go into it now, but there is a list of things Dumbledore left unfinished when he died. And it's important that it shouldn't be destroyed or found by the wrong people. Do you think you can get it for me?

"Do you know where it is?"

No, but I'm betting that one of the old Heads will. Is there a mirror or a sparsely occupied picture frame in your bedroom?

"Yes, Lavender Brown left her wall mirror behind when her parents came to get her."

Hermione thought back to that day. She couldn't hate Ron's first girlfriend, not any more. The poor girl had barely had time to pack the essentials with her mother sobbing and wringing her hands and her father looking all the while at his wristwatch. Lavender had missed the funeral altogether, and, wet-eyed, had given Hermione a small bouquet of dried flowers to lay on the Headmaster's tomb for her.

Good, said Sirius. Wall mirror, sixth-year girls' dorm, Gryffindor Tower, say at five? And bring that list. And before she could object he disappeared down into the sediment at the bottom of the bowl.

The List

Chapter 2 of 29

Hermione must run a formidable gauntlet of Minerva McGonagall and all the old Hogwarts heads to retrieve the list Sirius needs.

2. THE LIST

"Blubber," Hermione said confidently. The stone gargoyle moved aside and she stepped onto the spiraling staircase. Professor McGonagall had likely been meditating on her predecessor's sense of humor to come up with this series of passwords. Last week's had been "Nitwit."

She entered the Headmaster's...no, Headmistress's...office, which certainly needed tidying. Drawers had been opened, books strewn about, some of the more delicate magical devices on display smashed way beyond anything a simple *Reparo* could fix. She decided she would look for the list Sirius wanted while she followed Professor McGonagall's own itinerary, making piles of things to Scourgify, Reparo, replace, file, store or Vanish.

She started with Fawkes the Phoenix's perch. It had not been touched by the marauding band of Aurors, so it just needed to be Levitated to the door for the house-elves to remove. She put a little tag on it with the instruction the Headmistress requested: **Please store in the Come and Go Room** This was the house-elves' name for the Room of Requirement.

Hermione had a sudden pang of guilt. It was in that hidden room that Draco Malfoy had manufactured a portal to let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. All that year, Harry had been sure that Draco was plotting some evil, but he had been unable to convince her or Ron, or even Dumbledore himself, of the danger. Now they would be forced to hunt down Voldemort themselves, without the Headmaster's guidance, at least partly because she had pooh-poohed her friend's instincts.

She shook off her malaise. There was no use crying over spilled potion. It was like lamenting all the times she'd treated Ron badly. It didn't do anyone any good. *I'm not*

going to think about Harry, she chided herself, *Or Ron. I have a job to do.* She started putting away the books that Scrimgeour's bullies had dumped onto the floor, but she ran into trouble immediately trying to figure out what shelves to put them on. The ones that were still in place seemed to be in no particular order. They weren't alphabetized by author or title. They weren't grouped by topic either. Transfiguration tomes were mixed in with bowling manuals and recipe collections. *There's a pattern here; there's got to be,* she thought. But she couldn't see it.

It reminded her of one time when she was playing wizard chess with Harry. Ron had come up behind her and breathed into her hair: "Don't you see it, Hermione? He's going to fork your queen." And she had seen it, as soon as he gave her the hint. She hadn't thanked him of course. She had been uncomfortably conscious of his sudden closeness and simultaneously irritated at realizing once again that he was infinitely better than her at this so cerebral game. *But why shouldn't he be? Why shouldn't he have something he excels in? Why do I feel I always have to be the best in everything?*

"Trying to figure out his system?" It was Professor McGonagall at the door.

It took Hermione an embarrassed moment to realize that it was Dumbledore she was talking about.

"Don't bother," the headmistress continued, striding to the desk. "Last week he had his favorites at eye level, the boring-but-necessary books on the bottom shelves, and the impressive-looking-but-useless ones up top. The week before that he arranged them by color. And before that, by the year he acquired them." She surveyed the shelves with her quirky smile, fondly, as if she saw her old, dear friend there once more, squinting at a particularly intriguing title. "Just put them up anywhere for now. We'll be sending quite a few to the library upstairs according to the dictates of his will, though what the students will do with a book on twin-needle crocheting, I do not know."

She swung a small satchel up onto the desk. "Bag of Holding," she said. "For the items going to his brother, including some of those." She gestured at the delicate magical devices on display.

Hermione was surprised and looked it.

"We needn't worry about their size. They'll fit all right."

But it wasn't the satchel's capacity that took Hermione aback. She knew a Bag of Holding had almost infinite space inside, but she never expected that Dumbledore would give some of his most valuable and sensitive equipment to his brother, Aberforth, who she had heard was an irresponsible type, and quite possibly illiterate.

Professor McGonagall, for all her mistrust of Divination, seemed to have read her student's mind. "For much of his life, Aberforth Dumbledore was an adventurer...a treasure-hunter if you will. In his travels, he discovered and brought back many of the artefacts you see here. They were actually on permanent loan to Alb...to his brother." She gave a little grunt, as if speaking his name winded her.

She loved him very much, and not just as a colleague, Hermione thought in wonderment. *How do such things come about? When do friends come to realize they are more than 'friends'? Have we...Ron and I...started to turn towards each other in that way? Or is it just the circumstances...Dumbledore's death and Harry's predicament...binding us to each other?*

Teacher and student, they cleaned the room together. Hermione tried to keep her thoughts in the here-and-now, not wanting to wander to the there-and-then, where that freckley, loose-limbed red-head with the lazy smile lodged. She found some distraction in amazement at how much the Bag of Holding could absorb.

And then there was the Pensieve. "Help me with this, will you, dear?" Professor McGonagall had opened a closet, and Hermione could see a sparkling white light flowing out of it. "Do you know what it is?"

Hermione nodded. Harry had told her about the device that allowed Dumbledore to eavesdrop on other people's memories. And there it was, the large stone basin on a pedestal, filled with a silver liquid, mercury-like, but light and motile. What would Ron's musings look like if they could be captured like this? Would there be any thoughts of her? Would they be as fond as McGonagall's thoughts of her martyred colleague? Or would they hold bemusement? Or even... accusation?

"What nonsense," she muttered under her breath. Minerva McGonagall gave her a look. "Oh, no, Professor, sorry. I was thinking of something else."

"Quite. I think if I do an Enlarging Spell on the Bag's mouth, while you Levitate the Pensieve, we should be able to get it inside quite easily."

Hermione performed her part of the spell with bated breath. She really was with child to know more about the workings of this magnificent device, but she waited until it had disappeared safely into the Bag before she asked: "Wherever did he find it?"

"I've no idea. Those two never got along well, but they shared an absorbing interest in... some things." Professor McGonagall tutted and started Banishing other items out the office door. She apparently had no interest in pursuing the subject of Aberforth, so her student bowed her head and went back to work.

They bundled up papers meant for Order of the Phoenix Headquarters, filed away school records that Scrimgeour's minions had scattered about, and packed mementoes for storage or shipment. Hermione, concentrating now on her promise to Sirius, worried that Professor McGonagall would find Dumbledore's list before she did, and that she'd have to try and put something over on this redoubtable woman. She thought she could bring herself to say, "Oh, Professor, I think that's mine," if it were somewhere on the floor, but what if it was discovered inside a drawer or something?

She took what chances she could to sneak sidelong glances at her Transfiguration teacher. Professor McGonagall looked older now, and her movements were not precise and commanding as she remembered in her classes, but hesitant, even meandering at times. Perhaps it would not be so difficult to fool her now. It was actually a rather sad thought that this hardy Scot, pre-eminent in the field of Transfiguration, could be failing physically or in spirit.

Fortunately, about an hour into their chores, the Headmistress excused herself. "I have to go to a meeting now," she said, picking up the documents meant for the Order of the Phoenix. "I'm going to put your name in for full membership, if you don't mind."

Hermione gasped with pleasure. "Oh, yes, please."

"And Harry's too, of course, when he comes of age."

"Erm... what about Ron?"

"Ron? Do you mean Ronald Weasley?"

"Yes... yes, of course."

"Is he interested?"

"Oh, very. And he is of age, as of March first."

"Hmmp... I heard he failed his Apparition Test."

"Well, yes, but only by an eyebrow." She giggled, remembering the absurdity of Ron's missing out on his Apparition license because he had left behind a few curly red hairs.

Professor McGonagall was not amused. "So long as he knows it's not just some lark."

"Oh, I'm sure he doesn't...."

"I'll be frank with you, Miss Granger. I disagreed with the Headmaster when he chose Weasley for prefect. I understood that he wanted to give Potter a breather. But Dean Thomas would have been much the better choice to my way of thinking. And I have to tell you that Ronald's behavior this year did little to win me over. He was a rather reluctant disciplinarian if I do say so. And a bit overly distracted by his *dalliances*, if you take my meaning."

Hermione blushed at her teacher's Victorian euphemism for Ron and Lavender's carryings-on.

The Professor scanned her with a beady eye. "Admit it: you did most of the work this year... didn't you?" Without waiting for a reply, she shouldered her bag and took a bit of Floo Powder from a flowered chamber pot on the mantel.

This unprovoked and marginally unprofessional outburst left Hermione stunned as she watched her teacher disappear in the fireplace. She wanted to shout, "What gives you the right to judge him like that?" *Wait...why didn't you defend him when you had the chance?* Hermione chided herself. *Oh...you stupid fool, it's because you just can't resist a compliment, can you? And it is an honor, I'm sure, being named to the Order so young.* She slumped down onto the big chair behind the desk and tried to argue away her guilt. *It's true I had to remind Ron to do his patrolling a few times, and he did want to use his power of office to get back at the Slytherins, but he sacrificed just as much time as I did, and he didn't ask for much help with his homework...nothing like as much as he used to...and he had all those Quidditch practices and the pressure... he stuck with being a Keeper, even when he felt down about it. No one appreciates his analytical mind, his resiliency, the way he cares about his family and his faithfulness to his friends. Well, yes, there was Lavender, but he didn't know...I mean, really know...how I felt about it.* Discouraged and guilt-ridden, she returned to her work.

She had finished most of McGonagall's chores, so she was left to opening drawers and looking under things for the list. She did this as unobtrusively as she could because she knew that the old Heads were sitting above her in their portraits on the walls. Dumbledore's was up there too. She had gotten a good long look at it when she first came in. He was sleeping...still. Harry had had occasion to visit the office the day after his death. He was sleeping then, and no one since had reported him opening his eyes.

Now a new worry assailed her. What if the Aurors had found the list already? Sirius had said it was important that it not fall into the wrong hands. Did he even know Scrimgeour had broken into the office?

Somewhere overhead, a voice cleared itself and spoke. "Looking for something, Miss Granger?"

Hermione turned about. Former headmaster Armando Dippet was on his feet looking down at her from his portrait behind Dumbledore's desk. "Uh, Headmaster, how are you?" she called up to him. "... erm... I'm just cleaning up a bit... for the Headmistress--"

"A job you finished some time ago." A new voice, sharp with accusation came from behind her. She whirled around and recognized Dilys Derwent, whose picture she'd seen once enshrined at St. Mungo's Hospital.

Hermione blushed. She admired Headmistress Derwent greatly. She had distinguished herself in Wizard-dom not only as Head of Hogwarts, but before that as a Healer at St. Mungo's.

Healer Derwent continued, "You're looking for something, aren't you? What is it?"

"I can't tell you. Sirius... I mean... I promised someone..."

"Someone named Sirius," prompted Dilys.

"Surely not Sirius Black," opined Armando Dippet, who had settled himself back in his chair. "I hear he passed over last year."

"Not precisely," said a third voice. It belonged to a clever-looking wizard with a pointed beard and robes of Slytherin green. Hermione recognized Phineas Nigellus, Sirius's great-great-grandfather. "My dear, young, reckless offspring died, but he has not yet been allowed into the Beyond."

"What?" said Hermione in spite of herself. "Did he decide to stay on after all... as a ghost?" That would make Harry very happy. He missed his godfather terribly.

"And perhaps organize a few practical jokes with Peeves the Poltergeist or sneak a peek up a few witches' robes while he's at it?" Phineas Nigellus chuckled nastily. "It would be like him. But no, he was too eager to pass over to the Other Side and be with his... er... friends who preceded him. But I have it from Lord Death himself that Sirius Black died before his time, and you know what that means."

"No, I don't."

"My dear girl, I thought you were up on these things, your Muggle antecedents notwithstanding. Have you never read *The Magicosmical Book of the Dead*?"

Hermione shook her head.

"You should. I had a hand in writing the eighty-fifth revision. Quite good, if I do say so."

"Get on with it, Phineas," said Dilys, with an exasperated sigh. "Tell the girl why this person...your great-great-grand-whatever...cannot pass over into the Beyond, like the rest of us have. We all know you're just dying to."

"Well then, I will." He stood up and cleared his throat. "As I said, Sirius Black died too soon...by about a year actually. It was written in Death's appointment book that he was to pass over this summer after being garrotted with a hacksaw blade in a pick-up game of Troll Blood Ball."

Hermione remembered back to the day of Sirius's death. She had not herself witnessed it, having been felled earlier in the battle by a Death Eater's curse, but had heard about it later. His cousin, the evil Bellatrix Lestrange, had hit him with a curse, though not a lethal one. The momentum of his fall had, however, propelled him through a mysterious Veil covering an ancient stone arch in the center of the Ministry's Death Chamber, from which, it was said, no one could ever return once they passed through.

"So what does that mean?" she asked.

"He has to wait until it is his proper time. The Grim Reaper is very firm on that point."

"You mean he's an insufferable nit-picker," grumbled Dilys Derwent.

"Hush, Dilys," cautioned Armando Dippet, "you never know who might be listening."

"You mean Old Scythe-Swinger? What's he going to do, kill me?" She laughed harshly. "Anyway, he's much too busy to come to Hogwarts right now as long as Voldemort is on the loose."

"I think I see," said Hermione, who had been pondering Phineas Nigellus's last statement. "You're saying Sirius is dead, but he can't pass over yet, but somehow he can still appear to the living as a reflection, like in a bowl of soup."

"Is that how he came to you? How like him," said his great-great grandfather. "Always thinking about his stomach, that one. But actually that isn't the only way. His spirit can inhabit things...animate them I mean...corpses and such..."

"But only so long as they won't be missed, Phineas," put in Dippet, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet.

"I don't understand," said Hermione.

"Yes, yes, Armando. But the important point is that Lord Death **can** give him a body to walk around in, one that's no longer in use, but not too decayed, of course. One must be... erm... presentable and not too odiferous, if you take my meaning."

Armando Dippet came back at him, "But he can't give him one of a person that's being prepared for burial, for example. You understand, young lady. It would naturally upset the Muggles if the body of a loved one sat right up the coffin and walked out during the viewing."

Hermione felt a bit of pique as she pondered these revelations. "Hold on. If Sirius Black could just put on a body like a coat from his closet, how come he hasn't come to visit us before this?"

"How do you know he hasn't?"

"Well, I mean, no one has come up to Harry this year and said, 'Excuse me, sonny, I know I don't look like him, but I'm really your godfather in the body of this eighty-year-old woman.'"

"Well, there's the trouble you see," said Phineas. "Most humans have relatives who care about them. They all get embalmed and viewed and buried in a trice. Mostly it's only animal bodies that are conveniently available for possession. You know, road kill and such."

"You mean Sirius may have come to us as a dog or a cat?"

"... or a hare or a toad or a squash bug... so long as their corpses were... er... serviceable."

"Hermione had a horrible thought. "You don't suppose... I mean... what if he was a fly and one of us... erm... swatted him?"

"Oh it wouldn't hurt him... much, but it is a tad inconvenient. He has to wait a while... you know... between avatars."

"Oh, right. Well that does help me to understand a little better. I mean if he were a dog, communication would be a bit difficult, wouldn't it? I mean I don't know of any spells that would let you understand dog language."

"Well, under certain circumstances, he can communicate with you telepathically, as I'm sure he did when he appeared to you in the reflection."

"Is that what he was doing? I understand now. It sounded like he was inside my head. But wait a minute. If he was able to appear to me in my soup all this time, why did he wait until now to do it?"

"Actually he shouldn't be able to. It's the house-elves' fault that he can."

"What?"

"They're so distracted, they've let the protective spells lapse."

"You mean there are protective spells even on our food?"

"Only the reflective surfaces: soups and gravies and the occasional glazed ham."

Yes," said Dilys, "and the mirrors, windows, toilets, the lake, standing pools of water. They all need to be spirit-blocked."

"I don't understand."

For the first time, Headmaster Dippet entered the conversation. "My dear young lady, we don't allow just any homeless spirit to inhabit our castle. Those so-called 'reflective surfaces' are the primary way mischievous, wandering efreets and succubi make their way into ancient castles and ruins."

Hermione still looked bewildered, so he explained: "Mirrors and such are connected to the spirit world, though tenuously, you see. Sometimes, when a suitable opportunity arises, a particularly needy or energetic spirit can make the leap."

Hermione frowned at this. She had never heard of such a thing, and she'd read *Hogwarts: a History* from cover to cover at least a dozen times.

"Yes," said Phineas. "How do you think Peeves the Poltergeist got in here? You don't think he was invited, do you? No, it happened the last time there was a lapse in security."

"When was that?"

"If you must know, it was back in 'fifty-six when the Dark Lord visited Hogwarts and applied for the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

"He did? What happened?"

"Dumbledore turned him down, of course. So, out of spite, he cast a spell on the position so that no one could hold it for more than one year. That required him to fool with the Space-Time continuum, and briefly opened a portal to a rather... ahem... unstable dimension, and in slipped our favorite little nuisance."

"Enough of this idle talk," said Dilys Derwent. "I want to know what it is you're looking for, young lady."

"Erm... it's a list."

"On parchment?"

"I suppose so, but we've cleaned everything up, and I've looked through his desk and his cupboards. I just can't find it anywhere."

"I take it that it's important."

"Sirius thinks it is. It's a list of things Professor Dumbledore needed to do."

"Oh, that sort. He was always making those. And we all know what he does with them."

"What?" Hermione asked, trying to keep any kind of emotion...excitement or trepidation...out of her voice.

Phineas Nigellus rolled his eyes. "He transforms them...usually into candy wrappers...and sticks them to the bottom of the wastebasket."

"Why would he do that?"

"He says... er... said that way they couldn't possibly be misplaced."

Hermione gave the portraits an odd look, but she went to the wastebasket and looked inside.

"Not there. Underneath."

And indeed there was a Fizzing Whizbee wrapper stuck onto the underside of the basket with a piece of what looked like Drooble's Best Blowing Gum...cherry flavor. Hermione tapped it with her wand, saying "Reveal yourself," and it turned into a piece of parchment.

"This must be it," she said, scanning the graceful script. Thank you all."

Without further explanation or a hint of apology, she hurried off to meet Sirius Black.

Sirius' Story

Chapter 3 of 29

Sirius has a tale to tell, and it is a whopper!

"Here it is, Sirius." She thrust the parchment at the face in the mirror.

Good girl!

"So what's this all about?"

Have you had a chance to look at it?

"No. Shall I?"

I guess it won't make much sense without an explanation. It's apparently a list of things Dumbledore meant to take care of before he died.

"Oh." Hermione couldn't keep a hint of irritation out of her voice. She'd always thought of Sirius as rather a shallow, flighty type. If he was going to waste her precious time making her run around looking for a laundry list...

As if he had read the look on her face, Sirius blurted, *Wait, Hermione. I'm not talking about trivial, everyday chores like airing out the guest bedroom or have having your pet Kneazle declawed. These are promises he made to people. Big promises, Hermione, life-and-death promises.*

She glanced at the headings on the list. A lot of the words were abbreviated, but she recognized some right away, prominent among them: "Mggl-brns", "D.Drsly", "DEs", "Kncktrn A.", "N.Mlfy", "Scrmgr", and "Pttgrw."

"He certainly cast a wide net," she murmured.

Sirius bowed his head and murmured, *Albus Dumbledore cared about everyone he ever met...even Tom Riddle.* There was the merest hint of reverence in his voice. Whatever else you might say about Sirius, he admired and respected his old headmaster

"You said something about this list being important to help Professor Dumbledore...that he was trapped or something."

I'd better go back to the beginning, said Sirius, clearing his throat. *Did Harry tell you why he and Dumbledore were not in the castle the night the Death Eaters broke in?*

"Yes, they were looking for Horcruxes...objects Voldemort has stored parts of his life essence in. Professor Dumbledore thought there was one in a cave by the ocean. He and Harry Apparated into it. Harry didn't tell me and Ron the details though. I think it hurt him too much."

What exactly did he tell you?

Hermione thought back. "Inside the cave, they found this lake. And then a little boat appeared, and they used it to cross over to an island. Harry said they could see this green glow coming from the island. That's what they aimed for. Then they stepped ashore... That was about all he said... I guess there must have been a Horcrux on the island."

While they were in the boat, did Harry mention seeing anything... in the water for instance?

"No, he didn't."

There were creatures called Inferi in the water...

Hermione nodded eagerly. "I've read about those..."

Harry didn't know what they were at first. He just saw these corpses floating along. Dumbledore would have told told him not to touch the water at any price. Do you know what Inferi are, Hermione?

"They're zombies, aren't they? Animated bodies of dead people...but mindless. I heard that Voldemort has been able to conjure a great number to do his bidding."

Well...

Hermione went on quickly, "They're something like Dementors, I think."

Sirius snorted. *Not really. They are souls, tortured souls of people long dead, who have been given the loan of a body so that they can walk the earth for a time. And they're not entirely without thoughts. They've some of their own, and emotions too, unlike Dementors...*

"What emotions?" she asked sharply.

Longing... regret... envy... among others. Sirius paused and stared out into the middle distance. *But to go on with the story: the island wasn't very big...more like a rock*

sticking out of the water...and there was this pedestal with a bowl on top filled some greenish, phosphorescent liquid. That's where the glow came from. And they could see a locket at the bottom of the bowl. The professor tried every way he could to reach it, but there was some kind of invisible barrier that prevented him. So he pulled a goblet out of the air...

"A goblet? Why?"

This was a very special goblet. It was able to get through to the liquid inside the bowl.

"So how do you know all this, Sirius?" Hermione asked.

Lord Death told me.

"Lord Death?" That name again.

I'll come back to him later. Anyway, Dumbledore Accio-ed this goblet from beyond the Veil, from Death's own house, in fact. It's the only kind of vessel that would work, under the circumstances. That's some kind of magic, Hermione."

Hermione was with child to know more about this person "Lord Death" all the ghosts kept referring to. He sounded like another powerful Dark Wizard, as if one wasn't enough. She hoped he wasn't a friend, or even an acquaintance, of You-Know-Who's. She had a hundred questions about Sirius' situation as well, but she could see he wasn't about to answer them...not yet at least...so she concentrated on the story he was telling.

Now here's the really weird part, said Sirius. It wasn't enough to just penetrate the barrier or even to bail the fluid out of the bowl. For some reason, Dumbledore had to drink it.

Without knowing exactly why, Hermione was horrified by this idea. Perhaps it was because the liquid had been placed in the bowl by the person who most hated and envied the Headmaster. Was it a trap of some sort? "Drink it?!" she exclaimed.

Yes. Sirius' voice was grave. "The water from the River Styx must never be allowed to mingle with the waters of earth.

"The River Styx! The river the Dead have to cross to get to the Underworld," Hermione recited from her Ancient History class. "But that's just a myth, isn't it?"

But Sirius's face had taken on a grim, closed look. After a moment of silence, he went on. *Before he began, the professor made Harry promise to force him to keep on drinking no matter how much he begged not to...until the bowl was empty. And Harry did. I don't know how he found the strength, but he did. Each time he offered him a glassful, the professor begged, pleaded with him not to make him drink any more. Harry had to lie each time and say it was only water or it was the last glassful...like that.*

"It must have been the hardest thing he's ever had to do," Hermione murmured. For some reason she found herself remembering the look on Harry's face the night he described Voldemort's rebirth to her and Ron. He seemed bent on punishing himself for not being able to stop it. Once Ron would have cringed at such a description or made some lame remark, but that time, he just put a steady hand on Harry's shoulder and held his eyes with a grave stare. *It wasn't your fault mate, Ron had said, you did more than anyone else could have.* For that, she should have kissed him right on the frown line puckering his freckled brow.

Sirius cut into her thoughts. *My godson has certainly been through some rough times. But the worst may have been having to listen to the things Dumbledore said during the ordeal.*

"What?" Hermione leaned in to the image in the mirror. "What did he say?"

Apparently, after a couple of glassfuls, the professor seemed to fall into a trance or something. He was twitching...all over...and he cried out, like he was having a nightmare...like he was guilty of some terrible crime...or witnessing one. He kept saying, 'I'm sorry. It's all my fault,' and 'I did wrong' and 'please, don't hurt them'...things like that.

"That sounds like the Headmaster," said Hermione, nodding. "He never seemed to care much about protecting himself."

Do you know how many gobletfuls he drank?

"What do you mean?"

Take a guess.

This sounded like the sort of riddle Ron was always posing: "how many hags does it take to screw up a potion, or those "Knock-knock" jokes of her father's. But Sirius was not smiling. "I don't know," she admitted impatiently. "Ten, maybe?"

"Close. There were eleven in all."

"So?"

So, there were twelve gobletfuls in the bowl. Somehow that number was important to the spell binding the water."

"That makes sense. In arithmancy, twelve is a mystical number, tied to the relationship between life and death. So there was liquid left in the bottom of the bowl. Was that important?"

Supremely so, according Lord Death. Because it was then that Harry did something that he never should have done, though it seemed the only thing he could do at the time.

"Oh, no," Hermione cried. "What was it?"

The professor said he was terribly thirsty, and Harry couldn't get his Aguamenti charm to work properly, so he filled the goblet with lake water.

"Oh, I know. He disturbed the bodies...the *Inferi*."

Yes, but that's not...

"No, no, it makes sense..."

Right. And that's the important...

"Exactly. Because it woke the *Inferi*, and Harry had to try and fight them off. I remember now. He did tell us that much."

Nooo...

Hermione was vehement. "Yes, I'm telling you: Harry didn't have enough power to fend them off, and they both might have been dragged under the water, but the professor came to his senses and drove the *Inferi* off... with a Fireball, I think."

Exasperation at her stubbornness caused Sirius to shout, *Yes, yes, but the really important thing, the Nogtail in the pigsty, one might say, is that apparently that action of Harry's...putting the goblet into the lake...carried the last of the Styx water from the bowl into the lake.*

Hermione quailed at his reaction. "I...I don't understand. What's so wrong about that?"

Sirius calmed down, but only a little. He said acidly, *You were taught that the River Styx marks the border between this life and the next. What they don't teach in those Muggle classes is that if its waters are permitted to mingle with earthly matter, unspeakable things may happen.*

"But, Sirius, nothing did happen. Harry and the professor...they got away all right..."

That may be true, but it's only because the consequences of that rash act could not be carried out on the earthly plane. And I'm quoting Lord Death now: "By the immutable laws of the Afterlife, punishment could only be inflicted after death."

"W-why?" Hermione stammered.

Because the water of the Styx belongs to the Beyond. And, worse still, the first creatures it touched were already dead.

"The *Inferi*," Hermione said, and her brain started working frantically, recalling snippets from her classes and her readings, especially some she loathed, having to do with Divination.

Yes, it called to them, reminded them of their sorry fate.

"And shortly thereafter, Dumbledore died, making him susceptible to the water's magic."

Sirius nodded. *The punishment I spoke of is even now being wreaked on his soul by the spirits of those dead who were present in the lake.*

"That's what you meant when you said Dumbledore was trapped. You meant by *Inferi*?"

The image in the mirror nodded gravely. *The way Death explained it, Inferi are a branch of the Dead who are imprisoned in a lower world...beyond a watery border early Greek Muggles called the River Styx. It's a kind of dull Hell reserved for the ones who never kept their promises in this life...liars, cheats, and like that. There are other Hells as well, but this is the only one that evil wizards like Voldemort can draw his undead minions from.*

"Why is that?"

Having all these regrets about faithless pledges and broken vows, the Inferi are in closer touch with this life than other spirits. They long to come back, even if only as zombies. Have you ever read Dante?

"Only *The Inferno*. My parents were taking me to Florence one summer and thought I should have some background first."

Bella used to read it to me...for the fun of giving a small boy nightmares. I remember. It describes all the circles of hell with their torments in deliciously sadistic detail. Dante was quite a good at divination...for a Muggle. The eighth circle has all the liars, hypocrites, thieves, gossips, warmongers, counterfeiters, flatterers, fortune-tellers, and politicians. Probably more sinners are there than in any other level.

Hermione goggled. "So You-Know-Who's army could number in the millions."

Well, not quite. As I say, in order for them to be able to interact with living beings, he has to have bodies to join them to...that they can walk around in. But although they can only affect the living if they can control a physical body, when Dumbledore died, their souls were drawn to his through the bond of the Styx. And there was another link as well. Their sins of omission haunt them eternally, so they are able to hold him and torment him because of something they best recognize and understand...his unfulfilled commitments.

Hermione studied the list she had found in the Headmaster's office. "And this contains some of those commitments."

All of them, if I'm right.

"How can you be so sure?"

Sirius' eyes unfocused, and his mouth quirked in a smile, as if he was seeing events long past, happy ones. *I remember some of the Order meetings he chaired. Dumbledore never let even a hint of magical danger to any wizard or witch...or Muggle even...go unanswered. Whenever someone would come to the Order with a problem or an injustice...especially if it had to do with the Death Eaters...he would write it down. At meetings, he parceled them out...to everyone but me, of course. He frowned. But he took a lot of those tasks on himself too...the most challenging ones I think, the ones with the greatest risk. And he always wrote down his obligations and crossed them off as he completed them. Our beloved Headmaster may have seemed disorganized in some ways, but where people's welfare was concerned, he was totally reliable. You can be sure that what you hold in your hand is the key to Albus Dumbledore's salvation.*

Hermione beamed. "So if someone goes around and carries out the promises he made, the professor will be released."

The way Death explained it, it's more like the Inferi will no longer recognize him as one of their own, and so they'll lose interest. He will become transparent or sort of like invisible to them. Anyway that's what Lord Death says.

"We should get this list to the Aurors immediately. Even though they're busy hunting down Professor Snape and Draco, they'll still want to make this a first priority."

But the question is: would they believe you?

"Of course they would..."

But even worse, can we trust any of them? They report to Scrimgeour, you know.

Hermione was indignant. "Tonks would never..."

But if she asked for an extended leave and couldn't tell them why... This is a long list, Hermione.

Hermione admitted the force of his logic. "All right, the Aurors are out. The Order then."

I hate to point this out, but most of them are Aurors.

Hermione grimaced. Sirius was starting to sound like Ron at his most irritatingly logical. "Professor McGonagall...erm...no, that's right. She'll be busy...at school." She didn't mention to Sirius that the new Headmistress looked much older since Dumbledore died. And that look she got whenever she said his name...it would kill her to know he was suffering still. "What about Professor Lupin?"

Sirius' face turned sad. *Have you seen him lately?*

"No..."

I'm going to tell you something in strictest confidence, Hermione He looked about and beckoned her closer to the mirror. *While I was still alive, Remus Lupin took on the responsibility of infiltrating the rogue werewolf population to try and neutralize them. We can't let him be distracted from that.*

"But Professor Dumbledore..."

...would agree with me. The werewolves are the biggest threat to both the Muggle and magical populations now, even worse than the Inferi or the Dementors... or even the giants. Remember, every werewolf attack means new members for the pack, countless potential Dark allies. And to be a werewolf is worse than death, Hermione, much worse. Dumbledore wouldn't want Remus to leave that post, even to save his soul.

Hermione had to acquiesce to his heartfelt plea. "Harry... or Ron... no, we can't bother them with this. Harry's been through too much already, and if he thought that he was responsible for the professor's suffering, it would just about kill him. Oh, and Ron's going to be celebrating his brother's marriage. I can't deprive his family of him now, especially since it might be the last time he ever... And Ginny...no, I couldn't put her through this. Oh, dear... what can we...?"

Don't you see, Hermione? The only person available... and qualified... is you.

An Unlikely Partnership

Chapter 4 of 29

Hermione agrees to Sirius' plan, but she's worried about their relationship, which has never been all that good.

4. AN UNLIKELY PARTNERSHIP

Hermione's thoughts were a swirl of confusion. There was something very flattering about the supercilious, blasé Sirius Black, asking for her help. When he was alive, he had never seemed to trust her or Ron's or even Harry's judgment. But he was asking the impossible. Anyone could see that. She tried to explain, "Sirius, I'm not... I couldn't..."

But he obviously wasn't going to accept a 'no' answer. *Believe me, Hermione, there is no one better suited for this task.*

"There must be someone else who can..."

Think, Hermione. You said it yourself: the list shows that Dumbledore cast a wide net...far beyond our Magicosm...in his efforts to shield people from the Dark Lord. And besides him...and Harry...you're the only person I know who has such an intimate knowledge of both the Muggle and magical worlds.

"That's true but I... I just don't know..."

You've a quick mind, and your spell work is off the charts. Hermione, you are the best...the only person for the job."

This final blast of fulsome praise shattered the barriers of reason. "All right. I'll do it. For Dumbledore." And maybe she could ask Ron... or Ginny to come along... at least for a bit.

That's great. And with my help, I just know you'll succeed.

"What do you mean...with your help?" She hoped to heaven that he didn't mean what it sounded like he meant.

But Sirius was on a roll. *Do you think I'd just leave you to fend for yourself? I do still have some male pride, you know... and some abilities, though they are limited. At the very least, I can be a companion to you, someone you can bounce ideas off of.*

Reason roused itself and warred with reluctance. She really couldn't do this all by myself, and it would be unfair to ask Ron... But Sirius? Oh, honestly! "Well... erm... all right..."

I can understand your reluctance to work with me.

"What do you mean?"

I know we haven't always gotten along.

"Oh, that. Well, sometimes you have been rather... stand-offish." *And brooding and unsympathetic, petulant, uncooperative, self-centered, out of control...* She forced a note of cheeriness into her voice. "Never mind. We have the same goal here. I'm sure we'll work together just fine. But... there is one other thing."

What's that?

"We'll have to act fast. I'm to meet Harry and Ron for Bill's wedding the end of July. We were going to start off to look for the Horcruxes right after that."

He sighed. *We have to finish this by August, you say? That gives us only two months. But there is another reason why it's important that the work be completed quickly.*

"What?"

I'm afraid of what the Inferis' torments can ultimately do to Dumbledore's soul. If it's anything like the Dementors... well, it's got to be even worse than with them.

"What do you mean?"

While I was in Azkaban, Hermione, I was never entirely alone. At least, I could hear other prisoners nearby. Oh, they were mostly just muttering to themselves, moaning, crying...screaming sometimes...but in a way all that noise was comforting because it reminded me that there were real people all around me in the same boat as I was. And I could see the sky through the grate in the ceiling... hear the rain, and the seabirds calling. And there was the occasional outsider...always there to visit someone else of course...but it helped keep me going too, just knowing the door swung both ways and that there was a real world on the other side of it, far away from those soul-sucking fiends. It gave me hope, you see.

But Dumbledore's all closed in, in that tomb, Hermione. He's all alone in there, hopeless and helpless, with all these feelings of guilt, of insufficiency, knowing that there are people up here he was not able to help, people he promised something to...

"Well, not exactly alone. But, as you say, the Inferi are like Dementors..."

Something like. They're hungry, yes, but for revenge, not happy feelings. I think the Inferi must be so jealous of the living. They'd love to turn even one of us into a twisted bit of ectoplasmic swill like themselves.

"How can you know that?"

I think I understand a little of how they feel. My last year, I had to sit in Grimmauld Place doing nothing, feeling bitter and envious of the rest of you out there...free...and fighting. I wanted you all to know how I felt. I wanted to punish every last one of you...oh, Merlin...Harry especially...for the sorry situation I'd got myself into. The Dead are like that, I'm sure, at least the ones who have made a lot of lives miserable with their lies and cheating. They can't ever go back to fix their mistakes.

She felt a very unrational lump in her throat. "Sirius..."

Hermione. I don't know anything about necromancy or psychology or whatever else the great minds of magic and Muggledom use to explain these things. I just have a feeling in my non-existent gut that we have to wrap this up soon before they damage Dumbledore's soul beyond repair.

He's changed, she thought. But I can't let this get to me. We have a job to do. "Well, there's no sense dwelling on that," she said briskly, waving away the fumes of discouragement. "I just have a few things to wrap up with the Headmistress, and then we can go. But how will you travel? I can't carry this mirror around with me."

Well...

"Oh, I know. While I was in the Head's office, your great, great grandfather told me that you can inhabit bodies when you're not traipsing through mirrors and such."

Ah, dear Phineas Nigellus! He sends his love, I'm sure. Yes, over the last year Lord Death provided all sorts of 'containers' for my spirit. He made a face. But I won't inhabit just any old body. Some of the corpses he offered were foul...from old cemeteries and battlefields.

"And I heard you've been cats and dogs and...um...lesser beings."

If you're referring to that flobberworm I was forced to inhabit...well, I was desperate. How was I to know you'd stopped taking Creature Care?

"Why did you do it?"

I...uh...felt I had to keep an eye on you all.

"Really?"

Yes, I was also one of those owls that brought your test results that day at the Weasleys'...the one with the hole in his chest. You didn't notice; you were so wrapped up in your OWL results. And later I took possession of a dead garden gnome in the midden out back of Molly's kitchen. Choked on too many potato peelings, the greasy little git. I don't ever want to be inside of one of those again. The smell and the diet was bloody awful... not to mention their mating habits...

Hermione stared at him, horrified.

Oops...sorry about that. Then I heard you all were going to Diagon Alley...not the safest of trips these days, so I borrowed the corpse of a seedy amulet merchant who'd been garrotted in Knockturn Alley and set up shop.

And...oh, yes...later on the train to Hogwarts, your friend Luna Lovegood mistook me in my spirit form for a Wrackspurt. I couldn't stop Malfoy from beating up on Harry, but I was able to put a bug in Tonks's ear about it out on the platform so she could get on the train and rescue him. And I spent a good bit of time inhabiting various not too decayed bits of Buckbeak's snacks...

"But you never communicated with us...not even once." *Sneaking around like that, spying on us all, when Harry was hurting so badly after your death. I wonder if you'll ever grow up.*

Well, when I'm inhabiting an animal, I can't use telepathy. Something about the ectoplasmic vibrations being trapped within the confines of earthly clay... I don't know... I never paid much attention to that stuff in Trelawney's classes.

She rolled her eyes. *Trelawney. Right. "Tell me about it. But you could've left clues...hints...spelled your name out in rat pellets or something. It would have been so helpful to Harry. You... you don't know how many times he wished he could talk to you."*

I'm sorry, Hermione. Believe me, I felt his pain. But my silence was a condition of my freedom. The Grim Reaper let me go out in the world and watch over you all, but he made me promise not to reveal myself to any of you. He gets a little touchy about the boundary between Life and Death. It's his baby after all. He can't stand mediums and séances and such.

Oh. "So how come you're allowed to talk... erm... communicate with me now?"

The Pale Prince wants Dumbledore freed as much as we do. He's beside himself about the way Voldemort has been usurping his power.

"Usurping? You mean by making the Horcruxes?"

Yes, they kept him alive all those times he should've died. His Ghastliness still resents Voldie. I can tell. He wanders around mumbling, "Why couldn't he just kick off on schedule like a good fellow?"

"On schedule?"

Voldemort refused to die when it was his turn.

"When was that?"

Voldemort was actually scheduled to die in 1981 on Halloween Night.

"That's when Harry...as a baby...was able to resist his Killing Curse, and it rebounded back on him."

Yes, *Death* told me that was the true meaning of the prophecy: 'neither can live while the other survives.'

"But the prophecy also says: 'The Dark Lord will **mark** him as his equal.' Harry didn't get the mark on his forehead until that night. But if You-Know-Who was meant to die that same night, it doesn't make sense."

Excellent point, Hermione. I asked something like that same question, and Skull Face just said that some words can have more than one meaning. I don't know what he meant by that. I mean, a mark's a mark, right?

"No, 'mark' can mean lots of other things, not just a sign or a scar. It can mean 'recognize' too." She had a sudden epiphany, which gave her a jolt of confidence. Epiphanies always did that for Hermione, especially when they came out of her own swotting, and the effect was doubled when she could show her revelation off to someone she felt had never really appreciated the value of scholarship, like Sirius...or Ron. "And the Dark Lord did just that when he heard the first part of the prophecy. He perceived that Harry would be a formidable enemy. That's when he 'marked' him or 'recognized' him as his equal. That's why he felt he had to hunt him down. "

Then the scar may have had nothing to do with the prophecy. It makes sense...as much as the other anyway. So Voldie cheated Death...literally. And it made Death mad. But Voldie couldn't leave bad enough alone. He had to keep interfering in Death's affairs. The old Scythe-swinger told me all about it in one of his rants: how Voldie's spirit inhabited Professor Quirrell, and then he tried to steal the Philosopher's Stone, and then he killed a unicorn to keep himself alive, and he made that restoration concoction with Harry's blood, and then he conjured the Inferi, yada, yada, yada...

"Well, I guess I can understand how... erm... how Death feels...."

And that's not the worst of it, Hermione. Since Voldemort didn't die when he was supposed to, anyone he's killed himself since then is also a person who wasn't scheduled to die yet. And since there's nowhere else for them to go, they end up on Death's estate...just like me.

"Who has he killed since 1981?"

Only three that we know of: an old Muggle geezer named Frank Bryce. Well, his time did finally run out last week...he was that old...so he passed over at last. I kind of miss him. At least he was a decent snooker player. And Bertha Jorkins. Sirius said this last with a look of pain on his face.

"Isn't she that scatty witch who went missing during the Quidditch World Cup?"

Yes, though 'scatty' isn't the word I'd use. More like brainless and weepy and terminally annoying. Death thinks so too. She's a non-stop talker. He'd do anything to get her off the grounds, but she's not scheduled to go for another fifty years.

"That's dreadful."

And then there's Karkarov.

"Igor Karkarov, Viktor's headmaster? The one who was a Death Eater?"

No, actually it's his brother, Sergei. And this is the one funny thing in this whole mess. Voldemort was itching to get Karkarov after he turned tail and ran out on the Death Eaters last year. He heard a rumor about where he was and went after him himself. Just couldn't wait on his minions, he was that mad. But it turns out, it was Karkarov's older brother, who looks a lot like him. So he killed the wrong bloke.

"Does he know he made a mistake?"

No one does yet, not even the Ministry. But if Voldie doesn't, I'm sure he'll find out soon enough. Wherever the real Igor is hiding, his spies are sure to get wind of it.

"Do you think Lord Death, angry as he is, would help us take Voldemort down?"

You betcha. The Master of the Moribund can't interfere directly...it's against some rule or other...but he can give us information. It was Death who told me about Dumbledore's situation in the first place. I had to wheedle most of the story out of him though. He's not the most forthcoming of informants.

"You say you live with him?"

Yes, he has this house and grounds...a garden and such. He doesn't much like my being there. He's still mad at me for coming through that Veil. I'm a trespasser who's upset his nice, neat little universe. And, as I say, I can't leave until my time.

He doesn't... torture you or anything, does he?"

No, it's more like intermittent carping and whining about 'the good old days'. That's not so bad, really. Reminds me of my mum. It's when he gives me the silent treatment that I start to go crazy.

"Does he do it a lot?"

Oh, yes, it's his favorite way of getting back at me. But then, he's away a lot too...finishing people off. There's a brisk business in dying, especially nowadays. He looked glum at this.

"But it's a good thing for him to be away, isn't it? I mean the ranting and all sounds awful."

No, it's not. I hate to say it, but I miss him when he's gone. It's like solitary confinement. Lonely and very, very boring, except when Bertha or Sergei come wandering in...which might actually be worse when I come to think of it. She's very silly, and he's very quarrelsome, but since he doesn't speak English, I can never tell what he's mad about.

"It must be frustrating."

And monotonous. Death's house is all shades of black and gray, and, as I say, apart from visits from those two, there's no sound, none at all, except for the ticking of that one big clock in the hall and all that eerie tinkling and whooshing.

"What?"

Oh, didn't I tell you? He has shelves lining every single goddamned room, with all these hourglasses on them...

"Hourglasses?"

I guess it's okay to tell you about them. There's one for every living creature on earth, from the tallest giant right down to the teeniest pissy ant...or so he says. So all this sand is whooshing through all the necks of all these hourglasses, and there's this tiny tinkling sound when a stray particle hits the sides.

"And when the sand in your glass runs out, your time is up."

Death showed me mine once. It'll empty out at the end of July of this year...only another month or so...but it started him off on one of his rants. My non-existent ears were ringing for days afterwards.

"Wait. What happens when you do pass over? I mean...will you still be able to help me?"

Oops, I forgot about that. I'll have to ask old Bag of Bones about it. He seemed really eager to get Dumbledore on his way to the Beyond, so I'm sure he'll come up with something... But, it's true. When ya gotta go, ya gotta go. He brightened. But then I'll get to...well...

"You really want to pass over and be with James and Lily, don't you?"

The image in the mirror just sighed.

"You've been through a lot since you...died."

All in a most excellent cause though. It's ironic, isn't it, that I may be able to help more in the fight against Voldemort dead than I did alive.

"You mean by rescuing the Headmaster's soul."

Yes, but also it looks to me as if some of these promises on Dumbledore's list involve Death Eater activities. So we'll be gutting two vampires with one stake, as they say: fighting Voldie at the same time we're saving Dumbledore.

"All right, let's say we try to do this together. Will you be traveling as a spirit or what? I mean, if you're inhabiting an animal, it will be hard to understand you. I mean...my French is pretty good, but I don't speak Kneazle."

That's true, but there's a potion you can take to allow you to understand us dumb brutes

"Really?"

*Mmm-hmm. There's some in Dumbledore's...McGonagall's office: **Dr. Doolittle's Veterinariserum.***

"I remember that bottle. I packed it up. It's going to his brother, Aberforth."

Can you get it back? It will come in real handy. That Doolittle was quite a gifted vet...Muggle fellow, you know.

"How did he come to be able to make a magical potion?"

That's something I'll have to ask him after I get into the Afterlife myself.

"I have another question...about how this whole thing started. The Styx water, how did it get into that bowl in the cave in the first place?"

Voldemort, of course. He, of all people, would have a detailed knowledge of necromancy and would have figured out how to Summon it...

"But, Sirius, Harry told us that the locket at the bottom of the bowl wasn't the real Horcrux. It had a note inside...a message for the Dark Lord. Someone had found the real Horcrux, stolen it, and left the locket in its place. So there's someone out there who was able to get by the water in the bowl, remove the Horcrux, and replace it with an innocent replica."

A Death Eater, I'd guess. Who else would have a clue what Voldemort was doing?

"But who else would have that kind of power?"

Necromancy is a very specialized field of study. I only ever knew one person who had that kind of interest. He was rather brilliant...if misguided...in that way. It made him quite valuable to the Dark Lord for a time.

"The signature on the note was just initials: R.A.B."

Sirius looked startled and was silent a moment. *It fits, he murmured. Then: I have an idea who it is, but I won't know for sure until I have myself passed over.*

"Then the person is already dead. Can you tell me who..."

No! He bowed his head. But...if I'm right...yes, he's dead.

5. Words of Warning

Chapter 5 of 29

Professor McGonagall has a visitor, who finds her student helper very interesting.

Hermione woke the next morning in a fit of longing to be off on the quest to save Professor Dumbledore, but she still had to report in and see if the new Headmistress had any last minute chores for her to do. As she allowed the moving spiral staircase to propel her up to the office, she heard McGonagall's slightly nasal contralto, tinged with petulance. "You had only to ask. There was no need--"

A voice answered, "Once again, I apologize. My people overstepped their bounds a bit, I admit." But this voice did not sound in the least apologetic.

"A bit?" the Headmistress echoed sarcastically. "You should have seen what those ruffians did. This place was a shambles!"

The door was wide open. Hermione saw the back of the other speaker first. He was on the short side, and wearing a dark cloak. But it could not mute his powerful presence, the broad shoulders, thick neck, and massive, squarish head with a lion's mane of hair streaked yellow, white, and gray.

Minerva McGonagall, who was standing behind the desk, turned sharply at Hermione's entrance. "You're early, Miss Granger."

Hermione hesitated in the doorway. "I'm sorry, Professor. Shall I come back later?"

The man turned and gave her a careless glance. She thought she might have met him before. He made her think of wintertime for some reason. Was it his girth, the high color of his cheeks, the pince-nez, all trademarks of Father Christmas, the "founder of the feast"? But the lines about the mouth and forehead spoke of a grim tenacity and a shrewdness alien to her image of a jolly old elf. And he was beardless.

"That's all right," said the man brusquely. "I was just leaving." He turned on his heel and limped to the door.

But the Headmistress, at least, remembered her manners. "Minister, this is Hermione Granger, one of our very best students. Miss Granger, the current head of the Ministry, Rufus Scrimgeour." Professor McGonagall emphasized the word *current* as if she hoped that his tenure would be a short one.

Hermione inclined her head. "Magus Scrimgeour, how nice to meet you."

Now she remembered. Scrimgeour had imprisoned a clueless young wizard named Stan Shunpike on the merest suspicion of Death Eater activity. He had also used Percy Weasley as an emotional wedge to gain access to Harry at the Weasleys' Christmas dinner last year. He had tried on more than one occasion to badger Harry into acting as a "poster child" for the Ministry, the last confrontation coming at Dumbledore's funeral, when Harry was at his most vulnerable. And now he had ordered the ransacking of this very office before its former occupant was cold in his grave.

How could she have thought he looked anything like Father Christmas? This man was a taker, not a giver. He weighed people's value by their political clout. Hermione smiled grimly. She could imagine Rufus Scrimgeour frowning over a list of children, deciding who was worthy of a toy and who would receive a lump of coal. But his decisions would not be based on justice or any lesson the gift might teach, but on the advantages to be gained.

"Hermione Granger, yes." The Minister had stopped in front of her and was staring at her with interest. Now he smiled too. "The pleasure is all mine." He made to take her hand, but she was busy trying to keep her composure to notice. "I've heard a great deal about you."

"Oh?"

"Indeed! The Ministry keeps a close watch on the... progress of students here at the school. You received a raft of Outstanding O.W.L.s, I believe."

"Ten," she replied automatically. "And one EE."

"Mmmm... yes. And captain of the Gobstones team too."

"Ah... no."

"I must be thinking of someone else. You play Quidditch, don't you?"

"Hardly."

"But you're a prefect?"

Hermione only nodded, blank-faced. She recognized this probing spiel. It was just like Professor Trelawney's fishing expeditions in Divination class. *Go ahead*, she thought cynically. *Make lots of vague statements and watch for a reaction. You're bound to hit on an atom of truth sooner or later.*

Scrimgeour was rambling on: "... Your parents did equally well at Hogwarts I'm sure...."

"No," she said, carefully keeping the note of triumph out of her voice. "I'm Muggle-born."

"Oh, I must be thinking of another Granger..."

Professor McGonagall interrupted impatiently. "Stop talking nonsense, Rufus. Have you anything further to say? Because if not, Miss Granger and I have work to do."

He turned to her and gave a perfunctory bow. "Once again, Minerva, I offer my apologies for the state of your office. I'll speak to the appropriate department about it. It needn't happen again."

"It would not be wise in any case. Not good for the image, do you think? Aurors on wild goose chases, tearing up school property--"

"Ah... please, let's not trouble Miss Granger with our petty quarrels. I wonder. Do you mind if she sees me to the gate?"

"That won't be necessary. I can remove the Floo Restrictor quite easily."

"No, really, I feel the need for a little exercise. Perhaps a walk to the Three Broomsticks and a small firewhisky. In my position... sitting behind a desk all day, signing papers, delegating work... one gets a bit stiff... I'm used to more action as you know."

"Yes, Rufus, I know. Well, if Miss Granger is willing, she can take some things over to Albus's brother as well. I was going to have the house-elves do it, but they're still a bit... unsettled."

"Afraid to leave the grounds, are they? You know, I could send one or two of my own."

"No, thank you, Minister. Miss Granger, come with me a moment."

Hermione followed the Headmistress into a storeroom. A satchel sat on the floor. The Bag of Holding. "It's very heavy with all those magigadgets," Professor McGonagall said, fumbling in the pocket of her robe. "I'll just put a Lightening Charm on it."

"I can do it, Professor," said Hermione.

"Oh?"

Hermione waved her wand in a complicated series of loops and said the spell, which was longer than most. When she hefted the satchel, it was light as air. She stifled the

urge to say "Ta-dahhhh!"

"You are a wonder, child," murmured her teacher. "I can't tell you how many students have never come even close to mastering that one."

"Goodness," said Hermione. "I'd think everyone would want to practice it. It's so very handy."

"It seems to require a high level of dexterity and recall, not to say concentration. Most long-lasting spells do. I'd say only one wizard in ten manages it."

"I guess most are happy to stop at a simple *Leviosa*. It is so much easier. But of course Levitation only lasts a short time."

"Yes." Professor McGonagall looked at her for a long moment, then seemed to come to herself. "Ah... you know where you're going?"

"Hogsmeade you said, but--"

"The Hog's Head. It's a pub--"

"Oh, I know where it is."

Professor McGonagall raised her eyebrows. "You do?"

Hermione blushed. "Um, well it's a long story--"

"--which no doubt involves Messrs. Potter and Weasley. Collecting bezoars I suppose."

"Well... erm... no. You see--"

"Don't trouble me with the details. It's probably best that I not know what use the three of you had for that den of dust and devilment. Suffice it to say that Aberforth Dumbledore is the proprietor. He's there most days behind the bar, and he has his digs upstairs."

Hermione had trouble digesting this at first. The brother of the greatest headmaster of the greatest school of magic in the wizarding world was a bartender? And there was that other remark...

"Erm... professor, why did you think we'd be collecting bezoars at the Hog's Head?"

"Aberforth has a fondness for goats... er... for their milk I believe. He keeps a small herd of them out back of the pub."

As Hermione picked up the satchel, Professor McGonagall laid a hand on her arm. "Be careful what you say in front of the Minister, my dear. He has a number of hidden motivations."

"You mean about Harry?"

"Yes, among other people. He'd give anything to get a spy inside this place. You heard his offer to send some of his own servants over here to take up the slack."

"You think they'd act as spies for the Ministry?"

"Let's just say I wouldn't trust a gift from Rufus Scrimgeour any farther than I could throw a mountain troll."

6. An Unpleasant Conversation

Chapter 6 of 29

Hermione escorts Minister Scrimgeour to Hogsmeade.

AN UNPLEASANT CONVERSATION

"Ah, Miss Granger, what's in the satchel, may I ask?" Rufus Scrimgeour was obviously still fishing for information.

"Some things for Professor Dumbledore's brother, sir."

"Aberforth Dumbledore. Now there's an interesting history. Bad blood between the two of them, I understand."

Hermione refused to take that bait, though the image it conjured was a disturbing one. She had deliberately set a fast pace down the castle hallways, hoping the Minister, with his gimpy gait, would have to concentrate all his efforts on keeping up with her, but he surprised her with the smoothness of his stride. The limp had, in fact, disappeared altogether.

He tried another tack: "I imagine being Muggle-born, all this must have been a great challenge."

"You mean coming to Hogwarts?" she asked coolly. "It's been rather exhilarating, actually."

His voice took on a hint of humility. "I suppose for one with your gifts, spell work was just another interesting puzzle to solve."

"You could say that."

"Your friend Harry Potter had many of the same kinds of obstacles to overcome, didn't he? Being brought up by Muggles...the Durtsies, am I right?"

They had reached the front door, and she used opening it as an excuse not to reply...not even to correct the name of Harry's odious relatives. When they were out in the open air, under a hot, cloudless sky, he tried another tack.

"I heard you doing that Lightning Charm. Works very nicely, doesn't it?"

Hermione was a bit unnerved by this. Had he been listening to her conversation with the Headmistress?

He hastened to explain. "Oh, I wasn't eavesdropping, I promise you. But I recognized the cant. And you do have a very penetrating voice, Miss Granger."

"Oh."

"I can understand why you'd be suspicious. I suppose you know I started out as an Auror. We do develop more sensitive ears than most."

"I didn't think that would be important...for a wizard, I mean."

"Oh, yes, very important. The job's not all fancy gadgets and gizmos, you see. You have to use your five senses...and your brain. Yes, a keen mind is very important."

Hermione smiled at this. It sounded like he was going to offer her a job. She wasn't in the least interested in being an Auror for his regime, of course.

"But even more important is instinct," he continued, catching her eye. His gaze, out of bronze-colored eyes, was almost hypnotic. "To feel in your bones when something is wrong. When something strategically dangerous or important is 'going down', so to speak."

Hermione wrenched her focus away from the old man and concentrated on the tops of nearby trees. Her heart started pounding, but it wasn't from the exercise. The Minister's pace had quickened as they passed the Quidditch pitch, but she had no problem with that. No, what concerned her was the tone of his voice. He was like a hound on the scent, and she was feeling more and more like a beleaguered fox.

Scrimgeour pursued his point: "You're Harry Potter's best friend, aren't you?"

"I am a friend of Harry's, but Ron's his best mate."

"Ron? Ron who?"

"Ronald Weasley."

"Oh...really? One of Arthur Weasley's brood?"

"Yes."

"Percy Weasley's little brother?"

"Yes, of course!" Why was Ron such a nonentity to everyone? "Ron's not just 'Percy's little brother', you know."

"Oh, no?"

"In fact, he's not little at all. He's the tallest of them all. And he's a prefect too, in case you didn't know. And Keeper for the Gryffindor Quidditch team."

"Ah..."

"And...he's just about the best Wizard Chess player in the whole Magicosm!" She fell silent suddenly. Why was she bothering to defend Ron to a man she had not an ounce of respect for?

There was a silence, then, "Please, Miss Granger, could we slow down, just a bit?"

Hermione stopped and turned. The Minister was several yards behind her and panting heavily. In her anger, she had apparently picked up the pace beyond the Minister's breathing capacity. And his limp was showing again.

When he reached her, he mopped his brow with a conjured hankie. "I see. Quidditch Keeper and a prefect. Gone his brothers one better, has he?"

"Yeh...esss," she replied carefully. They started walking again more slowly.

"I should have known. All those Weasley boys are clever chaps. Credit their Prewitt blood, I think. You say Ron's good at chess?"

"I've never beaten him." She tried but failed to keep the rising irritation out of her voice.

"Nor has Harry Potter, I'll wager."

"No." He was starting on Harry again, but Hermione would not bite on that subject.

The Minister of Magic sighed. "You paint a very pretty picture of your friend. Loyalty is a quality to be admired in the young... but it might be considered a luxury in these dangerous times."

"I would think it was even more important now...to be faithful to one's friends."

"Perhaps...but politically speaking..."

She stopped and faced him. "Listen, Minister, you might as well know right now. I'm always going to be on Harry's side...and...Professor Dumbledore's..."

"Dumbledore's dead."

"Well, to his memory then, to the ideals he stood for."

"And what are those? Truth, Justice, and the Wizarding Way?"

"Among others, yes."

"Would it surprise you to hear that your wonderful Headmaster was one of the most accomplished prevaricators I've ever known?"

"What? He's no liar...he..."

"Oh, I wouldn't brand him a liar actually. His sins are more ones of omission. It's the professor in him. As a scholar you know, I'm sure, that teachers only tell their classes so much. Do you know why? It's so that their students won't be able to use their superior knowledge against them later. That's the chief reason why Dolores Umbridge wouldn't let you all practice Defensive Charms last year."

"Well, that's no surprise."

"Dumbledore's always been cagey like that, with the Ministry, as well as with... his students. I don't believe in his whole life he ever did tell anyone the whole truth about anything."

"He did too! He told Harry everything he could find out about Tom Riddle's past..." She flushed at her statement, put her hand to her mouth, then started to walk again quickly towards the school gates, hoping this former Auror had missed those last words.

He called after her. "Thank you, Miss Granger. It's been a pleasure talking to you."

She stopped, her heart filled with dread, and stammered weakly, "I...I...you're welcome."

"Oh, I'm sure I'm not welcome, not welcome at all. But that's all right." He limped slowly towards her. "How interesting. Albus Dumbledore told Harry Potter all he knew about Lord Voldemort. And why would he do that, hmmm? Unless he knew that Harry was indeed the so-called Chosen One. That he would need that knowledge to help him defeat the Dark Lord."

"That's not what I said."

"It is what you implied."

"No!"

"My dear little pedant, with your eleven Outstanding O.W.L.s and your intensely competitive nature, you do miss so many obvious facts. Aurors learn very early to wait patiently for little slips like that one. Makes for some very useful information."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Hermione...I may call you that, mayn't I...Harry needs protection, don't you see that? With an army of Aurors at his back, he could be so much more effective..."

"No, that won't work. Dumbledore didn't trust the Ministry. If he had thought you could help, he would have asked you..."

A note of testiness sharpened the Minister's voice. "Why do you keep coming back to Dumbledore...as if he were Merlin himself?"

"All I know is that he kept Harry alive all these years, even with the Death Eaters looking for him. It must have been hell for Harry, having to live with the Dursleys, but it was necessary to his survival, and Dumbledore knew it."

"Yes, I heard about all that. The power of love..."

"Yes...and loyalty...and all that that means. Qualities you wouldn't understand with all your scheming and political cover-ups, Minister."

He looked as if she had just slapped him in the face. "I stand corrected."

"Yes, and you stand alone." She started walking again. The gateway was only a few yards away, and he needed no escort now.

He called after her. "So, you're going to help him in this... quest... to defeat the Dark Lord?"

"Yes, and Ron too. If Harry will let us."

"I'm sure he will. The question is: will you be able to?"

She kept walking. The old hound was in pursuit again. But was he closing in for the kill or just bluffing, knowing he was beaten?

He continued: "I won't be defeated in this, Hermione Granger. You young people don't realize the harm you could do. If you put a foot wrong, it could spell the end of all we've worked for: the Ministry as we know it..."

His last words came at her from her side. She was startled to realize that he had caught up with her. "Would that be such a bad thing?" she said, refusing to look at him.

"Of course it would. Who keeps order in the Magicosm...gives it purpose and structure... if not its Ministries of Magic? Oh, I know there are lawless pockets...America comes to mind...but by and large, we do an excellent job of keeping Wizardkind safe and sane."

"You're not doing such a good job of it at the moment, Minister."

"Yes, but that's in the main because your Mister Potter won't cooperate. So, I'm sorry to say that I'm going to have to do something a bit drastic about that."

They had arrived together at the gates and passed through them. Hermione stopped again and faced the old hound. This was it. The *coupe de grace* for the fox or the dog's retreat with its tail between its legs.

"What's that? What are you going to do?"

He rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a piece of parchment. It read:

.....By order of.....

THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

No student shall be considered 'of age'
and allowed to do magic off school property
until he or she has actually completed his or her
seventh year of magical schooling.

The above is in accordance with

Educational Decree Number Twenty-nine.

Signed:

Rufus Scrimgeour

Minister of Magic

.....-

She read it through twice. "You can't do this."

"I can. I just did. This morning...at 8:02."

"But that means..."

"What it means is it buys the Ministry some time before you go off half-cocked on your little mission to save the wizarding world. You and your seventh-year friends are banned from performing magic off campus until next summer, unless you want to risk being caught and banished from the Magicosm forever."

"Th-that won't stop Harry...or Ron."

"But it might give you pause, eh, Miss Granger? Oh, I know you. You're just like Percy Weasley." He lowered his voice to a nasty, mocking whisper. "Just have to follow *the rules*, don't you?"

"No, I don't..."

"And you do so want to make good in our world, don't you, hard-working little Muggle-born that you are? Yes, my dear Miss Granger, you'll have a very difficult time forcing yourself to go against this decree. Oh, I know you've bent the rules here at the school. But that's not like breaking a real law promulgated by a real government with the power to punish... to imprison... to exile..."

"Why are you doing this?" she cried, on the verge of tears.

"Any little thing I can do to stop Harry Potter from destroying the Magicosm will be all to the good."

"Whether I help him or not...that won't stop him."

"Aha! But not having you guarding his flank wouldn't be just a little setback, would it? Your hero...or is it your boyfriend?...Ron Weasley may be a chess whiz, and Harry may excel in Magical Defense, but you're the real brains of this operation, Miss Granger. Without you...well...Potter may at least have second thoughts. And if that slows him down..."

"But you can't...you don't understand...I need my magic...have to..."

"You have to what, Miss Granger? Oho, got another little scheme of your own going? Not going to hunt for Voldemort yourself, are you? Steal a little of the glory from the Chosen One?"

"NO!"

"I'm no Legilimens, my dear, but methinks you do protest too much." He gripped her arms and looked into her eyes. "Oh, yes, you've got plans all right. But what they are, I've no idea. Perhaps a clue lies in that bag of yours..."

He tried to grab the satchel. Hermione wrenched away from him and broke into a run down the path to Hogsmeade. He didn't try to stop her, but just laughed long and loud before Disapparating.

Aberforth

Chapter 7 of 29

Hermione gets corroboration and support from an unexpected source.

7. ABERFORTH

Trembling with anger and humiliation, Hermione raced up the path and on through Hogsmeade's main street. She remembered just in time to turn off at a side road to the Hog's Head Pub. The sight of the battered sign strengthened her a bit. This was where she and Harry and Ron had first met with the students who wanted to learn defensive spells against Dolores Umbridge's direct order. They became Dumbledore's Army, a name Ginny invented, and some of them backed Harry up when he tried to save his godfather from the Death Eaters. It reminded her of what they were fighting for and the large number of their peers who were willing to risk expulsion to arm themselves and protect their loved ones against the evil to come.

Inside, the place was empty of customers and as dirty as ever...perhaps dirtier even, as if its owner had given up all pretense of social nicety. Hermione had no idea what kind of relationship Professor Dumbledore had sustained with his brother. She realized now that he was the one Ron had pointed out in the crowd at the funeral, a gaunt, untidy figure in ill-fitting robes that seemed at once too voluminous for his frame, yet too short in the arms. Unlike some who craved the limelight, he had been loath to draw attention to himself. He had not even sat up front where space was reserved for relatives and close friends...and 'worthy dignitaries' like Rufus Scrimgeour. She'd heard something of his tangles with authority. Perhaps it was the presence at the funeral of so many Ministry officials that made him uncomfortable.

There was no one behind the bar either, and for a moment she studied smudgy, half-full bottles of liquor scattered about dusty shelves on either side of a ragged baize curtain in the center of the wall. Presently, there came a sound of movement, and a purple-veined hand groped at the curtain's edge and jerked it aside. In lurched a tall man with stringy gray hair and beard. His robes hung loosely and askew about his gaunt frame, as if he'd been caught sleeping in them. They also looked as if they might have been used to polish some of those bottles. But in spite of Aberforth Dumbledore's dishevelment, Hermione was struck by his resemblance to his celebrated brother and wondered why she had not noticed it the first time they met. His blue eyes burned under dark scraggy eyebrows like the incomparably hot flame of a Swedish Short-Snout dragon. Yes, clean up the face a bit, put him in decent clothing, add twenty pounds or so, and they could have passed for twins.

"Whuh you wan'?" The barkeep scratched his head and pulled absently at his beard. He'd either just woken up or was more than a little drunk.

She placed the satchel on the bar and stepped back a pace. "I'm from the school. I brought you some things. Your brother wanted you to have them."

He lurched towards her out of the doorway. She quelled the urge to run. He did not look particularly threatening, except for the eyes, but she was by nature suspicious of men who appeared not quite in control of their baser natures. But he stopped when he reached the bar and bent under it, bringing up a bottle and a glass. She had expected Firewhisky, but it looked like... *milk*. At least, it was white. His hands shook with a slight, steady tremor. He poured...well, tried to pour...himself a glass, but all that came out were thick curds.

"Garn! Already on the turn."

Hermione remarked in spite of herself, "It looks like... erm... yogurt."

He sniffed at the glass and set it down with a scowl. "I hate yogurt. Who'd you say you were?"

"Hermione Granger."

"You a student?"

"Yes..."

"What's the swag?"

She nudged the bag towards him. "Professor McGonagall said it's things you loaned to your...to Professor Dumbledore."

"Hmmp, Scottish Min," he snorted. "She the Head now?"

Hermione suppressed a giggle and nodded. She'd never heard her redoubtable Transfiguration teacher referred to in that way before.

But Aberforth had opened the satchel and gazed at its contents. He drew his wand and Levitated the Pensieve out of it. It rocked gently on the uneven floor. Its contents sloshed about, but did not spill. He examined it suspiciously. "Not a mark on it... well, 'cept these runes of course. Never did figure out what they meant. Guess maybe he might've." He frowned.

"I heard it was you who discovered it."

"Aye."

"Where...wherever did you find it?"

"West Coast of Ireland...Dingle Bay...in a cave. It was one of my first finds."

"First?"

"Curious little snip, aren't yer? If you must know, I did it on a dare, but it got me started...for life. When the exploring bug bites you, you stay bit." He glared at her as if daring her to contradict him.

But his gruffness did not frighten her at all; underneath it, she sensed deep hurt and resentment, akin to Harry's in being branded a freak of nature. Hermione watched as he continued to remove small delicate artefacts from the bag. "Um... actually... I think I might be able to figure out what that writing says. I took Ancient Runes."

He started Levitating objects to the back room. His hands seemed quite steady now as if having a purpose calmed them. "Tough subject. They must love you... up there at the school. My brother placed great stock in clever learners."

"I think he most valued fairness and hard work," Hermione said humbly.

"Yes, he was fair. I'll give him that. Better than those ninnies at the Ministry, any road. My goats have more sense..."

"Um... Mr... Dumbledore..."

"Call me Ab, everybody does." He sighed and muttered under his breath, "Short for *Ab-normal*."

Hermione pretended she didn't hear that last. "Mister... Ab... um, there's something in the bag... I wonder if I might borrow it."

"What's that? Not my lucky bowling ball, is it?" He drew a translucent crystalline sphere out of the bag. "I'll not part with it at any price."

"No," said Hermione, staring at it. "You know, it looks oddly familiar..."

"Not surprising. It was originally one of those dime-a-dozen crystal balls you can get in any Muggle hock shop. Old hag left it in one of the upper rooms once."

"Not...not Sibyll Trelawney by any chance."

"Think that was the name. I heard Albie gave her a job."

Hermione nodded ruefully. "Yes, he did."

"This here one is weighted perfectly. I just had to drill a couple holes in it.... Should never have let Albie borrow it. Not that it helped. He throws...threw...the worst back-up ball I ever saw..." He stopped and frowned again. His eyes grew watery, and he wiped them with his sleeve.

Hermione waited respectfully for him to pull himself together. He obviously missed his brother more than she would have imagined. "Um... what I need, Mister... I mean, Ab, it's a potion, Dr. Doolittle's Veterinaritaserum. Could I perhaps have a little, please?"

The blue eyes narrowed. "What you want it for?"

"It's a bit hard to explain..."

"Need to commune with your favorite Kneazle, do you?"

"Something like that."

He was silent for so long, Hermione thought she might just drop a little curtsy and be on her way. But she needed the serum badly. And the man before her held her with his bright, piercing eyes. *He looks so like the Professor...*

"It's got something to do with Albie, doesn't it?" he finally forced out.

"What do you mean?" She tried to keep the tremble out of her voice, but it caught at the end of the sentence like a calloused hand catches on cloth it is trying to smooth. It pricked her in much the same way.

"You're on his side, aren't you?" he muttered with a sudden, odd, male coyness. "Not just one of his students."

She nodded, not trusting herself to say anything. It came to her that she needed to let him make the first move, like coaxing an injured bird out of its hiding place.

"I remember you came into the bar with all those other kiddies last year. Recruiting, were you?"

"Yes... erm... for a class."

The faintest of smiles lightened his face. "*Dumbledore's Army*. Some class."

"What..."

"Surprised I knew?" He shook his head slowly and essayed a chuckle; it came out as a wheeze. "Well, you all were sure loud enough with yer *secret* plans. 'Specially those Weasley twins."

Hermione was amazed and a bit concerned. "But you couldn't have known the name...the D.A. We didn't... we only came up with it later... when we were back at school...."

"You wanter know where I heard it?" He leaned in and leered at her. "*From the horse's own mouth*," he whispered. "Yes, my sainted brother, gawd rest 'im, told me all about it over a glass of Murphy's. At that same table over there where you all had your meeting."

"Really?"

"Aye, whenever I got in a case of his favorite, I'd let him know, and he'd come over and sample it for me. I can't really take that stuff any more." He touched his midsection. "Stomach, y'know."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Hermione, meaning it. It heartened her to finally have a chance to share any thoughts at all of the Headmaster with the person who knew him best. Until now, she had believed that person to be Professor McGonagall. But 'Scottish Min' was, as Ron might say, as forthcoming with her feelings and memories as she was about her nicknames. This forlorn man, slouched in front of her, was the real 'chief mourner' of Albus Dumbledore, and if he had avoided the front row at his brother's funeral, it was not out of fear, but because of a natural dignity and reticence about his own feelings...which seemed to run in the family, now that she thought about it. But she needed Aberforth's reflections, no matter how random, to help her relieve her own pain and make sense of his brother's seemingly senseless death.

He continued with a wry face. "Albie told me all about that midnight hoo-ha in his office when Fudge accused him and the Potter boy of starting a rebellion. And the way you stormed the Ministry to save that Black chap, getting Harry's back... he was almighty proud of you lot."

A flush of satisfaction suffused Hermione through and through. She found she cherished this remark more than any praise for scholastic accomplishments she had yet received. It subsumed her forebodings for a time and let surface the feeling of solidarity she'd felt standing with her comrades, fighting Death Eaters that night in the Ministry sub-basement.

It was a while before he spoke again, but she found the silence equally comforting, as she imagined the Headmaster sitting there discussing the little everyday problems of students, as well as potentially more troubling matters with his brother, the publican.

Finally, Aberforth cleared his throat and wetted his lips. "I went to visit his tomb the other day... when nobody else was around. There were things... between us... things that needed... saying...." He stopped. He obviously was affected by the moment, but there was something more, something he couldn't bring himself to express.

"It's all right," she said softly, wanting to touch his sleeve, to pat his arm. "I...we...all know how you feel." But she had the feeling that there was more than unexorcized grief here and that she would have to be patient.

"Do you? Somehow I don't think you do," he rasped. "But that's another story entirely. I got to tell you though... I saw him... inside the tomb."

"You mean..."

He grasped her arm hard and breathed into her face. His breath was not fetid as she feared, but only a little sour. "You gotta know, Missy, I ain' touched a dram of the hard stuff in a dragon's age. I was stone-cold sober."

She was suddenly terrified of what he was going to say...and perhaps do...to her, but she had to know. "Wh-what did you see?"

He let her go and whispered. "Terrible it was. It was like I could see right through the rock. My...my brother on his knees, his eyes rolled up in pain or worse. I thought it was the D.T.s at first."

"No, I'm sure it wasn't."

"He was calling to me."

"What did he say?"

"I heard him...clear as a phoenix's cry. *Help...help*, he says...*get help*. Then I thought it must be his ghost reliving the way he died, you know. Like he wanted me to understand his final moments...the pain of it, the fear. Like he mighta wanted revenge. But, no...I realized it right away...it was all wrong. That's not his way. Oh, he had his faults, lots of 'em. But killing people just to get even wasn't one of them."

"That's right."

"But there's no reason for him to...to come back and haunt me...like this."

"I'm sure he didn't mean..."

The old man held up a hand to silence her. "Always restless, always wantin' something more...even from beyond the grave. I thought: I'm too old for this. But then he said...I remember it... *The dog can help, the big black hound*. I thought he meant a Grim at first. Then he said, *And the witch with the bushy hair*. He meant you, didn't he?"

Hermione was speechless.

"Are you the one he's talking about?"

She nodded slowly, thinking inside, *Oh, I hope so...I sincerely do*.

"And the dog?"

"Yes," she said softly. "There's a dog too...a big black dog."

His face relaxed from its rigor like a sick child's who falls off to sleep after the fever breaks. "Makes sense. You need the serum to talk to the dog. That's all right then."

"May I?" she asked, gesturing to the satchel.

"Oh, sure, take the whole bottle." He reached in the satchel and brought out a small phial. "I won't be needing it anyway. Goats and me pretty much understand each other after all these years."

"Thank you so much."

He handed the precious phial of liquid to her. "Anything else you need on your... expedition?"

"I...I don't know."

"This satchel will hold pretty damn near anything. I have a feeling you might need it," he mumbled, seeming abashed at having shown weakness to a stranger and a student to boot. He retreated, lugging the Pensieve through the curtains out of sight.

"But it belongs... to the school, doesn't it?" she called after him.

"Nar, it's mine," she heard him mutter. "And I'll lend it to you... just in case."

He re-entered the bar, rubbing his hands. "I would like to give you a piece of advice, young lady, if you will accept such from an old wayfaring warlock like me."

Hermione just blinked at him. He really did look like his brother...even sounded a bit like him, now that he'd had a chance to tell his story.

He cleared his throat and rumbled on. "I have found in my travels that it is best to always take more than you need. Magical devices, of course, whatever you can get your hands on, but also anything you think might have a use...even things you can't imagine needing." He chuckled, his eyes twinkling. "I have gotten out of many a scrape using nothing more than a Muggle hairpin and a ball of twine...and the occasional Dungbomb. And there are a few more things in this bag...well...they might come in handy...." He handed it to her.

Hermione remembered the oddments of Ron's that sat in her room, awaiting transport back to his house. Could any of that junk be helpful to her and Sirius? She thought not, but this wizard standing before her had had many an adventure and come away unscathed. Perhaps she would...

She shook his hand and crossed to the door. From behind her, he said, "You think you can save him? I mean we didn't always get along, but nobody should have to go through what he's suffering, even if their sins was a hunnert times worse...." It was little more than a whisper, but it brought her out of her brown study, and she gazed into the face of Aberforth Dumbledore.

"If the Headmaster says so, I'm sure we can," she breathed, feeling more confident than she had in a long time. *Just try and stop us, Minister,* she thought. *If Albus Dumbledore himself wants us on this job, then we'll find a way to see it through.*

In Death's Own House

Chapter 8 of 29

Sirius sinks back into Lord Death's abode and remembers a revealing conversation he had with his host.

Thanks to Artemisa for the idea for Death's character. I have her permission to borrow it. You can read her excellent take on this personage (originated by Terry Pratchett in the 'Discworld' series) in her one-shot, 'Black Garden,' on sugarquill.net.

His meeting with Hermione finished, Sirius let himself go, slipped backwards in the mirror, and watched the frame recede rapidly until it was but a point of light. He passed myriad other dimensions, tantalizing wheres and whens he might someday want to investigate...but not now. Released from the pull of the terrestrial plane, he slid along through the ether until he found a bit of space-time cloud that looked and sounded familiar...dark and lonely, with that irritating ticking and whooshing...and made a dogleg left into it. He found himself zooming down a long gray hallway, one of many in Death's castle. He landed gracefully...the first time he'd managed it without teetering and falling on his face. For a few seconds, he felt almost human, sauntering down the dingy stone corridor; it was, in fact, a bit like being back at Hogwarts in his salad days. At any moment he expected...well, hoped...to see James or Remus or even that little rat Wormtail turning the corner, the light of 'mischief managed' in their eyes. He missed his friends and wished for the umpteenth time that he could go either backward or forward in time: back to life with Lupin and his godson Harry at Grimmauld Place or forward to the Afterlife to be with James and Lily Potter, his surrogate brother and sister. But once again, he was stuck in a kind of dreary stasis, and he was determined this time to make himself useful.

He thought about his conversation with Hermione. It was nice to know he still had the ability to persuade a girl to do what he wanted although he definitely had no desire to do with Hermione what he once did with other nubile young women. She would make a decent partner...brainy and knowledgeable...but she had a reputation for bossiness, and he knew she didn't much care for his own rather casual attitude towards 'The Rules'. This would not be an easy ride.

But anything...even spending weeks with the know-it-all wench...would be better than this waiting. It made him think of the limbo he had endured for close to a year in Grimmauld Place, hiding out from the Ministry, watching lesser lights like Dung Fletcher and that traitor Severus Snape wallow in glory and usefulness, while he had to sit on his hands, powerless to help in the fight against Voldemort and his toadies. But now he had a mission: to save his old Headmaster.

He thought back. Said mission had been thrust on him by the Grim Reaper himself. Well, maybe not *thrust*, more like *suggested*.... It had been nearly a week now since he heard the shocking news of Dumbledore's demise...

~*~

He had been sitting with Death in Death's garden, playing Scrabble. It was a quiet morning. Sergei and Bertha had thankfully not made an appearance in days. And Regimald... well, he was another story... Best not to think about Reg. Thinking about him tended to make him show up.

Everything in the garden, every leaf, every flower, was some shade of black. Sirius, not being the meditative type, except on the ways and means of having a good time, had never thought before how very many tinges and textures of black there could be. He was forced into it now as there was little else to do, waiting for his opponent to make a move. He noticed now the way the thin light played on the different surfaces and transformed their blackness into shades of near-to-color. The roses, for example, their petals had an almost-red patina to them; the violets wore a blue-black sheen.

It was decidedly creepy, all that black, and its owner was creepy too, with his skull-face half-hidden in the hood of his voluminous black robe, one brittle bone hand gripping the shaft of a gleaming scythe, the other rearranging the letter tiles in his rack. He had a monochromatic voice too, with a unique, distinctly *final* quality to it, as if every word was the last a bloke would ever hear.

In spite of all this and the alternating bouts of ranting and passive aggressive silence from his host, the two had developed something of a rapport. Their conversations reminded Sirius a bit of Lupin at his most naive. (He often thought that Remus's nickname, Moony, did as much to point up his nerdy detachment from reality as it was a veiled reference to his lycanthropy.) Death didn't know much about Life, and was forever asking Sirius questions about what it was like being human. He rarely had a chance to actually speak with persons he had helped Beyond the Pale. They weren't supposed to just show up on his doorstep like Sirius...and Bertha and Sergei...did. And given that one could never get a word in edgeways with Bertha nor decipher a tenth part of Sergei's mumblings, Sirius seemed the logical person to interrogate. So, every once in a while, when he was feeling a tad less testy than usual, The Pale Prince would unleash on his captive guest all his questions about the nature of humanity and its

intriguing subset: wizardkind.

For instance, he didn't understand the need for wands. When you wanted to go someplace, you just imagined the place and there you were...with none of that uncomfortable feeling afterwards of having been stuffed through a large macaroni. Or if you needed something, say a back-scratcher or a bit of cake, you didn't need to point and mutter, you just thought of what you wanted, and there it was.

On this particular morning, the subject of Dumbledore came up during the game. Sirius had just finished explaining how the Unforgivable Curses worked.

"... and this green light comes out, and you just snuff it. No pain, nothing. That's what they say, anyway. But speaking of...you know...killing people, I sort of thought you'd be more...uh...busy, just now."

"Well, there are no plagues or wars to speak of just at the moment," Death replied, pushing the letters h-y-x-i-a-t-e onto the end of the 'asp' Sirius had just laid down. "With the triple letter on the 'y' and the double word score, that's 64 for me," he said smugly. "Humped your asp, didn't I?"

Sirius shrugged and wrote it down. *Humped your asp*. It sounded like something James would say, and for a moment he felt a little more at home with his host. "Glad to be of service," he replied. "But what about the Death Eaters? They're killing lots of people, aren't they?"

"Yes, but they seem to prefer Fridays... and they like to do lots of people at one time. It's considerate of them... in a way."

"Considerate?" Sirius laid 'pott-r' across the 'e' of 'asphyxiate', wrote a '6', and sighed. His heart just wasn't in this game.

"Well, it means I only have to go to England once or twice a week. And they're efficient too. That Abba Dabba Curse, you were just talking about, for instance..."

"You mean *Avada Kedavra*."

"Whatever. It is, as you say, instantaneous and can cut quite a wide swath. Sometimes I feel I'm just in the way."

Sirius caught the faintest note of irritation in Death's usually emotionless voice. "You don't seem too happy with the idea."

"Oh, I don't mind a little free time. It's the sheer chutzpah of this fellow... Ribble... or Moldymort... or whatever he calls himself. First of all, he's managed to wangle his way out of his own Appointed Death Time..."

"What do you mean?"

"He learned a trick... a way to prolong his life."

"How?"

"By dividing his soul into lots of small pieces and hiding them in things."

Sirius snorted at this. "What do you mean? Like biscuit tins? Or his shoe maybe?"

"I don't know."

"But how do you divide up a soul anyway?"

"I was hoping you'd explain it to me, you being a wizard and all."

"An ex-wizard, I might remind you. And anyway, we don't all know all the magic there is to know, you know."

"No, I didn't *know*. Have you ever heard of the term 'Horcrux'?"

"No."

"Neither did I."

"How'd you spell it anyway? W-H-O-R-E?" Sirius thumbed through the much-used *Scrabble Dictionary, 1993 edition*, which was the only one Death would allow in the castle. It was a tribute to the game's inventor, 1993 being the year he had died.

"I'm sure it starts with an aitch, and there's an ex at the end, I think."

"It's not in here; so you can't use it."

"Can't use it?"

"In the game."

"What? I wasn't thinking of the game. No, listen: a Horcrux is the thingie, the life preserving trick I was talking about."

"The one Voldemort is using."

"Yes. I've managed to learn just a little about them in my travels, but I was hoping you could fill in the details."

"Never heard of them." Sirius watched as Death made the word 'poison' with the 'p' in his 'potter'.

"Sixteen! Where does the chap get off, creating these Horcruxes to extend his life? It's unnatural!"

"That's Voldemort for you. But I'm sorry, I haven't a clue about Horcruxes."

"Pity, really. There's this fellow named Dumbledore might have known about them if anybody would. Ever heard of him?"

"He was my old Headmaster. Everybody knows Dumbledore."

"Knew."

"New? What's new?"

"Nothing...I mean *kuh-new*. Everybody knew Dumbledore."

"What do you mean? He's not dead, is he?"

"Death looked at his pocket hour-glass. "Since about three hours ago."

"What?! Oh no, not Dumbledore. Poor Harry."

"Who's Harry? Oh, your godson, Harold Patter."

"Potter. And it's just plain Harry. Oh Merlin, why'd this have to happen? First his parents... then me... and now Dumbledore."

"Were they close?"

Sirius nodded. "He was like a father to Harry. Oh, this is terrible. Who's next? Hagrid? McGonagall maybe?"

Death got out his little black Appointment Book. "Want me to look it up?"

"No, I'd rather not know. But how did it happen? How did he die?"

"Another murder. A foregone conclusion, one might say. The only odd thing was, he was supposed to be terminated by a fellow named..." Death paused and leafed through the book, then put his bone finger on a line, "...a fellow named 'Draco Malfoy', but the person who actually did the deed was one 'Severus Snape'."

"What? Snape? How could he! Of all the awful things I could imagine him doing, I would never have thought of this. How'd he kill him?"

"That Av Yer Cadaver thingie."

"*Avada Kedavra*. Damn him...damn Snape to hell!"

"You want to know when he's due?" Death tapped his book.

"Yes! I mean no...not if I can't kill him myself." Sirius slumped in his chair. "So Dumbledore's dead."

"Yeeesss... after a fashion."

"What do you mean? A person's either dead or he's not... um... myself excepted, of course."

"Yes, you're definitely a special case. Dumbledore is too... but in different way."

"You mean he wasn't supposed to die?"

"Haven't you been listening? Of course he was. He planned for it in fact, but, having followed all the rules, consented to death, died, and so forth, he still can't Pass Over."

"What? Why?"

"It seems his protégé... that godson of yours: Harvey... or Herbie... or..."

"Harry. Potter."

"Yes, that's the name, Potter. He tried to rescue himself and this Dumbledore from some Inferi and made a grave error."

Sirius grinned at the unintentional pun. Death never made jokes. He didn't understand humor at all. But then he himself turned grim. "What was the error?"

Death explained about the water Harry took from the basin ("no use crying over spilled Styx"), the mingling of it with the water of the subterranean lake ("an honest mistake, but there it is"), and the Inferi's binding of the Headmaster's spirit ("wouldn't wish it on a three-headed dog"). He was no help whatever in seeing a solution to the problem, and Sirius had to drag out of him the information that it was the Headmaster's unkept promises that were holding him down in the ranks of the Inferi.

Sirius knew that in his nebulous state, he couldn't do much to effect the fulfillment of those promises. He did manage to extract from Death a promise of help from the Beyond if Sirius could find a human to get the List and act as their agent to carry out its stated intentions on the terrestrial plane. As his trump card, he played Voldemort's repeated violation of The Rules of the Underworld and his fear and jealousy of Dumbledore and intimated that it would irritate the Dark Lord in the extreme to learn that he had had his nemesis's soul entrapped and then let it get away.

Death stopped short of promising any real help from the spirit world, but Sirius knew the thought of giving Voldemort the mickey would bring him some satisfaction.

He ceded the Scrabble match to Death, who by now had a handy lead, and took some time to decide whom he would approach for help. His reasoning kept bringing him back to Hermione Granger although he didn't really like the idea much. In life he had felt she looked down on him and disapproved of his feckless ways, and he didn't think his new status would improve their relationship. But there was nothing for it: Harry was out by virtue of the supreme commitment he needed to prepare for. Ron? Well that was a laugh. Ginny? Too young and too unknown a quantity. The twins? They'd have been his choice to orchestrate a celebration after the fact, but he wasn't sure they could be relied upon to keep focus for the length of time it would take to get the job done. Arthur and Molly still had too many obligations to family and the Order. Remus had the Werewolf Project. Tonks and the other Aurors? The absence of any of them would raise suspicions with the Ministry.

As he whisked away to find Hermione, he wondered briefly whether, in fact, it would be possible for Voldemort to learn of Dumbledore's extreme vulnerability, and if he did, whether he could do anything about it.

~*~

Today, Sirius, having gotten Hermione's 'yes', bounded down the paths of Death's Garden to report his success and see if he could count on some additional help in their first task.

But on this particular day...or night...or whatever, Death was sitting at the round, obsidian-coated table, having tea with his alter-ego, Reginald, the Death of Poets. Sirius had met Reginald, an incorrigible kibitzer, during one of those Scrabble games. Being a wordsmith, and a most irritating one at that, the Death of Poets had insisted on whispering possible letter combinations in Sirius's ear every time he took his turn.

Sirius had never thought that there might be more than one Grim Reaper, although now he thought about it, it made a sense that there should perhaps be one for each of the many species in the Plant and Animal Kingdoms, certainly a separate one for Magicals and Muggles at the very least. But there were in fact, only three: one for humans, one for rats (perhaps because there were so many of them), and one for...of all beings...poets.

This seemed unfair, but Death explained that it had come about because a mortal named Dante had written a poem called the Divine Comedy. In it, the poet Vergil guided some unnamed, benighted soul...presumably Dante himself...through the underworld.

The Divine Comedy was all the rage among the Dead in those old, old days. To them it read like a scandal sheet or tell-all biography, naming as it did all the bigwigs of Florence, Dante's home town, and revealing their most secret sins. Who, quick or dead, could resist that? So it was agreed that, as a reward for Dante's cleverness in making up so many interesting ways of passing Eternity, the spirit world should appoint a Vergil-like character to escort poets...not playwrights, not novelists, not essayists...just poets, through the tortuous paths of the Afterlife to their final resting place.

Sirius had a passing acquaintance with Dante's work. As a child, he often visited his female cousins. The eldest, Belletrix, being a bloodthirsty and sadistic sort, was by far the most fascinating to a little boy. She introduced him to the sickening descriptions of crime and punishment in 'The Inferno,' the first part of the epic. Her sister Andie, seeing his wild eyes and trembling limbs after a bout of Belletrix's storytelling, would hasten to soothe him with the other, less scary parts, especially her favorite, *Paradiso*.

Sirius never thought much of this part, except the description of the heavenly guide, Beatrice, who sounded like a swell girl, very beautiful and probably stacked. He did wish that the Death of Poets might have been more like Beatrice.

But dead poets were stuck with Reginald as a guide, a pale, lanky fellow, who didn't even have the imagination to look grim, like the original Death's Head. He most resembled an effete wandering minstrel in his parti-colored robes and tasseled cap, and his conversation was boring in the extreme, being made up of painfully rhythmic, blank verse.

"Hullo, Reg," said Sirius.

Informality irritated Reginald.

"I don't believe I gave you leave to call me

"By that most odious name which sounds like spewing."

"What? Oh, you mean 'retch.' No, I didn't mean to imply that you were sickening. Not at all."

"Then kindly call me by that name my mother

"Was pleased to give me on her bed of childbirth."

"All right... Reginald. How's it going?"

"How to tell you of the myriad torpors

"That torment my so delicate condition

"Alas, I weep, I melt, I... "

And so it went...a florid retelling of Reg's week for a full ten minutes, replete with sighs and tears and limp-wristed dramatic gestures. Sirius got out of there as quickly as he could and never got to ask Death for help. He figured he and Hermione could handle one task by themselves. It had to be easier than enduring Reg's stories.

9. Sv Mgglnbrn Chldrn fr DEs

Chapter 9 of 29

Finally: the first task.

9. Sv Mgglnbrn chldrn fr DEs

Hermione got off the bus a convenient block from the location written on Dumbledore's list. She'd gone home and put on her mother's primmest outfit, the navy-blue one, the one she wore to dental conventions, the one that said "Yes, I am a real dentist, not one of your cutesy assistants...and not, heaven-forbid, one of those power-suited sales representatives." A pair of Mum's support hose, "sensible" shoes, a shoulder bag, and the Bag of Holding completed her outfit.

She strolled up the curving road, thinking about the choice she had made. She was both heartened and chagrined by Sirius's offer of help. It came back to her how impetuous and self-centered she remembered him to be, always thinking he had all the answers, never pondering the consequences his actions might hold.

She told him about her meeting with Scrimgeour and was forced to admit that not being able to use her wand would pose something of a problem. If she was even once caught defying that decree, their adventure would be over all too quickly. For the time being, she would have to rely on him to do any necessary legerdemain.

As for her interview with the headmaster's brother, he could only add that the relationship between Albus and Aberforth had always seemed rather of the love-hate variety. The Marauders had, by fourth year, made the Boar's Head their hangout of choice, having been warned against it by most of the adults they knew. They had, by one means or another, managed to eavesdrop on more than one of the Headmaster's visitations. It always started out genially enough, but, as the ale flowed, deteriorated into a sort of civilized brawl, with Aberforth making veiled accusations about some event or events long past and Albus sighing and staring into his drink. Then, a few moments later, things would clear up with Aberforth once again agreeing to go off on an expedition to find some rare artifact Albus had read about. Yes, there was definitely been something dark between them.

She'd read over the first obligation on the Headmaster's list at least a dozen times:

Sv Mgglnbrn chldrn fr D.E.s.

Two lists of names and locations, each headed by a date, followed it. She and Sirius had decided that the dates were presumably attack dates. And it became quickly obvious why there were only two dates for so many names. Four of the children lived together on one street and three lived on another, though the lists didn't give specific addresses.

It was so like Voldemort's followers to try to root out all the young Muggle-borns who were polluting their ideal magical world. Hermione wondered briefly how Dumbledore had known about the attacks. Likely he had one or more moles in the organization. Professor Snape came to mind, Snape who, when push came to shove, had chosen to betray his mentor, the man who'd taught him, given him a job, and shielded him from criticism, from arrest and imprisonment. No, of course the information couldn't have come from Snape. Perhaps the Headmaster had used Veritaserum on some of those Death Eaters they still had locked up in Azkaban prison.

The two neighborhoods they'd have to visit were a long distance apart. Hermione had never been to either, so she made herself familiar with bus routes and Tube schedules and arranged to meet Sirius near the first address, Daisy Terrace, in an old farming district west of London. As a spirit, he apparently could travel anywhere instantaneously, and Death had promised to provide his daily cover, so she wouldn't have to carry a mirror around. She wondered without much hope if some of his avatars might actually be physically useful.

She took a surreptitious swig of the Veterinaritaserum and walked up a rise on what looked to be a newly-paved roadway. There were no trees or bushes or grass anywhere, only bare, empty ground. It looks like a road to nowhere, she thought. But around a curve, it ended with three very new houses on greensward, spaced evenly about a circular parking pad. Each was unique. One looked very like a farmhouse of the old style with two storeys and a mansard roof. The second was an asymmetrical ranch-type with a jutting wing. The third reminded her of a chalet she'd seen once on a trip to Switzerland.

Nearby on the unimproved, weedy ground was a small mustard yellow trailer with the words HEFFLEHOFFER BROS., LTD. on its side. And parked randomly about a huge mound of construction detritus were some earth moving vehicles...dump trucks and the like... all the same yellow color.

She watched in the shade of a monstrous claw-and-scoop machine as a young, dark-haired woman in the door of the farmhouse waved to another woman who was down by the curb retrieving the post. Inside one of the houses, a baby wailed. In two days, Death Eaters would destroy these people. And the area was so isolated and exposed. There would be no help for them and nowhere to hide.

"Need help?" squeaked a voice around the region of her ankles. She looked down. There sat a tiny white poodle with a pink bow in its tufted topknot and a glittering, sequined collar around its finger-thick neck. It looked like one of those dogs that perform in circuses with cockatiels and miniature horses.

"Sirius?" she asked in what she hoped was a casual voice.

"Yep!" yipped the little dog.

She stifled a grin and the urge to reach down and pet it. Lord Death did indeed have a sense of humor, though not much practical sense. She squatted down. "Nice one," she said, looking into the very life-like eyes.

"Yip-yip! Thanks for not laughing."

"It is a bit different from your usual. Where did you get such a cute...erm, I mean clean...erm...corpse?"

"Grrr...actually it...that is, he...was stuffed. Madam Smythe-Hollins, bookkeeper and dog-trainer extraordinaire for Sibley's Traveling Show, died yesterday, and when Death made his visit, he saw Popsie, her first major success, stuffed and posed in grand style on the mantelpiece. It took a bit of shaking and un-stuffing to get him into shape, but it works." He pranced about, wagging the doggy-star's bit of a tail. "It's no 'Snuffles' but it'll do." But he didn't sound very convincing and added ruefully. "At least there's no *odeur of decay*."

"True," said Hermione, fanning herself with her hand, "only formalin." She stood up and turned about. "How do you like my disguise? Since I've got to win these people's confidence fast, I thought I'd go in as some kind of official survey-taker."

"Wowrf! You need to be older. They'll never believe anything you say looking like a school girl."

She rummaged through the satchel and took out a small vial. "A little of the twins' Aging Potion should do the trick." She took a long pull and waited. Now she staggered backwards, trying to focus. She had 'floaters' in her eyes, which no amount of blinking would clear. And a pronounced tinnitus in her left ear. And nagging back pain.

"Oh," she gasped. "I think I went a bit too far. I feel like I'm a hundred."

The poodle sniffed at her ankles. "Ruff! Nope, you smell more like fifty-five, a most trustworthy age. I like the outfit. What kind of survey-taker are you going to be?"

"Someone no young mother can resist...a Board of Ed rep. I just need one prop." She took a clipboard and pen from the satchel then hid it inside the scooper part of the big earth mover. "You stay here and guard this. It's very important that no Muggle should get a hold of it."

Sirius started to growl. It quickly deteriorated into a series of yips.

"No offense intended," she continued, "but I think I'd better take care of this first one by myself."

"What if you get in trouble?"

"I'll manage." She patted her shoulder bag. "I have my wand. And besides, how would I explain bringing a small toy animal along on my job?"

"Well..."

"It's no use, Sirius. Anyway, it's not as if we're going to actually find a Death Eater in one of those houses. And even if there was, what earthly good could you be to me?"

Now she strode gamely up the driveway to the first house, noting the name THE WAGGONNERS on the post box, her canine companion forgotten. She was pleased with herself. She had been firm, but kind. He would wait patiently out by the dump with the satchel, where she could meet him to discuss the results of her interviews and decide what, if any, information they could use to form a plausible story to get those folks to evacuate.

She hadn't told Sirius that she had no idea how she was going to convince these people to leave their houses. She was hoping to get a clue as she talked to them. She wondered what had gotten into her? She never did things without a coherent plan, and had often chided Harry and Ron...especially Ron...for poor planning in some of their escapades. She had a sudden pang. What would Ron be doing right now? Was he thinking about her? Would he approve of what she was doing? He would certainly have been more of a help than Sirius. At least she knew his thought processes and could control him to a certain extent. Now she felt even more keenly the difficulty of this problem she had to solve, and Popsie the Poodle was certainly an unknown quantity in the equation.

The Sisters

Chapter 10 of 29

Out on the first adventure and Hermione and Sirius are already at loggerheads.

Hermione rang the doorbell of the first house.

The young woman whom she had seen waving answered the door. She had a pleasant, open face and her short, black hair sat smoothly, like a cap, on her head. Hermione introduced herself as a census-taker for URBORED: the United Regional Board of Reorganisation, Education Division.

"They're changing the district boundaries again," she explained. "We're taking a head-count of area children, and answering constituents' questions."

A small face appeared at the door between the woman's hip and hand. Polly Waggonner was pleased to introduce herself and her daughter Susanna, her only child. The face looked the visitor up and down. Something at Hermione's feet caused it to split into a wide grin.

"That your dog?" asked Polly brightly.

It was Sirius backing up alongside her left shoe. He had one handle of the satchel in his mouth, and was dragging it along defiantly. When he realized he had an audience, he let go the handle, looked around at them all, and gave a single interrogatory "Yip?"

"Oh," said Hermione, hiding her irritation. "I forgot. This is...um...Piddles." She hoped Sirius would wince at the word. "I had to bring him along as I'm...erm...pet-sitting my neighbor's cat. They don't get along at all."

Susanna tugged at her mother's pants-leg and looked up, as if to say, 'Please, please, mum, can I play with him? Please?'

"Oh, do bring him inside," said Polly. "He looks well-behaved, and we're quite used to animals."

"He's...um...not house trained."

Piddles, true to his name, walked over to a growth of plantain, lifted a leg, and watered it long and expertly.

How'd he do that? Hermione wondered. There can't be room for a bladder in there.

"Looks like he'll be empty for a bit," said Polly smiling. "Please come in, the both of you."

Hermione picked up the satchel, and Sirius/Piddles followed them all into a cool, pleasant sitting room. It had a large arched doorway leading into a dining room. Hermione commented on the different styles of the houses.

"My sisters live in the other two," said Polly. "And we all have very different tastes, as you can see."

"So how did you come to live together like this?" Hermione asked.

"This property was part of my parents' farm. Dad willed it to us. We decided it would be nice to live together...for a while anyway. So we kept this bit of property and sold several parcels off to get money for the construction. My great-aunt Gaga still lives in the farmhouse...down in the valley there." She gestured out a window in the dining room.

The phone rang, and Polly went through the dining room into the kitchen, tossing a "make yourself comfortable," over her shoulder. Hermione followed her as far as the dining room window, noting the table already set for tea, with a small plate of tarts and other treats, and another with tiny sandwiches, and two place settings. She pretended to stare out the window at an angle convenient to observing Susanna, who must be the incipient witchling of this household, and as such, marked for destruction. The list was specific: it was 'chldrn' who were marked for execution, not just 'pple' or even 'adlts', though doubtless the Death Eaters would not stick at wiping out whole families to reach their goal of purifying the Wizarding population.

She turned her attention to the valley outside. On this side she could see that the house was built on a high hill, and the panorama was magnificent and extensive. But that meant the houses too were highly visible from this side. She guessed that the Death Eaters would have to approach stealthily and not perform any major pyrotechnics in their attack...unless they were feeling so confident that they no longer feared repercussions from the Ministry or the Muggle police. She could see a house in the trees down in a hollow and a bit of smoke wafting up from a chimney, even though it was summer. That must be the farmhouse Polly mentioned, where her aunt lived.

A movement in the far corner of the sitting room interrupted her survey. Little Susanna had cornered Piddles neatly and was talking to him. Her head, haloed in fine reddish hair, bobbed about in animation. Hermione wondered parenthetically if Ron's hair had looked like that when he was just a little thing. She could only catch a few words of what Susanna was saying, but Piddles was evidently enjoying the conversation because his tiny tail wagged incessantly, and at one point he stood up on his hind legs and walked about briefly. Susanna clapped chubby hands in glee and nodded her head.

"Good Piddie," Hermione heard her say. "Want goodie?"

She turned and took a long look at Hermione, who had shifted her gaze back out the window, but could still manage a glance at the child out of the corner of her eye. Satisfied that this old lady was engrossed in the lawn outside, the child pointed at the dining room table. Suddenly a tart fell off the serving tray. It inched jerkily across the nappy tablecloth and flew to her hand. She broke off a piece and threw it to her doggie friend. Then, with a giggle, she stuffed the rest into her mouth.

Clever girl, thought Hermione, remembering her own childhood experiments with her powers. Not everyone could actually control their wandless wishes at this age. As a small child, Hermione had taken it for granted that everyone could Summon treats and Silence barking dogs, but by the time she was five, she had figured out that hers was a rather unusual talent. At six, after almost causing heart-failure in a maiden aunt for whom she demonstrated her new trick of walking on the ceiling, she decided that showing off like that was a definite no-no, even though the aunt had a reputation for sneaking sips of whisky from a 'medicine bottle' she carried in her purse. Susanna obviously knew that pilfering sweets was against the rules, but did she yet know that using magic to do it could cause conniptions in the 'normal' folks around her? It would seem so, given her stealth.

Polly entered with the tea tray laughing. "Those contractors. They've always got some excuse or other for not finishing up. They were supposed to come out today and clear up that mess outside and plant grass on the embankment." She pointed at the dump Hermione had hidden behind earlier. "Well, Mrs. Hefflehofer just called and postponed. Something about her astrologer saying it was not an auspicious time. I'm not saying the occult doesn't have its place, but it sounds like a pretty lame excuse to me."

Polly set a place for Miss Granger and called Susanna to her and they all sat together at the dining room table. Hermione could see the little girl surreptitiously sneaking crumbs to 'Piddie' on the floor. Between bites and sips of tea, she asked what she hoped were convincing questions about the Waggoners' educational preferences, Susanna's aptitudes, and the like. Polly had been a teaching assistant herself, and was up on some of the latest instructional methods.

"And your sisters," Hermione queried, "do they agree with your views on phonics-based reading?"

"Oh, Deanna...Lord love her...hasn't a practical brain-cell in her head. And Mary is so busy with her travel agency, working out of her home...she's divorced, you know...she hardly has time to think about anything not directly related to keeping a roof over their heads."

"But she's getting some support, isn't she...from her husband?"

"Yes, but the split was so messy, she doesn't like to take anything from him...won't let him come round. Visitation rights haven't been established. She says he's a perv...oh I'm sorry...but he's not. Just can't seem to stay faithful. He hurt her pretty bad."

Hermione was a little embarrassed at the young woman's frankness and hastened to deflect the subject. "I thought I heard a baby crying as I was coming up your driveway."

"That'll be the twins. My youngest sister's...Deanna's boys. They're about six months now. They're such a cute pair."

"Twins can be so engaging."

"They're going to be little devils when they grow up. Sometimes when they look at each other, I could swear they're cooking something up together. Their dad's away a lot. He's with the government. A lot of hush-hush, you know. But Deanna's up for it. And she has us to help out..."

"You said your great-aunt lives in one of the farmhouses in the valley. I did see one out the window with smoke coming out of the chimney..."

"Oh, yes, that would be Gaga. She's a little funny in the head. Always has been. She says she can do magic. And sometimes she even had us kids believing her."

That was a possible explanation for the children's magical abilities. If Gaga was a low-level witch, a hag or some such...

Polly brought up a question on the general educational policies of the current government, which Hermione was up on. Like Dumbledore, she felt that keeping current with Muggle news was every bit as important as subscribing to the *Daily Prophet*. Polly ended the interview pleasantly with "It's time for Susanna-girl's nap, and you've your interviews to complete, Miss Granger, before your driver picks you up."

"Yes," said Hermione, gathering up her things, "next door is your sister..."

"Mary."

"The one who's divorced."

"Yes. She's a little prickly, you know, and..."

"She has just one child?"

"Naomi. She turned ten yesterday."

Polly looked down. Her daughter was pulling at her pants-leg again and now lisped into it, "C'n the doggie stay wif us while the lady goes to Aunt Mary's?"

~*~

Her visit with Mary Parr was short. Mum was sullen and curt, but daughter Naomi was highly entertained by the lady with the dog, as if it was all a show for her benefit...which it was of course, but in deadly earnest. And Hermione got a full dose of a ten-year-old personality in full flight. While the adults talked on either side of a closed screened door, Naomi danced in the background about the tile floor, opened the coat-closet and hung from the hanger bar, then slid up and down the hallway in her socks. *This one's a candidate for the Quidditch team*, thought Hermione. Her mother ignored the stifled shrieks and thuds, as if she was used to it. Hermione tried and failed to imagine what it would be like to try to run a phone business as complex as a travel agency with such heady distractions all about.

Her friend Harry had started out like this, sunny and trusting and gung-ho, despite his unpleasant upbringing. But after the death of Sirius, who was his godfather, he had spent a lot of time in the black hole of teenage depression. She wondered if Naomi would succumb eventually to the pull of her mother's darker nature. She hoped not. She would receive her invitation to Hogwarts in just a year...if all went well.

The Seance

Chapter 11 of 29

Hermione finally figures out a way to get the families out of their houses, thanks to--of all people--Professor Trelawney.

11. The Séance

She stepped from there into the bubbly presence of Deanna Maturano. This youngest sister was very busy with her twins, changing their nappies right there in the den while they chatted. Sirius/Piddles curled up politely in front of them and pretended to go to sleep. Deanna explained that her husband was away for a week, and as she prattled on, Hermione realized the young mother was desperate for some adult company. But Deanna was not much interested in the finer points of the National Educational Syllabus and kept getting off the subject.

"Do they teach Creationism? I've never been a very spiritual person myself, but I would like the boys to get the whole picture, if you know what I mean. A person should be spiritual, don't you think? My husband's half Jewish. His family's from Spain...what do you call 'em?"

"Sephardic Jews, I think," opined Hermione.

"They have some interesting ideas. I read this book about the Moors and cabals and such. Talk about bizarre." A noise from the kitchen interrupted her. She left the babies sitting up with Hermione, who played with them a bit, letting them try to grab her fingers. They really were darling--fuzzy little bald people with big brown eyes. And they did seem to look at each other with a knowing glint in their eyes, like Polly said. It reminded her of another pair of twins she knew...

Deanna returned, still talking. "You know, I really think this house is haunted," she breathed. "I mean things keep moving around. I'm sure I didn't take any baby bottles out of the fridge, but there they were on the kitchen table again."

"Does it happen much?"

"At least once a day. Steve says I need to get out more, but honestly! No, there's something weird going on. Maybe I should ask Gaga about it. She'd know what to do."

"That would be your great aunt, wouldn't it? Polly mentioned her."

"Yes, she was such fun when we were kids. She'd visit all the time. Her stories were the greatest ever."

"Mmm... sounds interesting."

"Oh, yes. She has such an imagination. She told us about witch burnings, where one old lady escaped by freezing the flames of her own pyre, and this great evil wizard who hates non-magical folk and goes around trying to off them. But my favorite is the one about this whole other world of magical creatures living right alongside us, only we can't see them because they disguise themselves with spells and such. Isn't that a riot?" She tittered. "But I really do think we have a poltergeist or something in here."

Poltergeist. And a haunted house. Hermione began to see possibilities in these loaded words. The outline of a plan began to form in her mind. Could it work? It was the only decent idea that had presented itself all afternoon. *I'll go with it*, she thought. *I only hope Sirius will agree with me.*

Her father once told her, when she was going on about Hagrid's boring Flobberworm lessons, that every experience, every bit of knowledge, every mistake even, had its value; a person just had to tuck it away until it would be needed. She tried to think how to introduce the idea of a séance into her conversation with Deanna. Her only

experience with the Beyond consisted in a nodding acquaintance with the castle ghosts and...oh yes--her days in Divination with the odious Sibyll Trelawney. *Perhaps Dad is right. Perhaps, Sir Nick's Death-Day party and Peeves' torments and Trelawney's tea-leaves can be of some earthly use to me now.* She concentrated on memories of Sibyll, her innumerable scarves and beads flapping about, her twitchy, flitty hands, her myopic squint behind huge convex spectacles. *Yes, yes, that'll work.* She took a deep breath and let fly.

"Oh, you know, my dear," she twittered in what she hoped was an appropriately distracted voice, "I did detect some rather disturbing vibrations as I entered. And I see now the aura of your kitchen is quite dark, and this room positively shivers with destructive emotion."

"Ooh, are you a Sensitive?" gushed Deanna. "I've read about those too."

Time to put on the hauteur of the unfairly trivialized. "Well, I like to think I have some small talent in making contact with the astral plane." *Now a touch of humility.* "But I am merely an amateur...though gifted in a small way--as my friends in the Theosophical Society are always telling me. I do Read a bit, you know...palms, tea-leaves and the like..."

"Do you ever do séances?" Deanna coaxed her into admitting that, yes, she was a medium and yes, she had done some rather good work, if she did say so herself, helping a friend who had been violently murdered to Pass Over and rousting out an overexuberant spirit or two for grateful relatives. Then she pouted that Deanna was her last interview of the day, and she would have to wait two hours in the hot sun for her ride. Deanna took the bait--why not beguile the time with an impromptu séance and see if they could communicate with whatever ethereal essence was plaguing her house? Hermione acquiesced graciously. Excitedly Deanna rang up her sisters to invite them to join in the adventure. Then she put the twins down for their nap.

While Deanna prepared tea, Hermione used the toilet. Sirius followed her in and said he had a pretty good idea where she was headed.

"I can do a couple of wandless spells," he said, "but only the most basic. *Leviosas* and such."

"That's fine," she said. "The Ministry must know about these children, so hopefully they won't be suspicious if they detect some minor magic in the area."

Hermione sent him to entertain Deanna in the kitchen while she searched for information on possible 'spiritual contacts.'

She eased herself into a small office next to the bathroom. Quickly she found what she was looking for in a file drawer: the deed to the house and grounds and the names of the sisters' deceased parents.

The guests arrived shortly. Polly, who was carrying a pink-cheeked Susanna, seemed mildly interested. Susanna was at first bewildered by the whole affair, having just woken from her nap, until she saw 'Piddie' cavorting about, and she leaped on him. He squirmed in her arms and licked her face. Hermione couldn't tell if he was enjoying it or not, but she hoped Susanna wouldn't try to take him off to another room to have him all to herself.

Mary looked put-upon. She had obviously been pestered into coming by Naomi, who confided to Aunt Deanna that she'd listened in on the conversation on the upstairs phone. The ten-year-old had also insisted on bringing her leftover birthday cake to share.

Tea promised to be an elegant affair; Deanna, for all her fluffiness, had a real talent for decorating. The dining room, she explained, was meant to evoke a sense of grandeur in the style of *Le Roi Soleil*. She had managed that with polished imitation-period furniture, satin wallpaper, and matching giltwood mirrors at each end of the room. She led Hermione with a kind of reverence to the head of the table. Hermione caught her breath, gazing into the rectangular looking glass behind it. It was most unusual, a definite period-piece with a second rounded triangle of glass above it in an ornate, curlicued frame like an arch over a door.

And the mirror did for a moment seem like a doorway to Hermione. As a child, she had been enthralled by the effect of two mirrors placed directly opposite each other, with their endless, concentric reflections, receding back, back, back to a tiny point. In each of Deanna's handsome glasses, the gold-painted, rococo frames, thus multiplied, resembled the support beams of some fantastic tunnel, like an entrance to Ali Baba's cave of riches or the Elysian Fields. And Hermione's reflection made a sentinel at each rib like a guide to the Afterlife, beckoning others to join her for a heady adventure into that endless cavern. She wondered briefly if Sirius' spirit encountered such enticing pathways in his journeys to and from Death's abode.

Naomi broke the spell as she charged in, her mother barely hanging onto her shoulder. The child yelped with glee and made a dash for the seat next to Hermione, but Mary grabbed her hand and led her to the opposite end of the table, as far as possible from this probable charlatan. Hermione took her own seat with some misgivings. Would Mary behave herself? She thought she would, if only for the sake of the children.

Polly and Susanna sat together on her left with Piddles at their feet, and Deanna served them all from the spot closest to the kitchen door, befitting her role as hostess-cum-servant. Susanna made sure her doggie friend was not left out, 'accidentally' dropping bits of bread and biscuit into her lap and periodically brushing them off in what she imagined was a ladylike way. Piddles did his duty and kept the carpet about her feet immaculate with delicate pawings and lickings.

Conversation rolled easily among topics as diverse as the price of wheat (the sisters still farmed the bit of property around their great aunt's house), the most popular tourist destinations this year, and Susanna's loss of her first tooth, which she proudly displayed in a bit of cotton wool. Hermione learned little of possible importance, except that Mary thoroughly disapproved of Aunt Gaga and never invited her to the house, as Polly and Deanna did.

Finally they got down to business. Deanna cleared away the pastry dishes and refreshed their tea. Hermione explained to the little girls that they could join in the fun of calling up some 'ghosties,' but that they'd have to be very quiet about it so as to not frighten them away. This made Naomi giggle, and she worked off some energy gliding about, peeking around corners and into the drawers of the buffet, whispering "Ghostie, ghostie...come here, ghostie." Susanna only nodded gravely while surreptitiously dropping yet another biscuit onto the carpet for her faithful doggie companion to scarf up.

Hermione had decided to try to 'channel' Nearly Headless Nick, whose doleful voice and manner she was sure she could imitate--although nothing like so well as Ron could. She was just warming to her task, essaying a trance-like state, when Mary made a skeptical remark. Sirius sat up, perked his ears, and her teacup floated right out of its saucer and up to eye-level. Bewildered, Mary grabbed it out of the air, and that effectively silenced her for the time being. Deanna and Polly were astonished, but the two little girls just smiled as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Hermione started again, relaxing and closing her eyes. "I call upon Sir Nicholas de Mimsy Porpington," she cooed. "Do you have you any messages for us from beyond the Pale?"

Then she rolled her eyes up and let her head fall back, as if the spirit were taking over her body. She'd seen bits and pieces of a horror movie once...a supernatural thriller--and hoped her effort was convincing her audience. She changed her voice to Sir Nick's stuffy Queen's English. *"Only one message, madam. And it is directed to the sisters here present--from the two people who love them best."*

"Dad?" said Polly.

"Mum!" shouted Deanna.

"Yes, your dear parents, Roddy and Joanna. They wish to warn you of grave danger."

"What?!" All three sisters reacted as one.

"Tomorrow night your homes will be invaded by evil men who seek your money--and your lives."

"What? How can you possibly know that?" This from Mary.

"In the Afterlife all time is One."

At this, Mary gave a bark of laughter, which seemed to break the spell. "This is ridiculous," she said, rising. "How dare you come in here and worry my sisters with this--this claptrap? Pretending to have a message from our father...and Mum."

"Mary!" gasped Deanna.

Hermione's head jerked forward abruptly. She'd never expected this. But she should have, of course. She sought to buy time with words. "I assure you, my dear..."

"Please, Mary, don't get yourself upset..." started Polly.

But her sister paid no attention. Her eyes were boring into Hermione's. "What were you going to do? Promise to rescue us all from the terrible danger if we only give you a couple thousand euros apiece? Well, I'm sorry to spoil your little scheme--"

"It's no scheme. It's true."

"You'd better get out of here right now before I call the police..." Mary picked up her bag and rummaged around in it until she found her cell phone.

All this time, Hermione had been keeping eye contact, but feeling through the bag in her lap too...for her wand--thinking: *Now I've done it. I'll have to do a Stun on her I guess, so she can't complete the call, then an Obliviate on the whole family. Oh, Merlin, there's no way I'll be able to explain this to the Ministry...*

But now Mary's gaze shifted and focused on a point behind Hermione's head. A look of horror came over her face.

Arrogant meddler! How dare you? an unearthly voice thundered. Hermione didn't dare turn around. She feared that she must have accidentally Summoned a real spirit to their tea party, and an angry one at that. Or had Rufus Scrimgeour somehow read her mind and Apparated an Auror in to arrest her? She froze, staring rigidly ahead of her, and realized that something was moving in the mirror behind Mary's head. It must be a reflection of whoever it was behind her chair--a white face, almost translucent, haggard, but stern, with tousled black hair, and...*Sirius!* He must have abandoned Piddles and appeared in the mirror behind her.

Listen, he intoned, all of you. I speak with the wisdom of the ages. You are in the gravest danger. You must leave your homes...tonight!...and stay away for at least...two...Hermione caught his eye and shook her head quickly...no...three days. He glared at them and gave a deep groan for good measure, then receded in the mirror, passing all those reflected arches. Hermione stifled the urge to stand and applaud his performance.

Naomi and Deanna just sat there, their mouths gaping, silenced for once. Mary was dead white and sagged back into her chair, looking as if she would shortly faint dead away. Susanna leaped off her chair and grabbed her adopted pet, who seemed to be sleeping, unaffected by the hubbub. "I take care of you, Piddie," she cried, cradling him in her arms. "No bad ghosties can hurt you."

Naomi ran over to her mother, who was now weeping, climbed into her lap, and gave her a fierce hug.

Deanna's loquacity reasserted itself in a spate of questions. What to do? Call the police? Their husbands? They'd hardly be believed. Hermione reverted to type and tried to calm her down with some logical observations, but that only served to put a blank look of sensory overload into the young mother's eyes. Then she gave a little yelp and ran upstairs to check on the twins.

Surprisingly, it was Mary who suggested a perfect solution. She recovered quickly from the shock with the help of her daughter's caresses and a generous tot of whisky from a decanter Polly brought from the buffet. She opined that she didn't really believe all this nonsense, but if her sisters were really adamant about it, she could arrange for them to have a nice couple of days at a hotel in town. There was a relatively cheap family matinee of *The Lion King* musical, and nowadays all the museums had activities for kids, even six-months-olds. Even if Polly's husband couldn't get off work, they could still meet him afterward for dinner at *The Rain Forest*--a restaurant geared to children. Listening to her, Hermione had the feeling that Mary might actually have been dreaming of sharing an outing like this with her sisters, but bitterness had kept it locked away inside her. Making their plans, now laughing and joking, it seemed as if the sisters had forgotten the imminent danger.

Susanna interrupted them with a wail. "Mummmmmmy...it's Piddie...he won't wake up!"

Hermione took the small ball of fluff gently from her convulsively clutching hands.

"What's wrong?" the little girl sobbed. "He sick?" She was in her mother's arms now, alternately craning to see her beloved poodle and burying her face in Polly's neck.

"Yes, honey, he's sick" Hermione said as she placed the deflated body of Popsie aka Piddles aka Piddie in the satchel. Thinking fast, she turned her remarks to Polly. "It's all right--really. He has a condition, something like epilepsy. It comes on him suddenly, usually during periods of high excitement. He'll sleep it off in his...er...carrying case and be good as new tomorrow."

~*~

The dog and his girl watched from the construction midden as the families drove off for their London holiday. "Yip-yip! Well done," barked Sirius, having managed to worm his way back inside his disguise. "I think you've saved some grrrr-relationships as well as lives."

"Yes," said Hermione. She was standing in the shade of the claw-and-scoop, feeling more herself now that the Aging Potion was wearing off, but she couldn't wait until she could get home and change into tank top and shorts and relax. *Poor Sirius, he'll never be able to relax and be himself truly until he crosses over and joins with his friends.* She stifled this unhappy thought with one of pride and satisfaction. "Those little girls will be a big help to their mothers some day. But what will happen to these nice houses? Will the Death Eaters destroy them when they find their plans frustrated?"

"Rowrrr...well...actually, I thought we might send an anonymous owl to the Ministry to warn them what's afoot."

"How perfect. But wherever will I get an owl?"

"Arf! Arf! There's a corrrrrpse of a Grrrrrrreat bark--barrrrrrred up in that tree over there--rrrrrr. Quite grrrrr-gamy, but it should last a shorrrrrrt flight."

"So why didn't we do this in the first place...just warn the Ministry, I mean?"

"Brrrk--because I only just thought of it. But we still can't be sure they'll believe an rrrrrr-onymous tip, so it's just as rrrrell the families arrrrrf out of here. But you can be surrrrrr that whoof--whatevrrrrrowf they do...put a whuff...whuff--watch on the houses or come in afterrrrr the DEs' attack, they'll keep an eye on these three families frrrrrr--frrrrrrrom nowrrrr on. Yip-yip-yowrrr-whuf. Owoooooo."

It was clear the Veterinariserum was wearing off too. But before Hermione could get the vial out of the satchel, there was a popping sound behind them, and she saw three men closing in on her in black robes. *Death Eaters...so soon?* Oh no...

Sirius launched himself at one wizard's leg, but was Stunned quickly, and the three brandished wands at her.

"Miss Granger...you're to come with us...immediately."

Hermione was almost paralyzed with fear, but she managed to blurt, "To...to...Voldemort?"

"No, Miss. We're Aurors, and the Minister himself wants a word with you."

Mr Mggibrns

Chapter 12 of 29

Hermione and Sirius have to save yet another group of families on Dumbledore's list.

12. Mr Mggibrns

It was just after sunrise. Hermione jogged up the road and was greeted warmly by Piddles/Sirius at a crossroads. She'd had barely six hours of sleep after being questioned by Rufus Scrimgeour, but at least, she was once again wearing comfortable clothes: shorts, trainers and a bright tank top. Yesterday's success had brought back her old confidence, and she was looking forward to this next challenge with renewed vitality, although the thought that she might be tailed by Aurors made her nervous.

"Grrruffff...What did the Minister want?" Sirius asked.

"It wasn't so bad. They detected your Levitation Charm and came to investigate, that's all. It seems they didn't know that Muggleborns are living in those houses."

"But Susanna's been doing wandless magic for quite a while, and those baby bottles popping out of the cooler had to be some kind of primitive *Accio* from the twins."

Hermione nodded. "And I'm sure Naomi knows she's magical. I wouldn't be surprised if she Levitates her bed at night and dances on the ceilings. All I can think is things must be really bad at the Ministry if they didn't pick up on all this." She sighed. "Well, at least they know now."

"So how did you get out of it?"

"I told them to check my wand."

"*Prior Incantato*. Yip-yip...good idea."

"Yes, it showed the Lightening Charm I did on the Bag of Holding in the Head's office. Scrimgeour actually knew about that one so I was off the hook. But I'll have to be doubly careful now."

"Did he ask you why you were there?"

"Oh, yes, that was his first question. I said I had a summer job doing surveys for an advert agency."

"Pretty slick, Hermione. You sure you haven't done this kind of sneaking around before?"

"Well, yes...remember when we rescued you from Flitwick's office?"

"Woof! But the kiddies won't be safe for long. I mean...we never got to send that owl to the Ministry. Once they get home, won't the D.E.s just pick another day to attack?"

"Oh, I've got that covered, I think. Scrimgeour figured that your Levitate must've been from someone in the house, so I told him how I noticed the way Susanna was filching cookies. He got an egg-on-the-face look for a minute, and then said they'd start monitoring the place right away. And I saw in *The Prophet* this morning that a bunch of 'suspicious persons' were roused near there last night."

They were distracted by a yellow pick-up rumbling down the road towards them. It stopped at the crossroads, and the driver grimaced into the sun through dark sunglasses before moving on. Hermione noticed the truck had the letters G & E on its side.

"Nice dimple," yipped the poodle, his tail wagging furiously. He was staring at the driver, who had long, curling blond hair.

"Down, boy," Hermione cautioned. Sirius' sexual proclivities were legend at Hogwarts. It was a bit distressing to think he could still be aroused by the sight of female charms even though he was a dead dog.

~*~

Down a hill, six houses faced them in an arc. The land behind was unfenced and bare, its only boundary a scrubby wood. They could see other houses rising on a hill beyond the wood.

Hermione and Sirius discussed strategy in low tones. No use trying to deal with each individual household here, he argued. It would take far too long. And they didn't even know for sure which houses held child-mages. From Dumbledore's shorthand, they had managed to guess that Death Eaters would strike tonight, wiping out all these Muggle families, their only sin having children with magical powers in their midst. Hermione suppressed a gasp as she watched one of them, a tiny child with golden ringlets down to her shoulders, skip out of the front door of the end house and run down to the road. A dark-haired woman ran out after her and retrieved her before she could hurt herself.

"Naughty girl!" the woman scolded the child as she snatched her up. "You foiled the dead bolt, Stacy. Ah, you're too clever by half. But you mustn't, darling. It's dangerous out here..." The rest of her warning was lost as she nuzzled the child's neck and swept her back inside.

Mudbloods, the D.E.s called these magical misfits...filth, polluters of the purity of the Magicosm. Hermione did not want to think of how many more children like this sweet little thing, who could already command locks to do her bidding, were slated for extinction this very night.

She agreed with Sirius: they needed a blanket solution to save this particular group, but she couldn't think of one. She didn't know how to do a Mass-Apparation and didn't even know if such a spell existed. And besides, such a gigantic expenditure of magical energy would surely be detected at the Ministry.

"How about a a...ruff-ruff...rumor of a maniac loose in the neighborrhood," barked Sirius. "That would clear them out pretty quick."

"People don't believe in rumors like that unless they've heard about them from someone they trust or if it was on the news or something."

"So...rowf!...let's call up the Muggles in charge of the news and give them an anonymous tip..."

"But I think the networks always check a story out before airing it. Mmmm... what if we start a fire, just a small one, back in the woods there?"

"Grr...there's no such thing as a 'small fire' when it's so dry. I remember one time when James and I almost burned up Godric's Hollow playing Exploding Snap out in the yard one summer day. The sparks landed in some brush... Not a pleasant memory, Hermione...." He paced the ground a few moments, sniffing the bushes. "Oh, if only he was here..."

"James?"

"He was always so clever.... He'd have an answer for this, you know. Woof! I miss him."

Hermione stifled an urge to pat him on his doggy head. "I know you do. I remember how you went after Peter when you found out he betrayed them."

"Yes," growled the poodle, "I was right out of my head then. I was going to pulverize the little bastard. But I didn't know he had it in him to fight back like that. The spell he cast was so powerful..."

"I remember. The only explanation the Muggles could give for it was a gas main explosion.... Oh my," gasped Hermione. "Gas main! That's perfect."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember that truck that passed us this morning on our way in here?"

"Do!" yipped Sirius, his tail thumping the ground in a spate of doggie amour.

"Not the driver. The sign on its side. It was a gas and electric truck. Um, I wonder if that means..."

She scanned the area around the houses until she found a row of yellow markers sticking out of the ground near the tree line behind the houses. There was a sign too, partly covered by bushes. She pointed it out to Sirius.

CAUTION...GAS LINES...BEFORE DIGGING, CALL OUR MISS INFORMATION AT 553-1313

"That's it," she crowed. "There's our answer. A gas leak. That'll start them evacuating the place. Sirius, do you know some kind of cutting or Puncturing Charm?"

"Sure, *Perforatus*. We used it all the time to crack Slughorn's demijohns during his more boring lectures."

"Could it make a hole in an underground line?"

"You'd have to know exactly how deep down it was."

"I could call this misinformation number and say I was planning to dig around the site. They'd probably give me the approximate depth."

"I don't think it's a good idea, Hermione. First, I'm leery of using magical energy, however low-key, on a flammable gas, and second, if the gas is in the air tonight or building up underground when the D.E.s attack, mightn't their own spells trigger a secondary explosion?"

"All the better," she said, "It might take a few of them out too."

"Yes, and start a real wildfire that could spread to those other houses." He pointed with a paw to the development rising on the ridge beyond the woods.

But Hermione was not to be deterred. "You know what? We don't even need a real gas leak, just the *smell* of one."

"Would an *In Fragrante Delicto* Charm work?"

"That wouldn't last long enough. No, I mean Dung Bombs." She rummaged around in the Bag of Holding and brought out the pack she had found when she cleaned out Ron and Harry's dorm. "They've got a dozen different kinds in here, and there's one I know that smells just like gas, only stronger."

She tore open the package and found a number of two smaller packets, two of which were covered in blue spangles. "Here they are:*Fairy Farts*. They'll be perfect...and they're guaranteed to work for 24 hours."

They watched the houses for a while, then casually strolled around the edge of the open space and into the thicket beyond. Sirius sniffed out the path to their goal, and soon they came up behind the gas main warning signs. Hermione thought they should hide the bombs up in the trees, but Sirius came up with a more realistic plan. He started digging with his sharp little claws and soon had two nice holes they could drop the bombs into. Hermione activated the bombs and, holding her nose, stuffed them into the holes. Sirius covered them over expertly with quick kicks of his hind feet. Then they waited for the miasma to carry to the houses. Unfortunately there was no wind at all and the odor just settled about them.

"I guess it's time for Plan B," said Hermione, and before Sirius could stop her, she set off across the open yard at a jog-trot, straight for a young woman who had come out of the center house to hang the wash.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Hi, my name is Hermione. Erm... did you catch that smell?"

The woman stopped in mid-hang.

"What smell?"

"I was bird-watching out in the trees back there... and I noticed this odor... like gas, coming from this side of the wood. It seems strongest there by those yellow pickets. Oh, I say! 'Danger...gas'...well that must be it!"

"You mean a leak? Oh gorry, show me where you smelled it."

Hermione led her over to the edge of the yard where the scent of Ron's Fairy Farts hit them full in the face.

"I'd better call the gas people," the lady said, turning back to the house. Hermione kept up with her. "By the way, m'name's Carol. And you're Hermione, right? Thanks, Hermione. Oh, I hope they don't make us evacuate."

"Why not?"

"I don't care for myself; it's just an inconvenience, but Darla...oh gorry, she's gonna hate this. Never mind. I'll take care of it. Thanks ever so for the warning."

It seemed a *fait accompli*. Hermione and Sirius watched from the hillside...a girl and her pet poodle, mere interested bystanders...as yellow trucks arrived in front of the row of houses along with some police vans, all with their emergency lights flashing. Officers visited each house in turn. More cars started pulling up. It seemed reporters had gotten wind of a story in the making, and the families resigned themselves to interviews, as well as several days' stay at relatives' houses or a local hotel. Everyone started loading cars for the journey.

All except for one person. The young woman with the child at the far end of the row did nothing. When the policemen visited her, Hermione saw her shake her head rather violently and close her door. The policeman rang the doorbell and banged on the door a long time. Then Carol came over and called to her friend. The young woman appeared at an upstairs window and shouted something at her. The policeman shouted something back, then made a beeline for his van.

Only then did Hermione remember Carol's cryptic remark. *This must be Darla. Why would she be reluctant to leave her house in the face of such danger?* Most of the other residents had already left, and one of the two remaining police vans pulled out behind them. Carol made one last plea to her friend, then, hearing no response, shrugged her shoulders and went down to her own car. The other police van waited down by the road.

Hermione decided to try a gambit. She approached the van. "Excuse me officer, I'm a friend of Darla's. I heard about the trouble, and I wonder if I can help?"

"Arr, Miss, maybe you can tell us why Ms. Mudge is willing to risk her little girl's life staying in that 'ouse when the air positively reeks of propane. And there's no telling 'ow much is building up under those 'ouses. Sure, she told us she's scared of her boyfriend and all, and there's a restraining order pending. But I checked wi' 'eadquarters and'e 'asn't been seen abaht in over a week."

"Do you mind if I talk to her?"

"Well, she doesn't seem dangerous, so I guess it couldn't 'urt. Might even 'elp, 'cause if she doesn't come out...well...she could be 'ad up before the judge as an unfit mother."

Hermione nodded gravely and went on up the driveway. She knocked tentatively at the door and when there was no answer, she called on Sirius, who had followed her, to do a discreet *Alohomora*. There was a scary amount of rattling noise before the door would yield. Hermione hoped it was just her tautened nerves twanging.

She slipped inside and called, "Darla," gently.

A woman with dark hair and circles under her eyes lurched out of the next room. "Who are you? How did you get past those?"

Hermione turned back to the door and saw what Sirius had foiled with his charm. Three deadbolts, some heavy chains, and a metal bar.

"I--I'm Hermione Granger. I'm sort of an expert in these things."

"A bit young for a copper, aren't you?"

"Not really. But I'm more of a...private...investigator." Darla seemed to cringe at those words, and Hermione hastened to calm her. "But I'm not on a case right now. I just happened to be birding in the woods and smelled the gas. I gave the initial warning to your friend...uh...Carol..."

"So what do you want?" Darla came a few steps closer. She wasn't holding any weapons, not that Hermione could see. What she could see was that Darla's circles were actually the remnants of two black eyes...there was still some yellow in the bruising. She also saw scars on Darla's arms...round ones like cigarette burns and one long one like a knife slash.

"I'd like to help. The danger's very real, Darla. The gas could be collecting in pockets under us. There's not much time."

"I'll take my chances."

"Have you ever seen a gas explosion, Darla?"

"Mummy?" This from her little daughter who had appeared at her side and was groping for her hand.

"She just woke up. Don't scare her," mouthed Darla, keeping her eyes on Hermione as she bent down to pick up the child.

"What's her name?"

"I Stacy!" she called from the safety of her mummy's arms, her legs wrapped tight around Darla's waist. "Who ow you?"

"What did I tell you about talking to strangers?" scolded Darla.

"She not stranjow, Mummy, she inna house." Stacy smiled and showed a cute dimple before burying her face in Mummy's neck.

"I'm Hermione, and you're right, Stacy. I'm not a stranger. I'm a friend."

Hermione took a deep breath and looked Darla right in the eye. She spoke low and calmly, in hopes of not frightening Stacy. "Listen, Darla, there's no time for small talk here. If the danger of an explosion doesn't frighten you, what do you say to being declared an unfit mother? Because if the police serve you with a court order...and I have no doubt they will...that's what you'll be branded. And you know what that means. Little Stacy becomes a ward of the Court."

If Hermione had directed a Stun Spell to Darla's gut, the effect couldn't have been more dramatic. Her face sagged, and she crumpled protectively about her daughter. Stacy shook her golden head and whispered, "Is all right, Mummy? You got tummy ache again?"

Hermione went to her. "It's only for a few days. The police said your boyfriend hasn't been seen any where near here."

Darla nodded, numbly. Hermione helped her to her feet and held Stacy while she packed. They were all three in the car and down the driveway inside of fifteen minutes.

Hermione heard Sirius barking and growling as he ran after the car. "Growrrrr...ruffruff! What are you doing? This isn't part of the plan."

Yes it is, she said in her mind, hoping he would understand. *It's the only way I could get them to leave the house.*

At the Motel

Chapter 13 of 29

There's still one small snag...

13. At the Motel

They arrived at the Kings Inn—a cheap motel with a pebbled, almost empty parking lot, but with deadbolts and chains and steel-clad doors. While Darla unpacked and Stacy tested the beds for jumpability in their ground-floor suite, Hermione walked down the road to the local *Chickin-Lickin* to get them some food.

She thought back to their ride to the motel. Darla, bristling with suppressed fear and suspicion, drove with her eyes darting every few seconds to the rear-view mirror. Stacy, between them, clasped Hermione's hand complacently and patted her mother's leg.

"My-mee?" she addressed her new friend, "Know wha' I wan'be when I gwow up?" She beamed a perfect baby toothed grin. "A jim-niss."

"She means gymnast," put in Darla unexpectedly. It was surprising—the mother was not too distracted by fear of being followed to keep track of her daughter's attempts at conversation with this interloper.

"That's nice," said Hermione. She remembered the awe of seeing Olympic gymnasts on the telly, defying gravity almost magically with their leaps and cartwheels and backflips. Stacy was small for her age and would probably remain so. Her tiny hands and bird-like bone structure were a miniature of her mother's. She would be a tumbler or balance beam artist—when she wasn't busy studying Transfiguration and Ancient Runes at Hogwarts.

When Hermione came back from buying dinner—two *Chickin-Chunks'n'Chips* and a *Jolly Meal*—she noticed a yellow G & E truck in the parking lot. *There's a funny coincidence*, she thought. It made her think back to the first one of those she had seen. Not the ones that had arrived in the wake of her warning, but coasting down the road away from the cul-de-sac when she and Sirius had arrived earlier in the day. A young woman had been driving—a buff young woman with flowing gold hair, much the same color and curliness as—Stacy's. Another coincidence. And Sirius had remarked on the woman's dimples. *Stacy has a dimple too*—Hermione's heart skipped a beat. Had it even been a woman in the cab of the truck? She'd thought the dark outline on the lower part of the face had just been a shadow caused by the woman's hand—that strong, slender, brown hand—shading her eyes from the morning sunshine. But what if it had been not shadow but—beard stubble?

She walked carefully into the motel foyer and eased her parcels into a chair, then tiptoed down the hallway to their room, which was at the far end. She edged up to the door, placing her hands on the steel surface, willing herself to hear that everything was all right. But through the metal sheathing, she made out a soft, high-pitched keening and then a deeper voice that chilled her.

"That's right, Stacy," it crooned. "Good baby, letting me in while Mummy was on the toilet. You've always been clever with opening locks, darling. Now, we can all have a cozy little talk..." The voice became a murmur, punctuated by sobs and suppressed whimpers of pain.

Hermione had the key at the ready. It was the card kind that you slipped into a slot, being careful not to turn the doorknob until you saw the green light: nice and quiet except for a faint click that hopefully the boyfriend would not hear over his gloating. She pulled her wand out of her bag. *A Stun Spell should take him out, but... what if he has a weapon—a gun—or a knife pressed to Darla's throat?* Hermione shuddered. She had to take the chance.

At this moment, Minister Scrimgeour's words came back to her. By performing this spell, she could be banished from the Magicosm and her wand confiscated. Harry had gotten away with stuff like this before, but, well, that was Harry. She, Muggleborn Hermione Granger, had been expressly warned by the Minister of Magic himself about the change in the law and had already been found at a place where there had been a suspicious use of magic. And this time the Aurors would appear and find that she had done magic. They would ask what she was doing there.

She couldn't tell them about Dumbledore's list. Scrimgeour might try to use the information to keep Harry from his fated duty.

No, her path was clear. She would use magic and risk the ban. She had promised Darla and Stacy that they would be safe, and it was her fault that they were not. She blocked out of her mind unrelenting images of her friends—Ron especially—going on to fulfill their magical destinies without her.

Rhythmic slapping sounds were coming from beyond the door now, and the whimpers increased in volume. She slipped the card quickly in and out of the slot. She thought she heard Stacy crying for her mother. She squeezed her wand, squared her shoulders, turned the handle, and pushed.

At that instant there came an explosion, a splintering crash, and some kind of shock wave that slammed against the door and almost forced it shut again. But Hermione countered it, thrusting her whole body against it, praying: *No—dear heaven—he doesn't—he couldn't have—not a gun— please—*

Swinging the door wide, she took in an incredible tableau. There was a haze of smoke, as from cigarettes—or a recently discharged firearm.

Darla was splayed out on the far bed, her face puffy and mottled, blood snaking down her cheek, but alive—coughing and crying. Against the wall under the window curtain lay the golden-haired monster—sprawled crazily over a chair, his head twisted and lolling on his shoulder at an impossible angle to the rest of his body. One leg was stretched out in front of him, the other dangling over the chair arm. A cigarette was burning a hole in the carpet, just beneath a too-still hand. His eyes stared at her in an expression of disbelief. His work shirt was splattered with some dark liquid. And there was a fast ebbing halo of blue flame receding from his body.

But as she glided past the entryway into the room proper, not daring to make a sound, Hermione realized it wasn't really her at whom his sightless gaze was directed. He was looking at something just off to her right, a slight figure balancing athwart the pillows on the other bed. It was little Stacey—her back arched and her arms stretched out towards him, like a tiny gymnast posing in triumph after a flawless tumbling run, her fingers glowing with that same bright blue aura of energy that surrounded her father.

Now Stacy turned and smiled that angelic, dimpled smile as if she sensed that her new friend My-mee would see that everything was made right. Then she sighed and collapsed on the pillows in a small exhausted heap.

14. The Dead Speak

Chapter 14 of 29

Sirius gets a tongue-lashing from Death, and Hermione is made to pay the price for her irritating

14. THE DEAD SPEAK

Sirius strolled into Death's den twirling Popsie's mortal remains at his side like a fluffy pink walking stick. He was planning to ask his host how it was he could manipulate material objects like this here in Death's house, yet would pass right through them when he was out on the material plane...except for those bodies Death loaned him, which were Charmed somehow to hold his spirit essence. And he would ask the question...but only after he received congratulations for the amazing coup he and Hermione had pulled off: rescuing dozens of people from certain death...probably before their time, although he hadn't quite worked out that theory either. That should be

worth something...a bit of respect at the very least, or a room of his own he could retreat to whenever Reginald or Bertha came around, or maybe...just maybe, mind you...a few days taken off his 'allotted time', putting him that much closer to his reunion with James and Lily.

"What are you doing?" Death stared at him from behind his coffin-shaped bone-and-ebony desk. But then the Grim Reaper always seemed to be staring. There wasn't a whole lot he could do in the way of softening his gaze, as he hadn't any eyelids. At least the curl of his jaw line made him seem like he was grinning...though it was small comfort, given the tenor of his voice, which at this moment had a McGonagall-like shame-on-you tone to it.

"Erm...I've worn out this little fellow, I'm afraid," Sirius said, plopping the fuzzy corpse onto the desk. "I seem to have put a couple of extra holes in his tushie with that Watering Charm I used to simulate peeing, and he's just too full of biscuit crumbs...very uncomfortable."

"Humph...well...they're not meant to last very long." Death consulted a ledger. "I can give you a badger...only two days old...preserved under dry leaves..."

"Ooh...smelly...and rather too slow for my taste. How about something birdy?"

He turned some pages. "Thrush? Wren?"

"Eagle."

"I don't have any of those in decent repair at present. How about an eagle *owl*?"

"Sold. When can I move in?"

"Not just yet, I'm afraid. We have matters to discuss. Sit down. I'm not sure I like the turn this little adventure of yours is taking."

"Really?" Sirius sat on a loveseat draped with black lace antimacassars. They were literally dripping with jet beadwork, reminding him painfully of his mother's execrable taste in furniture. Death's remark bewildered him, as Mum's criticism so often did. Even in those times when he had done exactly what she wanted him to, she always had a nit-picky observation to make about his appearance or his attitude or a likely ulterior motive. He had been expecting a pat on the back from the Pale Prince or at worst a minor dressing down for misusing the taxidermic tribute that had been Madam Smythe-Hollins' Popsie. "What's the matter now?" he muttered.

"For one thing: this person you've chosen to help you...this Mortal, Hermione Granger...I was nervous about using one of Them in this affair to begin with."

"Hermione's the best...she's very trustworthy and smart as they come."

"That's not what I mean. I thought you said this was to be partnership."

"Well, it is..."

"Oh yes, certainly it is. She has tried to lose you twice already."

"Well...yes...but..."

"You have to keep a closer rein on her. She might have tried to interfere in the natural course of events at that sleazebag of a motel or even gone before her time, and then where would we be? I'd have her to contend with as well as you."

Sirius snorted at the thought, and Death continued in that testy, longsuffering way of his. "Oh, I've seen the way she treats that so-called boyfriend of hers. Patient she's not. And Hades knows I don't need another Know-it-All around here. Reginald fills that role quite nicely, thank you. And that so-called séance was a disgrace to the Dead. And those disguises."

"But..."

"And the lies."

"What..."

"Don't interrupt. What I mean to say is: can't you two do anything without using subterfuge?"

"What's the big deal?" Sirius replied. "In case you've forgotten, I have to wear these bunny suits. I don't have a lot of choice in the matter. And Hermione doesn't either. If she's not careful, she'll have the whole freakin' Ministry down on her. Hey, why the sudden fit of conscience? You cheat at chess all the time."

"There are grumbings... What do you mean I cheat at chess?"

"I looked it up. Black doesn't go first; you don't get an extra turn for capturing a pawn *en passant*. And you can only castle...with a castle. Oh, forget it. What do *you* mean: 'grumbings'?"

"There have been certain complaints from the Other Side..."

"What? You mean Scrimgeour has your ear? It figures. He'd do a deal with the devil if he thought it was worth his while."

"Your Minister? Hades, no! Not *that* Other Side. *My* Other Side. The rumblings are from my own constituency...the Dead."

Death laid it all out for him, starting with a background on the make-up of his 'constituency,' and it was quite a stunning revelation. There really was such a thing as Paradise. And there was a real Inferno too and a kind of Purgatory. Yes, all that stuff about sin and retribution that the Muggles were always going on about...it was all true. There were levels of 'hells' that a soul lived in after death if they had been evil during life. And not only raw, rank, down-in-the-dirt evil, which could earn you an everlasting stint walking over burning coals or being buried up to your eyebrows in dragonshit: but piddling stuff like bossiness and hypocrisy. The payback for these lifestyles was nothing like so all-consuming and painful as the punishment meted out to murderers and arsonists, but uncomfortable all the same...and darn near as eternal in duration.

This gave Sirius a jolt and it dredged up memories of his own bad habits, especially his attitude towards girls. He confessed aloud that he'd broken the heart of many a witchling while at Hogwarts and had entertained minor lusts for most of the female staff as well.

"And I couldn't be bothered to work my brains. I enjoyed coasting and constantly twitted people like Peter who had to work hard to get anywhere. What a rotter I've been," he murmured at the end of his painful litany as he buried his face in his hands.

"Small change," barked Death. "You had a most challenging childhood. You pulled yourself up single-handed out of that quintessential morass of snobbism and hatred known as the family Black. Your mother alone would try the patience of Mohammed, Jesus Christ, Moses, the Buddha, and all the gods of the Hindu pantheon. And if further redemption were necessary...well...dying for the ones you love covers a multitude of defects." Death's attempt at a compassionate smile was rather ghastly, but comforting in a weird way.

"But let's get down to brass tacks," he said. "The Dead are grumbling about your antics, and with good reason. You see, they can observe events in the world of the living, but they have no real power to affect them. But they gave me an earful, and I've got to pass it on."

"You visit Paradise on a regular basis?"

"Heavens, no. Can't stand the place...way too much light and cheery music. Why do you ask?"

"Just wondered how my friends are getting along."

"Mmm...the Potters? They do come into this."

"Really?"

"Patience. All in good time. Where was I?"

"The dead were complaining about me."

"And your mortal companion. Well, as I say, I was having my regular weekly game of skip-stones with Charon at the edge of the Styx. And a crowd from Purgatory gathered on the other side, shouting about the unfairness of it all."

"What?"

"Well, as near as I could make out, they're frustrated because they have to watch helplessly while their still-living relatives make flaming messes of their lives, frittering away the family fortune or marrying a person who is bound to make them miserable or just generally making the earth a rotten place to live."

"I'm sorry to hear that..."

"But you...you get to hop back and forth, from one side to the other, trying to save your old teacher."

"Well, I'm not like them. As you've explained many times, I'm neither dead nor alive."

"But you're also a tyro, a beginner, an apprentice..."

"A newbie."

"Mmm...yes. They all feel they should have a right of seniority over you so to speak, to have a chance to intervene in the world of the living the way you are, and try to prevent Dad from marrying that awful gold-digger or keep Aunt Millie off the sauce or stop Uncle Mervyn from dumping his effluent willy-nilly into the Thames."

"I see, but they can't intervene, can they?"

"Well, they could actually, but I won't let them. It wouldn't do, you know. The Living must make their own mistakes. It is their right, after all."

"So what will you do?"

"The Dead...well, most of them...want me to stop you."

"Stop us? From saving Dumbledore?"

"That's where the canker gnaws. The magicals do want you to help him, but they have a problem with your choice of a partner."

"You mean Hermione?"

"Yes. They believe that she is singularly unworthy of the role of savior for the noble Dumbledore. They've seen her in action, after all."

"What do you mean?"

Death ticked off items on his fingerbones, making a clacking noise. "Forcing house-elves to give up their cherished way of life, showing up her schoolmates with her perennial hand-waving, looking down her nose at normal teenage giggleness, and especially leading that Weasley boy around by the nose, criticizing him at every turn, then taking offense when he seeks comfort in the arms of a more...er...appreciative young woman."

"Oh. Sounds pretty...uh...unfriendly...especially that last. Did she really do all that?"

"Indeed, and you know there are an awful lot of Weasley and Prewitt relatives...both Mage and Mundane...on the Other Side just howling for her blood. She's has hurt that boy...what's his name?"

"Ron."

"Yes, Ron...she's hurt him badly with her arrogance. To quote his Uncle Bilius: 'she makes him feel like a horse's arse every flippin' chance she gets.' End of quote. And she blames Weasley for the messes he, she, and that Hairy Petal fellow get into..."

"That's 'Potter'...er...'Harry'."

"Whatever. And now, they say, she's pretending to care for Wren..."

"Ron."

"Ron...luring him back into her clutches with tears over the loss of their headmaster. But if I know my humans, that will soon pass, and she'll be her old, cold self again...unless you and I do something about it."

"Me? What can I do?"

"First, tell Hermione Granger she will have to change her ways: become more humble, more sincerely loving, and honest like the heroes of old, or she'll have the wrath of the Dead to contend with."

Sirius shrugged. That's easy enough. "I'll just tell her to shape up, shall I?"

"No, that's not enough."

"It isn't?"

"The Dead want me to confine her in the Mystic Wood...a kind of Limbo-on-Earth. She'll stay there between tasks so she can meditate on her shortcomings, and she'll be judged on her behavior after each one of them. If she fails to improve or lapses back, she'll be taken off the case, her memory erased, and you'll have to find someone else to help you...someone more worthy."

"But there isn't anyone else...and it would be the worst kind of blow to her pride."

"That mightn't be such a bad thing. Needless to say, I have agreed to their proposal."

"You didn't."

"It was either that or face a full-scale rebellion. I am not keen on having protest signs lining the River Styx from now until Doomsday."

"But who's going to judge her? Not the Weasley-Prewitt crowd?" He shuddered at the thought.

"No, it needs someone impartial, yet compassionate and understanding of her lot: an intelligent, hard-working witch, not born of mages, a relative stranger to the life herself. I have appointed your friend Lily Potter. And to help you both to complete the tasks, and be a sort of liaison between the worlds, her husband James."

"That's...that's great!"

"Don't think I'm rewarding you. There will be strict limitations on your visiting rights and so forth..."

"All right..."

"I'm drafting the rules document just now..."

"Well fine, but I don't need..."

"Yes, you do...the both of you. I don't suppose you know what happened after you let Miss Granger give you the slip on your last adventure."

"No, do you?"

"Certainly. I had to visit the motel room they stayed at."

"What? Was Stacy...I mean...are they...they weren't k...I mean...what happened?"

"A certain Garth Bliss was on my list of fatalities for the day. It seems he is the father of the child in question. He attacked the mother in their motel room and the child...Stacy Bliss...offed him."

"Offed him? How...?"

"Some kind of spellwork. Quite economical. Slammed the fellow against the wall and broke his neck. I didn't know you allowed four-year-olds to...er...practice..."

"We don't. It must have been what we call Underage Magic. It's rather random and uncontrolled. Usually comes out under stress."

"Well, there was that. When I arrived to do my duty, the boyfriend was slapping the woman around, twisting her arm, threatening to burn her with a cigarette..."

"Right in front of her daughter. Yes, that would do it. But that would have alerted the Ministry. Did you see any of our folks around?"

"I don't stay for the aftermath, just break the glass, send the soul to its final resting place...in this case the seventh level of Hell...and move on to the next one."

~*~

Sirius was beside himself with joy at the prospect of seeing James again and sooner than he expected, but his eagerness was tempered with the knowledge of the sickening news he was going to have to break to Hermione. Now Dumbledore's fate rested on a great deal more than their combined intelligence and her bravery and ability to dodge Scrimgeour's minions; now she had to become a living saint as well.

He gritted his beak and started his downward descent. He remembered he had been quite decent on a broomstick once, but trying to steer with your own wings and a tail were something else again. Although still high in the air, he could see the house quite clearly...a red roof, Death had said, backed up to a wood, with a neat border of purple petunias and white phlox alternating on the walkway. His Ghastliness been there a couple of days before helping a neighbors' elderly foxhound find the way to dog heaven. Thank Circe for an owl's superior vision. It wasn't quite the match of that kestrel he'd inhabited a few weeks ago, but it would more than do.

It was a rather painful conversation he would be holding with Hermione. But he had to agree in part with Lord Death: although she was a staunch friend of Harry's, he'd always thought of her as a rather frigid type. He'd frankly hesitated asking her to do this job with him, but when one considered the alternatives, what choice did he have? Tonks? Ron? There were too many liabilities with those two. Shackbolt? He'd never trusted button-down government types and wasn't ready to start now. And Harry? Well, Harry had to get ready for Voldemort.

It was the right decision; he was sure of it now. She'd proved her mettle in these first two tasks. But Death was right; she had a lot of shortcomings. Something had to be done about her bossiness, for instance. That had come out in spades during the first task. What did she think he was going to do...just stay by the roadside, licking his doggie balls while she went off into those houses all by herself? No way. He'd had enough of sitting around at Grimmauld Place.

She could never have pulled off that séance without him. But did she admit it? Since then, he had heard no scrap of a thank-you, no 'Attaboy, Piddles' thrown his way. And she had gone off with that wild-eyed mother and her little girl without so much as a by-your-leave. He shuddered. Under slightly altered circumstances, it might have been Hermione that Death came for yesterday.

~*~

"You're late," she said as he fluttered in through the kitchen window. "My parents will be home soon."

"Tu...whooh. I had a date...with Death," Sirius hooted, with as much menace as he could manage. He'd always wanted to say something chillingly final like that.

Hermione just arched her eyebrows. She had no sense of the dramatic moment. "What did he have to say?"

"Lots." *And you won't like it much* he thought. "But first, tell me about your adventure with Stacy and her mum."

"How did you know we had an adventure?"

"Death was there too. I understand little Stacy flexed her magical muscle and made her bad dad go bye-bye...permanently."

Hermione only murmured, "So he told you all about it?" She was engrossed in a newspaper spread out on the table.

He flew over to her. "Just the bare bones, so to speak. So what else happened? Did the Aurors show up?"

"Did they! I had just walked out to the front desk to get help when I heard the pop of them Apparating right into the room. I listened at the door a minute to make sure things were all right. I figured they'd take care of the situation. And they did. Quite nicely." She tapped the newspaper.

Sirius read the headline: *Man Found Dead in Motel* and the story bar: "Girlfriend and Child Unconscious, but Alive." "Hmm...they're calling it 'a drug-related hit,' whatever that is."

Hermione shook her head. "I've got to thank those Aurors."

"Yeah, I'm sure they did a little memory-altering."

"More than a little, thank heavens. You'll notice the article doesn't mention them looking for a girl with bushy-brown hair. So I guess the Aurors didn't ask Darla any questions...just Obliviated her whole day."

"Hmm..." He read, "'Mr. Bliss was hurled against the wall. Officers at the scene gave a preliminary theory that Death was due to asphyxiation or internal bleeding. A quantity of marijuana was found under the deceased's car seat. His girlfriend, Miss Darla Mudge had some cuts about her face. Her daughter Stacy was unhurt. Questioning of the mother has been inconclusive. Police are looking for a large man, possibly a wrestler...' So no one remembers you."

"I didn't approach the front desk, just sat with Stacy in the lounge while her mother got them registered."

"Hoo! That's great...but I'm afraid it's about the only good news you'll hear today." He told her about his conversation with Old Skull and Bones.

"I...I'm on trial?"

"Not exactly, but they...Lily and James...will be watching you oh-so-carefully."

"That's not fair. I'm risking my life already, and now, I'm to be a virtual prisoner between tasks..."

"Whoot! You're preaching to the choir here, Hermione, but it's now an added condition of our rescuing Dumbledore. Are you still in?"

"Of course, but..."

"If it'll help any, I told Death I wanted to be able to stay with you, so you wouldn't be lonely."

"Oh. That's nice."

"Don't mention it. You'd do the same for me, I'm sure. I did get one perk out of the whole mess."

"What's that?"

"I get to communicate directly with James and Lily."

"Sirius, that's wonderful!"

"And another good part is they'll be able to help us out a bit."

"How's that?"

"I'm not sure. Death was still haggling over the details of our 'agreement' when Reg showed up to put his Knut's worth in, and I had to get out of there. Information mostly, I guess. Lily and James were pretty close to Dumbledore their last year. So they might have a clue what some of the Tasks are about, even though it's been quite a while...And, as Old Scythe-Swinger said, the Dead can see all over the world...eavesdrop sort of...on the Ministry and all...so if we have any questions..."

"Like about what some parts of the list mean? Oh that would be great. I'm still stumped on the meaning of this next one."

"You mean: 'sv lvrs frm M McF & Nrcssa Mlfy.'"

"Yes. I get the 'Narcissa Malfoy' part, and 'frm' is probably 'from' but the rest makes no sense whatsoever. 'M McF' must be someone's name too, but..." She gestured helplessly.

"I'll have them get on it right away. But you're all right with being tested like this...and imprisoned?"

"What choice do I have? We've got to save Dumbledore, Sirius. Erm...I don't suppose they told you the actual consequences should I lapse into my old ways?"

"Well, that, I'm afraid is the bad part. You'll be...er...replaced and your memory wiped."

"Oh, that's dreadful. Who would you get to help you?"

"I haven't a clue. As I told you, Hermione, you were my first choice, but when I think about it, you're my only choice."

"What about Ron?"

"I don't know. He seems a little...scatty..."

"He's not, you know. He's very bright. He just doesn't always appreciate the seriousness of things like...studying."

"I can relate to that."

"I bet you can! Why did they choose Lily and James to be my judges?"

"Lily was a lot like you in her school days, and they feel she understands you better than most. James is about as different from you as it's possible to be...except in intelligence, of course."

"That makes sense...I suppose. I'm surprised they didn't make you one of the judges too."

"Why would they do that?"

"Well, for all your...erm...faults, you have always been yourself, and supremely...one might say brutally...honest with everyone you meet. Except for when you were running around as a dog of course."

"Hmmm... no actually, I believe that as Padfoot, I retained all of my best qualities and showed some of my hidden ones to their fullest: affection, loyalty, playfulness." He tried imitating the faithful companion, panting alertly, ears pricked, tail wagging, but in his owlish form, the effect came off as a bristling bird with its tongue caught in its beak and a bad case of ear mites.

But Hermione seemed to understand nonetheless. "That's true, you know. Faithful Fido...it suits you."

"Except with women," he said, a bit forlorn. "Listen, I'm going to have a first meeting with James and Lily and ask for some clues about this next challenge. And I'm trading in this body for something fresher."

"Good idea," she said, "When am I going to be transported to Limbo?"

"I'm not sure. Any time now, I guess. I'll find you though."

She nodded ruefully and watched him take off towards the sun.

15. 'Sv Lvr frm M McF'

Chapter 15 of 29

Heaps of Belated thank yous to Terra of Sugar Quill for inventing the challenge 'Hermione's Inferno' upon which these stories are based. I'm sure her descriptions of each challenge and her guidance were a great inspiration to all of us: J. Forias, Jim McGuffin, LNLisa, Chinese Fireball, Darwin's Apprentice, Swish and Flick, and especially—me. And I want to thank Dante—posthumously—for writing the Inferno—I got a lot of ideas from his work as well. Hope he's enjoying paradise with his beloved Beatrice. And I want to thank sites like SQ and The Petulant Poetess for encouraging this kind of writing based on the classics. We get so involved in our own little world of HP, we need encouragement to re-read the seminal works of our Muggle forebears.

15. 'Sv Lvr frm M McF'

Hermione was dreaming; she knew she was dreaming because she had been sitting in her back yard, reading a book on Greek mythology, and now she found herself walking up a steep hill, in no time or country she could remember. The grass was impossibly green and lush, with not a hint of yellow in it. The sun—hotter than England's hottest sun—beat down on her back. She looked up, nevertheless, to squint at the hill's top, although she could not remember why she had to reach it. But then, had she ever needed any more reason to reach a goal than the mere fact that it was there?

She saw three creatures near the top, resting. One was a panther-like creature with fur so black, she took it at first for a deep shadow in the hillside, until it moved, and its extra-long, sinuous tail looped and swayed over its back like a snake poised to strike. It had to be a Nundu. In front of it paced a Sphinx of flowing mane and huge, soft padded feet, hiding, she was sure, fearsome claws. Behind them both lurked a werewolf, its skin, raw red from the recent Change, showing through tangled clumps of gray hair, its fangs too large for its all-too-human mouth. But this was wrong. It was the middle of the day, and they were nowhere near Egypt, or Africa. *Where am I—really?*

The creatures approached her almost languidly, even the wolf, though the slaver of its jaws spoke of the instinct to rend flesh and lap blood. She was mesmerized by the eyes of the Nundu, who was so close now she could reach out a hand and touch its muzzle if she were foolish enough to try. Its translucent, golden eyes were dreamy and unfocused. She stood paralyzed with fear as it drew in her scent and blew it back at her. Its breath was not at all noxious, but smelled of heather and aloes. She reached out to it through her own fug of fear. At her touch, its dark coat turned tawny, its eyes darkened and became pupil-less, its neck stretched and its muzzle lengthened, showing a tense, defined musculature, its soft paws hardened into hooves, and, at the last, it sprouted antlers. Behind it the Sphinx was shedding its mane in great clumps, supplanted by outgrowing feathers of the brightest red, wings at its shoulders, its muzzle sharpening into a beak. Its front paws thinned into bird-feet, scaly, taloned. The Lycan's transformation was most miraculous. At first she thought she saw Remus Lupin in its sharp, agonized face, but then its hair thickened, curled, and spread to hide muzzle, haunches and sparsely thatched groin and chest with black fur, until finally a great dog stood before her.

"Padfoot," she cried in delight, "And Prongs! And... and, who are you? Not Buckbeak... your color..."

The hippogriff-form dissolved, and there stood a woman clad in white, her auburn hair falling about her bare arms, her eyes flashing like emeralds. Harry's mother. Hermione trembled. James had been guilty of faults similar to Hermione's, intellectual vanity and self-righteous myopia. And Sirius had his own sins to atone for. But Lily was not like that. With patience and love, she had helped James to find inside his arrogant young self, a mature, responsible wizard and family man, and she would likely have been working to turn Sirius around before she died.

The dog and the hart pricked up their ears, responding to some sound only they could hear. They bounded off down the hill, nipping and nudging each other with rough affection. Lily Evans Potter smiled after them. "They'll always be boys," she murmured. She turned to Hermione. "I know about your task, and you know about ours."

Hermione nodded, not trusting herself to speak, fearful that a sob of guilt or a whiney 'it's not fair' would escape her. She didn't want to mar the moment by showing weakness. She had never met Harry's mother but admired her for her courage and subsuming love.

"We want you to succeed, Hermione, and you are such a hard worker, I'm sure you shall."

"I'll try," Hermione allowed herself to say.

"Let me take you to your new home." She changed back into a hippogriff and beckoned Hermione to climb on her back. It was one of the braver things Hermione had done up to this point in her life. Heights, especially fast-moving ones, brought her to a state of near-catatonia. The hippogriff seemed to realize this, for she rose most slowly with long, graceful strokes of her sun-burnished wings.

They paused in their flight at the crest of the hill, hovering only a few yards above it, then took off in a gentle glide parallel to the more gradual windward slope. Hermione almost enjoyed the ride, distracted by the play of light on the creature's feathers, its shadow beneath them changing shape over the hill's waving grasses and the rough undulations of the moor beyond.

Approaching a wood, they rose swiftly to skim the tallest trees, and Hermione felt a downdraft of the sunny air slide past her, as if the shade beneath the billowing canopy was enticing everything hot and tired and dry to seek refuge beneath it. She made out paths below her, winding about a wide clearing. There was a building at its center, gleaming in the sun, ringed by an orderly crowd of dark cypress trees. The hippogriff and her passenger, much heartened, circled the clearing once and landed near the building. It was small and round and made of marble, with slender columns supporting its dome-shaped roof, perfectly symmetrical, like miniature version of the Pantheon of Rome or a shrine to Pallas Athene flown in from a rocky mountainside in Thessaly.

Lily reappeared, dressed now in jade hunting costume, the long-sleeved tunic just covering her torso, her legs thrust into thigh-high boots of pliable, pebbly snake skin. She had a well-used longbow in her hand, much scuffed at its center, and a quiver of arrows slung at her side. She lifted a horn to her lips and blew a long note. Barking noises and scrabbling in the undergrowth answered her call. The big black dog and the hart reappeared in a cloud of dust and bounded towards them. They changed into their human forms, looking not at all ghostly—in fact, if it were possible, more solid than the trees around them.

There's your gaol, Hermione," said Sirius. "What do you think?"

"It's—beautiful."

They walked inside. There was no real door; fully half of the building was open to the air except for the columns, though there were curtains of rosy gauze hanging between them from the arches they supported. There was a couch in the center, also of marble, but with a generous-sized down comforter spilling over it made of squares of dark red velvet and gold satin, and a pile of pillows. For some reason it reminded Hermione of a chess board. There was also a chair, a commode, a screen with a bathtub

behind it, and a table with a basin and a flagon.

"The flagon holds water," said Lily. "It will never run dry. The tub will fill and empty at your thought. Food will appear on the table at mealtimes."

"Just like at Hogwarts?"

"Sort of," said Lily. "Though I hope you'll find it a tad more healthful than their heavy fare. You have only to think of the clothing you need, and it will appear. And now, we'll leave you."

"Wait. Can I have some books—to pass the time?"

Lily pursed her lips. "Your stay here would be better spent in meditation, don't you think?"

"Oh, right."

"Do you want me to stay?" asked Sirius.

"No, I'm sure I'll be fine."

"Here's your Bag of Holding," said James. "I hope to have some answers for you about your next task soon."

~*~

"Whin-hinny-hoo-hra-snort-brrrag-hah!"

"Is that you, Sirius?" Hermione peered into the eyes of the chestnut-brown horse who had ambled into the clearing.

The horse nodded its head.

"Wait a sec." She took the vial of Veterinariserum from the satchel and had a sip. While she waited for it to take effect, she thought of yesterday's adventure. Whatever had happened to her, whether a dream or no, she really was in this place and to stay. She had walked its well-trod ways: under graceful sweeping willows by a pleasant stream, past wide-branching oaks and maples, through forests of stately pines, like sentinels strong and unyielding, but she could find no way out of the wood. Every path, even those she made herself, through patches of heather and laurel, of gorse and broom, curved back ultimately to the clearing and her tiny temple. She had soon given up and taken her dinner, a nice loaf of pumpernickel bread with a wedge of Stilton, sweet raw snap beans and cucumbers with a raspberry vinaigrette and sliced strawberries, bananas, and kiwis for dessert, washing it down with a draught of water, naturally heady and sweet. She had slept on the couch too and found it quite comfortable, enveloping herself completely in the comforter.

"Okay. What did you say?" she asked the horse.

"Like it?" Sirius turned about, showing himself off. "Death found this fine specimen for me at the knacker's. Pretty good shape, isn't he?"

"Erm—yes. His teeth could use a good cleaning, but he's definitely more you than Piddles was."

"Thanks. I feel positively studly." He trotted off and pranced about in the grass. He ended by rearing into the air. The effect was spoiled as he staggered sideways and thunked down into the soft turf.

"Oops—forgot. The poor fellow had a fracture in some bone or other. That's why he had to be put down. I'll have to watch myself."

"Well, at least you're in no pain."

"Yeah, but I've got to make this last a while. Who knows when I'll get a powerful body like this to walk around in again?"

"All right. Did James find out what the task is about?"

"Yes. Fortunately the first part is not too far away. Let me take you there. Hop on."

Hermione was taken aback at his statement, but he assured her that he was perfectly serviceable. She had taken riding lessons but had never ridden bareback. As they trotted down a zigzag path, she had to squeeze hard against his flanks to keep from being thrown. When they left the wood and were out on a straightaway, he let all the stops out and started galloping. The trip was a long one, and it tested Hermione's leg muscles sorely.

Finally to her relief, he slowed down and turned off into another wooded area, down a wide, well-trodden path. "It's not far now, broo—ha," he snorted. "If you'll get down, I'll tell you about the task as we walk. James was able to figure out the name, and he got us some background."

Hermione slid painfully off his broad back. Bareback was definitely not for her. Her thighs were aching and her back was tightening up. As if he understood her plight, Sirius nuzzled her with his nose for a bit. It felt good, especially with his hot, horsey breath warming her neck muscles.

"Thanks, Sirius. We can go on now."

As they walked, he explained. "At the center of the wood is a clearing with a cottage and a cherry grove. It belongs to one Mandrake McFustian."

"Would that be the 'M McF' on the list?"

"The very same. Don't know why I didn't think of him myself. 'Old Fuss' was in our year at Hogwarts. He was never very good with a wand—except for the simplest of charms—but he was a better potions-maker even than old Snivellus."

"So what's the bad news?"

"He's a Death Eater, Hermione, but the Order has never been able to get anything on him. James says they suspect he forced two girls from his year to do his dirty work: poisonings, arson, you name it. They were both caught and convicted and rotted away in Azkaban while he got off, scot-free."

"I thought you said he was no good with a wand. *Imperius* requires quite a hefty magical skill set. You have to have incredible concentration, not to mention steady hands ___"

"He didn't use an *Imperius* on them. The word is he used a very powerful, long-lasting love potion. I do remember that at Hogwarts, he spent a lot of time researching love philtres. And he bragged to me once that he was close to rediscovering the recipe for something called *Der Liebestod*."

Hermione recognized the name. "The Love-Death Elixir. But it's not real is it? I mean it's just a legend."

"No, it's definitely for real. Lily confirmed that. And she said McFustian did find the recipe. She overheard him telling Snape and Slughorn about it one day after Advanced Potions. Of course Snivvy wasn't in the least interested."

"Yes, but how do you know that for sure? I mean he might have just been brown-nosing."

"Because...broo-ha...in seventh year...whin-hinny... he used it... snorg... to steal my girlfriend."

One of the many, she thought. "What was her name?"

"Well... um... Gwendolyn Jones. I really liked her. And believe me, by himself, Fuss could never have done it. He was such an insufferable git. He had to have had help."

"And you're thinking that's what he used."

"Well, the circumstances were pretty suspicious. I mean, one day he started sitting across from her at lunch, and, at the end of the week, she broke up with me. I figure he must've slipped some of the potion into her drink or something. That's the way *Der Liebestod* works, right? The first person you see after you take it is the person you fall for. He made sure of that. Sat right across from her. And it lasts for-blinking-ever."

"There's no antidote?"

"Oh, there is, but I never knew about it back then. Believe me, I wanted her back. She was something special. If I had known—"

"It makes sense. I mean, the legend goes that *Der Liebestod* was first concocted for King Mark of Cornwall and his promised bride, the Irish princess Iseult. But it was drunk unknowingly by her and her escort, the knight Tristan. And they fell for each other."

"Hrum-snork—What a story. Muggles love it, I bet."

"Yes, it forms the plot of a lot of books and poems and plays and operas. Gilbert and Sullivan even wrote an operetta based on the idea of a love potion being drunk by the wrong people."

"Who are they?"

"Some Muggle—erm—celebrities. They were quite popular around the turn of the century."

"Uh-huh. Lily and James are certain that the *Liebestod* is how Fuss got those poor girls to do what he wanted. Lacking the natural charm of a real man—"

"You mean, like yourself."

"Well, yeah—although, when I think of it, I wouldn't have minded having a little of it myself. It would have made things a bit easier."

"I'm sure."

"But, of course, I would never have used it for anything really awful—like asking a girl to kill for me or anything. I mean I had enough problems of that kind without having to give a girl love potion. There was that one time that the whole fifth-year Gryffindor dorm were fighting over who would take me to the Yule Ball—some of those witches might have resorted to mayhem—"

"Right. Now let's get down to business. Just what is our goal here?"

"James thinks McFustian has some poor witch still in thrall to him, and he's kept her at his cottage all these years. He was probably just waiting for Voldemort to reappear before turning her to his dirty work. Though I suppose that if he's still got some of the elixir around, he might be tempted to increase his harem. Hroom—hoo—hee—ha!"

"What's the matter?"

"Just laughing at my own joke. The thought of that hairy little nit making it with a horde of beautiful women—well—any woman at all—well, it just defies belief—"

They came to the eaves of a clearing. Standing behind some bramble bushes, they could discern a mossy cottage with a neatly tended herb garden at its side and some outbuildings behind, a storage shed among them. A chubby man with frizzy hair and beard was walking about, *Accio*-ing cherries off a tree into a pail.

At that moment, a woman came out of the house. She was tall and stately with long dark hair. The bushes behind them rustled, and out came—could it be?—a mountain troll!

Hermione stared, at once fascinated and repelled. Surely the creature was sneaking up to bash their brains in with that cudgel he was carrying—as one had tried to do to her in her first year at Hogwarts. "Oh no, Sirius, look!"

Sirius shook his mane. "Whoo—ha—omigosh."

"We've got to warn her—them—look—that monster—"

"Oh, don't worry about him. That's another of Mandrake's talents: taming beasts of various levels of depravity. Like I said, he was pretty awful at wandwork, but he aced Potions and Care of Magical Creatures. It's nice to have a hulking great monster like that around to do your chores, eh? But he can't use 'em for assassinations. That takes smarts and cunning—which no charm ever invented could give that fellow."

Hermione saw now that what she had taken for weapons were merely a bucket and a stepstool dangling like toys from the creature's huge, knobby hand. She fought down nausea as its odor wafted towards them. "S-so what's the task? Rescue the wife?"

"She'd never come with us. No, James says if you can just get some evidence of McFustian's depravity, proof that he's a Death Eater or something equally incriminating, I can put it someplace where the Aurors will find it and leave the Ministry to do the rest."

Hermione thought: *just myself, no wand and no deceptions. And only a troll in my way—and who knows what other monsters McFustian may have hanging around. Oh well, best plunge in, like Ron and Harry would before I get so scared I can't move.* Aloud she said. "Sirius, do you think you can create a distraction while I go around to the front of the house?"

"You going it alone again?"

"What choice do we have?"

"Remember, the Dead think you're too bossy."

"Well, I'm sorry, but I hardly think McFustian would let me bring a full-grown stallion into his house." She looked him up and down. "Let me do this. Please, Sirius?"

"Hrumm—all right. One distraction coming up." He charged through the brush and ambled up to the orchard. Once there, he smacked his ample lips and started nibbling at the cherries. McFustian and his wife ran up to him, waving their arms and shouting. Hermione didn't wait to see what happened to him. She was off down a side path and around to the front door with the sounds of angry imprecations and happy whinnying ringing in her ears. She turned in time to see Sirius galloping off into the woods with a hail of Blasters bouncing off the trees. If McFustian couldn't do a decent charm, his wife more than made up for it, but Sirius somehow managed to outrun her magic.

Satisfied that her partner was safe, she knocked at the door. Another woman opened it, a servant from her clothing and manner. Was this woman the love-slave Sirius mentioned? Her face evinced no dark hunger, her figure no wasting desire. Wouldn't the potion have taken a dreadful toll in—what was it—fifteen or twenty years? But this

woman looked placid and well-fed.

"What do you want?" she murmured.

"Please let me in. I need to speak with your master. It's urgent."

"He's out in the garden with the Missus." She gestured to her right. Hermione was disappointed. She'd hoped to be invited inside for however short a time to get the lay of the land while the servant went to get McFustian. But she walked out to the garden, trying to calm her throbbing heart.

"Excuse me, Magus McFustian...."

"Who are you? How did you get here?" The chubby man was breathing heavily from chasing Sirius about. His wife *accioed* a handkerchief for him to wipe his brow with.

"Erm... I'm Hermione Granger. I'm a student at Hogwarts." *"Tell the truth," Death had said. Well it won't hurt, at least this once.*

"Ah, my dear alma mater. But what do you want with me?"

"I'm interested in potion-making, and a friend of mine told me about your accomplishments, and well—I was in the neighborhood—"

"That wasn't your horse in my garden, was it?"

"Horse? I don't own a horse."

"Never mind. You were saying you'd heard about my reputation as a Potioneer."

"Yes, I have made some pretty difficult ones myself—like the Polyjuice Potion and—"

"Polyjuice. That's a favorite of mine, though quite elementary, of course. I suppose you wanted to ask me about my work."

"Well... yes... if you don't mind. One so wants to improve, you know, and you have quite a reputation in the field—"

His face relaxed out of its frown of suspicion, and his voice became almost genial. "You must have been talking to old Sluggie—er—Professor Slughorn. I seem to have been a favorite of his."

"Erm... well... he didn't go into details... but I had heard of you...from other sources... and naturally...being an admirer of the brewster's art...I was curious...."

"That's good, excellent, in fact. My talents are still recognized, you say?"

Hermione nodded.

"Why don't we go inside, and I'll show you some of my concoctions."

"That would be nice."

He licked his lips and wiped his mouth with the hankie. "Yes, I'm always happy to help out a hard-working young witch, even if she is Muggle-born. Are you not, my dear?"

Hermione stared at him, wondering if this would disqualify her for admittance into *hissanctum sanctorum*.

"Oh, don't worry. It doesn't show—except to an expert. Excuse me a moment, won't you. My wife here is waiting to start the chores." He pulled his wife aside. Hermione heard him whisper, but she couldn't catch a word.

The wife glanced past Hermione. "Come, lcky," she muttered. And she led the troll around the back of the house. *Probably going to milk the family cow—if he doesn't eat it first*, Hermione thought grimly as Mandrake McFustian led her inside. They went up a winding staircase to a small office cluttered with scrolls, books, and bottles. He closed the door behind them and rested his pail on the desk.

"Won't you have something to drink—Miss Granger, is it?"

"I don't know—"

"Well, if you've come directly from school, you need a tonic—all those end-of-year exams can be so taxing. Here, have a bit of my famous cherry cordial. It's from last year's batch. Gwynelda makes it every harvest, and I swear it's her best ever." He poured a dram of a reddish liquid into each of two shot glasses. "A toast, Miss Granger—a happy outcome to all those bothersome NEWTS!"

Hermione could certainly drink to that. Cherry was one of her favorite flavors, and she was a bit thirsty. She downed it in one and looked out a small window. There was the troll, far below, washing windows. She turned back to her host. He hadn't touched his own glass. There was an odd look on his face—reckless and triumphant, the way Draco Malfoy looked whenever Professor Snape laid into Harry. Oh no, he couldn't—he hadn't—and there she was, looking him full in the face.... Her head began to spin.

"Miss Granger, are you all right?"

"I... I don't know..."

"Come over here. I want to show you something."

She edged towards him, at first unwillingly. All the while she felt the heat rising in her body and with it a marvelous glow. And she saw a vision.

Herself in fluttery blue robes running over the fields of Hogwarts, more alive than she had ever been, every cell in her body tingling with love for the figure striding towards her. She could see his delightful face smiling at her. Oh, how sexy he looked. She wanted to kiss every scab on his crusty neck, every wart on his bulbous nose. She wanted to run her fingers through the half dozen or so strands of hair sticking up from his wrinkled forehead.

"lcky, my love," she exulted, "take me, crush me in your great, hairy arms."

She shook her head. *Omigosh, I'm in love with a troll.*

But it feels luscious, whispered another voice.

She recognized her libido, freed entirely from its restraints by the Love-Death Elixir.

The voice of Reason countered: *Must keep focus. Must remember the Task. Must remember... whats-his-name... Ron....*

Who cares about him? You love lcky.

Yes, said her rational self, *and I must save him from his horrible owner.*

Oh, yes, yes, let us save our dear love, the troll of our dreams, from the nasty Mandrake McFustian.

Thus was she able to turn her eyes to the pale, hairy wizard, and her dreamy, adoring look was easily mistaken for love of him.

"My dear, I'd like you to do something for me," said McFustian.

"Of course. Anything, my Lord." *Anything to free my beloved lcky from your wicked clutches.*

"I have a job for someone who cares as much as I do about Wizard-Kind."

"I care deeply about all of the Magicosm." *Especially my troll.*

He took her hand and caressed it. Hermione shuddered—she could not help herself—but he apparently took it for suppressed desire.

"I have here a list of persons who are trying to harm me and my family. I need for you find one name which you recognize and eliminate him or her. See here." He giggled. "My Master has even written down the most appropriate method of punishment for each of them." The list was actually part of a letter. It had a family crest at the top, and was addressed to McFustian. And was signed with the Dark Mark! She glanced down it. Several names were crossed out, Sirius Black's and Dumbledore's among them. Tonks, all the Weasleys, and a number of other Aurors were on it as well. Her rational mind forced herself to find Ron's name. Most appropriate punishment: *cutting off fingers joint by joint, and making him eat them, then lashing him down and covering him in poisonous spiders.* She wanted to feel sorry for her boyfriend, but all she could see was lcky the Troll....

"I have access to most of these people," she said, "I could probably take out quite a few of them at one fell swoop... if my lord wishes it."

"You can? Oh excellent, excellent!"

"I shall go at once. They are even now congregating at the Weasleys' house for an engagement party."

McFustian was so ecstatic that he didn't notice Hermione slipping the letter into the pocket of her robes. She was out the door and deep in the woods in short order.

"Well done, Hermione," said Sirius as they galloped away. "This will make the Ministry move on Old Fuss. And they'll be able to rescue Gwennie."

"Gwennie?"

"I didn't tell you, did I? I recognized the woman with the troll. It was my old girlfriend, Gwendolyn."

"She's his wife now, Sirius."

He sighed—a deep horse sigh. "Yeah. Well—I'll neutralize the effects of that *Liebestod* on you with a simple Troll-Hate hex until we can get you some of that antidote."

"Oh, must you?" cried Hermione.

Sv lvr frm N Mlfy

Chapter 16 of 29

Hermione has to save yet another love-sodden wretch from doing Voldemort's work.

16. 'Sv lvr frm N Mlfy'

The *Liebestod* antidote Sirius brought her put Hermione into a deep sleep. She had a dream of being happily married to lcky the troll. At first she was ecstatic, but hour by hour, he did things that were less and less appealing and more and more of a nuisance, like bringing her an armload of alstroemeria, which she was allergic to, and a gift of hand lotion whose primary component seemed to be asafetida. When she was forced to spurn one of his more nauseating advances by hitting him with his milk pail and then running, he called after her in a vastly different, though familiar, voice, "Well, it took you long enough."

She turned. The troll had changed into Ron. He was slouching against a wall, grinning impishly. He looked so winsome there with his freckles crowding his cheeks and nose and his strong, slender hands buried deep in the pockets of his baggy trousers; she wondered what she could ever have seen in lcky. She ran to him; she wanted to embrace him, to kiss him, to tell him how sorry she was for everything she'd ever done to him...

His image dissolved to reveal Lily in her hunting outfit. She was smiling, but her eyes were opaque today, like jade. "James has discovered the meaning of the next Task on the list. When you awake, Hermione, you will have to enter the household of a Death Eater whose wife holds a wizard captive with another potent love philter. And you will have to go alone and undercover...Transfigured."

"But I thought I wasn't allowed to use disguises..."

"We have gotten the grudging permission of Sirius' ...er...landlord..."

"Lord Death."

"Yes...him. He is going to allow us to change you into a being who will be able to fit well into the household, so to speak. But at a price."

"What do you mean?"

"The transformation will only last for six hours and sixty-six minutes, and you can't take your wand."

"Will Sirius..."

"Nope, he's part of the price. In exchange for being allowed to transform you, Sirius has to spend a day in the company of Reginald and Bertha...to keep them away from Death's door."

"Poor Sirius. He dislikes them rather."

"Don't I know it! We could hear him raging about it from our Paradiso cottage. James wanted to go and help him, but he's not allowed any more visits." She sighed. "That last dream was their one and only romp together."

"It was good for Sirius, I'm sure."

"No, I'm afraid it's only whetted his appetite. But they didn't help their cause any. Did you know? After they left us, they roused a whole herd of centaur foals in the Land Before Time and darn near chased them into another plane of existence. So, no more visits for him."

"Oh."

"Try not to worry about it."

"What's the Land Before Time?"

"It's where babies are started up, before they're born. Before they go to the Weighing Room..."

"Where they wait for delivery?"

"No, no, 'Weighing'...erm...their essences have to be analyzed...so they can be matched to appropriate parents...it's a long, complicated process..."

"...which there's no time for right now. I understand. So what do I have to do?"

"As I said, there's another lovesick mage...a man this time...who's being held captive by a love potion, but it's not quite so strong as the other."

Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"Let me explain. The *Liebestod* compromises the victim's very moral fiber. The victim has no choice but to obey, no matter what. But the potion we're dealing with this time is one any school girl can concoct. I...erm...tried it myself while I was at Hogwarts."

"On James?"

"Heavens, no. It was first year, and...oh, never mind. With this potion, the victim falls in love with the girl who serves it to him, but she must persuade him or trick him somehow, in order to make him turn his back on his code of ethics..."

"...which is not so very difficult to do if he's already ga-ga over her. Who's the...erm...Lorelei?"

"Narcissa Malfoy."

"Draco's mother?"

"Yes, and her lover is Augustus Pye, a rather callow fellow. He went to school with Narcissa, and now he's a Healer at Saint Mungo's. I'm sure you can see that in his trusted position he could do a great deal of harm."

"Yes, of course. He treated Mr. Weasley, I believe, when he was attacked by the Dark Lord's snake two years ago."

"Even now Narcissa is persuading Healer Pye to do the worst kind of evil. Expose her nefarious plot or an essentially good man could turn into a mass murderer."

"And I only have seven hours to do it in. How do I get there?" After her long sleep, Hermione was more than ready for some action.

~*~

A *house-elf*, *how appropriate*, Hermione mused, not for the first time, as she studied her current surroundings. This was proving difficult because she was now only three feet in height and holding a tall stack of linens.

She had arrived at Malfoy Manor at nine a.m. in a grubby tea towel tunic and was directed immediately to the servants' entrance. She presented her letter of introduction to the housekeeper, who gave her a quick tour of the place and then thankfully put her right to work, shelling peas in the kitchen under the watchful eye of the cook. She had gone from there to helping squash pumpkin rinds for fresh juice...in a vat with her bare feet, and then to walking the master's Crups.

Now it was afternoon. She had been handed over to yet another overseer and was standing in a large, well-lit linen closet, a Slytherin green apron embroidered with the odious Malfoy coat-of-arms tied about her waist.

"Hermie, you isn't paying proper attention," squeaked a voice high above her. It was the head house-elf on a ladder braced against a wall of shelves. His name escaped her at the moment, but she knew he was a male because she had caught an unplanned glimpse under his tea towel as he climbed the ladder. He wanted her to do something...with the linens obviously...but she hadn't been listening.

"You is having to Levitate those towels up to me this instant. We is behind schedule as it is."

Hermione realized she had no idea how to do this. She had not needed magic for her other assignments. She remembered that Harry had described his friend Dobby's magic as always being accompanied by a finger-snap, but she couldn't do magic without a wand. Then an image popped into her mind of another house-elf cradling a bottle of butter beer in the Hogwarts kitchens and wailing like a banshee.

"Oh, I is useless," she cried in an approximation of Winky's high-pitched whine. "My finger-snaps is not working today. The mistress will be angry. I will be having to put my hands through the wringer as a punishment." She started to sob. "Hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo..."

The other elf descended the ladder heavily. He was quite old, Hermione could see now. "Do not cry, Hermie. Blobby knows it is hard to serve a new mistress when an elf's old master has died. But Hermie will get used to it in time. And Miss Narcissa is not harsh like the master was. She is kind... and good..." He took the towels from her gently and Levitated them up to the top shelf. Then he climbed back up to straighten them in their space.

"There!" he said, hobbling down again. "Work's all done, see? Now we take a break..." Hermione brightened. Perhaps now she could sneak away and start her search. "...Do some light cleaning," Blobby finished, and he handed Hermione a feather duster. She sighed, and her stomach rumbled. She had toiled right through lunch. For all their magic, the elves of Malfoy Manor worked very hard. Blobby seemed especially dedicated to the family. He prattled endlessly about how lucky Hermie was to have been taken on, about how gentle, how kind their mistress was. *If he only knew...*

They moved out of the closet and into a long hallway paneled in some dark wood and lined with potted plants. Hermione had been here before during the housekeeper's cursory orientation. There were at least a dozen doors along the corridor, each opening into a smallish room. Most were for storage, but the one across from the linen closet was the mistress's office and sitting room. Only senior staff were allowed to tidy that room.

Bobby started to open that very door, but paused as they heard a woman's voice behind it, tremulous but forceful: "...ask you one last time: do not continue to live in sin with that woman...."

Bobby looked briefly scandalized and motioned Hermione to follow him to the next room down. It held rows of shelves crowded with bottles and boxes, which were coated with dust. As she started cleaning them, she restrained the urge to sneeze. She needed to hear more of that charged conversation.

It wasn't difficult. The woman's voice, strained with emotion, penetrated the drywall easily, and in its highest register, made some of the bottles quiver sympathetically. "...that her husband is a convicted Death Eater with a life sentence is no excuse. In fact, it only makes matters worse. Think of your reputation. You are a Pye, a member of an illustrious race of physicians... not some third-tier medi-wizard, handing out painkillers and pick-me-ups at a local Quidditch match. If word of your behavior reaches Saint Mungo's..."

Bobby hissed, "Pay no mind to that wizard-talk, Hermie." She looked up to see him blushing scarlet.

She nodded and essayed a dull stare as she swept the shelf in front of her.

The man's voice was calm. "Mother, Narcissa and I love each other. And you needn't worry. You are the only one who knows about us. Everyone thinks I'm just the family Healer, helping her over a rough patch."

"If you believe that, you are incredibly naïve."

"But she's going to divorce Malfoy. She told me so. We'll be married soon. I'll take her away from all this: the danger, the shame of it..." His voice rose and cracked. "And, oh mother, her son...her only son, Draco...is missing!"

"Really?" The word was laced with scorn.

"You remember when the Death Eaters raided Hogwarts and that renegade teacher killed their headmaster? Apparently Draco tried to stop him. It seems he was rewarded for his heroics by being taken hostage. You can see why I can't abandon her. She has lost everything: her husband, her brave, young son. The family's reputation is in a shambles...."

The conversation dropped to a low murmur for a time, and presently a door opened and closed. Then there was silence.

The two elves worked a long time up and down the rows until their paths dovetailed in a corner of the room. Hermione heard footsteps in the hallway, and the door opened. Through spaces between the bottles, she could make out a woman with shiny hair, huge gray eyes, and pale skin. Bobby touched Hermione's arm and put a finger to his lips, reminding her of the house-elves' code: to tiptoe about the house doing one's business efficiently, unseen and unheard by the people they served.

They stood silently, and Hermione continued to peer through the jars and jeroboams as Narcissa Malfoy entered the room. Hermione recognized her from the Quidditch World Cup. Her hair was like a curtain, long and silvery and unnaturally straight, and she did indeed have a nose that seemed perpetually wrinkled in disgust. However, that might only have been a reaction to the acrid chemical miasma the two elves had stirred up in their cleaning. Fortunately, she only entered the room far enough to take something from the first shelf.

Once again, Hermione felt a powerful urge to sneeze. She rubbed her nose and concentrated on the contents of the shelves before her, which she realized now were potion ingredients. Between this and a few vigorous head-shakes, she managed to stifle the sneeze. She really didn't want to risk having to put her elf-fingers through a wringer, no matter how much Bobby raved about his mistress's largesse.

Thankfully, Narcissa was not in the storeroom long. They heard her close the door and open the one next to it, her office. At a look from Bobby, Hermione took up her dusting again, working her way towards the wall their room shared with the office.

Narcissa's voice was languid, but high in pitch and as such easily distinguished. Hermione blessed her large house-elf ears which seemed so much better adapted to eavesdropping than human ones.

"Darling Gus. So your mother's gone?"

The wizard's voice sounded not at all distressed. "Yes. She's not happy with our situation."

"I guessed as much. You should have seen the way she looked at me. You told her we were to be married?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't tell her of my troubles."

"She knows about Lucius, of course... and Draco..."

"Yes... my son... my poor, poor son...." There was a sob and silence for some moments. "But I meant my other troubles, you know, those horrible letters... You didn't say anything about them, did you?"

Of course not, my dearest, what do you think of me?"

"Oh darling, you know I trust you utterly."

"I could understand it if you didn't quite yet. Do you think I rushed things too much?" His voice turned hoarse. "I know it is still a bit hard to believe that we... found each other this way. That our relationship could develop so quickly."

"Not at all, darling. It's as if it were meant to happen."

"Yet we had such different interests when we were in school."

"You're right, of course, Gus dear. I couldn't believe you even remembered me when we met at that party last month: you, the unselfish Healer; me, the lowly housewife."

"Housewife? Hardly. You dazzled me utterly."

"No longer an innocent witchling, gazing in awe at you older students in the halls of Hogwarts."

"Actually, I confess I had only a vague impression of you back then, Narcissa. I believe I'd foolishly written you off as just another selfish Slytherin vixen."

She laughed. "And now you'd do anything for me."

"Yes, anything. You've been so understanding, so gentle, so brave. When you offered me that first cup of punch at the party, the gesture was so genuine, so spontaneous, not at all like the cold calculation I expected from one of your House. I believe I fell for you at that very moment."

Sounds of intimacy ensued. Hermione paused in her work to listen and realized shortly that things were altogether too quiet: she could no longer hear the rhythmic wiffa-wiffa of Bobby's duster. She turned and saw her overseer down an aisle. He was grasping his duster tightly in one hand and pulling savagely at the feathers with the other, as if he were plucking a live, particularly tough chicken. His mouth was turned down, and a large vein stood out at his temple. Then...

The duster exploded with a swooshing sound, and feathers flew everywhere. Blobby looked at her sheepishly and snapped his fingers. The feathers flew back to the end of the duster. He started sweeping the shelf in front of him vigorously. Hermione returned to her own work: cleaning and eavesdropping.

A sharp cry penetrated her wall. "What's this?" It was Augustus Pye. He sounded very angry.

"Oh, darling, don't...don't look at those. They don't matter."

"More letters from those lewd bastards. Aaaugh!"

"Darling, please, they're nothing. Remember: hexes and stones may break my bones..."

"...but names will never hurt you? This isn't simple name-calling, Narcissa. It's a threat. They're trying to blackmail you."

"But, darling, I'm used to it. Lucius told me...it's part and parcel of being the wife of a wealthy business man. One just has to ignore them..."

"But you've no one to protect you now. Except me."

"Oh, Gus, I wouldn't want you to..."

"What would Lucius have done, Narcissa? Bought them off? Threatened them? Arranged a little accident?"

"He had his ways. But I tell you, it's all right..."

"...and I tell you it's not. Look here. This fellow...this Lupin as much as says he'll kill you if you don't give in to him. Your beauty has driven him crazy. "

Papers rustled.

"Why I recognize this one...Kingsley Shacklebolt. And I treated this other fellow myself. Great Merlin! He's married...has a dozen kids. These two have great influence at the Ministry, Narcissa. You'd have scant recourse to justice if they had their way with you."

"And Lupin?"

"He's a werewolf, dearest. He comes to Saint Mungo's monthly with self-inflicted wounds. What he could do to you...the monster!"

"Oh, Gus, I've never seen your eyes so wild. It frightens me."

"More than these beasts? I can't let you face them. I'll have to take care of them for you... the way Lucius would have."

"But he'd never..."

"Oh, I'm sure he would."

"Yes, perhaps he did find it necessary to go outside the bounds of the law... once or twice. No, Gus, I can't ask you to do this. Your name, your reputation... I'll deal with it myself."

"How?"

"Can I trust you?"

"How can you ask that, dearest?"

There were sounds of paper ripping.

"Aconite, eh? Infiltrates the skin, does its work, then vanishes without a trace... Ingenious."

"I thought it the only way. But... oh, Gus, I'm so afraid..."

"Hmmm... it would work best in a salve, I believe."

"What? Darling..."

"Don't worry, dearest, I'll take care of everything."

"Would you? For me?"

"Of course. In my position, it will be easy. I'll start with Lupin. The full moon is only a few nights away..." There were more sounds: kisses and sighs.

"But, darling, you must keep up your strength. You have late rounds tonight, don't you? We can make our plans later. Let us go to dinner first, and then perhaps, a little... diversion..."

A door opened and closed, and there were footfalls up the hall.

Hermione found Blobby in a far corner, dusting away furiously, and essayed a winsome grin. "Oh, Blobby, I is finished my rows down here. Should I do the plants in the hall? They looked most dirtsome."

"That is a good idea, Hermie," he answered shortly. He did not look at her; something was bothering him mightily.

Hermione slipped out of the potions larder and looked down the long hall, silently praying that Narcissa had not locked her office. She had no idea what the hour was, and there were no windows to help her gauge the time. She had to get some information and be on her way.

The door was unlocked. She crossed the plush carpet gingerly. There was the evidence on the desk. Three letters, purportedly from Auror Shacklebolt, Professor Lupin, and Mr. Weasley. She perused one. It was salacious and smacked of blackmail:

...Now that your husband is in prison, you must be so very lonely...

With my connections at the Ministry, perhaps I can help you to get him out. If you will only meet me at the Cauldron, I can get us a nice private room, for the purposes of discussion only, of course. Unless you wish more...

I have a wealth of experience. Perhaps I might even be able to make you forget all about him...

I do so admire your feminine charms...

Eagerly awaiting your reply,

Arthur Weasley.

She had to hold down her rising gorge. Ron's tender, chivalrous father as a sexual predator? Narcissa Malfoy had imagination, she'd give her that.

She rummaged about and found an order from Narcissa to her grocer, signed and owl-ready.

All four were obviously penned in the same hand, though with different colors of ink. *Love is truly blind*, she thought, *if Augustus Pye did not notice the similarity in the writing.*

And here was the poison... Hermione rewrapped the bottle, gathered it up with the letters, and stuffed them down the front of her tea towel. As such they were not sufficient evidence of a plot, but if she could search the desk drawers...

The door opened behind her.

"Hermie, what is you doing in here?" It was Bloppy looking agonized. "This is the mistress's personal sitting room. Did not the housekeeper tell you..."

"Oh," she said in her most winsome squeak, "you is said for me to do some more dusting, and I finished doing the plants, lickety-splickety. Then I is heard the mistress and her friend going out, so, since this is the room you was planning to do first, I just thought..."

"I is having to explain, Hermie: you is only allowed to come in here when you is with me, never by your own self. Is you understanding me?"

She nodded vigorously. "Oh, I is, Bloppy. I is understanding you most well." He held the door open for her. She hunched her shoulders, hoping he would not notice the bulge in her towel.

"Is you all right, Hermie?"

"My tummy is feeling a bit rumbly."

"Oh. Does you need to visit the potty?"

"Yes," she said, smiling at the excuse he had handed her. "I'll be back, quickety-quick." But, of course, she wouldn't. Perhaps the letters and the poison would be enough....

As she walked down the hall, Bloppy followed and soon stopped her with a tug at her apron string. "You is not did a very good job on these plants, Hermie. Is you sure you..."

Her apron, loosened, fell to the floor, and the letters and the bottle followed it.

"What is this?" he whispered, bending over the incriminating documents.

"Erm... I..."

Bloppy gathered them up and stared at her a long moment. He looked so pathetically betrayed that she had no thought to run. Then he seized her arm and frog marched her back to his mistress's office.

He pushed her against the desk. "Tell me true. Is you a spy, Hermie?"

"No," she squeaked. "I is just a poor house-elf... without a house..." *No*, she thought, *I won't lie to this poor fellow, of all people. He deserves the truth...at least some of it.* "Oh, I is sorry... I mean... I am sorry, Bloppy. I am not what I seem." She told him her real name and that she was charged by the Ministry with the job of stopping Augustus Pye from murdering innocent people.

He looked horrified. "The Ministry?! Them as took away the master... with their hard-eyed Aurors and sting-y hexes... They would not... they is not daring to take the mistress..."

"I'm afraid they may, Bloppy."

"They's been watching her." He pressed his hands to his temples and started a keening whine. "No... no... it is not her fault... it is just... she is not strong..."

"What do you mean?"

He looked at her a long moment, then his words came in a mumbled rush. "I is knowing all the time the mistress is got herself into a horrible muckety-muck. Ever since this healing person is started coming around, she is been making more and more bad decidings, her menu choosing is off, she isn't running her finger over the mantel anymore, she is let the necessary disciplines go to potty-pot, she is buying nasty poisons, getting letters from nasty men.... She is so much... googly-eyed over... this Pye person... She is blind to his reckless badness."

"I'm sorry, Bloppy."

He looked at her, wide-eyed. "What is happening, Hermie? You is looking funny."

Hermione realized her point of view was changing rapidly...upward. She was growing back into Hermione Granger. It must be over seven hours since she entered the mansion.

"Oh, no," she cried, clutching at her tea-towel toga, which was now barely enough to cover her torso. "Erm...I told you I was not what I seem."

Bloppy turned puce and looked away, scolding her indignantly. "You is naked, young lady. Put on some clothes, quick as quick."

Hermione scanned the room. There was an elegant silk shawl draped over a loveseat in a corner of the room. She wrapped herself in it. "How's this?"

"All right," muttered Bloppy, sneaking a peek before facing her. "But how is you to dare to pretend you is a house-elf?" He shook a finger at her. "Oh, I should have been knowing: no finger snaps and your dusting was so haply hazardous and all that blubbing..."

"Believe me, Bloppy, I am sorry, but it was the only way I could search for what I needed."

"Well, yes, I is seeing that. Who else but us elves knows the ways of a household like the back of our thumbs?"

She felt sorry for him. He was loyal but conflicted. "Yes, and who else knows so much about the house's needs and those of its owners? Bloppy, I can tell you care for your mistress."

"I does, so much. She is frail, and she is not knowing the evilness... the plotting... of the master...." He stopped abruptly and started hitting himself over the head with the desk lamp.

She seized his arm and led him to the loveseat. She sat down, but he refused, with a reproving frown. She apologized. "I understand, Blobby. You must hold to your traditions. Never sit in the presence of a...superior. And never speak ill of your masters."

"You is understanding me, Miss, yes. But what you is not knowing is that the new master... when he is becoming the master...he will be *my* master."

"And that means..."

"I will have to obey him. I will no longer be able to protect the mistress." He started to wail hoarsely.

"Wait...Blobby...shhh...Perhaps, before that can happen...I might be able to stop him."

"No...no one can..." The elf stopped and stared at her out of bleary eyes. "If... I is giving you some proof, is you able to get the hard-eyed Aurors and hitting wizards to be taking him away?"

"I think so."

He wiped his nose on his towel and nodded eagerly. To her surprise, he thrust back at her the evidence she had already amassed and walked to the desk. He opened a drawer and brought out an envelope, which he handed to her. It was addressed to N. Malfoy. Inside was a note with the letterhead Borgin and Burkes and a bill. It was dated three days ago.

My dear Madam Malfoy,

Here is the ingredient that 'friend' of yours will need. May his use of it help speed our day of triumph!

Knowing that you may be in somewhat straitened circumstances at the moment, I have added the charges to your account.

Your servant always,

P.D.Q.Burke

The bill was for 'Tincture of Aconite.'

Blobby's eyes filled with tears again. "You is seeing that it is not her fault. He must have forced her to buy the poison. It is this Burke and this Pye fellow...strong warlocks, they is, and evil. They is making her do these things."

"I understand, Blobby. I will try to make the Ministry see your side."

"You is not got to only *try*. You must *do* it. You is got to promise that the mistress will be protected." He pointed at her. "Or I is not letting you go!"

Hermione sighed. She remembered the damage Dobby's magic had done years ago, before he became friends with her and Harry and Ron. He had smashed Harry's aunt's dessert platter, created a barrier to Platform Nine and Three-quarters, broken Harry's arm with a maliciously charmed Bludger, and sent Lucius Malfoy bowling arse-over-teacups down a flight of steps.

"I promise," she said.

Wrn D Drsly

Chapter 17 of 29

The next item on Dumbledore's list is the most distasteful yet.

17. Wrn DDrsly

Hermione was finishing a letter to her parents. They thought she was staying with Ginny, and she kept up the pretense with an occasional owl, describing what she hoped were likely preparations for Bill and Fleur's wedding. She heard a noise outside. It sounded like scrabbling, probably the messenger Lily had promised her. Then she heard a distinct, un-owl-like "Damn!"

She walked through the curtained entryway and squinted in the noon sunshine.

"Yo, Hermione!" called a squat, elderly woman, hobbling up the marble steps of her Greek temple. "Resting up for the next task?"

"Is that you, Sirius?"

"Yep. How do you like this get-up?"

Hermione took in his iris-print dress, massive purple purse, and violently violet pumps. The outfit was topped by a turban that reminded her of an oversized eggplant she had once seen in Hagrid's garden. She suppressed the urge to giggle. "Who are you today?"

"Maisie Pifflesmear, head of the local Theosophical Society." He flashed a maroon gash of a smile and peered at her over square, gold pince-nez.

"What did she die of?"

"Terminal bad taste." He brushed at his skirt, which looked as if it had wallowed in the dust of the woody path. "No, actually she's still alive, but her soul's off doing a stint of astral projection somewhere." He waved gloved hands at the air.

"And you just took over her body while she's gone?"

He shrugged plump shoulders. "She wasn't using it." He sauntered past her into the cool marble-walled room.

"But that's not right," she complained to his back.

"I'll give it back...eventually." He surveyed himself in her mirror and tucked a stray wisp of bluish hair back into the turban.

Hermione looked doubtful.

Sirius pressed his case. "I mean it is perfectly legal. I checked with Death. If your earthly essence is out gadding about the galaxies, your 'husk'...his word, not mine...is fair game for any wandering spirit that happens on it."

"Like you."

He turned this way and that, perhaps trying to see if his slip was showing. "Yep. Madam P. knows that. As I say, she's a life-long Theosophist. If anyone understands the rules of inter-dimensional travel, that witch does."

"You will return her...erm...it as soon as we're done."

"Of course. You don't think I like dressing like this, do you?" He got up close to the mirror and grimaced at his reflection, then put a gloved finger inside his mouth. "How do you gals keep lipstick from getting all over your teeth?"

She ignored his self-conscious preening. "What would happen if you didn't give her body back...in good condition?"

"She could send some djinns from another dimension to come looking for me...if she has the clout...and then things might get a tad ugly. But don't worry about that. She has a reputation of going off for weeks at a time. And I promise to be very, very careful."

You've already torn her stockings, and I bet she's got a bruise on her left buttock Hermione figured. She sat down and put a last sentence to her letter. "Erm...what happened with Healer Pye?"

"Tcha, Hermione, you messed things up big time when you promised not to blow the whistle on Narcissa Malfoy. Lily decided we couldn't send those letters you found to the Ministry after all."

"I'm sorry, Sirius, but... if you could have seen Blobby's face... I think he's half in love with her himself. As a general rule, I hate the way house-elves are treated, but..."

"I know. I know. Don't worry. It's all right now. I fixed things."

"How?"

"I...that is, Madam Pifflesmear...dropped in on Gus's mother..."

"She...you didn't."

"We did. It happens that Madam Pye is a staunch believer in Divination. She was appropriately impressed with Madam P.'s credentials. We told her that in our travels about the etheric plane, we observed her son walking about in a daze. We sensed that he was under the influence of a fairly common love potion, and, as an honest witch and a mother ourselves, we felt we just had to warn her about it."

"So how did that help?"

"She put a bit of antidote into his evening tea, and by next morning, he was freed of his obsession."

"But what if Narcissa gives him another dose of aphrodisiac?"

"No fear. I owled him the forged letters, that sample of Nasty Narcie's writing, and the bill from Borgin and Burke's...anonymously, of course. When he examines them with a clear head, he'll see that she was lying through her pretty, pearly teeth. She can give him a barrel of that love potion of hers, and it won't change his mind."

"Won't he confront her about the letters?"

"Naah. His pride won't let him. Trust me."

Hermione beamed. "Oh, thank you, Sirius. Blobby will be so happy." She had to restrain herself from hugging Madam Pifflesmear's portly torso. "So what's next?"

"I'm glad you asked. What do you know about Dudley Dursley?"

"Harry's cousin? He's...not very nice."

"Mmm...that's what I figured. Too bad. It seems that the next task involves helping him out."

"What? Do we have to?"

"Fraid so. He's on the list."

Hermione groaned. "Is he in some kind of trouble?"

"Yep. You know what happened two summers ago, right?"

"He made Harry's life miserable, like always."

"Besides that."

"Oh...you mean about the Dementors showing up in the alley near his house?"

"Right. How did you feel when you heard that they almost sucked out Dudley's soul?"

Hermione smiled grimly. "It served him right, the big bully. But frankly, I didn't think that there were enough Dementors in all of Azkaban to absorb that massive ego. I hope it gave his mum and dad a bit to think about."

"I'm sure it did. But you do realize that without the Dursleys, Harry would be at the mercy of the Death Eaters during the summer months."

"Yes, it's because of a spell of Professor Dumbledore's. He made a protection charm out of Lily's sacrifice and her blood-relationship with her sister."

"Do you know how it works?"

She thought a moment. "Something like a *Fidelius*, isn't it? Voldemort can't locate Harry as long as his aunt provides him a home."

"And that protection extends to the Dursleys as well."

"How nice for them."

"But only so long as they don't go too far from their house. If they were, for example, to take a holiday in Majorca, the protection would be much weakened."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She thought she knew what was coming. "Oh, now, Sirius, I'm sure they've gone away lots of times and never had any trouble."

"Yes, but that was before Voldemort returned to full strength. Dumbledore was apparently starting to worry about their safety and, by extension, for Harry's too."

"But we'll be going off after Voldemort ourselves soon. Harry won't need them anymore."

"We can't be sure of that. If something goes wrong, if he gets hurt or something, he'll need a safe house to rest up in. And anyway, Dumbledore wanted them protected, whether for Harry's sake or their own."

"That would be like him." Hermione made a face. "So what do I have to do? Shadow Pig-Boy every time he goes to the corner sweet shop? I can't even use my wand..."

"That part's covered already. There's someone in the neighborhood who's keeping an eye on him. And Dumbledore gave them all a good scare last summer when he turned up to pick up Harry. Lily thinks all you need to do is remind Dudley of the danger. After that last visit, he became cautious for a time, but lately he's been getting careless. He needs another shot of fear...like the fear the Dementors put into him."

"Why don't we just get Mr. Weasley to talk to him? Or better yet, sic the twins on him with some more of those Ton-Tongue Toffees." She giggled, remembering what Ron had told her about that incident.

"No, I think a nice-looking girl his own age could get through to him better than any of them."

"You mean me? Well, all right...if you think..." She cringed as Madam Pifflesmear grinned wolfishly. The expression looked positively obscene. "Sirius, can you please not behave so like a guy who's thinking about... erm... you-know-what... when you're in the body of a fifty-year-old woman? You're creeping me out...really."

"Oops, sorry." He averted his eyes. "The only question is...can you act the kind of girl Dursley would be willing to listen to? You know, kind of slinky...sexy..."

"Hmph! You forget I once changed myself into a cat with a Polyjuice Potion. And I've been told that I looked rather... alluring... at the Yule Ball." Arms akimbo, she tried out her idea of a sultry saunter about the room, then stared at him over her shoulder. "I'm sure can do 'slinky' and 'sexy' quite well, thank you."

Sirius pursed violet lips to rein in a devilish grin and said nothing.

Hermione blushed all the same and changed the subject. "But first I have a few questions. You said there are people already keeping an eye on Dudley. Who?"

"Actually it's one of the Dursleys' neighbors, Mrs. Figg. She's a Squib. She sends weekly reports to Minerva McGonagall. And various Order members help out as they have time."

"I know. Dung Fletcher, right? That's not very comforting. How much does Dudley know about...our kind?"

"Not a lot, but last summer, after the Dementor incident, his mother let slip some information about Azkaban, and Harry told them all that Voldemort is back. And Dudley knows that Voldemort was responsible for his aunt Lily's death."

"Does he know that Harry goes to wizard school every fall?"

"Yes, and the thought scares him poopless, but Petunia told the neighbors that Harry is enrolled at St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys."

"As if that were less shocking than having a nephew who can do magic. But, honestly...Saint Brutus's? Does such a place exist?"

"Yes, you should see it. Not quite Azkaban but near enough."

"Hmm...I have an idea. Can I get a look at Dudley now?"

"No problem." The witch took Hermione's hand in her gloved one.

~*~

They Apparated under a pavilion in a small play park. It was very humid; thunderheads were building in the sky. A stone's throw away, a group of teenagers clustered about an object in the center of a concrete circle. Their shouts carried clearly to the pavilion.

"C'mon, Big D, you can do it! Give it the ol' one-two, just like all those other dudes you beat!"

"Yeah, just one more heave for another trophy!"

The boys were shoving each other and cramming their mouths with doughnuts from a large bag on the ground. Crumbs and spit spewed into the air as they shouted. There was also a piercing sound of yips and arfs on the edge of the crowd. One of the girls was minding three toy dogs on leashes, and despite weighing no more than a pound apiece, they were able to pull her about easily as they leaped and snarled. They clearly wanted in on the action, whatever it was.

The center of attention was Dudley, who was bent over and appeared to be trying to pull a water fountain out of the pavement. He pushed it one way and then the other, back and forth, back and forth, with accompanying squeaks and groans of metal rubbing against cement. His face was bright red with sun and exertion, and his muscles strained at his tight T-shirt. Hermione was grateful that she couldn't see any lower than that; she imagined pallid mounds of rump swelling out over his belt.

The fountain finally gave way with a CRACK. He wrenched the metal cylinder out of the hole and hoisted it over his head. "Tah...daaahhh! The new...world...champeen!" he shouted. There was an answering boom of thunder overhead. Water from the broken pipe spouted skyward and doused one and all.

"Ooh, that's cold!" The cry, half-delighted, was from a second girl, who was dressed in the skimpiest of shirts and shorts. Her bared midriff showed off a glinting navel ring.

"Brrr... feels good," shouted one boy.

"Great job, D!"

"Yeah. You da man! All-England heavyweight!"

His chums were pushing each other around playfully in the arcing stream. One boy and girl started rubbing up against each other.

The dog-sitter bent down to calm her charges. Her voice had a put-on, babyish whine. "Dudley, you thug, my doggies don't like that icy wa-wa. Do you, my babies?" Her long blonde hair hung over her face as she made to kiss the squirming mini-mutts. Her low-cut blouse drooped so that quite a lot of her chest was exposed. Hermione blushed. The girl wasn't wearing a bra.

The dogs were yelping and shaking themselves. One wriggled out of its collar and made straight for Dudley. It bit at his ankle and hung onto his jeans. The hulking Atlas

looked comical, trying to shake off this tiny terror while holding the shell of the fountain up over his head.

"Lucilla," he demanded. "come and get this little rat off me before he gives me rabies."

She screeched back, "Ecch! More likely he's the one who'll get poisoned."

"Ooh, that hurts, that does. I'm crying. Hoo-hoo-hoo."

The girl straightened and reached into the pocket of her jeans-skirt and tore at a packet of something. "Come back here, Cerbie. Come on. Mama's got something for you." The dog's ears pricked up at the familiar sound, and he bounded back to his mistress. Now all three dogs were jumping and slavering and beating their tails against their sides, begging for a treat.

Hermione turned to Madam Pifflesmear. "Sirius, can you give me a disguise?"

"Sure, who do you want to be this time? Grandma Granger or a displaced house-elf?"

"See that Goth girl over there? The one who's playing sucky face with the ferret-faced dude?" She pointed to the pair standing in the stream who now looked to be welded together. They were really going at it, gasping and groping in the slick coolness of the water. Hermione wondered if possibly their braces had become entangled.

"You want to look like her?"

"To the max. Piercings, chalky cheeks, black duds, black eyes, black lips..."

"I get it. Like Elvira...or Alice Cooper."

"Who?"

"Never mind. Your wish is my command." He fumbled in the witch's handbag for her wand and did the usual wave-and-mutter.

"Oi!" cried Hermione as she was shoved sideways by the spell's energy. Now she surveyed as much of her new clothes as she could see: a long black dress, fingerless gloves, and combat boots with thick studded soles. Then she put her hand to her mouth. "Oh...ow! Theeriuith!!! I never thed I wanted my tongue pierthed." She felt inside her mouth for the offending bit of metal. "Merlin! How do they put up with theeth thingth? Ehm...how do I look?"

"Fine...for a zombie."

She took a step and swayed a little. The boots were surprisingly heavy. "No, I can't do thith; change me back, but lighten my hair and give me shorthth and a thkimpny tee. I need to look a little tough too..."

"Gotcha!" Sirius intoned another Transfiguration charm. There was a flash of light and a crashing sound. But it wasn't due to the spell. The storm had broken right overhead. Huge drops of rain started falling. They stung the hot concrete and raised little flares of steam all around.

"Want me to stick around?" Sirius murmured in her ear.

"In that outfit? I'm afraid you'd kill the party, rather. And I don't need any angry spirits after us if you ruin the good Madam's 'husk'. I can handle this, I'm sure."

"Whatever you say, Miss Independence." Sirius/Maisie Disapparated with a pop behind her.

Another clap of thunder shook the pavilion. Panicked cries erupted from the knot of kids.

"Jeeze, that was close!" one boy quavered. "Better leg it back home."

"Naw...just head for shelter," commanded Dudley. "C'mon."

Three boys, three girls and three dogs hurtled straight for Hermione's hiding place. She calmed herself and posed languidly against an upright, resisting the urge to pull at her miniskirt. Now she had a navel ring and several ear-piercings, but the crowning touches she could see were faded barbed-wire tattoos on each arm. She gave them all what she hoped was a hard, jaded stare.

Seeing her, Dudley dropped his trophy on the cement with a clang. The rest of the group ignored her and settled themselves on picnic tables, shoving and chattering. The girls played with their wet hair; the dogs shook themselves, bristled, cowered. The rain was unexpectedly chill and accompanied by swirling winds. Hermione shivered, more from fear than the cold. She scolded herself: *You've faced centaurs, Death Eaters, a giant, a basilisk, and... Professor McGonagall for heaven's sake. How can you be scared of a bunch of scruffy kids your own age?*

Dudley flexed his muscles and eyed her like she was a hamburger he was longing to devour. "Hey there, chickie. Great weather, isn't it?"

Hermione affected a bored monotone. "For ducks maybe."

"You new around here?"

"Just passing through." She felt a sudden lurch in her stomach as he approached her. He was much bigger than she remembered.

"I'm Dudley, but my friends call me Big D." He grinned at her. His skin had relaxed from its earlier redness into a mottled tan.

"I'm Her...Hera."

"Hera. Different." He ran his tongue over his lips, then unexpectedly turned about and made introductions. "This is Malcolm, Gordon... Piers and Ramona... Trilby... and Lucilla." He sounded like he was consciously imitating an adult...his father maybe...at a business meeting. The dogs started yapping again as if slighted. "Oh, yes, and what do you call your sweet little doggies, Luce?"

"Who wants to know?" Lucilla pouted.

"Oh, don't be such a grouch."

She rattled the names off, "Tartarus and Cerberus and Charon" and turned away. Hermione recognized the names, all denizens of the Greek Underworld, and thought whoever came up with them...not Lucilla, surely...had a bizarre sense of humor. She sensed jealousy in the girl's sulk. All Big D's showing off had obviously been for Lucilla's benefit, but she had ignored it. *So now he's pretending to be interested in the new girl. Well, I can play along...as long as it suits my purpose.*

Dudley came uncomfortably close and grinned. "So, Hera, what's new?"

Hermione steeled herself not to recoil. "Nothing. Same old, same old."

Piers looked up from his exploration of Ramona's neckline. "Ooh...her-uh named Hera."

"No...Hair-uh," grunted the big goon named Gordon. "She's got a lot of it too. But at least she shaves her legs. You don't, do you Ramona?"

Ramona didn't hear. She and Piers were at it again. It looked as if she was trying to bite his ear off, and he was pretending to like it.

Hermione stared Dudley. He looked as if he craved a little ear-biting himself. She said loudly to distract him, "You're Dursley, aren't you? Potter's cousin?"

This stopped the banter and the chewing. Even the dogs subsided to faint whimpers.

"*Dirty Harry Potter?*" squeaked Lucilla. "You know *him*? I heard he's...like...a homicidal maniac."

"We're in school together," Hermione retorted defiantly. She was settling into the role of street-wise outsider rather nicely, she thought.

Lucilla nudged her dogs. The hush was complete.

"But he goes to St. Brutus's," the boy named Malcolm sneered. "They only take boys."

"That's all you know," Hermione retorted, thinking quickly. "There's a new girls' annex. We even have some classes together."

"In what?" said Piers. "Lifting stuff?"

"No mostly *making* stuff. You know, with drills and acetylene torches and rivet guns and chain saws...." She let the litany of dangerous power tools sink in.

"Chain saws?" echoed Lucilla, horrified.

"Yeah, we get in a lot of practice, cutting and burning and putting holes in..." she leered at the dogs, "... stuff."

Lucilla drew the tiny, shivering creatures to her. "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I have a message for Big D."

Dudley watched her narrowly. He had to know that she was lying about Saint Brutus's unless he was even stupider than Harry claimed. But he could hardly go back on what his mother had told the whole neighborhood about his hated cousin's schooling. He cleared his throat. "What's the message?"

"Remember those two Demen...I mean...the goons that visited you and Harry last summer?" Dudley looked blank. "The guys dressed all in black?" He looked blanker still. Then Hermione realized: as a Muggle, he wouldn't have been able to see the Dementors. She tried to give him a clue in a way that wouldn't betray her background. "You know: they turned out the lights and made you feel cold all over. The ultimate chill, you know?" Dudley got the hint. He held onto his blank expression, but it was a struggle. He was starting to sweat.

Thankfully Malcolm came to his rescue. "Jeeze, Dud, you didn't tell us about that." He was busy chewing on his nails, so it came out as more of a mumble. "Who was it? Skinheads? Terrorists? Ninjas?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Dudley rasped. "Listen, you..." He tried to grab Hermione's arm, but she slid away from him, no mean feat in the stiletto heels she just realized she was wearing. *Damn you, Sirius!* she thought savagely as she lurched down the narrow aisle between tables, skinning a thigh on the splintery wood, catching a heel in a pavement crack.

"Come over here if you want to hear more," she growled over her shoulder. He trailed her to the other side of the pavilion. The rain was coming in on that side, so she could be sure none of the others would follow.

"So what's this all about?" he muttered. "You're from that stupid Piggimple school, aren't you?"

"That's Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." Hermione forced herself to smile at him, but then she heard a voice behind her, the last voice on earth she wanted to hear right at that moment.

"Dud! Dudleyyyy. Your mum wants us home...rrright nowwww."

Dudley cupped his hands about his mouth and shouted past Hermione's face, "Why? It's not dark yet."

"They're going out, and they want to have dinner earlyyyy."

It was Harry. She was sure of it. She risked a glance over her shoulder out through the pouring rain. She saw a skinny, bedraggled figure in overlarge clothes under a tree, his usually unruly hair plastered to his head. Rain drops were pinging off it; she could see his skin through his threadbare tee. She hoped he didn't recognize her.

She whispered to Dudley, "Can we meet someplace else later?"

"Sure. My house. Just down the block there. Number four."

She frowned. "Actually, Dudley, I don't think that's such a good idea..."

"Take it or leave it. Ten o'clock."

"All right."

"Hermione, is that you?" Harry's voice was right at her shoulder now. She turned and looked up into his emerald eyes. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "You know each other?"

"No, but we will," Dudley said, grinning. "We're going to get to know each other really, really well." He turned and announced loudly, "We were just making a date." He walked back to his friends and did a fist pump. They all...except Lucilla...whooped.

"Oh, yeah, like I believe that," Harry threw at his cousin's back. But he stared at Hermione all the same.

She clutched Harry's arm. It was slick with rain, the muscles very taut. There was no place to go in the small space to have a private conversation, so she kept her voice low. "Listen, Harry, Dudley and I have things to discuss."

"What things?" He didn't bother to whisper.

"Erm... nothing important."

"Right You don't want to tell me. Same old thing. Protect Harry. Harry doesn't need to know anything. He's just lost the nearest thing to a father he ever had, and now he's got to go out to face..."

"Harry..."

"At least tell me where you've been all this time. Ron's been writing you every day, and you haven't answered."

"He has?" She felt a blush coming on. "Oh dear... look, I can't talk about it right now..."

"I know. Later. I should be used to that word by now. But you'll write to Ron, at least, right? I mean, he's worried about you."

"I... I'll try."

"C'mon, freak." Dudley was back. "Stop messing with my girlfriend. We gotta get home."

Harry gave her a piercing glare, then turned on his heel and followed his cousin into the rain.

~*~

"So what's this all about?" Dudley rasped when they finally met on the sidewalk that night.

"Where's Harry?" Hermione asked.

"He went off after dinner...something about seeing some friends. As if he's got any."

"Harry has friends, lots of them. I'm his best friend... *girl* friend, I mean." She didn't want to slight Ron, his real best mate, even from this far away.

Dudley frowned. "You lie. A hot chick like you and that four-eyed freak?"

She realized his mistake and thought to correct it, but decided it wouldn't hurt to have this bully know that Harry was popular with the ladies. "I just said I'm his *best*. There are lots of other girls lined up behind me...there's Romilda and Parvati and Cho and... and Ginny...."

He snorted. "Whatever. So what have you got to tell me ... about the... the Dismembers?"

"Dementors," she corrected. "Actually, I have some good news. First, I don't think you need to worry about them particularly any more. They weren't sent by the major enemy..."

"Moldymort."

"Uh... close enough. But there's bad news too. The Dark Lord has unleashed an army of Death Eaters, and they're looking for Harry and you, your whole family in fact."

"But why?"

"Because you're all... special. Even though you're not wizards yourselves, your mother has this... power..."

"My mum?"

"Erm... yes. She can protect you all, but you have to stay close to home for the protection to work."

His eyes fogged over as if she had just given him an advanced calculus problem to work out in his head. She fell back on an explanation her dentist dad used to impress on her the need to brush and floss daily. "There's this invisible barrier... like the one that prevents cavities in those tooth cleaning adverts. Only it's not bacteria, but evil wizards that she protects you against."

A light came on in Dudley's dull, piggy eyes. "Whoa, I think there's an X-man that does something like that."

"What? Oh, never mind. Listen. It means you'll need to stay close to home from now on, so you can be under your mother's protection."

"Huh? You mean hide behind mummy's skirts? No way. Me and the gang are going camping this weekend." He licked his lips. "The girls too..."

And your mum doesn't know about it, I bet, Hermione thought, but she didn't say it because she wanted to keep things peaceful between them. Instead she essayed a gentle "You mustn't, you know."

He shook a fist at her. "Don't tell me what I can't do."

She took a step backwards. "Look, I only mean that it wouldn't be a good idea as things stand now. The further you go from your parents' house..."

"...the greater the danger. Yeah, yeah, I know. You made that crystal clear, Miss Know-It-All. But all I want to know is, if those Deaf Feeder blokes come sneaking around, how do I know it's them?"

"Well... erm... you'd need to keep your eyes open for people who dress oddly. I don't mean in robes and pointed caps, but in Mug...erm... clothing combinations that don't seem to quite work... like if they're wearing a blazer with hip-waders or a poncho and kilt together or," she giggled as she thought about old Archie at the Quidditch World Cup, "a flowered night-dress."

"Right."

"Or if they don't seem to know how to work ordinary gadgets like pay phones and door bells and things."

"All right, so I recognize the enemy. Then what do I do?"

"If you can get to your house, you're safe. If you can't, there are some people in the neighborhood who can help you."

"Like who?"

"Erm... do you know a Mrs. Figg?"

"Old Lady Figg? Yeah."

"Well... she's one of us... sort of."

"She a witch?"

"Not exactly, but she can get you help if you need it."

"Nuh-uh. I'm not going to trust that old biddy. She doesn't like me anyway, all because I scared her once, and she tripped over her cat. No, there's got to be a better way." That light came into his eyes again. "Say, do you think maybe I've inherited some of my mum's power?"

"What? No!"

"Why not?"

"Well... I mean... I don't think so...."

Dudley's face went red. "Look, if the Freak has it, and his mum, and my mum, then why not me?"

"This kind of magic... it... erm... it's not hereditary..."

Dudley started towards her, and she backed up the walk. "What do you mean? Not redditary. It's not fair is what I say. I have to be able to defend myself too, don't I?" He started yelling and waving his arms about, like a little boy starting a tantrum. "It's all his fault. That freak cousin of mine..." Although she had left her stilettos back at the park, it was all Hermione could do to keep her balance in bare feet on the gravelly surface. He started poking at her, and she stumbled backwards. "...he attracts them: owls, Demenders, stupid old men in purple cloaks, kids that look normal, but then they try to poison me..." His face was glinting in the light of the street lamp with sweat, or perhaps tears, and his whole body was quaking with barely controlled emotion.

He pushed her into a path between some hedges and shouted into her face. "If it wasn't for 'Dirty Harry,' we wouldn't be having all this trouble. It's because of him that my dad's business is gone to pot. We could've had a summer home on some fancy French island. Mum should never have taken him in. I've had to share everything with him all my life. All my toys..."

"That's not true..." she retorted, but her courage failed her as he wrenched her arm savagely. His grip was like iron.

"Course, it's true. You don't know how helpless it felt when those Dementy things came down on us, and then that freak yelled at me. Me! 'Shut up,' he says. Like he's the adult, and I'm just some little, scared baby. But I got him. Got him good. Made him drop his stick so he couldn't spell me like he wanted to. Augh! It makes me sick just thinking about it. You've got a stick too, I bet." He grabbed her other arm. "Give it to me. Give it to me now!"

Her heart was pounding with fear, but she couldn't break his grip. "Dudley," she panted, "your mother's power... it was really a... gift... from Professor Dumbledore..."

He started shaking her. "A gift? I want it too!" he screamed. "It's *my* birthday! I deserve a gift like that!" He threw her to the ground.

She inched away, still trying to reason with him. "Please, Dudley... you have to believe me. Only your mother has it. It's because she's your Aunt Lily's sister."

"No, that can't be it. I'm her son. I'm worthy, much more worthy..." He thumped his chest.

"It doesn't have anything to do with that. And you wouldn't want it anyway."

"Why not?"

"It puts your mum at great risk."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it. She carries the charm that is protecting you all because it's her blood that Harry shares. If the Death Eaters find that out, they'll kill her."

"So let *her* stay home. It's her favorite place anyway."

"Please, Dudley, you don't understand. This is serious."

He leaned over and leered at her, his sweat and his slaver, dripping down onto her bodice. As she tried to worm away, he dropped onto his knees, straddling her, his buttocks pressing her chest, all but crushing it, his breath hot on her skin. The moon rose over his shoulder, blinding her. He put his huge hands around her neck. They felt hot and remorseless. "No, you're the one who doesn't get it," he mumbled thickly. He started squeezing rhythmically on her windpipe, as she clawed ineffectually at his hands. "I'm trying to get out of this place. I'm sick of Privet Drive. I'm sick of Little Whinging. I'm sick of sicko freaks like you and Harry Potter. I'm sick of this whole... bloody... island..."

"Dudley, no..." But he had cut her air off completely. One frantic eye watched in despair as the moon disappeared. It was as if a Dementor had swallowed it. And she felt so cold....

Her hands went limp against his steaming flesh. The earth beneath her began to dissolve, or was she being absorbed into it?

There was a sound like an explosion, then a shout. She tried to make sense of it. "Geroffer bloodibig blob!"

She felt herself jerked out of her gravel grave and dragged forward. Pain in her neck roused her. She was released roughly and skidded in the grass on knees and elbows. She heard someone cry out in an animal rage and heard an answering cry, a deeper voice, one she almost recognized, "You freaking coward! Don't you ever touch her again..." The rest was muffled in punching sounds, grunts, and groans. Two boys...no, two men...were wrestling on the grass in the moonlight. She rocked back onto her bum, cradled her skinned knees, felt her wrenched, bruised neck. Someone came up to her and blocked her view a moment, then squatted and reached out a steadying hand. It was Harry.

"Hermione, are you all right?"

She nodded, and he settled next to her, putting a protective arm around her. They watched the show before them in silence.

There was Dudley, trying to get away, but the other fellow managed to trip him up. The hulking behemoth hit the sidewalk, face first. The other fellow dived at him, and they rolled over and over into the street and came to a stop with Dudley on his back, looking like a great white whale, beached, his shirt half torn off, his exposed stomach shiny in the light of the street lamp. Astraddle him and pummeling away at the mound of quivering flesh was a tall, slender figure with red hair. The surprise of recognition made Hermione feel lightheaded, and she leaned against Harry....

~*~

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, Ron." They were sitting together under a tree in the back of the Dursleys' house, her head on his shoulder, his arm around her. "Where's Harry?"

"He's *Levicorpus*ing the Blob up to his bedroom."

"You knocked him out, didn't you?"

"Think I might've broken something too. He was yelling about his leg before I cold-cocked him. He won't be waking up for a bit at any rate."

"How did you do it, Ron? I heard Dudley's some kind of wrestling or boxing champion."

He raised his eyebrows, and she thought she saw his ears pinkening in the moonlight. "It's a good thing I didn't know that going in. I might not have been so eager."

"I'm so glad you were, Ron. He was berserk. I think he might have killed me."

"Don't worry. He won't be bullying anybody else for a bit."

"He needed a lesson, and you gave it to him."

"Wait a minute. What am I hearing? No 'Ron-you-shouldn't-be-fighting' or 'Ron-how-dare-you-bait-a-Muggle' or 'you'll-end-up-just-like-Fred-and-George'?"

She giggled and put a finger to his lips. "I'll leave that to your mother." She looked at him for a long moment. "Oh, Ron, you saved my life, and you didn't even use your wand."

"Well, It wouldn't have been Quidditch, you know. I mean, with him a Muggle and all. Don't get me wrong. I was dying to try out Ginny's Bat-Bogey Hex on him. Then I thought, 'Nah. Don't want to get Harry in trouble.' He wanted to help, you know, but I waved him off. The twins showed me some moves last year, and I wanted to try them out." He leaned back into the bark of the tree, a satisfied smile plumping his cheeks. "I must say, when it comes to settling scores, the Muggles have it all over us wizards. Kicking and gouging and your fist in their face. Really gets the blood flowing, you know? Like no wizard's duel ever could."

"Yes, I know. It got my blood flowing too." She put a hand on his chest and brushed his lips lightly with hers.

He looked at her, thunderstruck.

"What's the matter, Ron?"

"Nothing. But...you don't know how long I've waited for that."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this." He returned the kiss gently with one on her temple, lingering long, feeling her pulse beneath his lips. She sat perfectly still, fearing that any movement would cause her to awake from this most perfect dream.

But she had to break the spell; he would hate her for it, but... "Ron," she breathed, "Don't you want to know why I'm here... at the Dursleys?"

"Nope." He continued his exploration of her warm brown skin, the small hollow of her collarbone, her firm, rounded shoulder, her arm, her fetchingly dimpled elbow, her wrist, pulsing now like a spring freshet, her fingers, one delicious joint at a time.

"That's good," she murmured, leaning into him, "because I can't tell you anyway.... "

He stiffened. "What?"

"Erm... it's a secret."

"Huh!" He let his hands fall, limp, to his sides. "Order business, I suppose."

"Order business? What do you mean?"

"Order of the Phoenix. They made you a member, didn't they?"

"What? No..."

"Sure they did. They made Harry one too."

"Harry? Really?"

"He told me when he came over. Got an owl from McGonagall after dinner. He was so excited about it, he almost forgot to mention he heard you making a date with the Blimp. He's not even of age, but they made an exception for him."

"Well, that makes a certain sense..."

"Sense? I *am* of age. Practically my whole family are members. I've stood by Harry through thick and thin. I saved you from a bloody-arsed troll. I'm a prefect, damn it. But no one's asked *me*!" He looked away, and his shoulders heaved in an Erumpent-sized sigh.

Hermione hung her head. He was suffering so, and it was at least partly her fault. For six years, she had tried to remake him in her own image of perfection, damning him with faint praise, making light of his ideas, scorning his every ability, especially the ones she did not excel in. "I'm sorry, Ron," she murmured.

"Why? It's not your fault. Guess they think I'm just a bungler. Not serious enough. Couldn't even pass my Apparition exam. I guess you knew all about it."

"McGonagall mentioned something. I told her you should be asked too."

"You did?"

"Yes." A sob escaped her. "Ron, I'm sorry for every time I ever hurt you. You're just about the best friend I ever had, and I've let you down time and again."

"What are you saying? You've never let me down, Hermione. It was me let me down. And you too. I mean you were always trying to make me study. I should have listened. And Lavender and all. I know I hurt you, but I couldn't help it. I never knew a girl that liked me before, and when she..."

"But you did. I mean, I was there the whole time. If I'd given you a hair of support... been nicer to you..."

He looked horrified. "Oh, no, Hermione, I would never have... I mean, taken liberties like that... with you. All that with Lavender was just practice..."

"Practice?"

"For the real thing." He looked pointedly at her, and she got his meaning. She ran a hand up his cheek.

He caught the hand, kissed it. "Look, I've decided. I'm going to take that stupid test again, and I'm going to pass it. Then I'm going to ask...no, I'm going to tell McGonagall that she has to let me in the Order."

"That's wonderful, Ron."

"And if you can't tell me what you're about... well, so be it. I'll find my own way to help out."

"Oh, Ron." She hugged him and pulled back to look at the young man she had once accused of having no more sensitivity than a sugar spoon. His eyes were dreamy, almost crossing.

He leaned in and kissed her, and she responded willingly, rejoicing in her own passion. He followed the kiss with a tracery of nips along her hairline to her earlobe, which he tasted lightly, savoring her woman's scent like an epicure, before continuing on, sliding his mouth down her neck. She started to shiver and giggle uncontrollably.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know. I'm so happy. But scared too. There's this job I have to finish.... You do trust me, don't you?"

He kissed her again and brushed a stray curl off her forehead. "I know you, Honey. Whatever you're doing, it's for some good cause, for people you care about."

She nodded gravely. "Aren't you worried that I'll do something stupid? Like tonight?"

"Nope. Harry was worried about you, but I wasn't. You've gotten me and him out of trouble so many times, somehow I just know you'll be okay. And now that you know you're not perfect, you'll call me if you need help... won't you?" His hand tightened on her arm for just a second, then relaxed. "I've had some time to think, and I've decided I care about you, Hermione Granger. I care a lot, but I can wait...."

"Oh, Ron, do you mean that? After all I've done to you..."

"Don't think about that. We're not kids anymore, and as soon as we finish here, I'll take you home...."

Finish? she wondered. She saw his eyes go misty again, and then she knew what he meant and found herself hoping they wouldn't "finish" for quite a while.

Kp Mlfys Sf fr V Ing as poss

Chapter 18 of 29

If Hermione hated helping out Dudley, imagine her chagrin when she is asked consider the 'plight' of the Malfoys.

18. Kp Mlfys safe frm V Ing as poss

"Sirius, where are you?" Hermione murmured as she trotted down a corridor. There was a door in the distance, a plain black door.

She felt a sudden, sharp twinge in her chest, as if a shard of metal were embedded there, and her movements had jarred it out of its cocoon of scar tissue. Now her every breath squeezed at it, working it towards her heart.

She put out a hand against the wall to steady herself. A red haze dimmed her eyes and phantoms of the past rose before her, roiling the mist: a grinning giant... centaurs stomping... cold breath of invisible winged beasts... Death Eaters leering through pallid masks...

Hermione suddenly dreaded this challenge more than any she'd faced so far.

"Sirius," she cried, "That door... I can't... I just can't..."

A robed figure lurched out of an opening Hermione hadn't noticed before. Squat, toad-like, breathless, a rainbow of ribbons in her tightly curled hair, Dolores Umbridge goggled at her.

"You! What are you doing here? Trespasser!" she screeched. "Come to do some more damage, have you? It wasn't enough you lot shattered thousands of Galleons worth of equipment in the Time lab. Not enough that we've had to re-interview myriads of witnesses to restore all those Prophecy Balls. Not enough that we haven't been able to recapture the Extra-terrestrial Memory-Squids that stupid Weasley boy let loose."

"But... but..."

"I'm going straight to the Minister. He'll settle your hash once and for all, Missy!"

Hermione froze, transfixed with guilt. She heard a clattering on the flinty floor behind her, and something muscled on past her, something big and hooved. Not Sirius, unless he was playing "horsey" again.

Now it was her turn to stare. Between her and the former High Inquisitor of Hogwarts stood a centaur, at least twenty-four hands tall. "Button your lip, you vindictive old hag," he barked as he backed her into a wall, "or I'll give you something to complain about!"

Mouth agape, eyes bugging out, Umbridge slid past them both and scurried up the corridor, squawking and flapping her arms like an enormous chicken. "Minister! Ministerr... rrrrr..."

~~*

...rrrrr...mione, Herrrr-mione, wake up!

"What? Sirius?" Hermione sat up and rubbed at her eyes. Pale light reflecting off the walls of her marble gaol told her it was about dawn. "Where are you?"

Over here.

Hermione looked about and found her partner waving at her from the mirror on the wall. The sight of him, opalescent, ghostly, and in a form she actually recognized first relieved then confused her. At least they were not in the Ministry basement. But... "Wait. Where did she go?"

He grinned. *Who? Madam Pifflesmear? Sorry, I had to give her back.*

"No, Dolores Umbridge."

Umbridge? What are you talking about? I'd never get inside her. Ook! How can you even suggest such a thing?

"It must have been a dream." She rubbed at her eyes.

It would have been a nightmare if she was involved.

"It was. We were in... the Department of Mysteries, I think..."

Say, you must be psychic. That's where the list will be taking you next.

"What? Oh, no, I dread that place, Sirius."

Why?

"Well, it's where a lot of my friends almost got themselves killed."

Yeah... and one of them actually did.

"Oh. I'm sorry, Sirius. Of course, it was a terribly sad day all around."

Aw... yeah... well...

She sought to change the subject with a practical observation. "Erm... will you still be able to travel with me? Like that?" She gestured at the mirror.

I won't be going with you this time.

"Why not? Couldn't you get another body?"

Not exactly. Hermione, I have some good news and some bad news.

"Meaning?"

The good news is my time is up. I get to cross over. Tonight.

"Really? I thought it wasn't until..."

Believe it or not, I got time off for good behavior. And Death found a new hobby for Bertha and Sergei...lawn bowling...so they're out of his hair for now.

"That's wonderful! But... erm... you said there's bad news too. You're not going to... the Other Place, are you? I mean I know your reputation wasn't exactly spotless on this side..."

Oh, that's all taken care of. His voice softened. Death says I had a lot of obstacles to overcome. You know, my family and all, and that made up for a lot of... you know... my... faults.

"Then you'll get to be with Lily and James. You must be so happy. Erm... what is the bad news?"

My time is up. I have to cross over.

"You already said that. Oh, no, you don't mean I'll have to do without you from here on out?"

For the next few challenges, at least. See, before you can get into heaven, there are these orientation sessions where you learn the ropes...the rules and regs...you know. And an entrance exam. So you won't be seeing me for a while.

"An entrance exam?"

Yeah. My rep being what it is, they want to be sure I'll be taking take this seriously.

"I don't know, Sirius. I'm not sure I can do this on my own."

Well, they're working on a contingency plan...

"They?"

Lily and James.

"Which is?"

James.

"James what?"

James gets to go with you on this one.

"Really? But he's already crossed over. I thought you couldn't..."

As long as he doesn't stay over here too long, he'll be all right.

"What do you mean?"

Lily explained it to me. Spirits don't eat, you know, but we still need energy to get around and pass through walls and stuff. Now, all this time, before I passed over, I was still partly of this world so I could feed off the energies of this world. But once I cross over, I say bye-bye to my leftover mortalness and become a completely different entity. What they call 'exo-SPAZZ-mic.'"

"Erm... I think you mean 'ectoplasmic.'"

"Really? Whatever. But it's impressive, isn't it? That's why no spirit can stay in this world very long. They have to get back and replenish their energy in the spiritual plane. I'll have to stay over there a while to get really gassed up..."

"Oh."

You don't sound too happy about it.

"I don't know. I've been thinking it over, and I've rather enjoyed getting to know you."

We both learned a lot about each other, didn't we?

"Yes. Erm, we made a pretty good team now that I think about it."

But I'll be back, Hermione. I promise. Until then, hang in there, won't you?

She nodded.

He grinned impishly. *And now... heeeeeerrrrre's Jamesie!* Sirius pedaled backwards and receded in the mirror until he shrank to gnome-size, then pixie-size, then just a little black dot.

There was a puff of smoke, and the translucent figure of a tall man with glasses and an unruly mop of black hair floated before her. *Hermione Granger*, said the shade of Harry's father, bowing, *I've been wanting to make your acquaintance for a long, long time.*

Hermione was sure she was blushing. He was very good-looking, a mature version of Harry. "Thank you, Mr. Potter. The feeling is mutual."

Call me James, please. He skimmed about slowly, taking in the room. *Nice digs. Reminds me of some picturesque ruins in Thessaly. Lily and I went there for our sixteenth honeymoon last year.*

"How... how romantic."

Yes, there are perks to being dead, I must admit. In an odd way, Voldemort did us a favor though I'd rather have stayed around long enough to see my son give him the mickey.

"You know what Ron and Harry and I are about, then?"

Yes.

"And you approve?"

We both do, wholeheartedly. And for that reason, I'm sorry to say, we had to tamper with Ron and Harry's memories a bit...

"What memories?"

It wouldn't be good for Harry to remember that he saw you with Dudley the other day.

"Why not?"

You need to start your quest with no doubts about each other...

"But..."

It's done, Hermione. Neither Ron nor Harry remember anything of what happened in Little Whinging.

Hermione felt a cold lump in the pit of her stomach. Ron wouldn't remember... the fight, the kisses... it was like they never happened. She hoped his feelings hadn't been erased too...

... course, we're hoping Harry will be doing more than just giving 'Moldie Voldie' the mickey.

"What? Oh, yes... I have a feeling it'll be a duel to the death..."

Right. And I understand there's a cozy little place reserved for the Dark Lord in the last level of Hell.

"You sound very confident we'll succeed."

No, I'm not at all confident. But...we know he'll get his eventually. Nobody lives forever, Hermione. And then it's into Satan's teeth for the wizard who's tormented my son all these years, right next to a pleasant fellow named Adolph Hitler."

Oh, that's gruesome. I read *The Inferno*. So it's really true?"

Pretty near.

"It sounds horrible, to be chewed and digested through all eternity."

Actually it's only a poor metaphor for what really awaits him: utter, loveless loneliness and despair. Serves him right though. He's ground down enough poor souls in his own rotten life.

Hermione shuddered at this.

The ghost stared at her. *What's the matter?*

"Somehow, I thought Harry's father would be more..."

More merciful? More forgiving, perhaps?

She nodded.

The living feel mercy. The dead deal only in justice. He thought a moment. *But I guess we'd better get on with the task at hand.*

Hermione took a deep breath. "What do I have to do, James?"

It's like this: Narcissa Malfoy made an appointment to see someone in the Department of Mysteries.

"How do you know that?"

She mentioned it to her husband in that letter you took from her desk.

"The writing sample. I remember. What's the visit about? Did she give any hints?"

She was pretty blatant about it actually. Careless of her. She's going to try to bribe a Ministry official to let Lucius out of prison...today, we think.

"How can that even be on Dumbledore's list? It's months old."

If we're reading Albus's shorthand right, the item reads 'Keep Malfoys safe from Voldemort for as long as possible.' So we're guessing that as long as Lucius is in Azkaban, he's relatively safe. and if we can get Narcissa and Draco arrested, then so much the better.

"But we still have to keep them from escaping. Huh! Like the Ministry's been able to do that."

For Dumbledore's sake, it's only important that we give it our best shot, Hermione. And, don't be so hard on the Aurors. They did manage to recapture some of the goons that got out last time. And they seem to have figured out a way to escape-proof the cells at least for now with wards and guards patrolling on dragons. An idea of one of the Weasleys, I understand. Your boyfriend, perhaps?

"Oh, no. Ron's brother Charlie is the dragon-tamer in the family. But flying around on dragons? That sounds dangerous."

That's what fighting Voldemort is all about, Hermione: fear held at bay by courage... and ingenuity.

"I'll have to remember that when we go out looking for him. But even dragons are better than Dementors, I suppose. They're so foul. I'd bet they were itching for You-Know-Who to return just so they could join him. Erm...how are we getting there? To the Ministry, I mean. Not Thestrals...or dragons, I hope."

I am equipped with something like an Apparition spell. And as long as I don't stay out too long...

"I know. You have to refuel. Do you have any other...defensive spells?"

Not to worry. I understand Madam Malfoy is wandless at the moment.

"What do you mean?"

That Healer friend of hers...

"Augustus Pye?"

The same. He visited her yesterday...

"Oh no, Sirius was so sure he wouldn't!"

Well, he did, and a good thing too. He destroyed her cache of potion ingredients and took her wand and locked her house-elves in the kitchen with a month-long Locking Spell.

"So she has to eat out and do her own laundry?"

And dress herself among other things.

"Poor, poor Madam Malfoy. Oh, that reminds me. Should I wear a disguise to the Ministry?"

No, you can relax and be yourself. The staff have been rather busy...ah...helping with the clean-up.

"What? It's been two years since the break-in. Did we really do that much damage?"

Oh, that's been fixed long since. But it seems that yesterday a group of centaurs ram-rodged their way inside and demanded to see the Minister. They crapped all over the Atrium while they were waiting. Muddied up that nice big fountain, dented furniture, destroyed statuary, broke the elevator. It'll need a complete makeover. But I hear that was in the works anyway. I'll Apparate us to the corridor outside the Department of Mysteries. We think the most likely target is one Roderick Herald. He's in charge of commutations and pardons these days.

"You mean he gets to say who stays and who goes?"

I think the Wizengamot still makes the actual decisions, but he signs the release form and owls it up to the prison warden.

"But Ministry agents would never take a bribe..."

They're Unspeakables, Hermione, not Untouchables. When Lily and I knew him, Herald was a heavy gambler. And a thousand Galleons would cover a lot of markers.

"A thous...oh, come now. Not even the Malfoys have that kind of money just lying around."

I don't know, Hermione. Have you seen Narcissa's jewelry?

~*~

They reached the black door. Hermione's hand trembled as it brushed the knob. She couldn't bring herself to open it. The memories...that pain in her chest...

James spoke a word in a language Hermione did not recognize, but it sounded like a command. The door opened, revealing the circular, many-doored anteroom she and her friends had encountered two years before. There were no more scorch marks on the doors from the flaming X-es she'd made on them. But one on the left was wide open, and she could hear voices.

That's your cue, I think, said James. I sense all the other doors are magically barred...probably out of respect for the ingenuity of those pesky D.A. members... Go ahead, Hermione. I've got your back.

She entered the room, hoping James truly did 'have her back'. It was an office with two men and two women standing around a desk.

The older witch's head jerked up, and she stared at Hermione as if she were a Jarvey that had just barged in spewing rude expletives. "How did you get down here?" She was small and white-haired, but there was nothing delicate about her voice. "This is a restricted area."

Hermione recognized her plum-colored robes with the silver 'W' embroidered on the chest. *A member of the Wizengamot*, she thought. *I'd better be careful.* "I'm Hermione Granger. I'm a student at Hogwarts."

"Granger," grunted the wizard behind the desk. He was short and pale and looked somehow familiar. A sign on the desk identified him as **Anson Croaker, Assistant Director**. "Hah, you were one of those kids that almost put us out of business us a couple of years ago. It's a tad late for apologies, girl, if that's what you're here for."

"Actually, Croak," crowed a familiar voice, another witch with her back to the door, young and Muggle-dressed, with shocking pink hair and a small star tattoo on her neck, "I think she's to be congratulated. If it wasn't for her and her friends, we'd still be thinking You-Know-Who was harmless." She turned and winked. "Wotcher, Hermione. How're the boobies?"

Hermione gasped. "Tonks! It's great to see you." They threw themselves at each other with hearty hugs and pats on the back. And my boob...I mean, my chest has healed up nicely, thanks."

Another man squeezed into the small office. "What's this? Old home week?" He was wearing a knee length white robe with an emblem of a clock on its yoke over rumpled trousers. "How's it going, Roddie? Ants? Tonks?...oh, hallo, Madam Lasser."

"Hullo, Orrin," said Tonks. "This is my good bud, Hermione Granger. She's going into her final year at Hogwarts."

"Granger. Where have I heard that name before? Something about the school... Oh, yes, our office loaned Minerva McGonagall a Time-Turner a couple years back so you could take extra classes. How'd that come out?"

"I pretty much aced them."

"That's my Hermione," said Tonks, "What say we commandeered her for an Auror right now, Madam Lasser? I bet she's better'n most."

"I don't think that would be a good idea, Nymphadora, with things as... unsettled as they are," said the older witch. "But my granddaughter Johanna told me all about you, Miss Granger. Very promising. Come see us when you graduate, won't you?" She moved towards the door, calling over her shoulder, "If any of your people find that missing... erm... artifact, Orrin, let me know at once. It's a good thing 'Miss Kitty' ordered that inventory. Can't afford to let one fall into the wrong hands."

"Guess I'd better be moving along myself, Croak," said Tonks. "I have a meeting with Old Litter Lover myself. Lots of new and exciting rules coming." Tonks squeezed Hermione's arm as she left. "That's Umbridge to you, girlfriend. Don't be a stranger now."

"See you at the game tonight, Roddy? I'm betting Puddlemere'll sweep 'em," said the time tech as he trailed Tonks out the door.

"Sure thing. I've got a couple of Knuts on the Falcons myself." The other wizard walked out with him.

The time tech slapped him on the back. "More fool you."

Anson Croaker sat down and crossed his arms. "Can I do something for you, Miss... Granger, is it?"

"Sir, erm... Agent Croaker, I think we met once before. At the Quidditch World Cup three years ago."

"Mmm... yes, I was there... Bulgaria and Ireland. Interesting finish, that. But you didn't come here to talk sports."

"Erm... I heard that the mother of one of my classmates is going to be coming here today. Madam Malfoy."

"And you're planning to meet her here?"

"Erm... yes, that's it. I was wondering if you knew who she was going to be meeting with?"

"Really? I don't think that would be any of your business. Do you?"

"Well... I know her son Draco quite well..."

"Draco Malfoy? The boy who was kidnapped by You-Know-Who?"

"He wasn't... I mean... erm... yes, that's him."

"So? What of it?"

"I've heard that Madam Malfoy is desperate to get her husband out of prison."

He frowned at her. "And?"

"And that she might even try something illegal to make it happen."

"What? Are you talking about a prison break? I can assure you, Miss, we've got Azkaban locked up tighter than Dumbledore's tomb, even without the Dementors." His scowl softened. "Oh, sorry. He was your head wasn't he?"

"That's all right. But Madam Malfoy... I heard... she might be going to try to... bribe someone to let him out."

"Huh? Where'd you hear that?"

"Erm...a letter I saw on her desk. And I got this feeling... like maybe I could talk her out of it."

"Snooping, were you?"

"No... just visiting."

"Do you have this letter?"

"No."

"Any other proof? Except this feeling of yours?"

"Erm... no."

He opened a datebook. "I don't see any Malfoys on the admissions list today. So you'd best be bothering someone else with your questions. Or better yet, get back to your studies, Missy. Leave the detecting to our Aurors."

Hermione hung her head. "All right. Thanks." She left the room and leaned against the wall. She had no idea where to look for this fellow Herald. She'd have to hide somewhere and see if Narcissa showed up. But where was James? Not refueling already, she hoped. He seemed so different from Sirius, as different as Harry was from Ron.

A frisson ran through her though she didn't feel cold or even frightened. Then she realized the wall itself was trembling. She pulled herself off it just in time as it began to rotate round and round. This phenomenon she remembered from the last time she had been there. Ginny had thought it was to confuse trespassers. When it stopped, a door opened, and out walked the lab tech she had met earlier.

"Hallo," he said cheerily. "Miss Granger, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mr...."

"Orr. Orrin Orr is my name."

"Mr. Orr. You work in..."

"The Laboratory of Time, yes."

"It must be fascinating."

"Indeed it is. Would you like to see it? I've nothing on my schedule for the next hour or so."

"Oh, I would." *But that bell jar that the Death Eater crashed into is in there and the cabinet with all the Time Turners that Neville smashed. And the office where Dolohov almost killed me me... and the Hall of Prophecy...*

She tried to quell her fears with calm reasoning. If Orr knew Roderick Herald...he seemed to like gambling too...it would be worth the discomfort. And she could keep an ear out for visitors. That rumbling wall would give anyone away.

She followed him through another door. The room was much the same as she recalled it: a sparkling light filled the air; everything they'd ruined was back to normal. Well, not normal. Nothing about this room could be called normal.

He gave her a tour and confirmed that the bell jar contained a slice of Time itself, captured years ago out of a collapsing parallel universe by a witch of great genius, now deceased. At this moment, it held a butterfly, which went through its stages...egg, larva, pupa, adult, and back to egg...with languid grace. They talked a while of time and prophecy and karma and the vagaries of chance. He seemed more a philosopher than a scientist. She found herself enchanted by his ideas and felt she was gaining a wealth of understanding about the Magicosm at every turn of the conversation.

But there was no time for this. She decided to come to the point. "What about gambling?"

"What do you mean?"

"Could a gambler gain a financial advantage by manipulating time?"

"A person like me, you mean? That would be strictly against the law of course. And a wizard that came up right a bit too often, picking a horse or a team, especially an expert in time manipulation like yours truly, would be suspected immediately. So we have to play the odds just like the Muggles do. Besides it's the thrill of not knowing until the last second that makes it all worth the price you pay."

"You enjoy it."

"As do many of us in the department. There's a certain rush to it, not unlike discovering a new worm-hole. But betting can be a bad for a chap. You have to know how to use all the tools at your command, or your purse will be the worse for it."

"Do you have any friends who don't know how to... use all the tools?"

"Oh, yes. Roddy Herald. He has no head for maths. Thinks it's all luck and... hunches."

Hermione's ears pricked up. "Was that... erm... the other man in the office just now?"

Orr nodded.

"I've heard the name. He's lost heavily, betting on Quidditch, hasn't he?"

"Who told you that?"

"Some mutual friends. They're worried that he might be in financial trouble."

"That's possible. He's tried to borrow off me a number of times."

"My friends were right then. Oh, dear..."

"What's the matter? Is that why you came here?"

"You're his friend too, aren't you?"

"Of course. I've worked with him for years."

"I... his friends think he might be going to do something bad."

"Like what?"

"Take a bribe."

He stared at her. "How... what do you mean?"

"Do you know the Malfoys?" she ventured.

His face became a studied blank. "I know of them. Lucius Malfoy and his family have supported the Ministry for generations.

"You know he's in Azkaban now."

"Yes, I heard. Some people think the charges against him were trumped-up."

"How could they? I mean... it's so obvious..."

"From what I heard, it could have been a mere case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Cornelius Fudge explained it to me. Mr. Malfoy could have been visiting the department on an innocent errand when he heard shouts, followed them to the Amphitheatre, and got caught in the cross-fire."

"But I was there... I mean here... in the Hall of Prophecy that day. I saw... I recognized Lucius Malfoy's voice. He was the ring leader. And he was caught red-handed by Aurors."

"Really? An eyewitness. How exciting. But it could have happened the way Fudge said, couldn't it? I mean unless you know Mr. Malfoy extremely well, lots of voices sound alike."

"No, no. I know the Malfoys. They're in with the Death Eaters. They tortured Harry Potter..."

"Potter! The kid who wrecked my laboratory..."

"He... we didn't mean to. They were chasing us."

His eyes bored into her and his voice grew cold. "Oh, I see. You were a part of that little wrecking crew."

"We did it out of self-defense," she murmured weakly.

He sighed and walked towards the back of the room. "Well, we did get things back in order. And I must admit it was a neat experiment getting that one fellow's head back to normal...the one who got caught in the Slice of Time." He gestured grandly at the bell jar. "I learned quite a bit about what rapid growth and decay does to brain cells."

Hermione, feeling his thaw, joined him. "What does it do?"

"Fries 'em."

"Oh, dear."

"Doesn't matter. The fellow...name's Goyle...is quite happy in his little room at Saint Mungo's."

"It's better than a term in Azkaban, I suppose."

"Oh, right. He thinks he's the reincarnation of King Arthur, does Master Goyle. Made his own crown and a Round Table in shop. Now he just needs a couple of other crazies to say they're Launcelot and Guinevere..." He continued his lecture, ambling through a short corridor in the direction of the Hall of Prophecy. Hermione followed. "... and believe it or not, it was all foretold by his great aunt Harriet. I can show you the glass it's captured in. Can't touch it of course..."

She heard a rumbling noise, the circular room doing its mixing-up trick.

She turned. "Oh, I'd better go..."

"Must you? I don't think that's for me... not yet."

The rumbling stopped and the door sprang open.

She could just make out, past the bell jar, a figure wrapped in a dark cloak and hood bent nearly double with what looked like heavy sacks in each hand. Dropping the sacks to the floor, the figure unwound itself from its disguise. It was Narcissa Malfoy.

Orrin Orr passed Hermione at a gallop, his face a fiery red.

"Help me with these, Orr," she complained. "I'm early I know, but one has no idea how long a trip without Apparition will be, and I couldn't wait out in the hall with these..."

"Um, Madam Malfoy, what an unexpected pleasure."

"Pleasure for you, perhaps, but hardly unexpected." She shrugged elegant shoulders though Hermione could see the silk of her blouse was quite rumpled. "You can count it if you like, but I can assure you it's all there. Now if you'll just hand over the Time Turner..."

Hermione started to edge backwards towards the Hall of Prophecy. She knew there were other ways out of the Hall, which included a series of offices she might hide in. But she was halted in her tracks by an *Accio*, which slid her forward to join Orr and his well-dressed crony, and then laid low by some form of Body Bind.

"What's this?" cried Madam Malfoy, stooping over Hermione. "I know you," she spat. "Potter's Mudblood bint." She drew herself up and confronted Orrin Orr. "What's she doing here?"

Orr shrugged. "Asking questions. She thought it was Roddy Herald you were going to bribe."

"For what? A release form? Ridiculous. But... how did she know?"

"That's what I was trying to get out of her, before you interrupted our conversation. But why couldn't you Apparate down? And your servants could have brought this stuff for you."

Narcissa's eyes glinted as well. "That's a longer story than I care to dwell on. Suffice it to say, I misplaced my wand, and the elves are... eh... otherwise occupied."

"Well, look here. I've got to go get the Time Turner. Keep this just in case." He handed her a wand from a desk drawer. "I always have a couple of extras around. It'll be good for a Stunner at least if that Body Bind weakens."

Narcissa accepted the wand with alacrity and turned it on their captive. "Good," she called after him. "Just show me how the Turner works, and I'll take myself back to the past to the Hall of Prophecy when all this happened and get my poor husband out of there. The dear, innocent fool, how he could get himself mixed up in this..."

"No!" cried Hermione, "You can't do this, Mr. Orr." He turned and stared at her. She was surprised herself that she could speak. It must have been a Lesser Bind that he had placed on her.

"Whyever not, Miss Granger?" said the time tech. "Are you going to say that I'm being disloyal perhaps? But I have been loyal, always. This..." he gestured to the two bags of Galleons spilling out over his desk, "...is a gift for my years of dedicated service to the Ministry."

"But what you're doing is wrong."

"No, the Ministry is wrong. I'm helping out a loyal Ministry supporter, Lucius Malfoy. Surely he will be proven innocent... eventually. Madam Umbridge told me so. No need for him to languish in prison while the Wizengamot tries to sort out the whys and wherefores of this sordid affair."

"You're taking a bribe..."

"Shut up, girl! You Muggle-borns with your James Bond movies think it's all wine, witches, and song for us Ministry agents. Mysteries technicians are no better than medieval vassals. We work hard for low pay, and we don't get out much. With my... er... reward, I'm going to enjoy life for a change. A thousand Galleons can buy a lot of... ah... catching-up on life." He whirled about and stalked back past the bell jar.

Hermione thought hard. The scenario didn't ring true. Why was Narcissa Malfoy bringing the gold to his office when all she had to do was send a letter of transfer to Gringotts? What if the Malfoy coffers were depleted? Did she steal the money perhaps?

She played the whole scene over in her mind, from the moment Madam Malfoy had entered the room. The bags were indeed heavy. She was still puffing and blowing from her effort. But a Galleon weighed much more than any other coin its size, because gold is the densest of substances except for a few rare metals not worth mentioning. In fact, each of the huge wizarding coins weighed almost three ounces. So each of those bags, holding five hundred Galleons each, had to weigh almost a hundred pounds! Even given mages' legendary endurance, she didn't think Narcissa could have lugged that weight all the way from Malfoy Manor.

Orr returned with the Time Turner dangling from his hand on a silver chain.

"I'll bet those aren't real Galleons," Hermione blurted.

"Silence, girl! Of course they are real. Just look at them." Narcissa rummaged through a bag and threw a handful of the coins on the desk. They glinted bright yellow in the torchlight.

The time tech's eyes reflected their glitter, but he suddenly caught up the Time Turner in his hand and held it to his chest.

Narcissa clucked in derision, but she tried to make her voice warm and inviting. "Come on now, Orrin, the offer's getting cold. Do you want the money, or do I take it next door to Roddy Herald? I hear he has a cash-flow problem even bigger than yours."

"Don't give it to her!" Hermione cried. "The bags aren't heavy enough. Don't you see? I did a paper on metalwork in Muggle Studies last year. Those bags should weigh more than Madam Malfoy could carry without a Lightening Charm. But if the coins were made of bronze, or better yet, aluminum or even steel, and painted gold, they'd be quite manageable."

Now Orrin Orr looked uncertain. He rummaged in his pocket, picked out three Galleons, hefted them and, with his other hand, picked up an equal number from the desk. With a fingernail he scratched at one from the bag, and gold flakes floated off it. His face went cold as he turned on Narcissa. "You avaricious witch! You've got more money than you can ever spend, but you can't even spare a few coins for the likes of me." He jammed the Time Turner into his pocket. "I'll see your husband never gets out of Azkaban. He can rot there. And you'll join him if I have anything to say about it!"

Rage distorting her face, Narcissa fired a Stunner at him. It caught him square in the chest, and he dropped behind his desk. Then she whipped around and pointed the wand at Hermione. "This is all your fault, you horrible girl. I'm going to make sure you can never interfere with my family again!"

This is it, Hermione thought. I'll soon be joining Sirius... and James and Lily. Not such bad company when you think about it. Still it's sad... just when I was starting to understand Ron...

Narcissa's wand barked and a purple flame issued from its tip. It was the same spell the *Silencio*-ed Death Eater had been unable to fully discharge at her when she was last in this place. *Déjà-vu...*

The spell glanced off something, a Block of some kind. James must have been lurking invisible and backed her up somehow.

Narcissa, infuriated, Disapparated with the borrowed wand.

To Hermione's surprise, Orrin Orr raced across the room and helped her to a nearby sofa. "She was so fast," he said. "I barely had time to get that Shield up."

"How did you...?"

"Something I've been doing experiments on." He unbuttoned his robe collar and she saw a flash of silver. "Goblin armor. Blocks most curses."

"It was you who saved me then. Th-thanks!"

Just then a figure burst through the door. It was Tonks, wand waving. "Hermione! Orrin! We detected a Slasher Curse down here. What happened?" She just managed to stop herself from tripping over something lying on the rug. "Ooh, ick! What's this? A finger? And a hairpiece."

"Oh, my," said Orrin Orr, surveying the tiny appendage, perfectly manicured and girdled by a diamond and sapphire ring and the hank of silver hair with some scalp still attached. "Looks like Madam Malfoy Splinched herself. Tch, tch, couldn't happen to a nicer person."

Hlp O Brgg

Chapter 19 of 29

Yet another task, generated by Sirius himself this time.

How are you feeling, Hermione?

She pulled the comforter closer about herself and peered hard at James Potter's ghostly form. It was a constant surprise to her how very much Harry looked like him. She found it a comfort actually. "I'm all right, apart from being mad enough to want to wring Narcissa's bloody neck. I'm just a little depressed is all."

He gestured at the walls of her marbled gaol. *It must be hard having to live here, apart from your parents... and friends.*

"It's worth it though. I'd do anything to save the Headmaster. But that's not why I'm down." She pointed her wand at the teapot which was brewing her favorite Darjeeling and Accioed it to her cup. "It seems so unfair...how some people have to struggle their whole lives to make their way, while others get all the breaks, have all the money..."

You mean the Malfoys.

She nodded and sipped the hot, fragrant tea.

Perhaps I can put it into perspective for you. It may seem as if they have it all now, but the day of reckoning is coming for them. I would say it has already come, in fact. And Narcissa, at least, knows it. Fortune swings the pendulum of prosperity and health with a blind eye, and those who are well-fed and clad now, the pampered and cowardly, become the beggars of the next generation. We have no say in this. The only power we have is what kind of people we will be ourselves: the decisions we make, how we carry ourselves, how we treat others. But that, I think is a very important power.

"But if there's no reward..."

Virtue is its own reward, Hermione. Never forget that. To be able to go to sleep at night, knowing that you've done a good day's work, used your talents wisely, cared for the good of the earth, helped people where you can, isn't that something worth having?

"A clear conscience and a decent night's sleep...yes, I suppose so."

And the knowledge that you're building up the world, not contributing to its demise.

"Yes, I see what you mean. Thanks, James."

I'm not sure you'll be so grateful when I tell you what the next task is.

She rubbed her hand over her old chest-wound. "After that last close call..."

I'm sorry about that. It was a lucky thing that Time-Research fellow was wearing body armor, wasn't it?"

"Where were you, James?"

Like I said, watching your back. About five minutes after you went into the time lab, I sensed Dolores Umbridge steaming down the hall towards the Department of Mysteries, and I thought I'd better head her off.

"You didn't conjure a centaur to scare her away, did you?"

No, although it would have been fun to see her reaction. I just whispered in her ear that she had a big ladder in her stockings. Lily says that's just about the most embarrassing thing you can say to a middle-aged witch. She turned tail and headed for her office. But I thought I'd better follow her at least part way to make sure she didn't change her mind. Then I got involved eavesdropping on Ministry gossip on the elevator. The old Auror habits never quite go away, I'm afraid. I'm sorry, Hermione. I let you down. It won't happen again.

He looked just like Harry did when he needed help on a particularly difficult Potions essay but didn't want to ask. She smiled. "That's all right. So what's the next task?"

He clapped his hands. *I like your spirit, young lady! We had a lot of trouble deciphering the next several items on Dumbledore's list, but when Sirius got back from his first set of tests...*

"Set of tests?"

The heavenly powers are being rather hard on him, I admit. All those old misdemeanors, you know, especially the... erm... hanky-panky... and pranking."

"Yes, I understand there was quite a lot of that."

Anyway, when Sirius got a chance to study the list, he recognized this name. Apparently, he had told Dumbledore about the case, hoping the Order could find evidence to prove the innocence of this fellow who had been wrongly sentenced to Azkaban.

Hermine brightened. "Was it Stan Shunpike by any chance?"

No, that wasn't the name. Is Shunpike a victim of Ministry injustice too?

"Yes, he's a... friend... of Harry's. But, please, go on."

Well, about a year before Sirius escaped from Azkaban, there was a fellow brought in to the cell next door...name of Ovid Bragg. He'd been sentenced to three years for Snidget poaching. Every night, Sirius heard him repeating happy memories to himself...to stave off the bleak ones, you know...and pieced together that he had small daughter whom he loved very much and that his wife was very sick. By the time Sirius escaped, he was so convinced of Bragg's decency that he vowed that he'd try to get proof of his innocence or, failing that, extenuating circumstances for the crime.

"What did he find out?"

Not a whole lot. When your name is on the Ministry's Most Wanted List, you don't have a lot of options. But he managed to find out where the little girl and the mother, who was in remission from a deadly illness, were staying. He acted the loveable stray around their yard for some months and became quite fond of Little Lu, as the family calls her.

"I'm sure the feeling was mutual. How old is Lu now?"

Around five or six, I'd guess. She's been living with her mother's sister...one Modesty Collins...since the mother died. Aunt Modesty wants to formally adopt her and is trying to convince the Wizengamot that Ovid is not a fit father.

"Well, it's not like he's a child molester or anything."

But the Aunt is a rabid animal lover. When she heard that Ovid had tried to smuggle those little birds out of the Rabnott Sanctuary, and had the child with him at the time, well she about went ballistic.

"Snitches are quite valuable, aren't they? I read somewhere that their eyes and feathers are highly prized on the Dark Market."

Yes, but what you may not know is that the means poachers use to extract them are very cruel. Pictures of plucked and blinded Snidgets have been circulating in Beast Rights circles for years.

"That's horrible."

Yes. *Bragg was lucky to get only three years.*

"What was his story?"

That he took his daughter to the Sanctuary because the mother had worked there before she got sick, and he wanted Lu to know her through the things she loved. When they left, he was caught red-handed with the birds...three of them.

"But he doesn't sound like a poacher... unless he needed the money badly for something important. Not that I'm excusing him..."

James looked at her reproachfully. *Sirius is quite sure of his innocence.*

"All right. If I interview to him, hopefully I can find some exonerating evidence, and the Aunt will forgive him, and he gets his daughter back."

It won't be quite that easy.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Why am I not surprised to hear you say that?"

As you may know, Azkaban warps a prisoner's thought processes and emotions terribly. Most inmates, when they come out, are more than a little bonkers and spend time at a half-way house for re-hab. Then they are helped to find a job and a place to live. Sirius thinks the only thing that kept Bragg from going completely round the twist was the thought of being reunited with his daughter. But the Aunt wouldn't let him see Lu, and he lost it. His social worker found him in his flat, smelly and starving, clutching Lu's picture, babbling like a brook. He's in St. Mungo's now...completely catatonic. All his personal belongings...what few there are...are there with him.

"So, if you'll send me there, I can get started looking for evidence."

He waved his hand. *I'll be right behind you. Honestly.*

~*~

They were in a waiting room at St. Mungo's with several groups of people...patients' families, surely...seated on cheap plastic sofas arranged in rows facing each other. The room was uncomfortably warm and smelled of unwashed bodies and incompletely cleaned messes.

"I'd like to see Mr. Ovid Bragg," Hermione said to the receptionist.

"Take a seat," the witch answered. "His family is here too, so you'll have to wait a while." She gestured to a woman and a girl seated in a corner. The little girl had long hair in brown, tightly woven plaits. She was wearing a cheery pink robe and had a Mad Muggle lunch box in her lap.

Hermione edged towards the pair. The child was amusing herself, swatting at flies with her small hands. There seemed to be quite a few in the room. She sat down; the seat crackled under her weight; it had been repaired many times with Spello-Tape.

She cleared her throat and asked, "Are you, by any chance, Mrs. Collins?"

"The woman frowned. "Yes. Do I know you?"

"No, my name is Hermione Granger. I know a little about Mr. Bragg... Lu's father," Here she smiled at the little girl. "From a... friend of his. Erm... they were in prison together."

Modesty Collins stared at her. "Oh. One of that thieving lot."

"Papa's not a thief, Aunt Tee," said the little girl, softly but firmly.

A man in green robes approached. "Mrs. Collins. Your daughter can see her father now.

The aunt made to rise, but the girl shook her head. "No, Aunt Tee. I want to see him by myself. You scare him too much." She got up and strode over to a wastebasket which was overflowing with refuse. She brushed off her hands, and a collection of small, dark objects fell into a half-eaten sandwich on the top. She wiped her hands on her robe and followed the man through a door he had just opened. The smell intensified, and loud noises...cries, jeers, thudding and scraping...flowed out. It reminded Hermione of an ill-kept zoo.

Lu's aunt pulled up a ragged copy of Witch Weekly from the empty space next to her. Hermione tried to think of a way to restart the conversation. She had begun badly; she knew that. She should not have mentioned Azkaban.

"Lu seems a bright little girl," said Hermione.

"That she is." The aunt turned a page.

"She'll be going to Hogwarts, I imagine."

"Mmm-hmm." She pulled the magazine closer to her face.

"I go to Hogwarts too. Have you... erm... heard of Harry Potter?"

"Who hasn't?"

"He's a good friend of mine."

"Really?" Modesty Collins looked at her. The look said, *I don't believe you.* The aunt murmured, "I hear he's quite a Quidditch player."

Hermione wondered if this was meant to test her boast. "Oh, yes. He's Seeker for Gryffindor. Has been for six years. The youngest player in..."

"...in a hundred years. Yes, I know." The magazine lowered a bit. "Did you watch him play much?"

"Every game."

The woman raised an eyebrow. "I hear he once caught a Snitch with his mouth."

"That's right. And another time he had a broken arm but still managed to get it, and once his broom wasn't working right and he was way up over the pitch, and he almost fell off..."

"Hmmp. Did he ever do the Wronski Feint?"

"That move Viktor uses?"

"Victor who?"

"Viktor Krum."

The woman leaned forward. "*The* Viktor Krum? You know him?"

Hermione affected nonchalance. "Well, yes. Actually, we went together... for a time..."

"Ohhhhh, you're that Granger."

"What do you mean?"

"Rita Skeeter wrote about you two-timing Potter..."

Hermione lost it. "That's not true! I was never Harry's girlfriend. Never. I'm just one of his friends. That's all."

"I wondered what the real story was. When I saw your picture... well... you looked too... sensible... and wholesome to be just a... a flirt."

Or a whore, thought Hermione, which was the reputation the Skeeter hag had tried to hang on her.

Modesty Collins seemed embarrassed, as if that very word was in her own mind. In lieu of apology, she changed the subject. "Do you play Quidditch yourself?"

"Me? Oh no. I can barely get up on a broom."

Modesty snorted. "That's me too. No sense of balance. But my sister...Lu's mother, you know...played pro for a while."

"Really?"

"Yes. She was a Seeker too. For the Appleby Arrows. Ah, how she could ride! The Wronski Feint was her favorite maneuver. And quick? No one in the league had faster hands. That's where Lu gets it."

"What?"

"Her quick hands. You saw what she was dumping out in the waste can? Flies. She just snatches them out of the air. Quickest hands I've ever seen. She can ride very well too, as young as she is."

Hermione smiled. "You're a Quidditch fan."

"Yes, we still follow the Arrows. I'll miss going to games."

"Why? Are you going away?"

"Yes, and soon, thank the stars. This is the last time we'll ever have to visit this place." She glanced about the room, her mouth a thin line.

"You're moving?"

"Yes, Lu and I, as soon as the adoption papers come through. We'll be living in Cornwall, as far as we can get away from this place. Then maybe she'll forget him. I promised her one more visit so she could try to jog him out of this funk he's in, but I think she knows it's no good. But she has to try, doesn't she?"

"I heard about his...her father's crime. Do you know what actually happened at the Sanctuary that day?"

"His story is they just walked around all morning... had lunch in a mulberry grove... then they took a nap. When they woke, they started for the front gate. The guard heard a buzzing sound coming from the lunch pail he was carrying, and when they opened it, out flew three Snitches. He confessed pretty quickly after that. So he got the minimum sentence, one year per bird."

Just then, the door burst open, and the little girl ran to her aunt. Her face was glazed with tears. "He doesn't know me, Aunt Tee," she cried. "He didn't even look, no matter what I said." She wrapped her arms about her aunt and pressed her face against her tailored brown robes.

Modesty Collins squeezed her niece gently and patted her back, then held the little girl at arm's length. "I told you, Baby, he's very sick. That's why he's here. You can't do him any good any more." She shouldered her purse in a gesture of finality, but Little Lu just sank down on the sofa and buried her face in her hands, sobbing.

Hermione saw a vending machine in a corner and sidled over to it. "James, she whispered, "I don't have any money. Can you...?"

I'm way ahead of you, Hermione. This used to be a specialty of mine. The machine rumbled and shook, and a pack of Drooble's Best Blowing gum fell out of the slot. *Heh-heh. I used to stop Harry's tantrums with this stuff. It's hard to cry when your mouth's working that hard.*

Hermione brought back the pack and offered a piece to Lu as her Aunt went out for water. Soon they were both chewing away. Ron once told her that the beauty of Droobles was that you could blow such big bubbles that it pretty quickly started everybody in a contest to see who could make the biggest. It took Lu away from her troubles quickly, and as she calmed down, Hermione asked questions, seemingly just to pass the time.

"Your aunt was telling me, you've been to the Snidget Sanctuary." "I've always wanted to go. What's it like?"

"It's the beautifullest place I ever been."

"What did you do there?"

"Papa and me, we walked about and saw skillions of these teeny birds all flying around the trees eating berries...cute and little..."

"And fast?"

"Not very. I cotched a couple, but Papa made me let them go."

Hermione goggled at the child's innocent boast. She must indeed be gifted if she could snatch a Snidget, the fastest of all birds, out of the air. "And then you had lunch and took a nap."

"No, I din't. Papa did. I just watched the birds and then I cotched some more and gave them a ride."

"How did you do that? How did you give them a ride?"

"I put 'em in my lunch pail, but then, when we were going home, a man came and let them go."

Hermione sensed a presence at her side. It was Aunt Tee with two cups of water in her hand. Her face was white. She put down the cups and pulled Hermione over to a corner. "We never told Lu what her father was arrested for. He wouldn't allow it. But... she must be making this up."

Hermione had an inspiration. "That lunch box, is that the one she took to the sanctuary?"

"Yes, she always carries it around. She keeps some mementoes in there: her mum's watch, a letter from her father. Of course she can't read..."

"A letter? Have you ever read it?"

"No."

"May I...?"

"You'll have to ask her."

Hermione took a deep breath and went back to the little girl. "Lu, that box of yours is so pretty. Do you mind if I look at it?"

Lu just nodded, her mouth at work on the biggest bubble yet.

Inside, among oddments of jewelry and small toys was a grubby envelope with a much folded and refolded bit of paper. It read:

My darling Chastity,

I want you to know that I'm innocent of the charges against me. I don't know how she did it, but I think our ingenious little girl managed to catch three of those damned birds and hid them in her lunch pail. I can't bring myself to tell the court the truth. You remember how cold-hearted the old Head of the DMLE...Crouch...was? He sent his own teen-aged son to Azkaban for just hanging out with the wrong crowd! And, from what I've heard, Amelia Bones is no better. I can't risk the possibility of our daughter being punished for something she didn't realize she was doing. And it'll only three years. How bad can it be?

I'm glad to hear you are so much better and that the Healers have high hopes for your complete cure.

Be well, my darling, and take good care of our little imp until I get back to you both.

All my love,

Ovid.

Manslaughter

Chapter 20 of 29

There are some things not on the list that just must be taken care of.

20. MANSLAUGHTER

"On to the Sixth Task!" crowed Hermione, as she burst out of the waiting room. "Where are you, James? Did you hear? Ms. Collins is going to drop her adoption petition and help Lu's father to recover."

James appeared in front of her. *That's wonderful, Hermione.*

"Didn't you hear our conversation? We found evidence...in Lu's lunch box...oh, I'm so happy! I didn't even have to use magic..."

I'm sorry, Hermione, I got side-tracked again

Hermione was strangely disappointed. She had never much cared what Sirius thought of her, but she respected James' sobriety and patience and found that she really craved his approval too. She pouted, "Wow, I guess it's a good thing the aunt didn't try to blast me for talking to Lu, or that the inmates didn't stage an uprising while your back was turned, or..."

You're right. I should have been there for you...just in case. But, there is something more important right now...

"Yes, I know. Saving Dumbledore. But let's not forget that it's yours truly who's sticking her neck out for him..."

It's not Dumbledore I'm thinking of. It's Sirius.

"What?"

Sirius has a favor to ask of us.

Hermione blinked.

James gestured at a bluish haze at the end of the corridor. It looked as if someone had been smoking there. The haze congealed into a ghostly figure...Sirius, looking woeful.

He can't speak to you...it's a condition of his testing...but he wants to thank you for what you did for Ovid Bragg. And...he would like you to help some of the ex-convicts on this ward.

"Why?"

It's one of the tests he has to undergo. He has to roam the land, looking for people to help, to prove that he's changed, that he really can sympathize with the sufferings of others.

"Sounds a bit like Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*."

Really? Oh, yes, I remember. Though Sirius more resembles Scrooge's happy-go-lucky nephew, than the old miser himself. Anyway, he stopped in here to get my advice about where to start looking and sensed that there are others here who have been convicted wrongly. It seems as though, as a former inmate himself, he has a special understanding of their situation. Every one of them has become a pariah to family and friends. That support system, so crucial to recovery, is denied them. He feels their pain deeply. Will you help them...and him? This is not a part of Dumbledore's tasks, Hermione. You can say no...if you want.

"No...I mean...yes, I want to help."

They followed the shade of Sirius back through the waiting room, unnoticed by the receptionist, who was listening to an animated conversation between Modesty Collins and an attendant. They slid through the door to the ward, passed some cubicles where visitors were meeting with patients, and followed a long, straight flight of steps downward. There was a stream of water flowing beside them in a narrow stone trough. The water swirled against the grayish-blue stone and made a restless, rushing sound. It was troubling, that sound, but at least the water was not fetid, like the air.

You need to know that this place is not well-kept. The rehabilitation of ex-convicts is not high on the Ministry's list of priorities.

"I gathered as much from the smell. I can't decide whether it reminds me more of a swamp or Crookshanks's litter pan."

It's the price the inmates pay for their perfidy.

"But apparently not all of them are guilty."

There was another set of doors at the bottom, and a guard station set into the wall. A woman with iron gray hair so perfectly combed and flattened that it looked as if it had been painted on her scalp sat at the admitting desk behind a window. Her white robes looked stiff and were buttoned up to the top of her neck.

"And how can I help you today, young lady?" she simpered in a voice that reminded Hermione of Professor Umbridge. Her badge proclaimed her to be: AMY RECHIDD, HEAD NURSE.

Hermione sent a desperate brain-wave to James. *What'll I do now?*

Feel inside your left pocket, he whispered.

Hermione felt and pulled out a bright yellow card. She speed-read it:

ST. MUNGO'S HOSPITAL...VISITOR'S PASS

Date: 14 July 1997

Name: *Hermione Granger*

Department/Ward: *Azkaban Recovery Unit*

Purpose: *To observe day-to-day activities. Visitor is a seventh-year student at Hogwarts who is considering apprenticing as a Healer.*

The signature was an illegible scrawl. She slid the card through the opening in the glass.

Nurse Rechidd pursed her lips. "Hogwarts. Well, aren't we special?" She looked Hermione up and down. "I suppose it would be all right for you to visit the day room. But I'm afraid we don't have anyone available to show you around just now."

"That's all right. I can find my way, I'm sure."

"Oh, can you? I must warn you, the inmates can be...frightening at times."

"I'm well-versed in defensive spells."

"I'm sure you are. But you'll still have to sign a waiver." She waved her wand and produced a clipboard. A bright green quill detached itself from behind her left ear and began frantically scrawling something on it. When it finished, the pen reinserted itself into Nurse Rechidd's hair, and she handed the clipboard and another pen to Hermione.

Hermione read the paper that was attached to it. *I fully understand the risks of entering this ward without an escort and will not hold the staff of St. Mungo's Azkaban Recovery Unit and Outpatient Mental Services responsible for anything that might happen to me while I am within its confines.*

Hermione signed the sheet and asked in as calm a voice as she could manage, "Erm...what kind of 'anything' are we talking about here?"

Nurse Rechidd's eyes gleamed at her discomfort. "Oh, they have no weapons, if you're worried about that. But some of them are quite strong...yes, quite strong. But it's more the nightmares..."

"Nightmares?"

"Yes, some visitors find it difficult to sleep at night once they've been here. They have no stomach for the harsh reality of mental illness. Most never return." She smiled, showing a perfect set of very large teeth. "Was there anything in particular you'd like to see?"

Hermione gulped and glanced through a small window in the double doors next to the station. She could see Sirius hovering over a ragged mass, curled up on the floor.

"That person there. I'll start with him...or her...if I may." She pointed through the glass.

Nurse Rechidd looked through her own window into the ward and frowned. "What's he doing in there?" She waved her wand, and both her door and the double doors opened. Hermione took that as a cue to enter. She found herself in a large shadowy room, minimally furnished. There were figures lounging on more of those plastic couches, or leaning against walls, or crouching and staring at the threadbare rug, or pacing it in the gloom. Faint groans and grunting sounds came from somewhere behind the dingy walls.

She glanced back at the nurse, who was nudging the pile of rags with her foot. "Mr. Fletcher," she scolded, "are you still here? Best be off now, before the orderly mistakes you for one of the inmates...erm...patients."

"Uh... whah?"

Hermione goggled. *Dung Fletcher. What's he doing here? He couldn't have served time in Azkaban since I last saw him, could he? Did Harry have him arrested for stealing the Blacks' plates?*

The disheveled old wizard sat up and looked about him. "Arr... must've dropped off. 'Ere, who's this?" He gazed at Hermione through rheumy eyes. "It's Miney... Miney... Gingold, ain' it? 'Arry's Potter's girl-friend."

"It's Granger, Mr. Fletcher. I'm Hermione Granger. What are you doing in this place?"

"Oh, you're acquainted with our traveling compost heap?" Nurse Rechidd looked doubtful, then added cheerfully, "Well, he can show you around then. He knows the place better than most." She turned, tittering at her little joke, and walked back to her station. The doors snapped closed.

He got up gingerly and brushed at his robes, a useless gesture. "Miney Granger, what you doing 'ere? Last I 'erd you was storming the Ministry itself, roustin' Death-Eaters by the score."

"That's been a year ago..."

"Wisht I coulda been there....I'd a hexed 'em good. Say, don' tell me they collared you for that!"

"No, I'm just visiting. But you...why are you...?"

"Like you... just visitin'. Course..." he lowered his voice, "place like this 'ud make a decent hidey hole if you was on the lam er something." He straightened up, trying to look respectable. "Not that I am o'course. Just visitin' my ol' pal, Brutus... Brutus Mortlake." He gestured to a corner where a hulking fellow stood pressed against the wall. He dropped his voice to a whisper. "Terrible thing they did to ol' Brutus. I brought 'im a little somepin' to cheer 'im up... you know... hair of the dog...." He opened his coat briefly. Hermione could see a pint bottle secreted in an inside pocket. It looked nearly empty. "But 'ee won't have none of it. Jes' stands and stares."

Hermione watched as the figure of Sirius drifted over behind the object of their scrutiny. He caught her eye and nodded his head. Apparently Brutus Mortlake was one of the people who needed to be helped. "What happened to him, Mr. Fletcher?"

"Arr... sent to Azkaban. For... you know... manslaughter!" This got an appropriately horrified reaction, so he hastened to add, "But he didn't mean to do it."

Hermione took Dung's arm and led him over to a couch. "Tell me about it, won't you?" she asked. They sat. The plastic crackled, and a smell of old urine wafted up about them.

"You see, me an' Brutus an' 'is wife...we was havin' coupla drinks at the Cauldron one night...."

"The Leaky Cauldron?"

"Right, an' when we left, we was jumped by a gang of wiz-kids... "

"Whiz kids?"

"You know.... Choovenile dee-linquents. They wear Muggle jeans, ride souped-up power-sweeps... uh... brooms... They hang around bars tryin' to bully decent, law-abidin' folk. Some say they're part of You-Know-Who's narsties.... Well, this gang drops out of the sky, takes us by surprise an' Accio-s all our wands...like that! Nen they start takin' the jewelry an' money right off us. One of 'em... big, rangy kid... their leader, they say... does a blast spell right over our 'eds... like a kind of warning. Nen they hops their brooms. But ol' Brutus-'ee was a wrestler back in his palmier days... 'ee grabs a-holt o' the big kid... to tries to drag 'im off 'is sweep. The kid drops 'is own wand and manages to take off anyways. Brutus scoops up the wand an' takes aim, and there's this 'orrible flash, an' the kid screams an' gets tangled in these wires 'angin' across the street. Nen 'ee drops down in the road... fried like an oyster. They give Brutus ten years fer that... said it was excessive use of force. 'Ee never recovered from the Dementors. An' now, since 'ees out, that gang's threatening 'is famby... revenge an' all that you know. 'Is wife don't dare try to visit 'im."

"How horrible," breathed Hermione, peering into the gloom to get a good look at Brutus Mortlake. He was quite large, not Hagrid-sized, but big enough. His face was lined deeply with sadness. "But if we could find proof that he didn't do it...the gang might leave them alone."

"I fink they're mad 'cause Brutus got the feller in the back. It's against their code of honour, y'see...an' these gangs got memories as long as a Pygmy Puff's tongue. But Brutus... 'ee did hex 'im.... I seen it.... Had to testify even. Felt rotten about it. But all that time Brutus said 'ee was innercent.... 'ee never did no spell at all. But the Aurors did one o' them Priory Ink and Dado hexes on the wand."

"You mean *Prior incantato*?"

"Right-ee-oh! An' there it was... a Blasting Spell."

"But you said the leader had fired off a Blasting Spell as a warning, just before they all took off. Couldn't that have been the one the Aurors detected?"

"Yeh, but if Brutus didn't do one too... how'd the kid get fried?"

"You said he got tangled in some overhead wires. Were they... possibly... telephone wires?"

"Yeh, Brutey's lawyer tried to make something out of that... like maybe the kid strangled on 'em, and it weren't the blast what kilt 'im at all."

"You mean the possibility of electrocution never came up at the trial?"

"What? That thing where eckle-trickity passes through yer, and you drop down dead? Nah, couldn't be that; there wasn't no lightning in the air at all."

"I don't mean lightning. I mean electricity from the phone wires!"

"But everybody knows them wires is 'armless. Why birds even sit on 'em wiv never so much as a spark. Nah, that ain't the answer."

"But it could be! If you only touch one of the wires you're okay, but if you touch two at the same time, it causes a short-circuit, and a terrific surge of voltage passes through your body. It's lethal in most cases."

"You mean the wires really killed the kid? Not Brutey?"

"I believe so, and if you just get someone at the Ministry...say Arthur Weasley...to look it up in any Muggle physics text, they can clear him."

"I'll do that, Miss. Right now. Arthur and me is thick as thieves... you know... what wiv being in the Order an' all." He stood up and shook Hermione's hand, then looked down at his shoes. "Uh... but maybe... do you think you could write all that stuff down? About the eck-lec-tiks and all. I'm not sure he'd believe... I mean... I'm not sure I could explain it as good as you...."

21. Breaking & Entering and Embezzlement

Chapter 21 of 29

Two more mysteries face Hermione in the bowels of St. Mungo's.

21. Breaking-and-Entering and Embezzlement

Mundungus Fletcher hurried off to the Ministry, armed with a scribbled note from Hermione. She looked around the ward. Inmates, both men and women, shuffled about aimlessly, or sat, twitching and glaring at nothing in particular. There were no windows that she could see but several doors at the far end of the room, one of which was

ajar. Bright light streamed through the crack, and it was at this opening that the shade of Sirius suddenly appeared. He beckoned to her. She followed cautiously, not wanting to disturb the patients more than necessary. The twitchers seemed to be getting more agitated, and she could hear little sighs or sobs from others she could not see.

Inside the room, a fetid miasma assailed her nostrils. She felt faint, but the sight of Sirius, now smiling hopefully, strengthened her. Before her loomed a great tank full of cloudy, brownish water, and off to her right was a sunken pool filled with what looked and smelled like swamp mud. Sirius was hovering over the tank. Inside it, she could make out the form of a woman, wearing only a bra and panties and floating listlessly. Her graying hair floated about her head like seaweed. Apparently she was alive and breathing because every so often, she would blink or an arm would twitch. Hermione looked closer and saw a slit in each side of her neck. Every few seconds a clutch of little bubbles burst out of them.

"What are you doing in here?" a voice behind her demanded.

Hermione whirled about and saw a stern-looking man in a white lab-coat with a badge that read: *Phlegyas Sticks, Chief Neurohealer*. Behind him, two other wizards in green scrubs...orderlies she guessed...were dragging into the room a squat, hairy, nearly naked inmate who was struggling against them.

Hermione averted her eyes. "I'm visiting. I wanted to see..." She turned back to the tank. "...her."

"Ah, Selleca Prod, our burglar-ette. You a relative?"

"No, a friend."

"Well, you can't talk to her now, she's in treatment. So you'll have to come back another time, Miss..."

"Granger. Erm...I thought that the Waffling Water Cure had been proven not only not helpful, but, in fact, detrimental in most cases of severe depression."

"Are you a Healer, Miss Granger?"

"No."

"Then I think you should leave such decisions to your betters. In any case, they can't drown. An infusion of gillyweed takes care of that."

He turned to the group behind him. The inmate was writhing about, gnashing his teeth and struggling against the grip of his beefy attendants. Healer Sticks growled, "Malacoda, Malebranch, lower Mr. Silver into the bath. He'll need several hours of steeping."

Hermione was horrified. The Transmogrifian Mudpack was, if anything, worse than the Water Cure, but she bit her lip and watched as they Stunned Silver and pushed him into the pool of churning filth. The disturbance caused other bodies to rise briefly to the surface. The stench sickened her, but she managed to ask, "Could I see Madam Prod's belongings? I want to buy her some things, but I don't know what she needs."

At Healer Sticks' nod, one of the orderlies led her back to the day room and pointed to a line of scarred and dented lockers. Selleca Prod's name was etched raggedly on one. Hermione rummaged through the clothing, glanced at a small album containing pictures of family pets...cats mostly. A yellowed news clipping fell out of it.

9 Aug 1992: On the night of August third, Selleca Prod, feline enthusiast, and former president of the local Muggle SPCA, was caught breaking into a Muggle house by Aurors acting on a tip from the Improper Use of Magic Office.

Prod at first claimed to be visiting someone she'd met at the All-England Cat and Kneazle Show the day before. The woman, a Squib named Arabella Figg, remembered meeting Madam Prod but claimed she had had no visitors that night. Confronted with this fact, Prod changed her story and said she was actually in the neighborhood examining a new strain of catmint in the local park and planned to surprise Miss Figg with a visit. On her way across the development in the dark, Madam Prod claims to have heard a strange noise and seen a large, shadowy object hovering in the air next to a window in the upper storey of a house. Fearing a return of Death Eater attacks, she raced over to alert the occupants. Finding the doors locked, she used an Alohomora to get inside. It was this spell that was detected by the IUMO.

"We've been watching that house for some time," said Ministry official Mafalda Hopkirk. "Had a call about some underage magic there just a few says before." Although she declined to go further into the reasons for the surveillance, it is known that a student wizard lives in the area.

Prod further alleged that once inside, she noticed a storage-closet door open under the stairway and some gold strewn about the floor. She followed a trail of Galleons and odd bits of clothing up the stairs, picking them up as she went. She entered a bedroom, where she saw three Muggles in pajamas staring out the window. As everyone looked safe, she tiptoed back down the stairs. She claimed she didn't want to alarm them further, dressed as she was in wizarding robes. She was apprehended outside the door still clutching the loot by Aurors, sent to investigate by the IUMO.

The wizard boy who lives there was contacted at his school and questioned discreetly about the incident, though not told of the reason for the interview. An official stated that "the poor chap has enough to be going on with without being told that his dear relatives have been endangered." The boy, in fact, denied knowing anything of the forced entry into his own bedroom.

The Durtsey family, to whom the house belongs, refused to be questioned. Officials did ascertain from a search of the grounds that the break-in was effected by some kind of pulling charm, which wrenched a set of protective bars off the upstairs window.

Prod has been charged with breaking-and-entering, using magic in a restricted zone, and making up a ludicrous story to cover her crime. If convicted, she could receive up to five years in Azkaban.

Hermione's mouth hung open briefly. She remembered what Ron had told her about breaking Harry out of "that prison in Little Whinging" at the start of second year in an enchanted car. At the time, she had been quite as upset about it as she had also heard that they had crashed that selfsame car into the Whomping Willow at the start of school. She had given both boys quite an earful over it.

She whispered to Sirius: "I think I've got the solution. Someone will have to question Harry and Ron...and Fred and George too... about what really happened on the ninth of August, 1992. Hmm... perhaps if Mr. Weasley shows up, he can help us with this case too."

Sirius smiled. At that moment, the main door opened and in walked the nurse, followed by Dung Fletcher and Arthur Weasley. Behind them trailed another couple, a small man Hermione recognized vaguely and a woman who looked very like him, except that her face was deadly pale. He was wearing a purple velvet hat and grass-green robes. The woman, dressed in gray, clutched his arm; her head was curled into her chest, as if she was trying desperately to retreat, not only from their current destination,

but from life itself. Sirius floated behind her, pointing at her and nodding his head gently.

"... we're always happy to have a member of the Ministry visit," Nurse Rechidd trilled nervously. "I'll be happy to get the Head Healer for you, if you like."

"That won't be necessary, Nurse, thanks," said Mr. Weasley, inclining his head to her. Nurse Rechidd gave a little yelp and hurried off to the room that held the water tank and the mud pool, closing it firmly behind her. Arthur Weasley stared after her a moment before noticing Hermione. "Oh, there you are, my dear. Dung told me about your theory. I must say it sounds most exciting. Imagine a Muggle contrivance that can actually harm a wizard."

"It would have meant thousands of volts of electricity traveled through his body, Mr. Weasley. Enough to kill an elephant."

"Thrilling! I shall let the Wizengamot know and..."

"I don't think that's the most important thing, sir. Really, an article in *The Prophet* would be best. That gang needs to know that their leader's death was an accident, so they'll stop harassing Mr. Mortlake's family. Then they'll be able to visit him again, and everything will be all right."

"Excellent idea, Hermione. I have a few connections on the staff. By the way, Molly's been wondering when you're going to come and help us get ready for the wedding. We'd be pleased to have you."

"I'd love to, really. How's Ron?"

"Oh, fine, fine. He's not entirely happy having to Scourgify the whole house, though I told him it's excellent practice for NEWTs."

Hermione laughed, then turned serious. "Mr. Weasley, you don't happen to know folks that came in with you, do you?" The odd couple had passed them and were seated on a couch. The man had taken off his hat and was twirling it nervously. The woman looked utterly terrified.

"As a matter of fact, I do. That's Dedalus Diggle, an Order member, and his...erm...unfortunate sister Delia," he said.

"Oh yes, I recognize him now. Would you mind introducing us?"

"Not at all." They marched over to the little man and Mr. Weasley proffered his hand. "Dedalus, how are you?"

He came out of his self-induced trance and mumbled, "Oh... ah... hello, Arthur... How's the family?... Got your invitation... not sure we can make it though... Give my best to... Bill and his intended, will you?"

Hermione remembered Dedalus Diggle as a very friendly fellow, who always had an impish grin on his face. But this Diggle was sober, almost curt. No doubt his sister was the cause of his reserve. She looked to be eaten up inside by some secret horror.

She put out her own hand. "I'm Hermione Granger, Mr. Diggle."

A faint glint showed in his eyes as he shook her hand. "Granger... ah, yes... You're a friend of Harry Potter's, aren't you?"

"That's right. Mr. Diggle, I hope you won't mind my asking, but why have you brought your sister to this awful... this place?"

He stared at her, and for a moment, Hermione thought he might just tell her to mind her own business. *Which he has a perfect right to do*, she scolded herself.

But then a rueful smile came over his face, and he shook his head. "Oh, how I wish I didn't have to. But, you see, ever since her reputation was ruined, Deelie's spirits have gone from bad to worse. I've tried everything I can think of to cheer her up...weekly fireworks displays, trips abroad, parties, games, pranks... She tried to end it all last week...with a self-inflicted Blaster." He brightened. "The Healers think a bit of the Water Cure will help."

"Not the Waffling Water Cure," cried Hermione.

"Why, yes, I believe that's the name. I brought her in here a week ago, and they diagnosed her as deeply depressed. Healer Sticks says either the Water Cure or the Transmogrifian Mudpack should snap her out of it."

"What's that about, Hermione?" asked Arthur Weasley.

"I know 'bout that Mudpack thingie," said Dung with a shudder. "They've used it on Brutey Mortlake, more'n once. It always makes 'im worse than before."

Hermione grimaced. "That sounds about right. They're both antediluvian methods of treating mental illness, long since shown to be ineffective, at best."

Arthur rubbed his chin. "Hmmm... I've heard nasty rumors about this place."

"About the hospital?"

"Oh no. Just this ward. There was supposed to be an investigation some months ago, but it got quashed. The Aurors are just too busy investigating You-Know-Who's mischief. Well, Dedalus, I'm not going to try to pour water on your hopes, but I think you should listen to this young lady. She knows an awful lot about just about everything."

Hermione blushed at the compliment and shook her head.

"Oh, now don't deny it, Hermione. Ron's been telling me about all the times you've helped him and Harry with your knowledge. He's very impressed...and grateful."

"Really?"

"Really. I do believe he's got a bit of a soft spot for you. But say, Hermione, do you think we can help Delia Diggle here? As I understand it, she's been sick a long time, hasn't she, Ded? Last time I saw her, she was working at Flourish and Blotts...about five years ago, I believe."

Dedalus stopped twirling his cap. "That's where it all started, Arthur. You may remember, she was a trusted member of the Gringotts staff for years."

"I do. The only witch or wizard of our generation to be trusted as a teller for the main vault."

"And it was a hard won trust, I can tell you. But she left them after twenty-five years of faithful service to care for her husband who had incurred an incurable, deadly hex from an Egyptian tomb. He was a Curse-Breaker for Gringotts, you know."

"No, I didn't know." Hermione saw a frown crease Mr. Weasley's brow. Was it possible that Bill had never told his mother and father about the risks of his job?

"She took a part time position at the bookstore in Diagon Alley. She just loves to read, you know. Well, one day the owner, Mr. Blott, had an emergency. It was an important day because Gilderoy Lockheart was going to be in to sign copies of his latest book, and also school would be starting soon, and sales were booming. Delia convinced Mr. Blott that he should leave her in charge with just an assistant to help. But he made her take Polyjuice Potion so that she would look like a man too. Somehow he didn't think all those adoring female fans of Lockheart's would take a witch seriously if she had to get tough with them. There was a bit of a set-to during the signing...probably people cutting in line...but nothing really dangerous. She got knocked about a bit, trying to break it up, hit her head and was out for a few minutes. But the assistant, Mr. Blott's nephew, said everything was fine. Otherwise, the day seemed to go normally."

Hermione listened carefully. This story, like the one she read about Selleca Prod, sounded familiar, in fact, almost déjà vu.

Diggle continued, his voice rising. "Now, Mr. Blott uses an Automatic Inventory Charm on his store every night. When he returned from his emergency, he totaled up the assets and compared them against sales. It turned out that six sets of Lockheart's books could not be accounted for, and numerous other school texts were missing. The total amounted to over five hundred Galleons. My sister was disgraced. Never in all her years at Gringotts had a single coin gone missing on her watch, but now, she stood alone, virtually accused of embezzlement. She resigned under a cloud of suspicion, and it was rumored that she had been canned by the goblins for a similar crime. She's puzzled over it endlessly, but to no avail. Her reputation, as she saw it, was ruined."

"You're not much like your sister, are you, Mr. Diggle?" observed Hermione.

"No, not at all. Delia's always been the responsible one, looking out for me. I just can't seem to be serious about anything. But now I have to be...for her sake."

"Mr. Weasley," Hermione murmured. "Does this story ring a bell with you? I think we were there that day..." She looked at Ron's father. He seemed dumbstruck.

"Yes, I think we were. I...Hermione...is it possible? I know that Hagrid weighed in and broke up that fight between me and Lucius, but did we really leave without paying? All those books..." He counted on his fingers. "Harry, Ron, you, Percy, the twins, and Ginny...but that makes seven sets, not six."

"But Lockheart gave Harry a free set, remember? And he gave them to Ginny."

"That's right." He turned to Dedalus. "I'm so sorry, Ded. I believe it may be my fault that those books went missing. You see, we were all in the store that day, and I...erm...got into a fight with Lucius Malfoy..."

"Not surprising," said Diggle.

"...and Hagrid...you know him...the Hogwarts Groundskeeper...big fellow...got between us and chivvied us all out of the store. The young assistant didn't dare ask us to pay, I believe he was that scared. Don't suppose he's ever seen a half-giant before."

"Quite understandable under the circumstances. But why didn't he admit what happened to Mr. Blott?"

"You know kids, Ded. He was probably terribly embarrassed at having made such a huge error. And I, hothead that I am, never remembered to come back and pay for everything. Molly was too angry at me to notice either."

"Could you have afforded it, Mr. Weasley?" Hermione murmured gently.

"No, of course not. We were actually planning to just get one set of Lockheart's books and have the children share. But now, with my new job, I'm happy to say I will be able to make things right...especially if Fred and George chip in for their own set. Come on, Ded, and bring your sister. We're going to Flourish and Blotts right now."

They were halfway to the door when Dung stopped them. "Wha' about Brutey?"

"Bring him along," said Arthur. "I'm sure Nurse Rechidd will give me custody for a short time. She seemed rather uncomfortable having a Ministry official here in the first place. We'll stop in at the *Prophet* offices and you can tell your story..."

Hermione called after him as he strode to the exit. "There's someone else we have to rescue from this place, Mr. Weasley..."

"Who's that?"

"Madam Selleca Prod." Hermione told them all the poor cat-lover's story.

"Oh my," said Arthur. "I'll get Ron and the twins to 'fess up at the Ministry. That'll get her a pardon. Where is she?"

Hermione led him to the room which held the hated so-called 'cures'. It was locked, but Arthur opened it easily with an *Alohomora*. Behind it they discovered Nurse Rechidd and Healer Sticks, hastily dressing a damp looking witch, Madam Prod. The gill-slits in her neck had disappeared, and she looked conscious, if a bit glazed over. Behind her, several very muddy, smelly men were being cursorily cleaned and clothed by the attendants.

"Madam Prod," said Arthur in his most authoritative voice, "come with me." Sticks and Rechidd just stood there, their mouths hanging open. "And you two," he thundered, "had better clean this place up if you don't want my office coming down on you with all the force of Ministry justice."

He stood aside to allow the other inmates to exit with some dignity, then offered Madam Prod his arm, escorted her through, and shut the door behind him.

Arthur did another opening charm on the main door and ushered his charges out into the hallway. "Is that everybody?"

Hermione saw Sirius hovering over them all, beaming and nodding furiously. "Yes," she said.

"Good. We're going to Apparate to the bookstore now, Hermione, then the news office, then the Ministry. Thanks to you, all these folks will have their lives returned to them. Come with us, won't you?"

"I can't just now, but if you need someone to explain about the electricity, I'll try to..."

"That's all right. As your note said, any Muggle Fizzicks text will explain it." Arthur put his arm about Madam Prod, and Dung and Dedalus did the same for their charges, although Dung could only manage a fistful of his large friend's sleeve. They all Apparated out, and Hermione smiled.

Her smile changed to a frown as she heard a rumbling and whooshing sound behind her. She turned in time to see the stream of water in the trough that ran parallel to the stairs transformed into a churning, frothing cascade. At the bottom, it overflowed in a great wave, which demolished the wall next to the guard's station. She watched in awe as it pounded and drenched Healer Sticks and Nurse Rechidd and the two attendants and carried them into the sunken pool. Its force shattered the water tank and scoured the pool of filth. A large hole opened in the opposite wall, and the slimy muck was washed through it, leaving three wizards and one witch...all smelly, soggy, and indignant...in its center.

She turned away, chuckling to herself, and saw Sirius and James, sitting on the stairs together, the light of *mischief managed* in their eyes.

22. Scrl fr Erchths Kncktrn Ally

Hermione has a guardian angel. Not James, not Sirius.

"What?!" shouted Reginald, the Death of Poets.

"I want you to go with the girl and the ghost on this one," said Death calmly from his Bone Throne.

Reginald could not believe his ears. "Whatever for? I'm no gumshoe."

"I know, but something bothers me about this James Potter."

"You said yourself, he's much more mature than Black..."

"I was wrong. Flooding that hospital's mental ward was not the act of a rational being. He nearly caused three unscheduled drownings that day. And besides, he's from the Beyond. I have no control over him. Sirius, at least, I could threaten a bit."

"Oh," said Reginald. "But why me?"

"Well, it'd be such a nice change... for all of us. You've never been to Knockturn Alley, have you?"

"Knockturn Alley? Is that where they're going?"

"Yes."

Reg shuddered.

"What's the matter?"

"It's not very... well... aesthetic."

"Unless you include old Gerda Gibbet who used to sell rhyming hexes at two a penny." Death waxed nostalgic. "My favorite of hers was..."

"Please, don't."

"...'Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow...'"

"Stop!" groaned Reginald, wincing.

"She was humming that one when her heart gave out."

"I wouldn't know. I wasn't there, but I do recall, her meter was execrable."

"And her spells hardly ever worked, but she was an entertaining old gal, all the same." Death gnawed absently on a finger bone. It sounded like chalk against a blackboard.

Reginald refused to let it get to him. "Granted. But how can I help these other two... the girl and the ghost? I'd just get in the way."

"I didn't say you have to get in on the action. I just want you to observe their actions and bring me a report afterwards. If they put a toe out of line, I'll want to know about it, chapter and verse."

"Oh, all right." Reg looked about to go into a deep sulk.

Death decided to throw him a bone, figuratively, of course. "You could make a poem of it."

"Mmm?"

"You know, a kind of epic."

"What's epochal about a tiresome student and a mischief-making spirit traipsing about a hole like Knockturn Alley?"

"Methinks they're going to have quite an adventure there."

Reg brightened. "Oh? Dragons and such?"

"Not exactly, but they'll be meeting some rather nasty souls."

"Oh." The Death of Poets pursed already razor-thin lips. "There could be something in it, I suppose."

"You could make it so."

"Yes, I suppose I might."

"Good. Here are your directions. Get on with it."

"Now?"

"Yes, now. There's a good boy."

Reginald, the Death of Poets looked at his vastly older counterpart and blinked. Then he took the bit of paper he was offered, smoothed his parti-colored houppeland and huffed off in the direction of the nearest wormhole. As he did, another figure, elderly but robust, came up behind the Bone Throne.

"Vat vas dat all about?"

"Oh, Karkarov, there you are. I've sent Reg off."

"Goot. Now can ve go find my brudder?"

"Yes, I believe I've located Igor...in a most unlikely place. But ingenious, I must admit. You said you wanted to put the wind up him?"

"Vell, yes. Giff him da mickey mouse, ass you say. It iss, after all, his fault dat I'm here and he's still dere. I tolt him und tolt him he shouldn't mess vit dat Dark Lord, but would he lissen to me? Nyet!"

"You realize I'm doing you a favor here."

"Da, und I will be eternally grateful...."

"Grateful enough to put in a good word for me with the higher-ups when you get to the Beyond?"

"Ven vill dat be?"

"Just a few weeks more. You were supposed to die in mid-August from a Gagging Hex in the Annual Krepetnikov Free-For-All."

"Hmmpf...I von dat contest tree...no four times. Hokey dokey, ven I get to St. Peter, I'll say dat you ver a most gracious host."

"Good, and tell him I'm in sore need of a vacation, will you?" He picked up his scythe. "Darn, I just had a nasty thought!"

"Vich iss?"

"What if he likes her?"

"Who?"

"Reg and this Hermaphrody Granger, or whatever her name is."

"Huh! Not dat vun. He's too stuck on hisself to haf a care for any lowly human."

"I don't know. Remember Elizabeth Barrett Browning? No, that was before your time. But Granger and Reg...they're an awful lot alike."

"How's dat?"

"Sort of... you know... prissy and perfectionistic and annoyingly know-it-all. They'll get to talking about some hifalutin nonsense, and that list'll never get finished. She might even decide she likes him better than Sirius. But no, he wouldn't risk talking to her. He knows the Law...."

~*~

I can't figure out this next assignment, James," said Hermione, hunched over Dumbledore's list. "I get the Knockturn Alley part, but who or what is 'Erchths'?"

Gesundheit! the ghost of James Potter wished her cheerfully as he slid off his perch over the lintel of her chamber door. He liked playing with the silken curtains that framed the entry. They reminded him of Lily: elusive, but oh so lithe and lovely.... *Erechthys. I've met her. She's a denizen of the Alley, famed for her ability to call up the spirits of the dead.*

"How do you come to know her?"

Eh... once upon a time she operated a bit of a smuggling operation on the side. Specializing in enchanted maps and such. He pointed a nebulous finger at the script, and it penetrated the parchment. *Let's see...you have to go to Knockturn Alley, find Erechthys and give her a 'scl'. What's a 'scl'? A squirrel, do you think?*

"Yes, that's just what she'd want," Hermione said sarcastically. "No... it's more likely a scroll, don't you think? But where..."

The moment James' ethereal substance had penetrated the page, it started to glow, though faintly at first. Now the parchment flared up, and something dropped off it, sparkling. Hermione tried to catch the object, but it passed right through her hands, like water. James snatched it up. It was, of course, a scroll. *A gift from the Headmaster, do you think?*

"I suppose he never heard of paper clips," said Hermione, "but why couldn't I hold onto it?"

Must be my soft and gentle touch, said James. *No, it seems to be made of some ethereal substance, just like us spirits.* He unrolled it and held it up for her to see.

There were three short lines and one long one at the bottom, all in a primitive rune-form, which she translated easily:

Merope Riddle

Bartimaeus Crouch, Sr.

Regulus Black

Each has a burning question to ask. You must answer them truthfully, but keep your mouth sealed otherwise.

"Hmm," Hermione mused, "all these people are dead. I wonder if Erechthys is supposed to make them appear to us."

Makes sense, said James, *and you have to tell each one something they want to know."*

"That's scary," she said. "Suppose I don't know the answer."

Just say so. The truth is all, remember?

"What do you think it means to keep my mouth sealed?"

Maybe it's like with that old bible story about Lot and his wife: only this time, if you open your mouth, you turn into a pillow of salt.

"That's 'pillar,' James."

Oh. I thought Lily said 'pillow.' Well, are you up for this?

"As long as you've got my back."

Always.

As they Apparated out, they did not notice a parti-colored figure trailing after them, pen and pad in hand.

~*~

"You're back early, Reg," thundered Death at his colleague. "I haven't even had a chance to finish my novel."

Reginald, the Death of Poets, squeaked apologetically, "I got the whole story...in verse. I used your favorite: iambic pentameter. It flows rather well, if I do say so."

"All right," Death grumbled, settling himself on his Bone Throne. "Report."

Reginald took out his pad, cleared his throat, and began:

"Said James, as he perused the glowing parchment.

"Our next assignment lies down Knockturn Alley.'

"Hermione feared the place's reputation,

"But flew with him to its debased environs.

"And stopped before its dark and dirty entrance."

Reg thought back to his first sight of her: *a very ordinary girl with scraggy brown hair, eyes like two raisins stuck in a pudding, skin almost gray in the ugly twilight of the Alley. A very dull person, though her conversation with Potter had evinced signs of intelligence. Her face looked drawn with worry.* He cleared his throat and went on.

"But from the heavens plunged a host of riders

"On broomsticks and, though headless, raised her spirits.

"She recognized Patrick Delaney-Podmore.

"And curtsayed, greeting him and grinning broadly,

"What brings you, sir, to this ill-favored crossroads?"

He'd had a sudden, indiscreet urge to shield her, weak creature that she was, from these ruffians. The Headless Hunt were a bunch of well-bred snobs he'd run into a couple of times before. Their number included Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, a decent poet. Too bad he'd been a traitor as well....

"Sir Pat replied, an eye to her dark beauty,

"We've challenged Valk'ries to a game of Quidditch,

"But need a Seeker of James Potter's prowess.'

"But James replied, 'I am not free to help you.'

"He waved the scroll as proof of his first duty."

He hadn't liked the way Podmore frankly leered at the girl, strutting and flaunting his codpiece, showing all his teeth like the proverbial Cheshire cat. Challenged Valkyries indeed! As if Brunnhilde would even look at that party of snivelling sots. More likely they were having a pick-up game with that group of ghouls that lounged about St. Paul's....

"At that, Sir Patrick snatched the glowing object,

"Ensnconced it in his belt and cried, 'Come get it.'

"He made off, laughing, with his men t'wards heaven,

"And James pursued them, longing for adventure,

"Rememb'ring youth, forgetting fair Hermione."

Death was right. James Potter was at bottom an irresponsible type, leaving the girl like that to the uncertain mercies of Knockturn Alley, not thinking of the consequences. Surely the scroll itself wasn't that important. But Potter had been piqued by the Hunt's macho swagger. There she was now, all alone. He'd prayed...how unlike him...that she'd be all right....

"Fatigue warred with Hermione's deep foreboding.

"She sank onto a bench inside the Alley.

"Now in the gloom, she saw three hags approaching,

"Snakes, amber-eyed, writhed at their necks and torsos.

"So like the Basilisk that once benumbed her."

He'd so wanted to intervene, but the laws of the Styx forbade it. Lord Death could make things awfully difficult for him, if he had a mind, but for a moment Reginald didn't care about that. Her face looked stricken and so lonely. He had to do something....

"The trio must have sensed her pain and panic.

"For now they brandished those night-marish vipers,

"With fangs envenomed, mercilessly lunging.

"As they closed in, she felt the fetid vapors,

"Of menses, verdigris, and noisome canker."

In a panic, he zoomed out into the sunshine of Diagon alley, looking for help. There, he saw a solitary witch scowling at plums in a bin.

"These are overripe, Mrs. Thatcher," said the witch, "I'll give you two sickles the dozen, no more."

The shopkeeper spluttered in response, "But Headmistress..."

The tall witch transfixed her with a beady eye, and the bravado leaked right out of Mrs. Thatcher. "Deliver the whole gross to Hogwarts posthaste," the witch commanded.

Just the sort of person Reg was looking for. He transformed himself into a ragged urchin. "Oi, Mistress," he shouted. "And didn't I just see one of your fyv'rits down Knockturn Alley, buyin' 'rumpent fluid orf a smuggler?"

She didn't even look at him, but strode immediately to the opening.

"Just then, a voice behind them stopped their onslaught.

"A gray-cloaked figure, tall, with bristling menace,

"McGonagall it was, in righteous umbrage,

"Rebuked in rich contralto those three Furies.

"I know you, Meg, Mad Alice, Tissie Keddle."

Back in his clean, comfortable houppeland, Reg had breathed a sigh of relief as he watched Minerva McGonagall go at the three hags. Human women were so very good at inflicting pain upon members of their own sex.

"I will not have you harassing my student!"

"She conjured Dragon-fire to speed them onward,

"Embossing wrinkled flesh with red-hot embers,

"And through the sticky swing door of a tavern.

"Then asked, 'Miss Granger, why come to this ghetto?'"

That witch certainly knew her hexes. A healthy dose of fire and brimstone drove the three hags, hair aflame and shrieking, into a nearby public house.

"She told her mentor all she was permitted,

"That James was with her on a righteous errand,

"But he had left her to retrieve their fortune,

"From thieving, but gallant and well-dressed sportsmen.

"She knew not where their perfidy would lead him."

The poor child looked just about beat as she floundered about trying to tell her Head just enough, but not too much. "I have this errand, Headmistress," she'd quavered. "James Potter's helping me."

"James Potter?" thundered Minerva McGonagall.

"His ghost," replied Hermione. "I know it sounds unbelievable, but we have to deliver this scroll to a witch in the Alley, and some other ghosts came and stole it..."

The Headmistress interrupted her, "...and James just had to fly off half-cocked and get it back. And leave you here to fend for yourself. How noble of him."

"Minerva raised her wand and sent a dove out,

"Ensorcelled to escort the miscreant earthward.

"A moment later James appeared beside them,

"The scroll he clutched like any Snitch he'd captured,

"But Scottish Min spoke to him rather sternly."

He'd almost felt sorry for Potter, who at the end of her scathing lecture, looked to have shrunk a good three inches. She'd called him just about every nasty Scottish epithet in her arsenal, including a few Reg had never heard before. But what really got to him was the way the Headmistress trusted this girl. Didn't question her further, just nodded and turned on her heel when she'd finished reducing Potter's ego to ashes.

"The two continued down the dismal Alley,

"And James, much chastened, called to mind their challenge.

"This scroll we must deliver to Erechthys,

"Necromancer and dabbler in the Dark Arts.

"She is not kind, but wise in spirit-knowledge."

He'd never met Erechthys, but knew her by reputation. Spirit conjurers were a dying race, and she the last of the best of them, it was said.

"She will conjure for you three restless spirits.

"Whose names are rune-encrypted on the parchment.
"When each appears, t'will ask of you a question.
"You must within your knowledge answer truly,
"Then close your mouth and speak no more,' he cautioned."

Reg knew well what that last warning portended. Dementors! He'd sensed them flitting around over the rooftops. And they were hungry.

"Hermione then re-read the glowing parchment.
"Can you protect me from whatever happens?"
"She asked in fear. 'I do not know,' he muttered.
"For as you saw with Podmore's Headless Hunters,
"I am not equal to these older spirits."

The girl's heart sped up in terror, sending a dark flush to her cheeks, but Reg found Potter's admission of frailty strangely comforting. Surely a man who knew his weaknesses would be a more reliable paladin than one who was nought but brag and blather.

"They found the old necromancer's apartment.
"And handed her the scroll with explanations.
"How this girl, lowly student, had to answer
"The curiosity of these three spirits,
"To know what they could not see through the Veil."

The die was cast. Reg could only watch and pray that she would say the right thing. Not a hopeful thought. But then he didn't know her very well.

"This trio are in thrall to their ambitions,'
"Erechthys said, 'And seek the peace of closure.
"But know that in their present state they cannot,
"Divine the present, though they see the future.
"They seek such knowledge questioning the living."

He knew well this part of the law. The denizens of the lower levels of hell could not see what their offspring were currently doing, though they were constantly tormented with the far-reaching results of those actions.

"They also are on borrowed time; their passions
"Must soon be neutralized or they'll be prey to
"Dementors, which now hover thickly o'er us.
"So quickly can they sense and suck such yearnings!
"Take care that this harsh fate should not befall you."

Yes, the Dementors were even now converging on the house. He felt their hunger though he was not touched by it. The girl was, however. He saw her quail, then draw herself up, resolutely. Brave child, he thought.

"Erechthys raised her wand of knotted hemlock.
"Per te si va ne l'eterno dolore!
"A door appeared in air. It wavered gently,
"And forth she called the first of three grave spirits:
"Merope Riddle, come and ask your question."

Her quoting of the verse from Dante's Inferno gave him pause. "Abandon hope, you who enter here." Was this a warning of the risk of exposure to Dementors the three souls were taking on reentering the world? Or did Erechthys simply divine from her vast experience that nothing the girl could tell them about their families would bring them comfort?

"A shade of slightest form slid through the portal.
"Cursed with bowed legs, flat chest, a wand'ring eyeball.
"I fell for one whose form outshone his station,
"A Muggle he, and rich in mundane fortune.
"He shunned me for my ugliness and birthright."

He shuddered at her deformity, but more at the bitterness in the voice retelling the story.

"I tricked him to conceive a child of passion,

"But neither babe nor lust could thaw his coldness,

"I died in pain of childbirth cursing Riddle.

"Tell me how fares my babe, my little orphan?"

"Hermione quelled her rancor with pure pity."

He sensed the girl's repugnance, not at the ghost's homeliness but at something else only she could see....

"Your son is powerful; he killed his sire.

"And sweeps mixed-breeds before him like a flood-tide."

"I'll be aveng-ed now!" the shade crowed, gloating.

"His wounds and mine will never be scabbed over

"Until the roads run red with Muggle life-blood."

Ah yes...Voldemort. How Death ranted about his cheats. And this vengeful woman was the demon's mother....

"Hermione watched the ghostess swell with fury.

"When from around the portal, a Dementor

"Swooped down on the poor hag and quaffed her essence.

"Hermione nearly fainted from its closeness,

"But sturdy, wise Erechthys fed her chocolate."

He gained respect for the old conjurer that day. They called her a hard bargainer and cold as a yeti's tits, but she treated the girl almost like a daughter....

"Come forth, old Barty Crouch, and pose your question.'

"A fading shade formed in the Portal, frowning.

"Where is my son, that curs-ed, sneaking demon?"

"He killed me in the guise of an old Auror.

"He never could have otherwise got round me."

He remembered when Death had taken this one. Much miffed Bartimaeus Crouch, Senior had been at not going straight to the Elysian fields. Thought himself a hero, he did. But he'd done everything out of vaunting ambition, which cancelled out his virtuous acts in the eyes of the greater powers....

"The girl cried, 'He's been swallowed by Dementors!'

"But Barty crowed, 'A fitting antidote to

"Suck out that poison from my family's blood-line.'

"His triumph was cut short as two Dementors

"Each seized an arm and shared his soul between them."

He could see that these answers gave the girl much pain. She must have a deep soul to go with those eyes.

"Hermione barely crammed some chocolatl

"Into her mouth before the next shade entered,

"Familiar in his face and in his bearing.

"Great gods, it's Sirius,' she cried, despairing.

"What's happened here? Did he not pass his testing?"

This threw Reg for a bit, but then he saw the difference in the lines about the mouth of this shade. No humor here, like in the Sirius Black he knew and loathed, just hard-bitten zeal....

"Erechthys said,'No. Regulus, his brother.'

"She chided him, who looked so like the other:

"Proud fool, you joined the Dark Lord, seeking glory,

"Then quit his death-squad though sworn to support them.

"For that you paid the ultimate in suffering."

He had heard about this boy's death too. Some kind of exotic poison in a cave somewhere....

"The shade replied, 'I have my dues paid forthwith.

"No man shall hear the tale of my redemption

"Save from my faithful servant, long reviled.

"To hear it fully, you must seek his grim den,

"Hard by stewpots and pans of polished metal."

Reg couldn't figure that part out. Must be the family cook. He was rather pleased to note that the girl didn't get it either from the bewilderment in her eyes. Or was she merely recovering from her earlier mistake?

"She asked, 'What question have you for the living?'

"His voice was like a harsh wind dried by deserts.

"What can you tell me of my brother, Sirius?

"I heard a rumor he was killed in action,

"But I don't see him here among the suffering."

Ah yes, that always got them. There were any number of ways a soul could avoid going into the Beyond, but only Reg and Death knew all of them....

"Hermione had to give the truthful answer,

"Although it likely would destroy him also.

"Your brother died defending his dear godson,

"The Dark Lord's nemesis, brave Harry Potter,

"And now he mourns the loss of their new friendship."

That confession got to Reg. He'd never thought of Sirius Black as the type who could sacrifice or mourn for anyone, but if Hermione said so....

"My poor brave brother,' Regulus responded.

"He warned me pure-blood vanity's a death-trap.

"I thought him just a coward for his pity.

"Oh how I hope some day that he'll forgive me.'

"Despairing thoughts showed whitely on his visage."

They cared about each other, these two brothers, though so unlike, he was sure of it.

"And suddenly out from behind Hermione,

"Strode Sirius his brother to embrace him.

"An instant later they were both ascending,

"But from behind the portal a Dementor,

"Came, sucking soundlessly on the thin ether."

He almost screamed then. But he could do nothing to help her....

"It headed for Hermione in a heart-beat.

"If it could not have Pure-blood, why not Mudblood?

"Its bellows of a mouth stuck out obscenely.

"She tried to say the saving incantation,

"Her 'Expecto patronum,' faltered weakly."

"Then all ablaze, the figure of a white stag,

"Leaped over her and rapped the Demon soundly.

"It lifted her and carried her to safety.

"I cannot best my fellow ghosts,' James chortled,

"But I can beat Dementors with no trouble."

He finished the piece and bowed. He felt drained.

"Good," said Death, applauding his effort. "And they stuck to the rules. Though the Dementors did not, I think. I'll have to look into that. I believe there's no soul-feeding

allowed once the spirit has passed over. They may just have to cough up those little titbits. And speaking of rules, Reg, did you not break the Rule of Silence when you spoke to the Headmistress?"

"Erm, well, technically, it wasn't me, but a street urchin..."

"That reasoning will get you precisely nowhere with the Powers Above."

"Um...well...what do I have to do?"

"It's out of my hands. I imagine you'll have to do some extra duty as a punishment."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, say, take over for me while I go on vacation."

Reg looked horrified. "When will that happen?"

"In a couple of months, I hope."

"How long a vacation?"

"A couple of eons...I hope."

23. Hlp RL gt ovr SBs dth

Chapter 23 of 29

Yet another task, to help an old friend and mentor.

23. Hlp RL gt ovr SBs dth

Safe back in her marble gaol, Hermione made tea while James contented himself with studying a crowded frieze circling the ceiling. It seemed to be populated with drunken men and women and cloven-hooved freaks, all running after some fat fellow on a goat.

Didn't anyone wear clothes back then? he muttered, then floated down behind her, as the pursuit theme reminded him of something. *Hermione, did you know Lord Death sent someone to follow us in Knockturn Alley?*

Hermione froze. "He did? Who?"

Fellow in ridiculous multi-colored robes. He sort of looked like one of those medieval clowns... what do you call'em?

"A medieval clown? You mean... a fool?"

"Right. He did look a few witches short of a coven. Erechthys clued me in about it. She knows everything that goes on in the Underworld.

"Hmm... that must be Reg. Reginald."

You know him?

"Sirius described him to me once. He helps dead poets pass over. He lives with Lord Death too. Apparently, he's an artistic sort and not exactly Sirius' favorite. You say he followed us? I didn't notice anything."

He may have been invisible to you, and you were rather preoccupied.

She frowned. "I suppose I was. Oh, James, I have to thank you for saving me there at the end."

No thanks needed. I was only making up for my earlier idiocy. I don't know what got into me, leaving you like that. The mere mention of Quidditch just drives me insane.

"But you were only trying to retrieve the scroll--"

Don't make excuses for me. All this time, since I passed over, I've just been dying to get out on the pitch again, and Sir Podmore just pushed all the right buttons.

"Don't you all... 'do sports' in the Beyond?"

We're allowed, but I can't seem to get anyone interested.

"Oh. Well, it's a good thing Professor McGonagall showed up."

To give me a well-deserved tongue-lashing. That was no coincidence. It was actually that fellow Reginald's doing.

"Really? How do you know that?"

I saw them while I was flying about. Podmore tried the old Wronski Feint on me early on, and we ended up buzzing customers in Diagonally Alley for a time. The headmistress was out shopping, and the court jester appeared to her as a mouthy street urchin. He must have got her to chase him into Knockturn Alley.

"That was clever of him. You should tell Sirius that when you see him. He really thinks Reg is no use to anyone. Say, maybe when Sirius is officially dead, you can play Quidditch with him."

He brightened. *That's a thought. Uh, do you miss him much?*

Hermione thought about it for a moment. "I do, rather. We worked well together even though we didn't always agree on methods. Will he be coming back to help us, do you think?"

James shrugged. *It's up to him. His testing is almost over.*

Hermione finished making the tea, conjured a dishful of biscuits, and sat down on her couch. "He is a hard person to figure out. When he was alive, he always seemed so self-centered and impulsive, but I know he cared for Harry. He risked his life more than once to help him. And Harry misses him terribly."

Yes. You know, there's another person who is missing Sirius a great deal more than he lets on.

"Who?"

Remus Lupin.

"I didn't realize that. He's like the last Marauder standing, isn't he?"

Yes. Did you happen to look at the next item on Dumbledore's list?

"Not yet."

It involves Moony, I mean Professor Lupin.

"I know who you mean." She smiled at him shyly. "And Sirius was Padfoot, and you were Prongs."

He beamed back at her, then turned grim. *Hermione, I don't think Remus ever really came to terms with Sirius' death.*

"Why do you say that?"

I heard, when he got word of it, that he never cried at all. Never said a word. Just walked away.

"You think he suppressed his grief."

James nodded. *They were very close, you know. Like brothers.*

"Really? I thought you and Sirius--"

"Oh, we had a kind of joking friendship, but he and Remus shared a sympathy of each other's situation, both being outcasts of a sort."

"You mean Remus being a werewolf, and Sirius being... a Gryffindor?"

"Yes, being rejected by others can generate a genuine brotherly bond. I believe the reason Sirius chose a dog as his avatar was so that he could understand lycanthropy a little better.

"It was dangerous for him, wasn't it? I mean, as a stag, you could outrun a werewolf, and a rat could hide relatively easily, but the dog would be too big, too slow. He could have gotten his throat torn out."

And Sirius couldn't be sure the bite of the wolf wouldn't change him into a lycan too.

Hermione almost choked on her tea. "What?" she sputtered.

There was no book in the library that we could find to answer that question definitively. I mean, we knew that animals are not affected by a werewolf's bite, but people in the guise of animals? We didn't know for sure.

"That was very brave... of all of you--"

James snorted. *Some would call it stupid.*

"I suppose. One thing's for certain: it can't be healthy for Professor Lupin to bury his sorrow like that."

He's shared it with no one so far as we know. Not even Tonks. And Sirius told me that the assignment to spy on other werewolves was Remus' own idea. I think Dumbledore must have realized he was getting too isolated. Look here. He pointed to the Headmaster's list, which was lying on the table.

Hermione deciphered the next item: "Help RL--that's Remus--get over SB's death." But don't you think Tonks would be the best person to help him?"

Take it from me, Hermione. Men don't like to open up about their... erm... relationships with other men to their girl friends. In fact, I think it might partly be Sirius' death that's kept him from asking her to marry him.

Hermione gaped at him. "Does he feel that way, do you think? That's wonderful! But why wouldn't he ask her?"

James sighed. *Knowing my exasperatingly unselfish friend the way I do, he probably doesn't want to burden her with his pain. When you ask someone to spend the rest of their life with you, it means sharing a lot of things, including the bad stuff. No, someone has to get him to open up and resolve those feelings before he'll even think of proposing to Tonks.* He stared at her intently.

"You mean me? But, James, I can't just go up to a teacher and start grilling him about his personal problems. And I've got to be the worst possible person for the job. Ron is always telling me I'm way too blunt--"

Blunt yes, but you're sensitive too. You care about Remus, and your innate honesty won't let him hide from the truth. That's the important thing.

~*~

The next morning, they Apparated out. Hermione still was not sure what she would say to her old Defense teacher, even after a decent night's sleep.

As they materialized, Hermione goggled. They were standing in front of Grimmauld Place. "This is where he's staying?"

James nodded. *Alone.*

"Brrr! That can't be healthy. How do I begin? I suppose I could interview him--"

How's that?

"Let me explain. When I was starting a self-help group for house-elves, I wrote an article about it that I sent to *Witches' Weekly*."

And they rejected it.

"No, they printed it in their humor section. The editor thought it was a parody. But I could tell Professor Lupin I wanted to interview him about the plight of werewolves...."

Hmm... I don't know....

"... or, I could ask him about a problem I'm having with some classwork."

Are you?

"No."

Hermione, let me clue you: honesty is always the best policy with lycans. They are in a state of permanent paranoia as it is, and all their senses are primed to detect trickery.

"All right. I'll just be myself. Erm... why is he living here, of all places?"

Apparently, there's a growing contingent of werewolves in the heart of London, and as you know, he's volunteered to spy on them.

"Yes, it's terrible."

It's a harsh responsibility my friend has taken on, Hermione. And he's so conscience-stricken at the best of times, I can't imagine what the experience is doing to him at this point.

~*~

Hermione rang the doorbell. After a few moments, her favorite Defense teacher answered. His face looked longer and thinner than ever. He was imperfectly shaved and smelled of some strong chemical odor.

"Hermione, what are you doing here?" There was apprehension in his voice. "Is Harry--are the Weasleys--is everything all right?"

"Never better," she said with forced heartiness. "They're getting ready for the wedding, you know."

His mouth sagged.

"You'll be able to come, won't you?" she chirped.

"I'll try," he mumbled, looking past her out the door. "But wait a minute, I'd better give you the test. Did you ever hurt a teacher in my presence?"

"Never! Oh... erm... there was that time I knocked Professor Snape out in the Shrieking Shack...."

"You pass. Now give me one."

"Erm... who else was in the Shack that night with us?"

"Harry, Ron, Peter--as the little rat he is--and Sirius."

"Perfect," she said and hastened to explain her visit. "I wanted to see how you were, Professor. No one's heard from you in a while--"

"I've been away on Order business." He led the way upstairs and into the drawing room. "How did you know where I was?"

"Heh... where else would you be? Say, I remember this room. It looks different. Did you do something to it?"

"Didn't need to. You all cleaned it pretty thoroughly when you were last here."

I remember. The Doxies in the curtains..."

"That's right, and all those nasty little knickknacks. I did add some bookshelves, so I had to enlarge it a little."

Hermione pounced on this nicely neutral topic. "Ooo, Expansions! That's Advanced Transfiguration, isn't it?"

"Mmm-hm. Can I get you something to drink?"

"I'm fine, but perhaps you should have something. You look a little--"

"Sick?"

"No, a bit pale is all." She gave a nervous little cough. "I guess it's safe to sit on the couch."

"Yes, I often fall asleep on it at night, reading. It hasn't swallowed me up yet."

She took that as a joke and laughed. "What are you studying right now, Professor?" she asked as she sat down. She picked up a slim volume from a side table and read out the title, "*Nature's Nobility, A Wizarding Genealogy*."

He cleared his throat. "Ehm, yes, I found myself wanting to understand the Pure-Blood mentality. It's so different from what I was brought up on."

"I'll bet this is from the library here, isn't it?"

He nodded.

Her eyes wandered about the room to the Black Family Tree and its motto:*Toujours Pur*. "It must have been hard--growing up with all that prejudice."

"Actually, I don't think that children like, say, Andromeda Black have a clue how warped their family's thinking is until they get out into the larger world." He picked up the book and returned it to its space on a shelf behind the couch.

"That's true," said Hermione into the silence. "What children grow up with is reality for them. Like, before I knew there was a magical world, I thought I was... well... just... weird. It must come as a shock to people like the Blacks to get to Hogwarts and find out that things are quite different from what they've been taught."

"That Muggleborns aren't all slobbering Neanderthals? I don't think they're all that surprised actually."

She slid the subject of her visit into the conversation, quite deftly she thought. "So first year went smoothly... for Sirius I mean?"

"Sirius? I do remember his mother making a bit of a fuss out of his not getting into Slytherin House."

"Did that worry him?"

"Got his back up, rather. Old Mrs. Black knew how to yank his chain."

"What did his parents think about his choice of friends?"

"It was all right for him to be seen with James. The Potter bloodline is relatively pure, but my parents were Muggle-borns." He frowned and walked to a window at the back of the room.

"Did he hate his family for it?" she called after him.

He mumbled something she couldn't quite catch.

She chattered on. "He wanted to be loyal to them, I suppose." She cast about for something else to say, but she couldn't think of anything that wouldn't sound like badgering.

She heard a creaking of floorboards and looked up. Remus was standing over her, his eyes soft. "I do remember once when James called Regulus a paucy little twit with a silver wand up his nose," his mouth quirked at the memory, "Sirius got really mad and tried to Body-Bind him."

"So he cared about his brother--"

There came a series of loud scrabbling noises overhead.

"What's that?" Hermione asked, both irritated and relieved at the interruption. "It sounds like the ghoul in the Weasleys' attic."

"Oops, it's Buckbeak, I'm afraid. It's feeding time. This'll only take a few minutes." He strode to the door.

"Can I go with you?" she asked, jumping up. "I haven't seen Beaky in a while."

"Sure, come on along. Just let me get his daily ration." Remus pointed his wand down the stairs and spoke crisply, "*Accio*, bucket of rats." Hermione followed him up the next flight of steps. "Actually," he explained, "I'm just keeping him for a bit while Hagrid finishes up some work for the Order."

Buckbeak met them at the door and didn't even wait for the usual bowing and scraping, but just stuck his head out with a glad little clucking sound so Hermione could pat it.

"He looks fit," she said as she stroked his throat. "Has he been out at all?"

Remus gave Buckbeak a small rodent and pointed to a set of French doors behind the hippogriff which gave out onto a balcony. "I exercised him last night. He gave me a bit of a scare when he went into a dive over the river."

"You won't miss him when he goes then."

"Oh, but I will. He's a decent house guest actually, and not too messy. Even though, as you heard, he can make quite a racket. Keeps me from getting too..." his voice trailed off, and he stared into the distance after it.

Hermione fought to keep the conversation going. "Speaking of animals, Crookshanks doing quite well."

"Really?"

"Yes, he's become quite the ladies' man." She prattled on, "There were these two Persians in Ravenclaw that he followed around last year. Whenever he went missing, I knew just where to look." She took over tossing smelly morsels to Buckbeak while Remus Scourgified the room and Banished droppings and regurgitated animal parts. They finished feeding the feisty hippogriff and walked back downstairs.

"Did you have pets when you were a boy?" Hermione asked.

"No, the wolf was as much as my family could handle, and anyway it would have been impossible to keep a pet after I was bitten."

"What do you mean 'impossible'?"

"Animals smell the predator in me, you know, and it drives them crazy."

"Really? Then why didn't Crookshanks have a bad reaction to you?"

"That cat of yours is a very special animal. I think he instinctively recognizes good will in a person."

Hermione grimaced. "I suppose that's why he never got along with Ron."

"Ron Weasley?"

"Yes." She might have pursued the subject of Ron with this most understanding of her teachers, but the day was getting old, and she still had not helped relieve the professor of his burden of sorrow. And the last thing she wanted to do was add her own troubles to his.

They sat down in the drawing room, and Hermione Conjured a tray with all the accoutrements for an afternoon tea. The professor really did look in need of nourishment. And she needed to put their conversation back on track, however uncomfortable it made both of them. A strong cup of Darjeeling would help stiffen her backbone.

She ventured, "Sirius told us Crookshanks was the first real friend he made after he got out of Azkaban. I think that's interesting, considering that his Animagus form was a dog." She *Aguamentied* water into the teapot and commanded it to boil.

Remus watched her motions, apparently fascinated by his former student's deft wandwork. "Mmm-hmmm," was all he said.

She asked hesitantly, "Did you ever think that his choice of an avatar was somehow deliberate?"

He looked at her sharply. "What do you mean?"

"An attempt to know a friend better?" she said shyly.

"You mean me?"

She nodded.

"I never thought of it that way," he said slowly, "but you could be right."

"And a try at understanding the friend's troubles."

"How's that?"

"As the big black dog, Sirius could get to know the Wolf in you."

"You mean the Wolf's proclivities."

"Well, the doggy elements, you know, the playfulness, the lack of... erm... control...."

"The lack, yes," he muttered, "and the hunger."

"Yes, dogs are always wanting a treat, aren't they?" She was stirring her tea, ever faster and more haphazardly. The spoon clanked against the china, and now the liquid was slopping over the sides of the cup.

He looked at her a moment. There was something in his face, reminiscent of that night in the dark by the Whomping Willow with Harry and Sirius and Ron, just before he changed. Anger it was, or something equally wild and dangerous. He spoke slowly, his voice rising with every word. "I don't mean kibble, Hermione. But you know that, don't you?" He seized her hand and stared into her eyes. There was a slash of red in the pupils, a ragged rent that gave her a glimpse into his overheated soul. "I'm talking about the longing for blood, the feeling of raw nature in your veins, of lusts unleashed, of things you dare not do but must. Oh, gods!"

She gasped and pulled away from him. He bowed his head and whispered, "I'm sorry, I haven't talked... or thought about things like that... a long time... and for good reason obviously..."

She quickly mixed a cup of steaming hot tea, fortified with cream and sugar, and slid it over to him. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

He took the cup in his hands. "You're right, Hermione. Sirius knew me better than any anyone. I could talk to him."

"He was a good friend."

"The best. Sometimes I wish he were still here, so we could talk about... what I'm doing now...."

"Your assignment?"

He looked at her, alarmed. "How did you know about that?"

"Erm... well, actually, I don't know much about it. I just heard that you were doing something secret and important to the Order."

"Important? I wonder." He sighed and sipped his tea. "It all seems so hopeless sometimes."

"But we have to try, don't we? I mean Voldemort's got to be stopped--"

"Yes, he has, Hermione, but what we have to do to bring him to heel... it's daunting is all."

"Yes, it is. Sirius would have understood, wouldn't he?"

"I'm not so sure. He was so reckless, so without fear. Maybe he couldn't help me after all."

"You said yourself: he knew you better than anyone."

"Yes, you're right." He smiled as if remembering something. "If he were here right now, he'd probably give me a pep talk or pull one of those insane pranks of his, make me want to laugh my guts out or kill him... or both. Ah! What a waste!"

"You mean his death?"

"Yes, of course. But I was thinking more of his last year when he was cooped up here. I could have gotten to know him then... supported him... the way he did me so many times. But I kept my distance." He looked up at her sadly.

She wanted to hug him, rock him, maybe rub his back the way she would comfort a small child, but she just asked, "Why did you do that?"

He rubbed at his face. "I don't know. I think I was hoping that it would push him closer to Harry. You know. Three being a crowd and all that."

"But it didn't work out that way, did it? Sirius and Harry never connected. Or if they did, I never saw it."

"No, Sirius was too embittered by his impotence and forced idleness to respond to Harry's needs. I only hope it didn't make Harry think Sirius didn't love him."

"No," she countered gently, "it didn't at all. It just confused him for a bit."

"But now, with Sirius gone, he must have this terrible void inside...."

"Just as you do."

"What? Oh, yes, I suppose... but I'll get over it." He smiled wryly. "It helps to keep busy."

"And to pull away from your other friends?"

He laughed harshly. "You think I should try to fill the void? With Harry? I don't want to make the same mistake Sirius did, trying to turn Harry into James."

"Is that what you think he wanted to do?"

"I don't know, Hermione. Molly Weasley said it to his face once, and I found myself half agreeing with her."

"But you wouldn't let that happen to you."

"Are you so sure of that? I didn't understand how Padfoot felt back then, why he would feel the need to do project his feelings for James onto his son, but I think I do now."

She looked about her. "It must be terribly lonely for you here with your two best friends gone forever. But you do have other friends. Tonks, for instance."

He pushed his cup away and stood up. "Yes, I have her, but for how long?" He started pacing restlessly from window to window, glancing out each as if looking for spies. "It seems everything and everyone I've ever cared about has been twisted or destroyed by the Dark Lord. I don't want that to happen to her."

"That must be the way James felt about Lily--and Harry."

"Yes, he did everything he could to protect his family, but it wasn't enough." Remus threw up his hands. "Oh, what am I doing? How can I think it's possible for me to make a difference? And as for marrying and having children--I must be crazy to even think about it."

A silly grin took over Hermione's face, which, up to then, she had managed to keep calm and straight. "Is that it? Are you really thinking of asking Tonks to marry you? That's wonderful--"

He crossed to her and seized her shoulders as if he would shake her, but only his voice trembled. "No, it's not wonderful, Hermione. It's tragic, and it's wrong. I'm not going to set Tonks up like that. She deserves better than this. She deserves better than me. I want her to go away--get away from all this--"

Hermione could feel his hands clenching and unclenching, punctuating his frustration. She gave a little yelp of pain. He let go of her and turned away.

Hermione recovered quickly. She found that she was not frightened or even sad, but angry. Men! Why did they always have to play the got-to-protect-my-woman card?! "You can't make her do that!" she cried.

"Why not?"

She took a breath. She should be the gentle counsellor here. But she couldn't. She stood up and followed him. "It's not like she's some pretty little doll you can just keep in a glass case. She's a witch, a very brave, very talented witch, and she has a right to choose whether and when she'll meet the enemy."

He looked at her, agonized. "But she wants children. I don't think I can bring a child into this awful world. With a werewolf for a father--"

She shook a finger at him. "Professor, You're only a werewolf twelve nights a year. According to my Muggle arithmetic, that leaves 353 days *and nights* for raising a family."

"But this world--it's so corrupt, so dangerous--"

She reined in her voice and spoke slowly, as to a small child. "My dear, loving, intelligent, so-modest-you-make-me-want-to-scream professor, your friend James believed enough in this crackbrained world to love and marry and have a child. That child has already made a big difference for the better in all our lives. We need more people like that in the Magicosm to counterbalance the Malfoys and Goyles and Lestranges. And as for Tonks--well--don't you think she has a right to some say in all this?"

He looked at her for a long time. "You're right. She does."

"You'll talk to her then."

"Yes," he said grimly, "but don't plan on sending out wedding invitations just yet."

24. Dnc at BW & FDs wddng...

Chapter 24 of 29

Will jealousy keep Hermione from completing the latest task?

14. Dnc at BW & FDs wddng...

A bell jangles. Eyes magnified behind bottle-bottom lenses peer around a bright red door. A vague, dreamy voice murmurs, "Those hats--I'm sure I wore one... yes... in another life... around 1895, it was... yes... yes..."

She totters towards the lavish display, almost tripping over her pale, gauzy neck-scarves, and seizes a hat with great florid Fwooper feathers that almost overwhelm its generous brim. She tries it on in front of a full-length mirror, stops, grimaces in pain. "What--what's happening? Oh... ow... My neck--" Her head has been wrenched 180 degrees around so that she can see the door she came through and, if she should glance downward, her scrawny, gabardine-clad derriere.

A voice snorts, "Looks like she won't be seeing the future anymore--only the past!"

Another, similar in tenor, adds: "Yep, the Headless Hats were fun, George, but that Tit-for-Tat Cocked Hat is your greatest invention yet...."

...

The crowd roars. High overhead, two Seekers, one dark-haired, the other silvery blond, grapple for the Snitch. A slender, graceful man, impeccably attired in gray robes lined with red satin, points a wand at the pair. The dark-haired Seeker jerks his head back, his face a rictus of pain.

A young, feminine voice cries: "No, NO--you great bully! Leave him alone...."

The red-haired dynamo jumps up, pointing her own wand. Suddenly the man is himself jerked out of the stands and suspended upside-down in mid-air, his head engulfed in great, pulsating, yellow-green globs of some noxious nasal exudate. His screams defeat even the crowd's volume....

...

A pinpoint of light illuminates two figures in the dark alley.

"Got them cauldrons for yeh, Will," a man's voice mutters, "if yer got the gelt...." The light shows him to be a short, stubby man, whose robes have seen better days.

The second figure, a mere shadow at first, draws itself up to a more substantial height and girth.

The man draws back. "Arf a mo'... You're not Will.... Just 'oo are you?"

A wand-tip flares with a spell that also illumines a face, normally motherly and kind, but, at the moment, distorted to the ferocity of a saber-toothed tiger.

"Molly?"

She doesn't answer, but points her wand at him and his metal burden.

"Wha'? This a joke?" cries the man.

The tall stack of cauldrons he is balancing begins to ooze a dark steaming jelly. It pours out over his head and arms. When he is completely covered--a boiling viscid mass--the witch dances about maniacally, poking at him with her wand, and screeches in triumph: "Serves you right! You'll not be selling any more illegal potion ingredients to my boys now, will you, Mundungus Fletcher..."

...

Greenhouse number thirteen: before class, Justin Finch-Fletchley is, as usual, flattering and glad-handing every classmate of any distinction at all. He makes snide comments about some Gryffindors, notably Harry Potter and Ron Weasley. Suddenly, his body lurches, twists, arches and does a double somersault face-first into a pile of rancid dragon-dung...

...

Her white-blond cascade of hair swaying seductively, the veela-girl sashays past a host of gaping admirers at the Yule Ball: Harry... Cedric Diggory... Roger Davies... Bill Weasley... Viktor Krum... She stops at last at a gangling young wizard who has a dreamy look on his face... She turns to him... smiling.... He takes her in his arms...

...

"No...oh no...NOOOO..."

Wake up, Hermione. We have a job to do.

"Mmm--wha? James? Oh--what a horrible dream."

What was it about?

Hermione sat up and stretched. "I don't remember the particulars, but it seemed to be about nasty people getting their just desserts. The last bit had that stuck-up Fleur Delacour trying to--oh darn--she was just about to walk off with...."

Bill Weasley?

"Nooo...If you must know, it was Ron. And I didn't get to see what her punishment was going to be! Ecch, she'd probably sweet-talk her way out of it anyway."

Hmm...you're not going to much care this next assignment then.

"What is it?"

It's not exactly on Dumbledore's list. Well, it is, sort of. The item reads, 'Dance at Bill and Fleur's wedding, and have a big slice of cake.'

"Oh good, a nice one for a change, and it sounds like the professor. Well, I'm going to do just that--but not until August first."

If what I just heard is true, you won't be able to--unless we act quickly.

"What do you mean?"

Fleur's been arrested.

"For what? Let me guess. Soliciting."

Now, now.... It seems she's being held by their Ministry....

"I know; I shouldn't be such a cat about it, James. I mean she's going to marry Bill... and he'll take her away, and Ron'll be safe from her wiles. Omigosh, she's going to marry Bill! But she won't be able to if... oh no, this is terrible...."

Steady now, Hermione.

She tore her blanket off and leapt to her feet. "Like as not, Ron'll think he has to go rescue her himself. Well, where are his parents in all this? Why hasn't Mr. Weasley intervened?"

I don't think they know about it yet, and I don't know if he could, anyway. Things are a bit touchy between the French and English Ministries just now....

"Wait a minute! I remember something Bill said. Fleur was invited on a trip abroad with some of the girls in her class. A kind of rolling bachelorette party, I think. She wasn't going to go, what with his injuries and all, but he recovered pretty quickly... so he told her she should. I think the person who issued the invitation was the daughter of some government bigwig...."

Well, something must have happened on the trip because she's being held on charges of treasonous activities. I went over to Paris to have a look. She's in solitary and under constant observation.

"So I have to get her out."

That's what the list says... well... ah... implies.

She pulled on some clothes and brushed her hair. "I don't even know where the French Ministry is."

That's all right. I'll get you there. I even have a pass to get in to see her.... Bofus of course, but Lily's French is impeccable.

"You have been doing some legwork while I was sleeping, haven't you?"

Well, yes. You see, the Weasley spirits came after us as soon as they got wind of her arrest. They're so eager for Bill to get married. Great aunt Florilda thinks he'll never get another girl now that he's so scarred up.

"I guess I can see that," Hermione said as she tucked in her blouse and crammed a bit of leftover muffin in her mouth.

I'll explain the rest on the way. You speak French, don't you?

"Un petit peu."

Oon petty poo? What's that mean?

"A very little bit," she translated with false modesty.

~*~

Hermione entered *Le Ministère de la Magie*. It was much better decorated than the British Ministry. The ceilings were low, and there was no grandiose statuary to dwarf the visitor, just tasteful portraits of persons she supposed were past heads of government hung against beige satin wallpaper. And they did not move at all.

She approached the magistrate's desk. "*Pardon, M'sieur,*" she said confidently. "*Puis-je visiter mon amie, Fleur Delacour? J'ai l'autorisation du Préfet...un laissez-passer....*"

The wizard took her pass and studied it carefully. "*Voyons. C'est en ordre.*" He handed it to another wizard and made explanations.

The other wizard barked curtly, "*Suivez-moi, s'il vous plait.*" Hermione followed him through a series of closed doors which he commanded to open in the universal wizarding tongue.

~*~

"*Qui êtes vous?*" Fleur was curled up on a lumpy pallet. She looked much the worse for her stay in this narrow cell. There were no mirrors here for her to examine her flaws in, no cushy bed, no magical potions to disguise the sleepless circles under her eyes, no Glamours to mask cheeks, white and drawn.

"Can we speak English, please?" Hermione said. "I'm from Hogwarts...."

"Oh, Air-miney Granger, of course." She drew herself up into a sitting position, brandishing long, straight, perfect legs. "You 'ave a message? From Beel, pair'aps? Or Meestair Weasley? Or Ron?"

"NO! No...actually...I'm trying to get you out of here. Can you tell me what the charges are? And cut it with the phony accent, okay? I'm not one of your--entourage."

"Eef...if...you insist." Fleur straightened up a bit more and ran her fingers through her hair, which was still lustrous, if a bit tangled.

Hermione tutted. Fleur could obviously speak clear English when she put her mind to it.

"They say I tried to seduce Beel--Bill--, that our engagement is all an act to allow me to penetrate the Gringotts defense system...for his Dark Lordship, how do you call him? The Flight of Death."

"Flight of Death? What's that?"

"Not what. Who. Lord *Vol-de-Mort*. It is how his name is rendered into English, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Oh. I never thought of that. Seems appropriate though. Go on."

"Also, that I ensorcelled the Goblet of Fire to choose me as the Champion for Beauxbatons. That rumor was put about by the *Profes's* daughter..."

"Let me guess, she's the one who burst out crying when she wasn't chosen for the Tournament."

"Yes,...Louise...she is *une peu jalouse*."

"Was she also the one who invited you on that trip abroad?"

"*Oui*, I know now that it was all a dirty little trick to get me out of England so she could have me arrested, And one of the other girls said that I deliberately did not rescue my sister from the lake during the Tournament because--*moi*--I was jealous of her!" Anger brought some color into her cheeks.

"Anything else?"

"Something about conspiring to keep your--ugh--caretaker and my *directrice* from an important meeting--with some giants, they said. Impossible!"

"Oh no--it did happen--the meeting, that is."

"I tried to tell them I am innocent, but they will not listen."

"Well, I'd like to talk to *le procureur general* and tell him your side of the story."

"*Peu de chance*. I already did that. No one believed me."

"Not even with all your veela-charm going full blast?"

"The *Procureur* is a woman."

"That explains it," remarked Hermione nastily.

Fleur made the typical Gallic shrug. "I do not see how you can do any better."

Hermione bridled at this. "Well, if you'd like to just stay here...."

"No, no, I do not mean that; I just don't wish you to be disappointed." She crossed her milk-white arms and stared at Hermione out of impossibly intense blue eyes. "You do not much like me, do you?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Your attitude. It is just like Bill's mother and his sister Ginny. You think I cannot possibly love Bill. You think I am only a flirt, a *mata hari* perhaps."

"Well... you certainly had all the boys at Hogwarts wrapped around your little finger...."

"That was not my fault. It is the Veela in me. I cannot help what it does to other people. Anyway, the effect will be much lessened once I am married."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, it is the virginal Veela who has the greatest effect on a susceptible male, and once I have had my first baby, the charm will be pffft!"

"Oh. That's goo--I mean--well, whatever."

"*Oui*, it is good. It is very good." She leaned forward and clasped her hands together. "You do not know how I long for that day, 'ermione. Not only because I want to have Bill's children." She sighed. "But because it is such a burden, being beautiful."

Hermione snorted. "I can think of a few girls who would disagree with you there."

"But it is. Imagine not being able to know if a person pays attention to you because he thinks you have good ideas or if he just wants to look at you... and imagine what color panties you are wearing."

"I see."

"Anyway, if I can't get out of here, it will not matter what they think. Please, do help me, 'ermione. I would be most grateful."

Hermione nodded and summoned the guard.

~*~

The slender, stylish witch looked up from her writing and motioned Hermione to a seat. "What can I do for you, Mademoiselle Granger?"

Hermione came right the point. "Please, *Madame la Procureur*, I am here to speak for Fleur Delacour."

"The Veela. What have you to say?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "I believe that the charges against her are mainly due to jealousy."

"Jealousy?"

"Yes, as you may know, Fleur took part in the Triwizard Tournament at Hogwarts and was chosen Champion for her school, Beauxbatons."

"Yes, this is all in the dossier."

"Well, I'd like to submit that her accusers are all disgruntled also-rans from her class."

"You are calling the daughter of the *Prefet* a 'grumbling also-run'?"

"Something like that. She did take on quite a bit when she was not chosen."

"Hmm... you are taking quite a chance telling me this."

"Why?"

"You do not know that I may be one of the *Prefet's* best friends, perhaps even godmother to his children."

Hermione gulped. "No, I don't know that. Are you?"

The Procureur chuckled. "Hardly. But that is unimportant. We are investigating the charges, which are grave, and until she is cleared, Mademoiselle Delacour will remain in prison."

"I think that if you will contact her Headmistress, Madame Maxime..."

"That is one of our problems. We have not been able locate the incomparable Olympe. She is soon to receive our highest award, *La Sorcière de L'Année*, but is nowhere to be found. We suspect Mademoiselle Delacour may have--how do you say it?--done her in."

"Oh no, that couldn't be true. Madame Maxime is likely on a--erm--vacation with a friend from Hogwarts. If you will owl my Headmistress, Professor McGonagall, I'm sure she will confirm this and will vouch for Fleur as well."

"Ah, we know of Madame McGonagall. She was very active as a courier between our two countries during the last Muggle war."

"Really!"

"*Oui*, I myself was her contact for a time. Her code name was 'Athene.' But I cannot promise anything for this Veela. Her ancestors came from the east, like the vampires and werewolves. Sentiment in the general populace has always run against them."

"That's just unthinking prejudice, I'm sure. Veelas are nothing like vampires--"

"But did you know that they can turn into something like the Greek harpy when angered? Hideous, winged creatures, throwing fire from their fingertips. I myself have witnessed this at the last World Cup--"

"I did as well," said Hermione, "but do you not think that Fleur, who was schooled at one of the finest schools of magic on the continent--"

"--the finest school of magic--" the *Procureur* corrected her.

"Yes, of course, the finest school of magic. Don't you think she would have been taught to control such a power? After all, Madame Maxime chose her as a finalist for the Tournament. That must say something for her."

"That is true, but it is said that your Dark Lord has promised all such mutants--Veelas, Erklings, Lycans--a place in his army."

"Including the giants, I believe."

"Yes, and it has made our Ministry very angry with your Ministry."

"Why is that?"

"Because they did not stamp out this menace from the very beginning. And now he threatens our own country!"

"I'm sorry about that. But, to get back to the subject: does not Madame Maxime herself have giant blood in her?"

"What is this you say?"

"Madame Maxime. She's so--erm--huge--"

"I never thought of that." The *Procureur* laughed. "I always thought she was just big-boned. But it does make sense--"

Hermione pressed her case. "And if she is part giant, or ogre, or whatever, would you have the right to detain her on a suspicion, just because of her ancestry, and the fact that others of her kind have joined Voldemort? Would it not, in a way, be giving in to the fear he is trying to spread?"

"No, you are right. I would certainly never try to detain *La Sorcière de L'Année* on suspicion of anything. You are a very intelligent girl, Mademoiselle Granger. Have you thought of becoming an attorney?"

Hermione shook her head, blushing.

The *Procureur* continued, "But have you nothing to say in favor of this Fleur Delacour yourself? As a Hogwarts student, I'm sure you had the opportunity to observe her during the Triwizard Tournament."

Hermione meditated on Fleur's behavior during the tasks. "She's bright, talented, competitive, and resourceful. She loves her family and is proud to be a Frenchwoman. I can't imagine her betraying her country."

"Thank you, Miss Granger. Your viewpoint is important to me."

"How so? I'm only a student--"

"But a bright and observant one. And I have a confession to make. We monitored your visit with Madmoiselle Delacour. It was obvious that you do not like her, yet, just now, you made a dispassionate and favorable analysis of her character. Your frankness counts for much with us. If Madame McGonagall will vouch for her, I am sure we will be able to release her."

And I will dance with Ron at her wedding, thought Hermone happily.

25. Cnvt Scrmgr

Chapter 25 of 29

Hermione exercises her playwriting talents.

25. Cnvt Scrmgr--or CHRISTMAS IN JULY

When Hermione and James got back from the Continent, they found Sirius floating restlessly about the ceiling.

"Sirius!" Hermone cried. She raced across the room to embrace him as he swooped down to her and, of course, passed right on through. "Oops, I forgot," she mumbled as she crashed into the wall. She staggered about, rubbing her forehead until the universe righted itself. "But this is wonderful. How did you do on the tests?"

Fine, just fine. Did you get Fleur off?

"Not quite, but we have high hopes."

James high-fived him and crowed, *Nice going, bro. I take it you've been to see Lily, and she filled you in.*

Yes, and she showed me around my new place. She also told me you're dying for a Quidditch partner.

Well, yes...

Sirius clapped his friend on the back. *You're on. I was talking to that big gatekeeper--what's his name?--Peter? There's this bunch of long-hairs he used to run around with--a retro band I think--called The Apostles. Together they drifted to the doorway. He thinks we might be able to get up a couple of sides....*

Hermione could hear them laughing and joking outside. It made her feel left out and a bit jealous, what with not being able to share hugs and hand slaps with them. She sighed deeply. *I miss Ron--and Harry--so much.* So she ambled over to the cupboard, opened a bottle of butterbeer, and downed it in one.

The two ghosts re-entered, and she heard Sirius say, *So what's the latest on Voldemort?*

James replied, *Well, I'm afraid this paranoia against Veelas and other shape-changers is only the start. The Death Eaters will continue to spread fear and discord to divide us until we have leaders who will stand up to them.*

The butterbeer was well aged and made Hermione feel warm inside and also a tad feisty. "So let's get rid of Scrimgeour," she chirped.

James frowned at her, but Sirius nodded eagerly. *That's a great idea, Hermione--"*

But we can't have a coup or assassination, James argued. *Those are Voldemort's tactics.*

Soooo... Sirius countered, *someone has to convince him to resign voluntarily--or come over to our side.*

Dream on, my friend, said James. *I worked with the man back in the old days. He's proud as a centaur and stubborn besides. It can't be done.*

Yes, it can. At least... Dumbledore thought it could.

"Don't tell me that's on his list too," said Hermione.

Something like.

"And I'm supposed to persuade him? I don't think so. Scrimgeour already hates the sight of me."

Listen, Hermione, said Sirius. I can see what Dumbledore's trying to do. There are lots of witches and wizards out there who are still wondering who to trust: the Ministry or the Order. We need a unified front if we're going to win this war.

"You're not kidding, are you?"

It's worth a try.

"Not if it gets me arrested--"

C'mon, you know we've got your back.

"You too, James?"

You know it.

"Well, all right--but what can we do? Any ideas?"

James scratched his head. *This kind of thing used to be meat and drink to the Marauders, but I'm damned if I can see how... I mean Scrimmie's a canny sort, and he's got a heart of stone where politics are concerned. I think he'd sell his mother to the workhouse if he thought it would gain him some influence with the voters.*

"Workhouse," Hermione muttered, "... are there no workhouses...?" Then she snapped her fingers. "I've got it! I think I can do it, gentlewizards, but you'll need to back me to the hilt with spells... and a cast of real ghosts, four to be exact.

What--? asked Sirius.

"I'm going to give Minister Scrimgeour THE DICKENS!"

I don't get it, said Sirius.

James grinned. *Wait a minute. I think I know where she's heading. You're thinking of Charles Dickens, aren't you, Hermione, and his "Christmas Carol"?*

"Darned right I am," she answered, picking up a quill and a sheaf of parchment. "My school once did a play based on a *Christmas Carol*. Our dear Minister, who, I admit, looks a bit like Father Christmas, is shortly going to have some very bad dreams--like the heartless scoundrel he is inside--Ebenezer Scrooge."

Eh... Hermione, asked James, glancing over her shoulder, what part did you play?

"No part," she replied. "I wrote the script... and directed."

That figures, murmured Sirius.

~*~

After her friends left, Hermone started writing furiously.

SCENE ONE: *Scrimgeour's bedroom. Midnight. The clock chimes twelve times.*

Voice (offstage):Minnnisterrrr.... (*Crouch enters. Chains, studded with law books, warrants, gavels, locks, keys, and broken wands, are twined about his body*)

Scrimgeour (waking): Who's there?

Crouch: Bartemius Crouch--Senior.

Scrimgeour: Oh--Master Crouch. Hem--you're looking well.

Crouch (frigidly): Considering that I'm dead. I have to talk to you, Rufus.

Scrimgeour: Can you make it snappy? I've got a lot to do tomorrow, and I need my rest.

Crouch: There won't be any tomorrow for you--if you don't mend your ways.

Scrimgeour: What do you mean?

Crouch: You've been a very bad Minister, Rufus.

Scrimgeour: I... no, I'm getting things under control... I mean, it's been a rough go, but we're seeing light at the end of the tunnel now...

Crouch: You can't fool an old spin-doctor like me with that mumbo-jumbo, Rufus. Things are *not* going well, and that tunnel hasn't seen so much as a *Lumos* in ages. We all thought when you replaced Fudge that you'd make some real changes. We thought you'd unite British wizard-dom, if not the entire Magicosm, against this juggernaut. But you've just made things worse with your patchwork Spellotape-and-flobber-spit repair jobs.

Scrimgeour: Such as?

Crouch: Promoting 'defensive measures' that wouldn't stop a blind pixie, arresting innocent wizards to make it look like the Ministry is on top of things, raiding the Headmaster's office for no good reason, harassing Harry Potter, putting obstacles in his way....

Scrimgeour: What obstacles?

Crouch: EDUCATIONAL DECREE NUMBER TWENTY-NINE!

Scrimgeour: Oh, that... well... it was Dolores' idea....

Crouch: Dolores Umbridge? Really, Rufus, how could you bring yourself to take the advice of that power-hungry hag?

Millicent (*blows the covers off the bed*): Remember me, Scrimmie? I'm your Spirit of Magic Present.

Scrimgeour (*clutches his robes, shivering*): M-Millie Bagnold, my eminent predecessor. You taught me everything I know about Ministry politics.

Millicent: Hold it there, son. I never taught you to torment innocent young folks and embarrass their families just so you could hold onto your job.

Scrimgeour: What do you mean?

Millicent: I'll show you... (*She takes him by the hand and leads him off into a soft silver mist.*)

~*~

SCENE FIVE: *Two adjacent prison cells in Azkaban. In one, a raggedly clad young man, Stan Shunpike, droops on his seat, a cold slab of stone. There is a leak in the ceiling, and a puddle on the floor in front of him. Two shadows swoop by. Dementors. The young man shudders and groans. A second person, in the other cell, sits up abruptly, yawns and stretches. He is well-garbed in a tasseled woolen robe; there is a pillow on his stone slab, and a fur-lined coverlet slips to the floor as he stands up.*

Lucius Malfoy (*adjusting his wrap*): Damn, that itches. I'll have to tell Narcissa to bring Angora next time. Oh, Shunpike, what's the matter this time?

Stan Shunpike (*shivering*): D-d-don't they bother you at all, your worship?

Lucius (*Studying his fingernails idly*): Who? The Dementors? I find them rather delightful actually.

Stan: Reelly?

Lucius: No, of course not, you twit. They're quite disgusting with all that sucking and gulping. But at least they don't want *my* happy memories.

Stan: Why is that, sir?

Lucius: These particular Dementors are the lowest of the low, the dregs of Dementor-dom, so to speak. They only relish--erm--uncomplicated thoughts.

Stan: How come is that, sir?

Lucius: It's simple. All the smart ones have gone off to join the Dark Lord. And soon, I will be doing the same.

Stan (*Hugging himself against the cold*): Wh-what?

Lucius (*Waving a small scroll at Stan*): My darling wife tells me that, at last, I'm to be freed.

Stan: How'd she know that?

Lucius: Connections, my dear boy. Narcissa has 'em in spades. (*He rubs his hands.*) Oh, there's nothing like the Blacks for money--influence--power. Even our beloved Minister of Magic caves under that kind of pressure.

Stan: Oh. Wisht I had some o' that stuff.

Lucius: You could, you know.

Stan (*rises hopefully and crosses to the bars that separate their cells.*) How?

Lucius: Join us!

Stan: Who?

Lucius (*whispering*): You know who--the ones I've been telling you about. The Dark Lord's army.

Stan (*shrinking back*): No! Not them. Them's the ones as got me put here in the firs' place.

Lucius: You mean you're already a member? Roll up your cuffs. Oh, never mind, you haven't got any. (*Reaches through the bars and grabs Stan's right arm.*) But I don't see the Dark Mark on you.

Stan (*Pulls his arm away, appalled*): That's 'cuz I ain't got one.

Lucius: Then how can you--

Stan: I ain't no member of your bleedin' army. Them Ministry blokes jus' fink I am.

Lucius: Surely even they couldn't be that stupid.

Stan: I don't know anyfink 'bout that, but what it was, I 'ad a Jolly Roger tattoo from a box o' Crinky Stars--

Lucius: How's that?

Stan: Crinky Stars, m' fav'rit Muggle cereal. it's got a surprise in ev'ry box. Anyway, I wetted the tattoo and put it on my arm. Looked real nice, it did. An' the Aurors thought it was You-Know-Who's mark. But now it's wore off an' they still won't believe me. But I ain' no Dead Beater.

Lucius: That's Death Eater, young man.

Stan: Whatever. An' now me mum can't make ends meet wiv me losin' me job an' all, an' she can't 'old 'er 'ead up on market day no more, on account she's that ashamed...

Fade to black with spotlight on Scrimgeour and Millicent.

Scrimgeour: Did that really happen?

Millicent: This is live action, Rufus, not a re-run. We're right here at Azkaban. Can't you feel that North Sea breeze? And the scent of despair?

Scrimgeour: Aye, I remember it...

~*~

SCENE SIX: *Scrimgeour's bedroom. The Bloody Baron enters. He says nothing, but beckons Scrimgeour to follow him into the mist, which is now a dark gray.*

~*~

SCENE SEVEN: *Post-apocalyptic London with buildings demolished, bodies strewn about. Smoldering fires are everywhere. People stagger about, searching the ruins.*

Mrs. Blott: Oh Gad, my Bobby, where is he? I been searching the Alley all day.

Madam Malkin: Courage, Mrs. Blott, at least you know your children are safe up at the school.

Mrs. Blott: No, they're not, Madam Malkin. I took them out--after Dumbledore's died. Now, we've got werewolves running amok, giants bashing everybody, and those hex-mines the Death-Eaters have laid down. And my husband didn't come home last night. I don't know how much longer we'll last without him.

Dung Fletcher (*stumbling out of the smoke*): Me cauldrons, anybody seen me cauldrons?

Madam Malkin (*gently*): Sit down here, Dung. Nobody'll be wanting to buy a cauldron just now.

Mrs. Blott: Why didn't the Ministry warn us?

Dung: It's Scrimgeour, he just wouldn't let 'Arry Potter get on wiv it... do 'is job.

Madam Malkin: What do you mean, Dung?

Dung: It's plain as the nose on all our faces, innit? 'Arry was s'posed to hunt Voldemort down, and destroy the blighter. Dumbledore 'ad 'im all prime ter do it too. Bu' Scrimgeour 'ad to 'ave 'is bit of glory, so 'ee confiscated 'Arry's wand an' locked 'im an' all 'is frens up in 'Ogwarts. Said it was fer their own good.

Madam Malkin: No!

Mrs. Blott (*Crying*): Curse you, Rufus Scrimgeour!

Dung: Don' matter 'ow loud you scream, Miz Blott. Death Eaters strafed the Ministry this morning.' Ever' last man-jack of 'em wiped out...

Fade to black with spotlight on Scrimgeour and the Bloody Baron.

Scrimgeour: Please tell me this doesn't have to happen.

The Baron shakes his head and disappears.

~*~

Hermione had been up all night, writing. Now it was three in the afternoon. She showed the finished script to Sirius. "Thanks for getting Headmaster Dippet to visit," she said, suppressing a yawn. "He remembered that hearing word for word. Will it work, do you think?"

Sirius skimmed the pages. *What if Scrimgeour doesn't say his lines? Or does he get a script too?*

"He doesn't have that much to say, actually. But if he really goes off, the cast will just have to improvise."

Or I could "Imperio" him...

"Oh no, Sirius, I want him awake and aware of everything."

That's all right. If I know our Scrimmie, these responses are right in character.

"So who've we got for actors?"

Sirius showed her a list. *I polled just about every ghost I knew--at the castle, all the pubs, everywhere. I think Sir Nick could play Malfoy, Dumbledore, and Dung Fletcher--*

"That's quite a range."

He's up for it. Used to do Shakespeare with a troupe of dead Scandinavians. I understand his Hamlet always brought the house down.

Hermione studied the list. "The Gray Lady can be Professor McGonagall, and--whoa--you actually got Helga Hufflepuff?"

Yep, but she only wants a small part.

"All right," said Hermione. "She can be Madame Malkin." Then she flushed and murmured, "Helga Hufflepuff, in *my* play. Oh, I'm so flattered!"

Sirius was still reading the script. *And she and the Bloody Baron can be Dementors in this Azkaban scene.*

"But isn't she rather--erm--substantial for a Dementor? What about the Gray Lady?"

Best not go there, Hermione. It seems there's bad blood between her and the Baron.

"Oh."

He breezed on, still leafing through the script. *I'm pretty good with accents, so I'll play Stan and young Scrimmie. And James can be--ook--Riddle. Say, by the by, he extracted Barty Crouch from those Dementors who swallowed him whole. I bet, if James asks him, old Barty'll play himself out of gratitude. And how about Lily for Mrs. Blott?*

"Great," she beamed. "Give them their copies, and tell them our one and only rehearsal is tonight."

Sirius grinned. *They're all quick studies, so that should be no problem at all. And by the way, James asked if he can be the one to say, "Quiet on the set!"*

~*~

In the wee, small hours of two mornings later, Hermione's place was jumping. The ruse had worked quite well, in spite of the fact that Scrimgeour almost had a heart attack when the first ghost appeared.

After the last scene played out and Scrimgeour Apparated to the Ministry, having promised the Bloody Baron that he would repeal Educational Decree Number Twenty-

Nine immediately, write a full pardon for Stan Shunpike, and try to stop the one for Malfoy, Sirius had invited everyone back to the temple for a cast party. He picked up all kinds of entertainment along the way, including a pair of bagpipers, Lester Mor and Evan Mor MacCrimmon of Skye, Kirlie Duke, lead guitarist for the *Weird Sisters*, who'd O.D.ed just a few hours before on Billiwig venom, and at least half of that musical saw orchestra Sir Nick had booked for his Death-Day party. James and Lily arrived shortly after with an array of dessicated and decayed foodstuffs they had picked up from the local tip, which everyone, except Hermione, oohed and ahhed over. Sir Patrick brought the rest of the Headless Hunt and, of all people, Reginald, the Death of Poets.

Found him composing terza rima under a bush, Podmore drawled to Hermione. *I told him the whole story. He was with child to meet the lovely playwright.*

Hermione accepted Reg's gushing congratulations and a little ode he had composed in her honor. She was, in fact, only a little miffed that her ghost friends had done all this without her permission. She had been waiting on tenterhooks to hear how the play had gone and listened to their reports, in a glow of triumph.

Sirius was fairly shouting over the din of music and conversation. He was so high on the moment, he could barely get the words out for laughing...*and James here flubs his cue... hee-hee... so Helena--you know--the Gray Lady--charges right in with her next line--you know--snorg--"I deal fairly with everyone, Tom." Brrr--just like McGonagall, cold and final, you know? And he gives her a glare that would have been like--ha, ha--lethal, if he had really been--heeheehahahoo--Riddle.*

Everyone laughed with him, and Lily kissed James tenderly.

What's that for, he asked.

Does there have to be a reason?

He looked at her.

She shrugged her shoulders. *Well, all right, it's for staying in character even when you forgot your line--but even more for agreeing to play a character that I know you abhor.*

He returned her affection with an even longer kiss. *The show must go on*, he said simply.

Just then, there was sudden strong, howling wind outside, the curtains flapped crazily, broke free of their tacking, and flew out into the night. In walked a huge black figure, carrying a crescent-shaped scythe, like a moon hovering in the party haze. It threw back its low-hanging hood and exposed a grinning skull face.

The music stopped abruptly. Everyone froze. Kirlie Duke snapped a guitar string. Lord Death strode in slow motion to the center of the room. Pairs of dancers glided out of his way.

Sirius let out a hoot. *Oh, look who it is! Hey, everybody, I want you to meet--*

James stopped him with a hand. *We've all met him, mate, except--.*

Sirius ignored the hand and floated through clumps of carousers, past the make-shift band, and over the buffet table. *Sorry we didn't think to invite you, mate. I thought you'd be--you know--occupied.*

"It has been a rather trying day--and night," said Death with no trace of emotion.

Come to check up on our Reg, have you? It's past his bedtime, I expect.

"No... I've come to find out why you are all, in one way or another--" his head swiveled neatly, three hundred sixty degrees, on its neck joint--"OUT OF BOUNDS."

We're not--I mean--we're adults here, aren't we? I mean, we can do what we want, and you did give me permission--

"I gave YOU permission, you and the Potters, to help this young person," he pointed at Hermione, "an opportunity to help her headmaster. And now I find that, behind my back, you've invited every Tom, Dick, and Helena to join in the--what do you call it?--THE ACTION."

Well...I...

"What I want to know is how did they get past the gates?"

What gates do you mean?

"THE PEARLY GATES."

Oh, well, I made friends with this bloke, Pete, the gatekeeper, and we got up this friendly game of Quidditch. Bets were laid--and he lost--so he owed me a favor.

"Pete? You don't mean--you can't mean SAINT PETER."

Yeah, I think that is his full name.

Death removed his head, knocked it a few times to clear out the ear holes, and replaced it on the cervical vertebrae. "I CAN'T BELIEVE what I'm hearing." He pointed his scythe at one after another of the ghosts. "OUT! OUT, ALL OF YOU! Sir Nicholas de Mimsy Porpington, Helena Ravenclaw, back to your castle! Podmore, get your scruffy little band back to whatever pub it is you're haunting these days. Brothers MacCrimmon, how dare you abandon your sacred trust, the school at Borreraig and your oath to Clan Macleod! For the rest of you, back to whatever part of the Beyond you're assigned to. You'd better be off now! THIS PARTY IS OVER!"

The ghosts drifted out of the temple in small groups, whispering urgently, until Death was left facing Sirius, Lily, and James, with Hermione cowering behind them.

"I should punish you all--SEVERELY," Death hissed.

It's really my fault, said Sirius. *I should never have--*

"SILENCE!" Death pointed his scythe at them, and the three ghosts wafted away--like smoke in the wind.

Hermione gasped. "Where did they go? You haven't--erm--obliterated them, have you?"

"No, they are on their way back to their places in the firmament--WHERE THEY WILL STAY FROM NOW ON!"

Hermione was appalled. She was all alone now. "I--but what will I do--I mean--the Headmaster--he'll be doomed."

"And tell me why the LIVING should care so much about the DEAD," Death spat. "You should get on with your own LIFE, Missy. It's what people DO, after all. They regret their LOSS for a bit, then they go on."

"I can't--"

"Yes, yes, you all say that," continued Death, sounding aggrieved, "but you can--you really can live without him, you know."

Hermione felt suddenly angry, even in the face of Death. She rose out of her curl of fear and shouted. "Of course I can live without him. He taught me a great many things I can use to 'get on with it' as you say. But you forget that he's imprisoned in his tomb by those terrible--creepy--*things*. He's being punished unfairly for an innocent mistake my friend Harry made."

Death sucked on his teeth "There are lots worse punishments than being haunted by *Inferi*--"

"Oh, yes, I know, Judas iscariot being chewed up in the teeth of Satan and Sisyphus's rock and Tantalus and Prometheus's liver being eaten out for all eternity and all that hellfire and brimstone. I know all about those!"

"Anglican, are we?" Death commiserated gently.

"No, Catholic. And Irish."

"That explains it. Well, you see--"

"No, *you* see. Albus Dumbledore was the finest wizard I ever knew. He doesn't deserve this!"

"But you only knew him--what--about five years?"

"Six."

"But you know he lived a great deal longer than that. Almost two hundred years. Quite enough time to have done many things deserving of retribution."

"No, no--he couldn't--"

Death nodded slowly. "You will have to trust me when I say that he did."

Hermione's felt a great lump in her throat. She had failed. This person--who was ageless and very likely omniscient--was telling her that the one mage in the world she trusted the most, after Ron --and Harry, had done something so awful in his life that the immortals would let him go on being punished for it forever. But it didn't matter to her, whatever he had done. He had obviously atoned for it long since in his care for his students, his staff, his friends, the Order, the entire Magicosm. How could she convince Death to help her or, at least, to not hinder her in her fight to save him?

"What about Voldemort?" called a voice from across the room. It was Reginald, the Death of Poets, who had been sitting quietly behind a potted plant, observing the pair.

Death sighed. "Oh, it's you. What about him, Reg?"

Reginald's voice quavered, but only a little. "I heard you tell Sirius that you hate that the Dark Lord's been able to usurp a part of your power--that he was able to keep from dying when he was supposed to."

Another voice penetrated Hermione's gloom. This one was laced with sarcasm, but also a trifle slurred. *I bet that must stick in your craw, Skull-Face.* She looked past Death's shoulder. It was Kirlie Duke, the recently deceased Sister, who was hovering over their makeshift stage, still fiddling with his broken guitar string.

Death turned to him. "IT DOES NOT."

No, of course not, sniffed Kirlie, floating up to him.

"Duke, you're just chuffed because I had to break your hourglass. I'm sorry about that, but it's my job. Your sand ran out. It was your time to GO."

Reg interrupted, his voice steadier now. "You haven't answered the question. Does it bother you that Voldemort is still around?"

"Albus Dumbledore's punishment can in no way affect that scoundrel's triumph or defeat. And why are you no longer speaking in couplets?"

Reg sidled across to stand next to Hermione, who was looking from him to Kirlie, goggling. "This is more important," he said. He took Hermione's hand and gave it an impulsive little pat, then dropped it as if he'd just realized that what he was doing was against some law or other.

But Hermione thought it a rather sweet gesture, whatever Sirius thought of him. It bucked her up a bit, and she found her voice. "I think the Headmaster's suffering can affect Voldemort, sir. As a student, he was obsessed with Hogwarts. He even applied to be a teacher there."

"So?"

"So, I think he's going to invade the school and take it over at some point in his revolution."

Makes sense, said Kirlie. *And don't you think he'll want to visit his old enemy's tomb--to gloat, at the very least?*

"It would be like him," Death admitted. "But how do you know so much about it?"

Kirlie put up a hand, showing index and middle finger entwined. *Aberforth Dumbledore and me, we're--like--that close. No, really, me and the band used to hang out at his pub. I never held it against his brother that he had to expell me from Hogwarts. I mean, he did tell me I ought to pursue my true calling, and it all worked out for the best, didn't it? I even cut him a deal on our appearance at the Yule Ball--for old times, you know. Went to his funeral and everything. Sat with Abbie. Visited him afterwards--to hoist a pint in his bro's name. He told me about the voice in the tomb.* Kirlie sniffed and rubbed his nose.

"Yes, that's an important point," said Hermione. "Aberforth told me about it too. Don't you think, Voldemort, with his knowledge of Legilimency, will be able to read Dumbledore's thoughts when he visits his tomb, at least as easily as his brother did?"

"What's that to me?" said Death. "So Lord Moldything will know that Dumbledore's in trouble. Just one more reason to gloat, as you say."

Hermione thought the scenario through and presented her case. "No, that's not true. We know that somehow Voldemort managed to conjure water from the River Styx into that bowl in the cave. If he figures out that that water can be used to bind souls, which he's likely to after he figures out what happened to the Headmaster, he could keep all the dead people in the world from ever crossing over. Wouldn't that, along with his Horcruxes, in a way, make him more powerful than you, Mister Death?"

Death took a step backwards. "That son of a succubus--he wouldn't, he couldn't--" He pointed a bone finger at Hermione. "All right, Missy, I can't touch him, but maybe you can."

"I just want to save the Headmaster," Hermione said softly. "Then--maybe--Harry and Ron and I can find a way to destroy the Dark Lord."

"But I can't let Sirius help you anymore. He's got to learn a lesson."

"Erm--I understand, but could you--maybe--" She looked at Kirli and Reg. "I mean, if they're willing--"

"Ask me anything, fair lady," said Reg.

"What about your responsibilities, Reg?" Death muttered.

"There are no poets due to hand in their pens for another six months," Reg replied.

And, man, I so do not want to Pass Over yet, Kirli sighed, brushing a strand of hair off his nose.

"That's not surprising, with what's waiting for you," Death retorted. "All right. How many tasks are left?"

Hermione thought she knew, but walked over to the place she had seen Sirius with the list to make sure. "Just two," she confirmed.

"Good," said Death as he turned on his heel. "That shouldn't take you but a few days." He vanished abruptly.

Right, Hermione thought. *And the wedding is next Monday.*

26. Gt PW bck hm

Chapter 26 of 29

Hermione has to do a favor for a friend and ends up killing two birds with one stone.

Hermione was at home, sitting on her bed in her own room, having been unceremoniously dumped there by Lord Death. It was midafternoon, so her parents were still at work. They'd be surprised to find her returned so soon as she had told them she would probably be staying with Ginny until after the wedding.

Reg and Kirli had followed her with Death's blessing. Reg sat in a chair across from her, trying not to stare at this new object of his devotion while Hermione checked her mail, a huge pile of envelopes and scrolls her parents had saved for her.

Kirli circled restlessly above them, muttering to himself. *Damn, I could use a fix about now. You got any Doxy venom in the kitchen, luv?*

"Heavens no," said Hermione, as she tossed the last of the Muggle post, a dozen adverts, into the bin. "My parents are Muggles. Anyway, you're a ghost. You couldn't actually swallow it, could you?"

He shrugged elaborately. *One can hope.*

"Doxy venom is poisonous, isn't it?"

Only in small doses. It's a great high...

She dismissed his prattling with a sniff. "Only in small—that doesn't make any sense." She started reading her owl posts. This particular Weird Sister was beginning to get on her nerves.

But Kirli had taken center stage. *Doesn't make any sense? What on this blasted earth does? But it's simple enough. The more you take, the less the danger. At least, that's what my dealer said.*

Hermione picked up a brightly colored circular advertising a sale at Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. "That doesn't sound right," she said in her most didactic tone of voice. "My Advanced Potions text says Doxy Venom can be seriously injurious to the internal organs in any concentration. But I think Fred and George were going to use it in some of their tricks."

Who're they?

"Friends of mine. They're twins..." She opened another scroll. "Oh, goodie, an Order meeting... but it was last Tuesday. Bother."

Kirli perked up a bit. *You mean the Weasley brothers? I met 'em once. Great illusionists. They were going to help the band with some... pyro-whatsis... but their candy-assed brother got into it...*

She unrolled yet another missive. "Who do you mean?" she murmured absently. Noting the letter's familiar, sloping scrawl, she blushed and put it in her pocket to read later. "Not Ron, was it?"

Nope. Name's Pervy or something.

Hermione frowned. "You mean Percy?"

That's the bloke. He heard us talking at that Yule Ball of yours and put the kibosh on what would have been a boffo ending to the evening.

"Which was?"

You know that Muggle song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas"?

"Mmm-hm."

Well, I wrote some new lyrics for it. You know—Kirli started crooning in his trademark rasp—"four vampire bats, three French hags, two screaming harpies, and a bubbling vat of Polllllleeee-joooooooooocce."

"So what was wrong with that? I can't imagine even Percy objecting to a simple parody."

Well, his good bros were going to illustrate it while we sang.

Hermione looked up. "Illustrate? You mean—"

Make 'em appear with some discreet Accios.

"The bats and the hags?"

Yep. And the harpies.

Hermine tutted. "Well, its a good thing Percy did stop you."

Oh, come on, luv, it was all in good fun.

"Whatever. But it's funny, your mentioning Percy. His name is on Professor Dumbledore's list."

Reg brightened at this. Talk about drugs always made him uneasy as it was the chief way poets (and artists in general) met their ends. "What does the list say, my lady?"

"Erm, it's Hermione, if you don't mind, Reg. I mean, I don't fancy being a lady in anyone's eyes." *Well, maybe I would in one person's,* she thought, patting the scroll in her pocket.

"As you wish." He bowed.

Hermione suppressed a giggle. "As I interpret it, the next item has to do with getting Percy reconciled with his family."

That won't be easy, said Kirlie.

"Why not?" said Reg.

There's bad blood between them. I smelt it at the Ball. When ol' Perce put his foot down, his brothers looked frozen daggers at him, and the room went, like, Antarctic.

"Yes," said Hermione. "Percy's siding with the Ministry against his father and the Order of the Phoenix, a group Professor Dumbledore started to combat Voldemort. He's said some terrible things to his parents and hasn't been home in years. Mrs. Weasley's heart is about broken. He was her favorite."

It figures, said Kirlie. *Mothers always go for that type, until it's too late. All ambition and no heart. But I won't be much help to you on that. I've never been good at patching up broken relationships. Jeez, I got more ex-girlfriends than an ogre has warts.*

Hermione had gone back to her reading. "Oh, darn," she exclaimed.

"What is it?" Reg asked politely.

"A friend of mine—a teacher—has sent me an owl asking a favor." She turned to Kirlie. "Do you remember Hagrid? The groundskeeper at school?"

Who wouldn't? He was, like, that scary, luv.

"Actually, he's quite gentle. But he has a brother named Grawp who's a giant—"

A brother who's a giant? Freaky! I always thought Hagrid was a bit—you know—large, but I never thought... Whoa! Friend of mine bet me he was part troll, seeing as how he can't do magic or anything, but he couldn't prove it, so I won...

"What is the favor he's asking, my—Hermione?" asked Reg, to keep things on track.

"Well, Hagrid rescued Grawp from his family in some mountains—in eastern Europe, I think. He's a bit small for a giant and they were treating him terribly. So Hagrid brought him back here and made him a home in the Dark Forest near the school. Apparently Grawp fought him every step of the way, but, as time went on, he got used to the idea of having a brother, and he calmed down quite a bit. But now Hagrid's out of the country, traveling with—erm—a friend. He writes that he wants me to visit Grawp and take him this barrowful of melons he's saved up. He's afraid without human contact, Grawp'll go wild again."

"So you need to visit him."

"I think I'd better. That next task can wait a day," she said, hoping her calculations were correct.

~*~

On arrival at Hogsmeade, Hermione headed directly for Hagrid's place at Hogwarts and the very full wheelbarrow. She had to push it into the forest without a Lightning Charm, since she couldn't be sure Minister Scrimgeour had gotten that decree repealed yet. It was rough work to say the least. Along the way, she came upon some flyers Dolores Umbridge's minions had nailed to trees the year before, bearing Hagrid's image, and offering a reward for information on his whereabouts. She pulled them off and ripped them to shreds. Merlin, how she hated that woman!

After about twenty minutes of trundling along over uneven terrain, she came to a wide marshy area. She stood for a moment, trying to think of a non-magical way to get herself and her burden across it without getting bogged down in the muck.

Behind her a voice called: "Hallo!" It sounded a bit like Ron. She turned joyously, and got a glimpse of red hair in the bushes. Maybe he was going to visit Grawp himself.

But this person was shorter than Ron, and his hair was a good bit neater. "Oh... Percy... hello..."

Ron's older brother was dressed in his usual somber robes, the gleaming, starched collar of his shirt and a tie the color of overcooked broccoli showing at his neck. "Hermione, this is a surprise. What are you doing here? And with a load of—what are those?"

"Melons. They're a... gift. I'm taking them to—erm—a relative of a friend... as a favor..."

"In the Forbidden Forest?"

"Yes."

Percy Weasley frowned deeply, which reminded Hermione of his mother at her most overprotective, but he stopped short of wagging an admonitory finger at her. "That's very foolhardy, Hermione, especially since you're not allowed to do magic."

Hermione stared at the expanse of swamp before her. She was too tired to be irritated. A sigh escaped her. "It has been rather difficult..."

He softened a bit. "You know, I thought Educational Decree Number Twenty-Nine a good idea when Undersecretary Umbridge suggested it, but now I'm not so sure, at least for people like you." He seemed reluctant to go on. "So who is all this fruit for?"

"It's a little difficult to explain——"

"Is it for the centaurs? A peace offering from that fellow Firenze?"

"Well, not exactly..."

But Percy was lost in his own thoughts. "I should have thought of doing something like that myself. I'm here to visit them, you know."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Remember last year, when Professor Umbridge was attacked in the forest?"

Hermione knew quite well, having been, in a way, the instigator of said attack, but few people knew that story, so she just nodded.

Percy amplified, "Well, she lost her wand in the tussle, and her briefcase, and she's been in a right snit all this time to get them back."

"That's a long time to be in a snit."

He struck that familiar, self-important pose—shoulders square, chest outthrust—which Hermione had once thought well earned, but now found merely tiresome. "She's been very busy, you know. Lots of new regulations since You-Know-Who returned. And now the Minister's changing things again."

"In what way?"

"Oh, he's trying to repeal some regulations he put in place recently. It's odd, you know. It's almost like he's turned into a different person."

"Oh, really," said Hermione, unable to keep a trace of smugness from creeping into her voice.

Percy prattled on. "And, would you believe it? Some malcontents are accusing the Undersecretary of—well—malfeasance. Mere technicalities, I'm sure..."

"Well, good luck looking," said Hermione doubtfully. "Apart from it being an awfully long time ago, I think her wand was broken in the struggle."

"How would you know that?"

She thought quickly. "Erm—oh—I just heard a rumor to that effect—from Hagrid, I think."

Percy looked at her sharply. "You've seen him recently?"

"Seen him? No."

"I only ask because the French Ministry is looking to question him about the whereabouts of that Madame Maxime. Too bad, because he could help me with questioning the centaurs. Madam Umbridge wants her things back at any cost. And she thinks I can negotiate with them, but frankly I think it's a bad bet all around. But say, I'm in no hurry myself. Why don't I help you deliver your gift?"

"Oh, that's not necessary..."

"Listen, Hermione, if you must know, I feel a bit guilty about all this. I mean you're of age, and a very responsible witch. I'm sure that Decree was meant for, you know, students who—well—can't handle the responsibility—"

"Like Harry Potter? And Ron?"

"Well—if you must know—yes. But I have to admit I'm not sure about that either anymore. Anyway, let me help you. Please?"

"All right. If you could just Fly the barrow over to the path, and then Lighten it a bit, I'm sure I can handle it from there."

But Percy insisted on accompanying her all the way to her destination, citing fear for her safety. He seemed really sincere, not at all like he was using this as an excuse to spy on a friend of Harry's. No matter that he was something of a prat most of the time; this was a sweet thing for him to do. But it still made Hermione nervous. What would he say when he saw Hagrid's huge little brother?

As they walked, Hermione answered Percy's questions about the duel at the Ministry. He apologized for not believing that Voldemort had returned. "Even though several Ministry officials and Minister Fudge himself testified to what they saw as they Floo-ed into the Atrium. Even though Madam Bones recognized him. She said he was much changed, but she knew him all right."

"He killed her whole family, didn't he?"

"Yes." Percy shuddered and was silent a moment. Hermione realized they were close to Grawp's lair and knew she would have to prepare her companion for what he was about to see. She explained about her errand and the presence of the boy-giant in as few words as she could manage. Surprisingly, Percy was not much surprised. "That sounds like something Hagrid would do," he said dryly.

They arrived at a clearing. Percy took in the uprooted trees, the piles of smashed birds-nests, the broken boulders. He grasped his wand tightly.

Hermione gathered her courage. "Grawp, Grawwww! It's Hermy."

Her voice echoed back to her in the stony silence. She took a deep breath and tried again. "I brought you something, Grawp... a present...from Hagrid..."

From the other side of the clearing, a voice boomed, "HAGGER! WHERE HAGGER?" And what had looked to be a pile of boulders stood up and lumbered towards them.

Percy raised his wand, but Hermione laid a hand on his arm and whispered, "I'm sure he's harmless. Let's save that for a last resort, shall we?" Then she wheeled the barrow into the clearing. Grawp reached her and wrenched it from her grasp.

"WHAT THESE?" he rumbled.

"A nice treat—from your brother," Hermione explained, and he sniffed, then poured the whole lot down his maw, munching and smacking. Seeds and pulp and juice ran down the sides of his mouth, but he didn't bother to wipe them away, just ran his vast pink tongue about his grimy lips.

"MMM—GOOD—FANKS, HERMY." He looked around. "HUH! WHERE HAGGER?"

Hermione told him that his brother had important business on the continent that could not wait and that Grawp might not see him for several more weeks. Tears rolled down his great nose and splashed on the rocky ground next to her. "I—MISS—HAGGER," he said and sat down with a thud, burying his huge face in his hands and swaying back and forth. Hermione patted his big toe and introduced Percy, who looked a little misty himself.

"PERFY?" Grawp asked.

Percy didn't bother to correct him. Instead, he asked politely after Grawp's family, which inspired a fresh spate of weeping.

"Do you miss your mother, Grawp?" asked Hermione.

"I—GOT—NO—MUMMY—ONLY BUBBIE. HAGGER—OH, HAGGERRRRRR." He rolled away from them, whimpering, and his sobs caused small tremors in the earth nearby. "HOPE YOU OKAY... BUBBIE.... PLEASE COME BACK... I PROMISE... NO MORE POKES INNA EYE...."

Percy just looked at him for about a minute. Then he pointed his wand at the barrow and it folded into a rectangle of wood like a large picture frame. He rummaged in his pocket and took out a piece of paper. It was one of those Wanted Posters with the sketch of Hagrid on it, like the ones Hermione had destroyed.

"Found this in the woods," Percy mumbled. He trimmed off the printing and Enlarged it until it fit the frame. "Here, Grawp," he said. "This is for you. Something to remember your brother by." He rubbed his nose as if it was itching.

Grawp took the picture in his huge paw, stared at it, then cradled it to his chest. "AW... HAGGER," he said. FANK-OO, PERFY... FANK-OO, HERMY!" He reached out and enveloped them in a hug, which turned out to be quite gentle since Percy had had the presence of mind to surround himself and Hermione with a Cushioning Charm.

When they finally left, Percy said haltingly, "I never knew... giants could show affection—I mean—Grawp seems to... really care for Hagrid."

Honestly, thought Hermione. *Sometimes he can be so dense.* "Well, they're brothers, you know—family. No matter what happens... you can't ever really hate your—" Hermione stopped short in embarrassment.

Percy frowned in thought. "No, you're right. I've had a lot to think about since Harry showed us that the Dark Lord returned. About which is the right side—Dumbledore's or the Ministry's."

"Well... they're both fighting the same evil now."

"Yes, but are they really? Do you know, Hermione, I went to a party a couple of months ago at the Minister's and took Penny. Professor Umbridge took me aside and said I could do better! And she handed me a copy of that damned *Wizarding Genealogy* and intimated that my chances at advancement would improve if I..."

"... married a Pure-Blood," murmured Hermione.

"Right in one! And now she's got me out here looking for her wand—for Merlin knows what insane reason."

"I can give you one," said Hermione, taking a chance. "She used that wand to summon the Dementors to little Whinging last year, to try to silence Harry. If anyone thinks to use a *Priori Incantatem* on it, they might just discover the truth. And I bet her briefcase holds a few more secrets she doesn't want anyone to know about."

For a few long seconds, Percy looked at her. Then: "I don't have time for this nonsense. Let her stew in her own juices. There's something more important I need to do. But let me help you get home first."

He took her arm and she Side-Along-Apparated with him to her house. The last thing she heard as he Disapparated out were the words: "I hope you're home, Mum."

~*~

She entered her room. A parti-colored troubadour and a long-haired ghost dressed all in black looked up from their game of hang-man.

"Finished your delivery?" asked Reg.

"Yes," squeaked Hermione, "and something unexpectedly wonderful happened along the way." And she told them what.

27. Kidnapped!

Chapter 27 of 29

Hermione takes some time off from fulfilling the list—but manages to get in trouble anyway!

Dear Ginny,

Thanks for covering for me with my parents. I wish I could tell you more of what I'm doing right now, but it's a bit hard to explain. Anyway, I'm home now, so you don't have to fib anymore.

I'm sorry to desert you when you are all working so hard getting ready for the wedding and everything. I wanted a nice normal summer, but since the Headmaster's death, nothing can be normal anymore, not until, well, you know what I mean.

To think Mum and Dad wanted to take me to Bulgaria this summer. They've always wanted to visit the Balkans...some wonderful caves and waterfalls they have there...and since I have a 'friend' in Vratsa, this would have been perfect. (Naturally they wouldn't let me visit him alone.) But my 'research' and the wedding put the kibosh on that. Oh well, it's for a good cause. I wonder how my 'friend' is doing. Maybe he's gotten himself involved with some Veela...like your big brother.

I've been amusing myself with this magigadget I picked up at the Alley last fall. It's called a Babble-izer. It looks like a headset, and it lets you understand any language. I wonder if it will work on Ancient Runes.

Your bud,

Hermione

PS...in case you don't know what a headset is, ask your dad.

~*~

Dear Hermione,

You're not missing much except Mum yelling at Ron every five minutes about stuff he forgets to do. The boy is positively ga-ga these days. Like someone did a Memory

Wipe on him or something.

Oh, yes, and Phlegm is here finally, mooning about, giving everyone orders that she pretends aren't orders in that cutesy-poo voice she used to trap Bill with. She says she saw you in Paris. Is that true? She wouldn't say more.

Funny you should mention your 'friend' in Vratsa. We got Viktor's reply to the invitation (apparently he was on the Delacours' list), and it was so odd. First, it didn't come from him, but from someone named I.Ivanova. His fan-mail secretary, maybe? Anyway, it says he may be coming, but not to be disappointed if he doesn't show up. Mum fairly screamed over that one. Something like "Honestly, don't these people understand how much catering costs these days?!!"

I didn't mention it to Ron. I think he doesn't much care for Viktor Krum.

Otherwise, all's as usual: dull, dull, dull.

I can't wait for you and Harry to get here.

Your bud,

Ginny

~*~

[translated from Bulgarian]

Dear Miss Hermione Granger,

You do not know me, but we have a mutual friend in Viktor Krum. The Hawk, as we call him, is my best friend since childhood. He has not owled anyone or come to a single Quidditch practice since the end of May. His parents thought he might be visiting you or Harry Potter, but since he does not live at home anymore, they don't know for sure. I am worried for him. If you have heard from him at all, would you please, please let me know, and tell him that his teammates are worried about him?

I will confide in you because I know you are his very good friend. Lately he has become active in a political group that some of us consider rather radical, called the 'Saedinenie'. You can understand why I am so concerned.

Our next game is in two weeks.

Yours truly,

Zoltan Zograf

Number One Keeper

The Vratsa Vultures

~*~

Gin,

I got a rather distressing note from a friend of Viktor's. It seems he really has gone missing. I'm going to write to their government straightaway to see if they know anything.

H

~*~

Dear Diary,

I have some time off now from completing Professor Dumbledore's list. Reg has taken over for James, and he says the next task, the last, in fact, will require some preparation on his part. Frankly, I think he's just being overly protective. I know the task involves Peter Pettigrew somehow. How I would love to get him out of the way before Harry, Ron, and I have to go after Voldemort. We have practically neutralized the Malfoys, and many Death Eaters are in Azkaban. This could be a double victory.

I am worried about my friend Viktor Krum. He always seemed so reckless yet so sure of himself. He's moody too. One never quite knows what's going on in his mind.

~*~

Dear Viktor,

I hope this owl finds you and that you are well.

I haven't heard from you in so long. I hope you are all right. I'm kind of busy with a long-term project right now. A friend of yours is worried that you may be in some kind of trouble and that I should wait to hear from you or someone from a group called the 'Saedinenie'. I looked it up. It means 'Union'. Is that right?

The sports section of the "Daily Prophet" has printed a rumor that you have been injured and will be out the rest of the season. Is that so? I hope not. I know how much you love Quidditch.

I really hope you're all right and that your parents are okay. Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help. I hope to see you at the wedding.

Your friend,

Hermione

~*~

[Translated from the Bulgarian text]

Miss Granger:

RE your inquiry into the whereabouts of citizen Krumm: this is to inform you that he has been found guilty of consorting with members of a traitorous group allied to the Death Eaters of your own country. If you do not wish to be blackened with the same brush, please cease attempting to communicate with him.

Sergei Obaloneycki

Minister of Magic

~*~

[translated from encoded Bulgarian]

Dear Yuri,

I agree. We must get Viktor out of the Well of Blood. He is too important to our cause. I still can't understand how he could allow himself to be arrested like that.

As I see it, we will need to get a wand and a broom to him. He will know what to do from there. Someone...a female, of course...will be needed to foil the Veela guards, someone who knows Viktor by sight, someone outside the Saedininie (we are so low on members we can't afford to lose any more), someone whose charm work is impeccable, someone bright but physically weak and devoted to Viktor. (I would volunteer myself, but since you are doing other work, someone has to guide the flock.) I still have the dossier on Viktor's school friends, and the best one by far is his former girlfriend, one Hermione Granger. She is a British subject, a recent graduate of the Hogwarts school where she excelled in Charms and Transfiguration. She is also Muggle-born, which under other circumstances would render her repugnant, but in this case it is fortuitous for it means that her parents would be powerless to come after her or start an investigation should she come to grief.

We could have her here by the 22nd in time for the planned mission.

Please advise.

I.I.

~*~

[translated from encoded Bulgarian]

Dear Ivanina,

This Granger sounds like an excellent choice. Under no circumstances should you attempt this mission yourself. You are far too valuable to the cause.

Bring her in. If she refuses to cooperate, you know what to do. Torture is not out of the question, though a simple Imperio should do the trick.

I have good news. I have been promoted. I am now a senior secretary with access to the Minister's office. I shall report to you soon on any suspicious behavior. I do not believe Obaloneyksi himself is a Death Eater, but I have my doubts about Kamenov and that half-vampire Justri.

It is too bad that our own people are blind to the Dark Lord's predations. It would be a sad, sad day were our country to fall completely into the hands of these odious criminals. I do not believe that Grindelwald on his worst day was ever this bad. At least he did not recruit werewolves to do his dirty work.

As to the particulars of the jailbreak, keep in mind that the vampires will be on the lookout as well. Be sure to lay some false blood trails to keep them off your scent.

Y.A.

~*~

Dear Diary,

Now I'm really worried about Viktor. He's tangled up in some mess or other. I've some time before I have to finish Dumbledore's list, but I can't seem to get a hold of James or any of the other ghosts. There's usually one of them hanging around, but I haven't seen him or Sirius or Reg or Kirlie in days. I know Death banished Sirius and James, but I'm sure...well I hope...they can find a way around that. Reg's a sweetie, but not the practical sort, and Kirlie, well he keeps talking...and singing (terribly off key, I'm afraid) about the thrill of 'shooting up' all the time. And time's running out for both Viktor and Dumbledore.

~*~

[Translation]

Yuri,

We managed to 'appropriate' the Granger witch at her home. No one saw us. No one will ever know.

The Union meeting went well. Since you could not be there, I, as the ranking member, led the group.

Members present were Dimitrov, Vulchanov, Levski, and Volkov. Granger was quite cooperative once we explained matters to her. It appears she still has some affection for our absent comrade. She seemed agitated about something, however, some deadline or other. I assume it is that wedding Viktor was going to. Well, if our plan fails, two of the guests will be regrettably absent.

I called the meeting to order. Granger was introduced. She is skilled in transformation and opening spells, also DADA. As a female, she will be impervious to the blandishments of the Veela guards. She is also relatively small...and quite bright for an English woman. She asked for some information on the prison. I loaned her my copy of Bluskiya. It should keep her busy until the time.

Our plans are set. We strike tomorrow at the dark of the moon. The 'twins' will lower Granger from their brooms through the opening. She will carry a broomstick and a mokeskin bag containing a wand for the Hawk, which only his touch can open. Despite her protestations of friendship, I dare not trust her with a weapon.

Levski, Dimitrov and I will patrol the countryside with bags of blood to distract stray vampires.

Yours in the cause of freedom,

Ivanina Ivanova

~*~

Excerpt from *Ancient Fortresses of Macedonia, Moesia, and Thrace* by Sophia Bluskiya:

The Gulack Fortress in the Rhodopi Mountains was once the most dreaded place of incarceration in all the Magicosm.* It is a great hollow cylinder of some twenty storeys, which also is sunk deep into the ground the same number of levels. The only way in is through the circular opening in the top. It was originally the summer home of the infamous vampire Vlad the Insatiable, who kept choice tidbits (victims) in tiered cells built into the walls of the vast atrium. For this reason it was referred to by locals as "The Well of Blood".

Around the time of the Rus invasion, it was used for a time to protect the women and children of natives fleeing the border lands. In 1947, the Bulgarian Ministry converted it into a maximum security prison for the most hardened male criminals, including traitors to their country, usually not more than several dozen at a time. Cells are recessed in the walls so that prisoners have a mere tantalizing sense of the sky above them but cannot see it. There are no windows at all. It is ironically guarded by vampires with a small contingent of veelas to help neutralize the temptation to escape. Often prisoners do not survive the full length of their terms, as accidental falls often occur from the unfenced tiers when prisoners, allowed out of their cells to take their evening recreation, are suddenly menaced by a thirsty lycanthrope or by a veela in Harpy form.

* In the 1900s it could be argued that the infamous Nurmengard trumped Gulack for a time, at least until its despotic founder was laid low, and today, many penologists believe that Azkaban Prison in the North Sea, with its cruel climate and implacable guards (Dementors), holds that dubious honor.

~*~

[translation]

Daily Report

Gulack Fortress

Officer of the Watch: Anton Sanguineski

9 PM: Gave the 'ladies' their assignments. (See appended roster) Took some smell-deadening pills and had an extra-big 'meal' at the Guts'n'Gore, so I should be good for the night.

11:45: All's quiet, except for Krum's cell-mate. What a whiner! I'd suck him dry, but I don't want to risk contamination with yellow blood.

12:08: A hole-guard has reported a noise overhead...like someone giggling and snorting. Probably just her time of month, but I'd better go check.

12:36: I sensed the warmth of two large bodies hovering over the hole (they must have been Disillusioned or something). Gave chase, but lost their scent because of those damned pills.

1:00: Veela Karbolevskiya reported surprising a witch in Krum's cell. When Karbolevskiya started throwing firebolts, the witch escaped on a broom. Prisoners are secured, but that old whiner just won't shut up.

~*~

Dear Diary,

I've never been so scared in my life! Kidnapped and whisked away to Bulgaria, with (I thought) no one to know where I was.

But I should start at the beginning. After my last entry to you, I made dinner and got out a book to read while I waited for Mum and Dad to come home. The book was in Spanish. I wanted to see if the Babble-izer could translate it. Well, it does, sort of, but because it's made for speech, not words on paper, I had to say the words out loud, and I heard the English translation in the earphones. And you have to be especially careful to pronounce the words correctly or it gets all huffy and...

But I have to get back to the story. Actually the Babble-izer does come into it, because if it hadn't been fussing at me about the way to pronounce d's (it insists on the Castilian "th"...oh drat, I'm rambling again. It must be nerves.) Anyway, I was distracted and I had the headset covering my ears, so I didn't hear them break in. One must have put a Body-Bind on me because my mouth just stopped working in mid-argument, and I went all limp and muzzy. I could see the intruders as they stared down at me, three of them, a gaunt, stern-faced woman and these two huge fellows. They threw a foul blanket over me, and one of the men just slung me over his shoulder like a rolled-up carpet. I can't tell you how awful and scary it feels to be limp and utterly vulnerable like that. I wanted to cry. Ron's name was in my mind, and somehow, in spite of the Bind, I managed to scream it out. That one little word. They smacked me hard for it and Apparated me in that humiliating position. I nearly suffocated, and my captor's odor was all around me. Sauerkraut and boys' locker-room smell and, omigosh, burnt Billiwigs like Kirlie tried to smoke one night. Ugh!

We arrived in this cellar, filled with boxes...tinned meat and bottles and more blankets. The woman told me right away why they had done it. I was still wearing the headset, so, even though she had some English, it neatened her version up for me. She said Viktor had been arrested, and they figured I was the only one who could get him out. I remember thinking the silliest thing: "Boy, what will Ron say when he hears that?" and giggling. Hysteria was setting in obviously. But I sobered up quickly because she pointed her wand at me and tried an Imperius. I resisted with all my might. Thank heaven for those DA lessons.

When she saw it wouldn't work, I said, 'You could have just asked, you know. I'm Viktor's friend. I'd be honored to help.' She looked a bit sceptical at that, but I said, 'You know I'm being honest with you. I could have just pretended to be under your spell and then run when you gave me some slack. But I didn't.' I think my logic may have reassured her. But I had to tell her there wasn't much time. I had to be back in England very soon. I didn't tell her why. She seems to be allied to our cause, or at worst neutral, but you never know. Heavens, I don't even know which side Viktor is on really.

They'd already decided on a rescue plan, set for the next night, which both relieved and alarmed me. You know how I like to have all my ducks in a row, and I couldn't imagine being able to prepare sufficiently for an actual prison break in under twenty-four hours. But they're so devoted to Viktor, I had to help, especially that Ivanina Ivanova. I have a feeling she's in love with him. She kept studying me like I was the enemy.

She introduced the two men, Vulchanov and Volkov. I remember they were Beaters for the Vultures when Viktor played for the World Cup. They are referred to as 'The Twins' though they are not related. (Actually they just look somewhat alike...all brawn and these teeny-tiny heads.)

I think I convinced them I'm for real. I did a few demo spells for them (since it was out of the country, and the Ministry couldn't touch me.) They were impressed, especially with my Patronus. One of 'The Twins' started chasing my otter around the room, giggling like a child.

The woman, Ivanina, introduced me to some more members of 'The Union' and gave me an outline of the plan and a book with information on the prison where Viktor's being held: Gulack Fortress. It sounds like Azkaban, only worse. I hardly slept a wink. I kept having nightmares of Fleur Delacour changing into a Harpy and making off with Ron and vampires sucking at my neck. Brrr.

The next night came, and Ivanina Disillusioned the twins and gave me an Invisibility Cloak. It was not nearly so good as Harry's, frayed at the edges and worn to holes in places, but it would have to do. Then I rode behind Volkanov (I think) to the top of the prison on his broomstick. I had Viktor's broom strapped to my back and a wand for him in a bag only he could open. That Ivanina didn't trust me a whit, I could tell.

But I was too busy going over the plan in my mind to be scared. They lowered me down hand-over-hand on a rope to the tier Viktor's cell was on. I had to tiptoe around to number 9983A, keeping a lookout for Lycanthropes and Veelas/Harpies. The ledge was not too narrow, about five feet wide, and most of the cells were empty and open so I could have ducked into one and hid in the shadows had I needed to. I just wasn't sure I could trust that cloak or the Disillusionment Charms to work on all magical creatures. I read somewhere that Dementors can see or somehow sense things right through them, but when I pressed Ivanina on it, she just shrugged. In that moment, I got the feeling that I was an experiment of sorts and easily discarded. That made me even surer that she's in love with Viktor and that she thinks me a rival. But, as I say, there was no time to think about it then.

I made it to Viktor's cell without a hitch, and who do you think I found with him? His old Headmaster...Igor Karkarov! I recognized his voice right away, and when I got a glimpse of his face, I knew even though he's much thinner and yellower and more stooped than I remember him. You could have knocked me over with a feather at that. I remember he was supposed to have been killed by Death Eaters, but Sirius told me that Voldemort got his brother instead. Apparently the brother looks a lot like him. His death must have been a case of mistaken identity.

I took off the cloak and revealed myself to both of them. Viktor did not seem all that surprised at a rescue attempt although he got angry at me for getting involved. That made me mad, and I was thinking of telling him they'd had to kidnap me to do it, but then Karkarov started moaning and shaking all over. He fell back on this mound of straw that was apparently a bed of some sort in a fit of coughing. He kept saying over and over, 'It's a trap. They've come for me. The Dark Lord knows, Viktor. He always knows.'

I couldn't figure out what that meant at first, but Viktor whispered to me that when Karkarov heard that his brother had been killed, he got himself arrested immediately, thinking he would be relatively safe in prison. After a while, Viktor got a letter from him, and it sounded so despairing that he decided to visit even though he and all the

members of the Union had been declared outlaws for demonstrating against the government. Naturally, he was discovered and arrested. Viktor has always been too impulsive and noble for his own good. He convinced the guards to let him stay with Karkarov as an agent of comfort as the old man was becoming a terrible nuisance with all his moaning and groaning. For a while, Viktor was able to calm him down, but lately he's gotten sicker and more importunate every day. I think I know why. I could see the mark on his arm. It writhed and glowed the whole time I was there like a thing alive.

I told Viktor the plan and shoved the bag with the wand through the bars. He opened the cell door for me, but he refused to leave his old Head. How like him. Karkarov looked awfully ill I had to admit. So I showed them the broom and said the three of us could fly out together, but still Viktor said no, that Volmort had by now found out his mistake, that this was the only place Karkarov would be safe from him. I tried to argue that his government was probably full of Death Eaters, but he said that the Justice arm of their Ministry were still relatively free of corruption and Karkarov might still be safe a while longer.

Then I said (I know I shouldn't have) that it looked like Karkarov wasn't long for this world anyway. I was sure I had seen a pinkish froth on the old man's lips. He just sighed and said, 'I know. All the more reason I should stay here. It is a terrible thing to die alone in prison, Hermoninny...like my grandfather did.'

Just then a Veela showed up and went Harpy on us, so Viktor placed me squarely on the broom and muttered a command, and next thing I knew, I was zooming up out of the Hole. But my Cloak had caught on something, maybe the handle of the cell door, and I was stripped of my only defense.

I could hear and feel wings beating all around me and the sharp cries of great birds of prey. I was within an ace of being caught when something whizzed past my face and began yodeling and wailing like a banshee. Omigosh, it was Kirlie Duke, orbiting my broomstick with his guitar, and he was singing at the top of his lungs and twanging those strings and working the wa-wa pedal with a screeching, mind-blowing intensity. I had no idea where he had come from, but I was never gladder to see him and hear that raspy voice of his.

I looked about me. All the Harpies were stopped dead, their wings still beating furiously, but hovering twenty feet away, their taloned hands pressed against their ears. Then they all fled outward in an explosion of feathered, fanged fury.

Kirlie dived at me, and I felt the intense cold of his ectoplasm penetrate me, but also something warmish and acrid. Somehow he had a reefer between his ghostly lips, and it smelled just like burnt Billiwigs. He muttered something, and we were back in my house in a trice.

He explained that as I was being kidnapped, my yelling had woken him up from an enjoyable stupor and he'd dived into the pocket of one of the twins as we Apparated out. Then he hid in the bag with Viktor's wand, but when Ivanina said the spell to make it impossible for me to open it, it shut Kirlie inside too.

'Some powerful kind of Dark Magic, that,' he muttered.

I pooh-poohed that idea. Ivanina may be cold and hard, but she loves Viktor, I'm sure of it, and he is firmly on the side of the Light.

I think I may love him, just a bit. But I'll never let my Ronnie know that.

On to the final task!

~*~

My Lord:

The plan has failed. Neither Krum nor Karkarov could be induced to leave the fortress. Assassination within the walls will be difficult. Please advise.

The spy Yuri Arctensi that The Union planted at the Bulgarian Ministry suspects Justri and that idiot Kalenov. Let me know if it will be necessary to 'remove' them.

Your obedient servant,

I.I.

28. Exps Pttgrw

Chapter 28 of 29

The final challenge takes Hermione close to the heart of a Death Eater's lair.

Reginald, Death of Poets was livid, a state his ordinarily bland personality was totally unused to. "I won't do it! I won't let her do it!"

You've got to, mate. Otherwise--well, you know the consequences. Kirlie Duke drew a nebulous finger across his throat. *Ol' Dumbie's soul is zombie fodder.*

Reg clenched his fists. Kirlie's mangling of the Queen's English reminded him of someone else, someone equally sloppy and egocentric. He muttered (as primly as he could manage through gritted teeth), "Sirius put you up to this, I'll wager. He still wants his name cleared, even from beyond the grave. Selfish twit!" He took a deep breath and hummed a verse of a favorite madrigal, *Where the Bee Sucks, There Suck I* drumming his fingers on his chin to beat the counter rhythm of the treble line. Johnson always cheered him up, but not, unfortunately, this time. His chivalrous anger brimmed over into shouting, "But Sirius is dead for Marlowe's sake! How is proving Pettigrew is alive going to do him any good now?"

Kirlie kept calm through Reg's entire spiel, a record for him, then drawled languidly, *I tell you, dude, I haven't seen Sirius. And it's nothing to do with his rep* But as Reg barked a contemptuous "Tut", he lost it, ran his fingers through his multi-colored hair, and shook a fist at his hoity-toit companion. *Cripes, it's on the list, you bloody poof!*

Reg had the grace to blush and offered in a placatory tone, "But perhaps this particular memorandum was written before Sirius died... and if it was Dumbledore's intention to clear Sirius' name by exposing Pettigrew, well, now that the point is moot, this particular promise is, one might say, null and void."

But Kirlie was not buying it. *That don't matter a harpy's tit to those deadheads! What matters is it's a promise his Headship made, that Pettigrew's miserable ass has to get hauled off to the Ministry and dropped spang into the limelight. Maybe it's a PR thing, you know, like... Dumbie wanted to score a bit of cred for Potter and his friends... maybe... with the average hag on the street.*

"You'd have my lady--Miss Granger--walk into a Death Eater encampment for--what do you call it? A bit of crud?"

That's cred, you ass. It's short for something--credibility, I think. But the important thing is you'll be there to--you know--protect her.

"How will I do that, pray tell?"

I dunno, the same way you put the wind up all those airy-fairy, dope-eating-poets, just before you cacked 'em.

Reginald frowned. "I don't ever remember doing anything of the sort. They--most of them anyway--went rather peacefully as I recall."

What-the-friggin'-ever. At least you'll have our heroine's back.

Reginald tried and failed to picture "having" Hermione's back. "If you say so," he shrugged.

You don't seem all that fired up about it. Or maybe you just don't want a teenaged wizard like Potter showing up your master, the great gawd-a-mighty Skeletor 'imself.

Reg began to splutter. "And just what do you mean by that?"

Well, Death can't seem to get Voldemort to roll over and die, so if our girl manages to take out his right-hand man, Potter will be that much closer to finishing him off.

"You don't understand. Lord Death wants Voldemort dead, more than anything."

And he doesn't give a rat's arse who smashes the hour-glass? Even if it's just some skinny half-breed?

"No. Unlike you, he's more interested in Preserving the Order and Rectitude of the Universe than in having his ego stroked."

Ouch, that hurts! Oh, never mind, I'll do it myself.

"You'll do what?"

I'll go with Granger.

"You? You couldn't Blast your way out of a paper bag even when you were alive."

Oh, Mr. Bringer-of-Sweet-Death thinks he's the only one who can protect a damsel in distress--

"Mr. Bringer of--And to think Lord Death wanted me to be the one to help you over, as if your caterwauling in any way resembled poetry..."

What? No way I'd have gone with you! And as for my poetry...

"Keep it down! She's sleeping. All right, I'll accompany her. And... protect her."

I'll go with you.

~*~

Hermione woke. Something nagged at a corner of her mind: angry voices, though insubstantial as if in a dream. But here came Reg, with a bleak look on his face and Kirlie Duke floating behind him, a good bit soberer than usual.

"So have you figured out what the last task is?" she asked, sitting up.

Reg nodded. "You have to... erm... capture one Peter Pettigrew and expose his crimes to the world."

His words numbed her at first. It had to be madness confronting a Death Eater alone, even that little coward, Pettigrew. But she shouldn't call him that. Harry'd told her Peter had cut off his hand to help Voldemort return to full power. It made him seem somehow braver, or at least more desperate than Hermione ever imagined. Then she felt that pain in her chest, reminding her that she had done that herself once already--risked everything for her leader--and had lived on. This thought sparked her rationality, if not her optimism, and her formidable mind began making plans.

"Do we know where Peter is?"

"He's in London. That much we know. We think he has a hideout near Gringotts. He might try a break-in."

"Break into Gringotts? Why would he? For one thing it's nearly impossible--"

"Kirlie and I managed to eavesdrop on an Order of the Phoenix meeting while you were gone. There are strong indications that Voldemort needs money--a great deal of it and quickly."

Like yesterday, muttered Kirlie.

"I have been thinking that it is likely that Pettigrew has been ordered to get it for him--"

Right! The Blacks and Malfoys have been a prime source of gelt for the Voldster.

Reg turned a beady eye on Kirlie, who was hovering over his shoulder, before continuing. "And Sirius was the last of the Blacks, and the Malfoys have been arrested..."

Hermione picked up his logic quickly. "And I bet most of his other wealthy allies are on the run. Yes, it makes perfect sense. Narcissa's attempt to bribe Ministry officials with counterfeit Galleons could mean that they were scraping the bottom of the barrel even then."

Kirlie swooped between Reg and Hermione. *And I heard those Auror dudes say that last week some Death Eaters tried to break into some house on Grimmauld Place where the Blacks used to live.*

"That's hardly germane, Kirlie," muttered Reg peevishly.

"Wait," said Hermione. "What happened, Kirlie?"

They were looking for the Black's hag's stash--you know, her personal fortune.

"Black hag... you mean Mrs. Black?" asked Hermione.

Kirlie nodded. *The word on the street is it's hidden behind her picture. But this hot, pink-haired bird said that two blokes named Remus and Buckbeak were able to shut 'em down.*

Hermione smiled at Kirlie's description of Tonks and his calling Buckbeak a 'bloke.' But there was no time for clarifications. "What does Voldemort need money for when he has all that Dark Magic?" she wondered out loud.

That came up too. Among other things, he has to start paying off all these wiz-gangs he's had mugging Muggle-borns.

Hermione frowned. "Somehow I can't see gang members kow-towing to anyone, especially a warlock four times their age."

Apparently his big 'in' with them was something they called 'the Mortlake gig.' I remember reading about it. This Muggleborn fried the leader of one of the gangs, and Voldemort was able to use that to convince those oiks that Mudbloods are all psychos. But, just a bit ago, somebody proved that the bloke--Mortlake--couldn't have done it, and so the gangs are upping the ante--demanding money to keep up their raids.

Hermione hugged herself, thinking, *So Mr. Weasley was able to prove it. My, that was fast! Score one for us--*

Reg interrupted her internal celebration. "Another thing: the Dark Lord has been spreading his forces very thin--"

Right. Tracking down Muggle-borns, offing pencil-necks...

"Pencil-what?" asked Reg and Hermione in unison.

You know--government types. And trying to recruit 'thropes--

"Thropes?"

You know: Veelas... vampires... werewolves... and hunting for that Karkarov dude, whose hide His Moldship wants in a very bad way.

"And, oh, yes," said Reg, "somebody called Dudley Dirtsy or something--"

"Dursley," Hermione corrected him automatically. "Wait a minute. He's hunting for Dudley?"

Yep, said Kirlie. Death Eaters attacked him right near his digs.

"Dudley was attacked?"

Yeah, but he apparently called up a Mrs. Frigg, and she managed to import some heavies from the Order to save him.

"Oh. Good."

Reg continued, "And Voldemort's had some losses to his ranks. A Healer named Tart or Trifle or--"

"Tart? You don't mean Pye? Augustus Pye?"

"That's the one. The Order found out he was recruited to be a Dark Agent at St. Mungo's."

Dragonspit! Kirlie ejaculated. I've never trusted hospitals, and now I know why.

"True," Reg agreed. "Who knows how many people he might have taken out that way? But he gave himself up to the Aurors and told them quite a bit about that plot. And it seems that Rufus Scrimgeour has gotten quite pro-Order, as you say."

Heh-heh, Kirlie chuckled. Him and that Pussy Weasley.

"Percy," said Hermione, trying to keep a straight face.

Whatever. Well, now his old man reports that Perfect Perce is back in good with his family, and he's on Potter's side now too.

Hermione allowed a small puff of pride to pass through her. Everything she and Sirius and James had accomplished in completing Dumbledore's list was helping to slow the Dark Lord's juggernaut too. But they had to get down to business. "So Peter's involved in breaking into Gringotts."

Reg stared at her grimly. "They're saying he has this magical metal hand his Master gave him. It can cut through anything."

"Even rock?"

Like butter, said Kirlie as if he was savoring the idea and, at the same time, a bit jealous.

"Then logically the hideout will be underground and near Diagon Alley," Hermine reasoned. "Oh... underground!"

Right in one.

"No I mean The Underground. Peter's point of contact with Gringotts could be in a Tube station, you know, the trains."

Reg interrupted her. "Oh, I don't think that would work, Hermione. Muggles would see what he's doing. And if he was excavating in a tunnel, he'd have to stop every time a train went by. And how would he hide the hole when he wasn't working on it?"

"Magic, I'm sure, but there are lots of disused tunnels and shafts and old air-raid shelters down there. And some are very close to Diagon Alley."

"Oh, yes, I remember. Back during what you call the Blitz, I had to help Lord Death with some of his--eh--errands. There were so very many, you know."

Hermione nodded, but she was not to be distracted by historical woes. Only facts that would help the living interested her right now. "We just have to figure out which tunnel is the most likely. Now Charing Cross has some abandoned lift shafts... Down Street was closed in the Thirties and was turned into a deep level shelter during the war. It housed Churchill and the Cabinet for awhile..."

"How do you know all this?"

"I went on a couple of tours with *Subterranea Britannica*. It's dedicated to publicizing the history of the Underground. Fascinating really... Oh, but we've got to get on with this. Now let me think: Aldwych is another disused station, and it's accessible from Piccadilly. Holborn has a couple of platforms that were closed a while ago. Goodge Street was Eisenhower's headquarters after it closed. Those are the closest ones to Gringotts. My guess is he's in the Holborn tunnel.

"Why is that?"

"All the others are in constant use by Muggles--for storage, tours, movie sets, experimentation..."

Experimentation? Kirlie rubbed his hands together.

Sounds yummy.

"It's not what you think. They try out new paints, signing, light fixtures--stuff like that--to improve the stations and the tunnels and the rolling stock--the cars. Now, the Holborn platform was divided into offices during the War, but they have no practical use now. We can access it from the Strand Station in Piccadilly--but first, I've got to run some errands."

~*~

Hermione made her way down the escalator to the West Platform. In her bag was a large glass jar full of ratnip, which she'd obtained on a foray into Diagon Alley. She'd been here before on one of those tours of disused Tube lines. She was sure her plan would work. All Reg, dressed in jeans and a dress shirt and looking uncomfortable, had to do was clear the way. Kirlie was currently invisible. He was likely less than happy with his own appearance, as requested by Hermione: student robes, circa 1980 and his real hair, which was luckily black, abundant, and tending to cowlicks. He had a bit more responsibility according to the plan, but not until they caught up with Peter.

Before starting out, she'd thought hard about Peter's habits and abilities. From what she knew of him, the latter were few and far between. In fact, Peter reminded her a bit of Neville, except for the fact that Neville wasn't a spineless git. He had proved that more than once. But then, Peter had cut off his arm to help his Lord live again--voluntarily if she remembered Harry's story correctly. She was sure it had been desperation driving him, not love or loyalty or any sort of bravery. As such, and taking his metal hand into consideration, he could be deadly if cornered or even merely frightened. The thought made her shudder, as she was still wandless.

Now they were at the far end of the platform, facing a wall of gray panels. It was late, almost closing time for the trains, and no passengers were in sight.

"Here it is," she whispered.

"Where?" hissed Reg.

"Behind those panels."

"Are you sure? It looks like a storage cabinet."

"It's supposed to. Can you open it?"

"Certainly."

Reg did nothing that Hermione could actually see, yet immediately locks clicked and the 'storage cabinet' swung inside. Hermione felt around for a switch. They entered a now-bright and surprisingly well-kept anteroom that looked recently painted. They took a dog-leg right and the paint ended in an extremely neglected narrow corridor, barely one person wide. Brickwork protruded from under flaking plaster.

"This is where we started using torches on the tour. Can you give us some light, Reg?"

A faint glow surrounded them, and Kirlie appeared at the far end of the corridor, bobbing up and down and brooding. *He really does look a bit like him*, Hermione thought, *well... as long as he keeps to the shadows...*

Now they could see numerous doors on each side of the corridor, each with a number. Kirlie darted about and examined the interiors minutely, calling out what he found. All were bare except for flakes of plaster and other detritus of old age. In one, however, a flight of steps upwards caused Hermione to comment that it might lead to a dormitory for clerks who used the offices during the Blitz. They decided to give it a good look. Ascending the steps, they came to a long low-ceilinged room and evidence of recent occupation: A mattress, a blanket, and the remains of a meal: slices of blauschweiger, a blue-dyed sausage made of Nogtail brains, and crumpled cans of bitterroot beer.

"A favorite of our quarry, do you think?" asked Reg.

"I've no idea," said Hermione, "but blauschweiger is--erm--inexpensive." *And smelly and totally without nourishment value*, she thought.

Mmmm, blauschweiger, said Kirlie, looking wistful. *Before I made it big, I used to live on Blauschweiger and bumbernickel sandwiches, but bitterroot did tend to coat my vocal chords.*

"Which could only have been an improvement," said Reg nastily. "Mm-hmm. I'm sure we're on the right track--if you'll pardon the pun--given the Dark Side's apparent penury."

Back in the corridor, they walked forward to another room, the largest by far.

"Our Britannica guide said this was a canteen," said Hermione, looking inside. "There's the hatchway for the food service."

At the far end of the corridor was a door hanging off its hinges and, beyond it, an improvised ramp leading down to track level. Loose electrical wiring sprouted from the floor.

"I think this is the last time we'll need your Opening spell," she said to Reg. She gestured to a metal door at the bottom of the ramp.

"Good," Reg grunted, making a face at Kirlie who was swooping about, making dust and paint chips fly about. "I'm beginning to think I'm the one doing all the work." More locks rattled and chains pinged, and the door opened.

Now they were out in the Tube-tunnel. A chain-link fence separated them from the tracks. They could hear the sounds of trains in the distance and feel the pulse of air displacement as the cars on the Piccadilly line made their scheduled runs.

"Where to now?" asked Reg.

"I'm not sure," Hermione murmured. "I was hoping we'd find evidence of digging back there in the dormitory. See how the track switches over to this side and goes down the tunnel ahead. It goes on down to Aldwych, but I don't think Peter would dig there. Trains run through there at least hourly."

As if in response to her comment, they felt a strong breeze as of an approaching train, but there was no accompanying burst of light. Instead, something swirled about them.

"What's--who's that?" asked Hermione, squinting. "A ghost?"

"Why--I think--is it not--Bea Lamb?" said Reg. He looked totally surprised and a bit out of countenance.

It's Miss Lamb to you, Reginald. a female voice said frostily. *Or, if you must, Beatrice.*

A pale woman in a lavender chiton or tunic of classical Greece coalesced before them. A long scarf-like chlamys was draped across her shoulders, falling to her bare feet.

"Beatrice, you look lovely. Are you still playing--what is it--Niobe?"

Yes, said Bea Lamb, *Niobe mourning the loss of her children.*

"And her audience," Reg said, sympathy apparent in his voice.

Ah, your words cut me to the quick.

"I'm sorry..."

The ghost began to swoop about, her drapes trailing after her. *How could they tear down my beloved Royal Strand, Reginald? And replace it with this--this dungeon!*

"Progress, my dear. By the way, this is my... erm... friend, Hermione Granger."

Miss Lamb stopped her fretful motions and descended to them. Her eyes glowed as she gazed at Hermione. *Friend? You mean "protégé", I am sure.... Ah, Hermione, a name in the best Classic tradition. Daughter of Menelaus and the infamous Helen, grandchild of Leda... Have you read the Iliad, my dear?*

"Yes."

In the original?

Hermione blushed. "No, they don't teach classical languages in the schools anymore."

The ghost sighed. *Pity.*

After an interval, Hermione asked politely, "But... are you an actress?"

"One of the greatest ever to tread the boards of the Royal Strand Theatre," said Reg, "and she wrote poetry too."

Beatrice Lamb giggled. *You are too kind, Reginald. I dabbled. Dactylic hexameter, mostly.*

"Oh, I suppose Reginald visited you when you... erm... died," said Hermione.

He was most gallant in that respect. But I chose to remain here at my beloved Strand. And now, look at it. She began to swoop again and a low wailing chant emanated from her agitated frame.

"Are you really haunting this part of the Tunnel?" Reg called after her. "It must be very gloomy."

Well, it matches my mood at present. But I pop up to the street occasionally and give the tarts and the ponces a good scare.

Reg tutted. "For shame, Miss Lamb."

He was only kidding, of course, but Bea Lamb took obvious, diva-esque umbrage. She dropped like a stone in front of him. *What would you have me do? I must have some reaction to my art, even if it is only the occasional fit of hysterics or the odd heart attack. As you say, it's so very dark down here.* She drew her chlamys tightly about her as if she was cold as well.

Hermione took Reg's arm. "I'm sorry to hear about your troubles, Miss Lamb. Perhaps we can chat another time. I myself would be most interested in hearing more about the Strand. But, as it is, we have to be getting on."

Reg added, by way of polite explanation, "We have a sort of--eh--mystery to solve, Beatrice."

The ghost perked up immediately. *A mystery? It sounds delicious. Could I... perhaps... be of service?* There was a hint of longing in her voice.

"Perhaps," said Reg. "Have you in your travels ever come upon a ratty-looking fellow mayhap digging in one of the tunnels?"

Indeed I have. Clumsy twit. He's in the Museum Tunnel every day around this time.

"Museum tunnel?"

"Oh," said Hermione, "Is that the one where they hid the Elgin marbles during the War?"

Yes. It's behind that door. Bea Lamb pointed across the tracks at what might once have been a parallel tunnel, but its large arched entrance had been bricked up with just a small door in its center.

"Thank you, Miss Lamb," said Hermione. "I sincerely hope you find an audience worthy of your talent."

As they moved down the track, looking for a place to cross over, Kirlie, who had remained strangely silent throughout the conversation, piped up, *Who was that boffo chick, Reg? Girlfriend of yours?*

"Heavens, no," said Reg indignantly. "She's someone I helped over many years ago. But she decided to come back and haunt the theatre she'd once played in. She couldn't stand the Afterlife. Too many egos, she said."

Hermione said quietly, "It really is too bad that the Strand had to be torn down. I suppose after that, she'd no place else to go but the Tube."

Hermione quickly found a rent in the fence and crossed the train tracks, careful to avoid touching them. At her request, Reg persuaded the door to the Museum Tunnel to open. Peering inside, Hermione felt a sudden dread come over her. This was the darkest dark she had ever encountered, a musty, dank, oppressive dark, and through it wafted the sounds, not of digging, but of torture: sobs and cries and cursing. The sounds cut through Hermione and made her draw back. That must be Peter. But who was he tormenting? And why? She breathed the lighter, cleaner air gratefully, trying to clear her head and calm her nerves.

More sounds came at her from behind, a humming, then moaning, then outright crying. *Hoo... hoo... hoo... no, ohnonononono....* They got oddly louder and closer until she could make out words: *Oh, don't gooooo...*

Hermione turned. It was Bea Lamb, looking like a Maenad in full manic frenzy, pulling at her hair, her face, her clothes. *Pleeeeeeeze take me with you!* she shrieked, diving at them, waving and jerking. *I'm soooooo verry loneleeeeeeeeeeeee!*

Hermione tried--unsuccessfully of course--to fend the ghost off with her hands and shivered when the creature penetrated her defenses. "Erm... well... I don't know... We'd like to... but..." she gasped the phrases out jerkily. She did have the presence of mind to fumble behind her and pull the door to. It wouldn't do for whoever was in that dark tunnel to hear what was happening on this side. All the while, she thought frantically. Including a hysterical ghost in their party would mean quite a change in their plans, but Hermione didn't know if she could stop the woman. She could, after all, walk through walls. "We had this thing we had to do... a sort of plan..."

Does it involve swooning? Or imprecations? Or a death scene? I'm very good at all of those, cried Bea hopefully.

Hermione saw Reg through her. He was frowning and gnawing his lip.

"Eh, Beatrice, will you excuse us for a moment?" He reached through her and yanked Hermione to him. "Hermione, let's talk about this," he said loudly, "I am sure there's something we can do..." He smiled and nodded at Bea, who was busy wiping her nose on her chiton, then took Hermione's arm and walked her back up the tracks.

"What c-c-can we d-do?" Hermone whispered, her teeth still chattering from full immersion in sub-zero ectoplasm.

"Not much, I'm afraid. This is Bea's... eh... turf--as Kirlie would call it. I can't force her to stay away from us."

"But I don't think it's a good idea to let her come with us. I mean, I know she's an actress, and... I suppose she could... well... watch Kirlie do his thing...."

"Bea Lamb? Just stand by and watch? No, Hermione, the way she used to chew the scenery, she'd never be able to just sit in the audience and let a tyro... a mere amateur... No, she'd have to upstage him. The old habits are just too ingrained. And you heard her. She's dying for an audience and one last great performance."

"So what now?"

Reg sighed. "I suppose I shall have to keep her occupied."

"You?"

"Yes. I'll have her show me around the area where the Strand used to be. We'll reminisce about old times, recite poetry to each other, scare a few tourists, and who knows? Maybe it'll last her an eon or two."

"Will she go for it?"

"Trust me. The only thing Beatrice Chatham Lamb likes better than a fat script is a witty, ardent stage door cavalier who will hang on her every word... even if only for one night."

"Oh. I guess we don't really need you for this last part...."

"That is correct. You do not. It is all up to Kirlie now and that Impervius spell the apothecary put on your jar of Ratnip."

"Well, all right... but I want you to know we couldn't have done it without you, Reg." She gave him a kiss on the cheek, and they walked back silently. On the way, he began to wish himself a new appearance. By the time they reached Bea Lamb, he was dressed as a Greek hero, complete with purple robe, carved staff and an olive wreath in his now curly locks. He bowed and Niobe took his arm. They walked up the tunnel talking for a while, then took off for and through the ceiling.

Hermione pulled open the door to the musty tunnel again. She edged forward in the darkness, clinging to the rough, damp wall, feeling for stones, old track, and other obstacles with her feet. Kirlie waffed on ahead for a bit. When he returned, he whispered in her ear that there was a hole in the side of the tunnel about fifty feet ahead. When she got to it, she could see a faint light coming from it, illuminating a pile of bricks on the side. The moans and squeals were much louder now, coming from the gloom deep below them.

She climbed into the hole and clambered down an endless, rocky grade, keeping to the shadows of boulders and chunks of concrete. Finally she detected a stronger light ahead, so she signaled Kirlie to go invisible.

There was Peter Pettigrew, his luminous silver hand waving about, casting weird streaks of light and shadows on the walls of a large hollowed out space. It looked like it might have been part of another abandoned and filled in tunnel. But the gleam of light glancing off his hand was not coming from a lantern or a Lumosed wand, but from a small hole in the wall behind him.

Three figures cowered in front of the raging Pettigrew: house-elves. He was shouting something--screeching almost.

"You have to take more. I don't care how heavy the sacks are. You're not holding up your end, Stub-Toe. We're almost through, but he is coming soon to see how we're doing, and this place needs to be cleared--completely. Do you understand? I want him to see what I have done! I, Peter Pettigrew, the first wizard ever to break into Gringotts."

Squeaky voices gave hasty assent, and the elves began shoveling rubble from several great mounds into canvas bags. Then each shouldered some heavy bags and disappeared with a crack. Peter returned to his work, carving swathes of rock out of the wall in front of him with his glittering hand. Now was the ideal time to act. Hermione opened her bottle and buried it partially in the dirt. The pungent scent of ratnip filled the air. She crept backwards behind a boulder and whispered for Kirlie, who appeared and began to dart about. His eyes glowed a ghostly green.

Peeeeeter! Peter Pettigrew--woo--woo--woo. His voice echoed about the cave as he flitted from crevice to rock to precipice.

Peter looked up, horrified, then angry. He turned in circles, trying to follow the flapping form. "What? Who are you? How did you--?"

It is I, your old friend, your best mate, James Potterrrrr! cried Kirlie.

"Oh no--"

Oh yes! said Kirlie *You killed my wife and ruined my son's life, you scabby little nit. I've to take my revenge out of your filthy, worthless hide.* Kirlie laughed maniacally and dived after Peter. He was really into this.

Scmpering about frantically, Peter drew his wand and changed instantly into Scabbers the rat. He scurried up the incline, but the scent of the ratnip was too much for him, and the jar mouth, jutting from the rubble, looked just enough like a drain-pipe...

Instantly Hermione placed the lid on the jar and tightened it.

Kirlie swooped down. *Woo hoo! That was just too easy.*

"Yes, wasn't it," said Hermione as she slipped the jar into her shoulder-bag, relishing the terrified squeaking of the rat who had once turned Sirius Black's life a hell on earth. As they climbed up the steep tunnel, Hermione could hardly congratulate herself. Peter said someone was on the way, so they'd have to keep a look out for Death Eaters. As they climbed out of the hole at the top, a light flared, blinding them, and they heard a high, cold voice that pierced Hermione's heart.

"Ah, who have we here? A witch..." It was Voldemort. It had to be. He sniffed the air delicately. "No, a Muggle pretending to be a witch... and... is it possible? The ghost of my old nemesis James Potter..."

As she got used to the light, Hermione made out red-rimmed eyes, a flat, pallid face, and thin, sneering lips. He fit Harry's description to a T.

Kirlie dove at him, but the Dark Lord dodged his icy fingers, chuckling. "You have no power here, you useless puff of wind. Haven't you heard? I have conquered Death."

He smiled mirthlessly as he examined Hermione's face. "Aha, one of Harry Potter's devoted followers, isn't it? A Mudblood girlfriend for a half-breed failure. I shall finally

have the pleasure of doing away with you, you worthless fraud!"

She shrank back from him, and he crowed, "Go ahead; run if you like. You'll never escape my power... or my pet."

He turned away from her and started making strange noises as she crept up the tunnel, looking for a place to hide, with Kirlie flitting about her. The Dark Lord was speaking another language, yet somehow it was familiar. It was the hissing sound Harry had used to speak to the snake that had tried to attack Justin Finch-Fletchley four years ago. *It's Parseltongue*, thought Hermione. Who or what could Voldemort be speaking to? Now she heard a dreadfully familiar sound in the distant dark. A lithe, serpentine body slithering over stones and an ominous, sibilant snarl. No ordinary snake, this. She thought she knew the nature of the monster, and she dared not turn around.

"Kirlie, don't look!" she screamed.

It was too late. She saw her companion's eyes go wide as he stared down the tunnel behind her. Then they went blank and he collapsed back, floating supine and inert, undoubtedly paralyzed by a Basilisk. Now, heedless of the dark and the obstacles, she ran for the door. As she swung it open, Voldemort, who was now crooning to his pet, was caught off-guard. He wheeled and threw a spell after her. It must have been some kind of Freeze-Blast for it hit the door and glazed it with ice. It ricocheted off and penetrated her shoulder. At first her arm felt numb, then painfully tingly, as if it had been frozen and was thawing. She stumbled out into the larger tunnel. Cool moving air revived her. She tried to push the door to, but her arm hurt too much. She ran on up the track. She could hear footsteps behind her.

"You can't run forever, girl," shouted Voldemort. "This Basilisk is young yet, but more than a match for the likes of you."

The breeze got stiffer. She knew this had to mean a train was coming. Deliberately she continued up the track, drawing the Basilisk on. At the last second, she leapt aside and clung with her good arm to some metal sheathing that protected the tunnel lights. She could feel it breaking under her weight and prayed that it would last long enough to save her from being thrust under the train's wheels. She thought she heard a squeal, a curse, and possibly the crack of Disapparition. Surely the Basilisk had been smashed to smithereens, but what of the Dark Lord?

The train passed, and the sheathing did indeed break off. She tumbled to the track with it, remembering just in time not to let herself or it touch both tracks, which she knew could cause a short-circuit and immediate electrocution. She saw the remains of the Basilisk; it had been crushed to a pulp. It had been rather a small one. A good thing. Likely the train conductor hadn't even seen it.

She felt inside her bag. Thanks heavens for the Impervius Charm. Peter's jar was still intact. She might yet save Professor Dumbledore if she could make it back up the stairs and to the Ministry. She didn't like to abandon Kirlie, but he was, after all, a ghost. Probably Reg would know how to revive him.

Now there was another crack. Voldemort had Apparated again and was walking towards her, slowly and deliberately, tapping his hand with his wand. He looked at the snake guts sliming the track.

"I'm afraid you've made the Dark Lord very angry, little Mudblood. Do you know how long it takes to raise a Basilisk even of that size? Many, many years. You've destroyed a lifetime of work. And now, you're going to have to pay...."

Hermione, against all her instincts, began walking towards him as well, holding the metal sheathing before her in her hands. She could see him smiling disdainfully, as if he thought this a paltry weapon against his formidable power. When she was within five feet, she stopped, gave a little sob, and cast the sheathing at his feet as if in surrender. As she had hoped, it hit both sides of the track at the same time and slid to rest against Voldemort's boots. Sparks flew into the air as a massive current surged through his body. The force of the concussion threw him back several yards.

Hermione ran up to him. He was out-cold, but she couldn't be sure for how long. She leaped over his body and ran back to Kirlie. Somehow she must get both of them out of here.

~*~

The rock star was not only paralyzed, but encased in ice. Voldemort's Freeze Spell must have hit him too. This solidified him, but since Hermione had had it in mind to blow him out onto the tracks and let an oncoming train waft him to the next station, this change in physical state put the kibosh on that idea. Then she had a brain-storm. She pushed him into the tunnel Peter had made and jumped on top of him. Soon they were sliding down the rocky slope as if they were on a toboggan run. Hermione only hoped that when they got to the bottom, she could use the house elves' shovels to widen that hole into Gringotts. Surely the goblins would help them.

When they reached the bottom, their momentum crashed them right through the remaining wall, which turned out to be very thin. Now they were in a corridor lined with metal-clad vault doors. Here were tracks of a different kind—the carts the goblins used to escort their clients to their valuables. Just then along came just such a cart, full of shouting goblins armed with fearsome weapons like maces and meathooks. *We're saved*, thought Hermione, until one of the goblins encased her outstretched hands in manacles and pushed her into the cart.

29. The Last Battle

Chapter 29 of 29

Hermione has a final confrontation with the real enemy.

Hermione was in a bad way. She'd tried reasoning with the goblins, but two sentences into her explanation, they'd zapped her with their version of a full Body-Bind and carted her off to the Ministry. She was thrown into a basement holding cell just down the hall from the door that led to the Department of Mysteries and another labeled **Courtrooms 1,2&3**.

After what seemed hours, keys jangled in locks, doors creaked open, and two figures entered the cell with wands aglow. Chilled by the dank flooring and the near-darkness, Hermione was just able to sit up and rest her back against the cell wall across from a lumpy-looking cot though she still felt dizzy from the ordeal of capture and restraint.

As her eyes accustomed themselves to the *Lumos Entire* Charm one of her visitors cast on the ceiling, she made out the writing on their name tags **Worris Yaxley**, **Dept. Mag. Law** and **John Dawlish**, **Auror**.

Yaxley, the older of the pair, was dressed in violet robes shot through with gold thread. Dawlish, in sober black, was very young despite a head of graying hair. He looked familiar, but Hermione couldn't quite place his face. He brought with him the Bag of Holding, which had been taken from her when she was processed, and a sheaf of papers. He placed the Bag carefully on the cot and sat next to it.

He rifled through the papers and looked at her but did not offer her a seat. "Your name is Hermione Jean Granger?" He had a slight brogue and trilled his Rs like a Scot.

She nodded.

"A student at Hogwarts. Going into seventh year, am I right?"

"Yes."

He glanced at a page. "And a Prefect." He pronounced the word with a faint sneer.

"Yes. Two years."

"Expect to make Head Girl?"

"I hope so."

That seemed a mistake for he tutted and looked at his partner before continuing. "Outstanding OWLS, I suppose."

"Ten actually and one Exceeds Expectations." It didn't hurt to be honest for the time being.

"Prefect, but not *perfect*." It was Yaxley making the weak pun. She looked up. The expensively dressed wizard had taken up a post by the cell door. He continued, "And I suppose that it will fall to a new Headmaster whether you make Head Girl or not." He laughed and looked at Dawlish, as if this was a private joke between them, but the Auror merely shrugged.

"Eleven classes," said John Dawlish. "That's a lot. Say, I remember you. You were the girl who was attacked by a troll in my seventh year."

Yes, that was it. He had been at Hogwarts Hermione's first year, a bright fellow, a Gryffindor, with prematurely gray hair, who she remembered receiving a scholarly award at the end of the year. But another "Yes" was all she gave him in reply. She still didn't know which of these men, if either, she could trust with the whole story or what Minister Scrimgeour would think of it.

"Just can't keep out of trouble," murmured Yaxley. He was staring out the cell door. He seemed the more easy-going of the pair.

Dawlish ignored him. "What did you think you were doing trying to break into a bank?"

"Erm... I... It was an accident."

"Really." This from Yaxley again, but the words were spoken idly, without venom.

"Come now," said Dawlish. "That's a difficult line to swallow, don't you think? How did you come to be inside those tunnels in the first place?"

"Have you ever heard of *Subterranea Britannica*?"

"Sounds like some kind of curse," muttered Yaxley. He was jangling the ring of keys in his hand.

"No," said Hermione, "it's a group of people dedicated to mapping the disused tunnels under London. There are miles of them."

"And you're a part of this group," prompted Dawlish.

She nodded. It wasn't an actual lie. The tour fee had included an honorary membership and free on-line newsletter.

"And you were just innocently exploring an old tunnel and accidentally broke through into Gringotts riding on a frozen ghost." His look was incredulous.

"Well," Hermione cast about for an explanation, "there are ghosts haunting the tunnels. One is a famous actress... named Bea Lamb--"

"Now that's enough of that, Miss." It was Yaxley again. He pulled Dawlish up beside him. "She's just stalling," he grated. "Ask her about the... you know." He went back to his post, but he no longer lounged, but stood stiffly upright, his back to them.

"This bag," said Yaxley, sitting again, "it has a rather elaborate curse on it."

"Oh... yes... " Hermione had to be careful here. The jar containing Scabbers/Peter was in the bag, and the spell, something she'd picked up in her reading on foreign hexes, had been a last minute safeguard.

"Just tell us what it is," Yaxley demanded from the doorway.

She wasn't sure she should let them discover the jar quite yet. It was one thing to march triumphantly into the Ministry with the guilty party in tow, quite another to be seen as the guilty party herself. She decided to wait a bit. "I... erm... it's proprietary, I think. The bag's not even mine." This was true; she had borrowed it from Aberforth.

"You're lying!"

"No, really." She smiled wanly, hoping to tweak their male chivalry.

But Yaxley wasn't buying it. "I don't have time for this." He walked to the center of the cell and stood between Hermione and her interrogator. He bent over to Dawlish and lowered his voice. "Look, let's do the--you know--the big C."

Dawlish was appalled. "What? Cruci--you're joking."

"Why not? Dolores uses it all the time."

"Undersecretary Umbridge?"

"Shush, now. Do we know any other 'Dolores'? Look... come on. I've got a meeting with her in ten minutes. You may think poring over Wanted posters and old cases will get you somewhere, but I know better. Let's do it... now." He straightened up. "Or don't you know how?"

He had hit a nerve. Dawlish bridled. "Of course I know how. I also know it's still illegal except under extraordinary circumstances."

"For the time being, yes. But it's just you and me here... and this little... Mudblood. Who'll believe anything she says. It'll be our word against hers. C'mon. Just a jolt or two. You know. It might just shake something loose."

This was beginning to sound like a warped version of a good cop-bad cop routine, Hermione thought even as fear welled up inside her. Could Yaxley be a Death Eater? And how could he be so bold, openly suggesting the use of a Forbidden Curse to an Auror? "The Big C" had to be *Cruciatius*, judging from Dawlish's horrified response. Had things changed that much at the Ministry?

"How do you know she's Muggle-born?" asked Dawlish.

"Can't you smell it?" Yaxley sneered.

Oh, yes. Worris Yaxley was a Death Eater all right or a prime candidate at the very least. Did Dawlish realize it? He showed no sign that he did.

"All right... tell you what," the Auror said. You go on to your meeting, and I'll keep trying my way for a bit. If I don't get anything out of her by the time you get back, you can do what you want with her, and I'll keep watch."

Yaxley looked at Hermione. "All right," he said. "I'll tell the Minister we're working on it." He sounded merely business-like now. It could be that his mention of torture had been just a ploy to scare her, but there had been no mistaking the excitement in his voice when he'd suggested using the *Cruciatus* curse or the disgust when he uttered the word "Mudblood."

He opened the cell and tossed the keys to Dawlish. She could hear him whistling a tune as he strode up the corridor. It sounded like *The Volga Boatman*.

She studied the Auror as he stood in the doorway, looking after Yaxley. What else did she know about John Dawlish? She had seen him a lot in the library when they were students together. He had been tops in his class and seemed destined for greatness. Oh yes, and he came from a large, rather poor family. Ron mentioned it once, observing that they both wore hand-me-down robes. But there was something else about Dawlish, something just on the edge of her memory, something important...

He swung the cell door shut and took her back to the subject of the Bag and the curse on it. Hermione sensed that he took great pride in his spell work and scholarship. They were alike in that respect. It would please him to figure out how to neutralize those curses himself, she thought. Or should she just be honest? He might be insulted if he discovered that she was leading him.

She opted for honesty. "All right. You win. It's basically a Multi-Forked Body-Bind with a Shrinking Hex kicker.

"No, that can't be. I tried the reversals for those, as well as a *Finite Incantata*."

"Well, the cant in this case is a form of Ashanti. I can take care of it for you if you like."

"Oh, right," he said sarcastically. "I'll just lend you my wand, shall I?"

"Well, the pronunciation is rather twisty. It took me days to get it right. But the book said--"

"What book?"

"*The Origins of Vodoun*."

"Huh! I never saw that one in the Hogwarts library."

"It's not. I found it in Professor Dumbledore's office. But you know, I think a beefed-up Dis-Spell will work. The book said it would if the wizard is sufficiently powerful."

"I should be able to manage that."

Hermione arched an eyebrow. "All right. You have to say it nine times, starting low and slow and getting louder each time. And the rhythm has to be very even."

"You don't have to tell me. I did pretty well in OWLs myself... and NEWTs."

That was it, the missing memory. There had been an article in *The Daily Prophet* about John Dawlish the summer after her first year: ten Outstanding NEWTs, the best showing for Gryffindor in over a hundred years--since Dumbledore, in fact. She had found herself wanting to top him and, later, Percy. In fact, it had become one of the forces driving her to request a Time-Turner in third year. She had forgotten about that until now... now, when striving for grades and making Head Girl seemed less than nothing compared to her current goals.

But in spite of his superior skill and hard work, Dawlish had not made Head Boy. Why was that? She cast back to her first year. The Head Boy that year was another Gryffindor, a popular fellow. She couldn't remember his name, but his father was associated with *The Prophet*, the owner, she thought. Did Dumbledore pass over Dawlish in favor of a glad-handing, rich kid? And did Dawlish resent him for it?

The Auror completed the spell reversal expertly, as the Bag gave a yelp and the faint orange glow on its clasp dissipated. He opened it and reached inside, immediately drawing out the jar with Scabbers inside. He was a very hungry and desperate rat by now, Hermione was sure, although at the moment he seemed groggy, perhaps from lack of air.

"What's this?" Dawlish barked.

Now she had a decision to make. Should she tell him the whole truth or just part of it? The fact of Peter Pettigrew's being still alive had to be revealed as quickly as possible, and to officials who wouldn't just let him go, not to someone like Yaxley or Umbridge, or even, perhaps, the Minister himself. Whatever danger she put herself in now could be fixed later. (Well, she hoped it could.) However, just in case Dawlish might have a grudge against the Headmaster, she wouldn't mention the list and the *Inferi*. Yaxley had said Dawlish made a study of Wanted posters and old cases. Would he recognize Peter Pettigrew if he saw him? Surely he knew about the case. Even some Muggles did. She daredn't be too obvious. She'd have to feel her way carefully in giving out information and rely on Dawlish's intelligence to fill in the gaps, and his ambition to make sure the word got out.

She said that the rat was actually the mastermind of the bank robbery in Animagus disguise. Dawlish scoffed at this, but she could tell he was intrigued. So she plunged on. Having decided to rob Gringotts from underground, the would-be thief needed to know the best place to start digging. He had kidnapped her when he found her exploring the tunnels, as she had a map with her and seemed to know her way around. He told her only that his name was Peter and made her show him the best place to dig. After he broke through to the bank and the goblins closed in on them, he surprised her by changing into a rat leaving her to fend for herself. But she'd had the presence of mind to grab him by his tail at the last second and jam him into the jar.

"And I took his wand and put an *Impervius* on it," she said triumphantly.

"What about that ghost?"

Hermione thought quickly, frantically. "Oh, I think he's the famous... erm... 'Sleeping Stiff.' *Subterranea Britannica* has a pamphlet about him. He was... erm... a homeless person who was... ah... sleeping in the... erm... Strand Theatre on an extremely cold night... and froze to death. When they tore the Strand down, he started haunting the Tube. They say he lies dormant for years and years and only wakes up when the... erm... temperature gets unusually high. He must have been in the wall that Peter blasted through."

Dawlish thought this over and decided it made enough sense to take seriously. He turned his attention back to the jar. Scabbers was awake and shivering now. "So this rat is an Animagus."

"Yes, and the spell to change him back is--"

"I know what it is," he said curtly.

"You might want to Body-Bind him first," she offered humbly.

"And why should I do that?" He started to unscrew the jar, then thought better of it. "He looks harmless enough."

"His hand... it's unnaturally powerful. He used it to carve out the tunnel all by himself."

"Really? Is that why that one paw is sort of silvery?"

"Yes, that's the one." Hermione was glad Dawlish was a sharp fellow. Only Kingsley Shacklebolt would have been so observant.

Yet he did not take her advice at first. He opened the jar and grabbed Scabbers by the tail. The rodent writhed and squealed, and its metallic paw brushed against the Auror's finger, cutting it. "Ouch," cried Dawlish, but he tightened his grip and yelled "*Petrificus Totalus!*" Scabbers' body stiffened, and he placed it on the cot. He intoned the words of Transfiguration, and the rat once more took human form. The Auror looked him over carefully.

Now came the moment of truth. If Dawlish was a real student of crime, he would...

"Why, that's Peter Pettigrew!" he exclaimed.

Hermione played innocent while hugging herself mentally. "Really? Who's he?"

"He was killed... supposedly in a gas explosion. Don't you know your history? It happened about twenty years ago."

"I'm a Mudblood, remember? Besides, it was before my time."

"Greatrakes alive! If this really is him, I've got to tell Yaxley right away!"

Hermione thought fast. "Oh dear, I don't think that would be wise."

"Why not?"

"Mr. Yaxley seemed rather an ambitious type... and he is your superior, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, my experience with such people is that when an important discovery is made, they tend to take all the glory themselves. And the person who did all the work gets left out."

"He wouldn't do that," Dawlish said brusquely. Without another word to her, he placed a *Levicorpus* on Pettigrew and directed the body out of the cell, locking the door on his way out. She heard him open another cell, far down at the end of the hall, presumably to house Pettigrew for the time being.

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She spent the night on the lumpy cot, unfed and, at first, thinking about other things, trying not to worry about whether Dawlish had taken her advice. She had no idea what had happened to Kirlië though she was sure that under competent hands, he could be cured. She wondered where Sirius and James and Reg were. She imagined that she wouldn't be seeing her Marauder friends any time soon since Lord Death had been rather adamant when he'd crashed the cast party about their staying on their side of the Beyond from now on. And as for Reg, well, Bea Lamb had been rather importunate, and he hadn't seemed all that unhappy to go with her. Surely they had been more than mere deathbed acquaintances. Who knew if she'd ever see him again?

Around midnight, a house-elf brought her a drink--tepid water--and two stale croissants. She fell upon these ravenously. Moments later she drifted off to sleep, a deep, exhausted sleep in which jangling keys, flashing lights, and loud, excited voices figured heavily.

In the morning, she found herself covered head-to-toe in a thick blanket. Someone had been very solicitous, she thought as she stretched herself. Shortly thereafter a single silent wizard appeared, waved his wand and opened her cell door. He was tall and rather well-dressed for a gaoler with a fine mane of black hair combed back from his bulging forehead, and a full beard, shot through with gray streaks. She expected he would be escorting her to a courtroom where grave mages in purple robes would pass somber judgment on her.

But no, he gestured her to go up a flight of steps halfway along the corridor to the vast Atrium and then into a lift. She hoped to see a friendly face along the way--Tonks, perhaps, or Mr. Weasley, or even the grim-faced Kingsley Shacklebolt. But she recognized almost no one who entered or left the lift at each stop. One wizard did look familiar, a nervous fellow who reminded her of a young Cornelius Fudge. He was mumbling to himself and, at one point, dropped a file he was carrying. "Application for Employment" it said on the tab.

It frightened her terribly when Walden Macnair stepped into the lift. He didn't recognize her though he did nod at the wizard escorting her. "Pious," he muttered oddly, but perhaps she misunderstood. She was too cold and tired to wonder about it.

They reached their destination, Level One according to the lift's Auto-Announcer. The hallways (there were many of these radiating out from the lift entrance) were carpeted in a rich bluish-purple plush. They went down one that had polished mahogany doors every twenty feet or so, turned a corner, and soon came to a large, open office with many desks, each occupied by a very busy clerk. There was a door to the right and a much larger one straight ahead down another short, narrow corridor past the desks. It was for this door that they were headed. Behind it was a small waiting room... and the office of Minister for Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour.

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"Miss Granger."

"Minister," she nodded as she took a seat across from him.

"That will be all, Thicknesse," he croaked to her escort, who lingered at her shoulder. "It wasn't necessary for you to bring her yourself, you know." He smiled at her, nastily, she thought. "Even though she is the smartest student at Hogwarts, she is only that: a student."

"I know, Minister, I just thought, since she was a friend of the number one--"

Scrimgeour rose, spluttering, "I told you, he's not--we're not using that term anymore."

"But the Undersecretary said--"

The Minister strode around his desk, caught Thicknesse's elbow, and steered him to the door. "I don't care what she said. Pot... he is not the enemy."

Hermione heard the door open and close. Rufus Scrimgeour, looking a trifle ruffled, took his seat and scowled at her from behind his pince-nez. Once she would have been afraid of him, but she had learned a lot over the past month, especially from James and Sirius, and she felt she had this old warlock's measure.

He said composedly enough, "You have been making trouble again, I see, Hermione Granger. Breaking into Gringotts, a very serious offense. I'm surprised the goblins gave you up to us. Usually they just lock thieves away in one of those timed vaults of theirs that only open once every five hundred years or so."

"I already told Auror Dawlish--"

"Yes, I have his report here." He tapped a sheaf of papers. "So Peter Pettigrew, whom everyone--Muggle and mage alike--thought was dead for almost twenty years, comes back to life, decides he'd like to celebrate his resurrection by burrowing into the most impregnable institution in the Magicosm, and kidnaps an eighteen-year-old Muggle-born witch to help him do it. Because she--and I quote--likes to muck about the disused tunnels of the Underground."

"I... I'm something of a history buff," she said.

"And Pettigrew... somehow... knew this."

"Well... erm... I was carrying some maps... and I suppose he just put two and two together."

"Very convenient, I must say. Oh, I do thank you for catching him for us. Reporters are having a field day with the story."

Hermione felt a great happy glow starting in the region of her chest, but she kept her voice calm by main force. "You're not suppressing it?"

"Of course not! Dawlish did a bit of digging, and it became quickly clear that Pettigrew must have framed Sirius Black for the Potters' deaths, and was therefore in league with He Who Must Not Be Named since Day One. It was quite a feather in our cap to be able to announce this."

"Oh, that's good!" She wondered if Dawlish would get a promotion out of it. She hoped so.

"Well, not that good, I'm afraid. *The Prophet* is sure to blame the Ministry for having allowed an innocent wizard to be blamed."

"But Sirius is vindicated now. He'll like that--"

"He's dead, Miss Granger. Or hadn't you heard? However, there's already talk of giving him some kind of posthumous recognition. At the very least, a full pardon... and perhaps OM third class."

"That's wonderful."

"But it's not all good news. You see, Pettigrew escaped."

"What? How?"

"Somehow he wrenched the bars off his cell, without even a wand."

"Oh dear, it must have been his hand," Hermione muttered. In his excitement, Dawlish must have neglected to reflect on the possible consequences of its power. She didn't want to get him into trouble so she added, "I--I forgot to mention it."

"What about his hand?"

"It's made of metal. Voldemort gave it to him. He used it to dig that tunnel all by himself."

"An Adamantine Hand, I suppose. A very difficult magic to master. But I would expect it of our enemy. Yes, young lady, that was an unfortunate omission on your part. One might almost wonder if it was deliberate."

"How can you say that?"

"I'm not saying I believe that it was, but it has occurred to at least one Ministry official that you and Harry Potter might actually be setting yourselves up as rivals to the Dark Lord and that Pettigrew might have switched over to your side to atone for his part in Potter's parents' deaths."

"That's crazy! Wait a minute. Would this Ministry official be Dolores Umbridge by any chance?"

"Actually, no. It was the brain-child of the man who brought you in here, Pius Thicknesse. He's head of Magical Law Enforcement."

"And that's why he brought me here himself. He's afraid of my power?"

"More likely he wanted to see if he could stick around to hear the details of your confession. You see, Dawlish didn't report on Pettigrew to him but came straight to me. It worries Pius a good deal."

What does that mean, I wonder? thought Hermione.

"I hired him you know."

"Mr. Thicknesse?"

"Heavens, no! John Dawlish. He's not the easiest person to like with his know-it-all airs but a damned good Auror all the same." The Minister said this with a curious look of affection, but then he scowled at her. "But the question now is: what do we do with you, Miss Know-It-All?"

"That's simple," said Hermione, trying to put in her voice a confidence she didn't feel. "Peter Pettigrew was the instigator of the robbery; I was an unwilling participant. That should be enough for the Wizengamot to acquit me."

"Yes, it should be, especially given your spotless record at school. But I have a problem here. The goblins badly want some heads to roll, and with Pettigrew unavailable--"

"But we didn't actually steal anything--"

"You ruined a very fine bas-relief of Fangfarkle Gringott, the founder of the bank. And goblins are very big on punishment as a discouragement to other would-be robbers. They believe a Knut of prevention is worth Galleons of cure... quite strongly, I'm afraid."

"Oh."

"But I can perhaps dissuade them from pushing for your prosecution... if..."

"If what?"

"If you tell me what you've been doing this past month and how it relates to Harry Potter's plans to defeat the Dark Lord."

"I... It doesn't."

"Oh, come now, Miss Granger. You don't expect me to believe that."

"Really, I'm telling you the truth."

"Then what have you been doing all this time?"

"Oh, relaxing, enjoying the holidays..."

"Relaxing, is it? Were you relaxing when my people found you in a rubbish heap outside those Muggle houses last month?"

"Well, no, I had this job doing surveys--"

"Don't tell me that! Magic had just been done inside one of those houses. Elementary magic that you would be more than capable of. Then we got a tip from an anonymous owl that those same houses were going to be raided by Death Eaters the very next night. And we came to find out from your Headmistress that all five of the children living in those houses are Muggle-borns and slated to get their letter from Hogwarts when they reach magical maturity."

"They are? Well, perhaps they were the ones who did the magic."

Minister Scrimgeour snorted. "Perhaps, but I think not. Next, a little girl--a Muggle-born--performed some prodigious magic in one of those Muggle hotels, and the first Auror on the scene saw a young woman who looks a great deal like you hurrying away from her room."

"Oh... well... I'm sure I'm not the only frizzy-haired teenager in Britain--"

"Then we get another owl with a list of persons to be assassinated addressed to a fellow named Mandrake McFustian from the Dark Lord himself! No explanation, just this damning bit of evidence against a wizard we've suspected for a long time but never been able to catch at anything dodgy."

"What has that got to do with me?"

"We found your marks on the letter."

"What? You mean my fingerprints?"

"That Muggle nonsense? No, we found traces of your emotional essence."

"I don't understand."

"Under certain circumstances, especially when the subject is in the throes of some deep duress or passion, a minute bit of his or her essence is exuded through the pores and leaves a discernible stain on parchment or other absorbent material, and its source can be identified by a suitable spell."

Hermione was stunned. "I never knew that."

"Didn't teach it at Hogwarts, I daresay. I wonder, what was the emotion that triggered the evidence, Miss Granger? Abhorrence of McFustian? I hear he's an ugly bugger."

"No, not that... I mean..." Hermione felt herself redden as she remembered her passion for Icky the troll. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"And then there was this story Healer Pye told..."

Hermione's expression became a studied blank. "Who is he?"

"Just a few days ago, Augustus Pye, a Healer of impeccable reputation, came to us claiming to have been drugged by Narcissa Malfoy to assassinate some of our own people."

"What has that got to do with me?"

"When we went to arrest her, a house-elf named Blobby swore up and down that one Hermione Granger--a Ministry agent no less--had promised him that his mistress would not be arrested, that he had given her proof that it was all Pye's doing."

"I--well--what can I say? I mean he's a house-elf. He'll say anything to protect his mistress."

"But how did he know your name?"

"I don't know... maybe Madam Malfoy mentioned it once. Her son Draco was in my class. Um... might I ask, did you catch Madam Malfoy?"

"No, we did not." Scrimgeour sighed. "You're good, Miss Granger. You're very good. All right, I'll let that pass for the moment. How do you explain the attack on one Dudley Dursley--"

"Durs--" She almost corrected him, but cleared her throat instead. "Does that name mean anything to me, Minister? I'm afraid not."

"You mean you don't know the name of the family your friend Harry has been living with all these years?"

"Oh, you mean *Dursley*. Well, I have heard of them. Erm... Dudley. Is that Harry's uncle?"

"No, his cousin. He was attacked and beaten to a pulp by a young wizard a couple of weeks ago. Broke his leg in two places. Without magic apparently."

Hermione could not control the flush of pleasure that rose in her remembering the night Ron fought for her. "How... how do you know it was a wizard who beat him up and not just another Muggle?"

"Young Dursley described the boy to a T. It could only have been a Weasley, and he said you and Potter were involved too..."

Hermione's insides writhed, but she would not give in, not yet. Why, oh, why hadn't they thought to erase Dudley's memory? She guessed Harry didn't know how to do an Obliviate, and she and Ron had been... well... otherwise occupied...

Scrimgeour was droning on. "...but, unfortunately, when we took their memories of that day and put them in the Pensieve--had to take it from that ne'er-do-well brother of Dumbledore's--there was no sign of a fight, not a trace. And we couldn't use Dursley's--"

"Whyever not?"

"It's dangerous to tamper with Muggle memories."

"Oh? That's too bad." Hermione's grimace had turned an uncontrollable grin

"Yes, isn't it? Then you were found in the Department of Mysteries under very compromising circumstances."

"I... erm... I just wanted to visit and see if... erm... the place had been fixed up... after... you know... after the battle with the Death Eaters."

"After you destroyed the Hall of Prophecy, you mean."

"Well, yes, but it did get Voldemort out into the open--"

"Where he's been ever since, persuading giants and veelas and werewolves to side with him!"

"But at least now you know--"

"Now I know what? I know nothing!" Rufus Scrimgeour thundered. "You and Potter are hiding things from me, Miss Granger, facts of the utmost importance, just as Dumbledore did in his time, and I tell you I won't have it!" He stopped, breathing hard, his face red, his eyes watering. He took a deep breath and added with forced patience, "You must understand. I only want to... help..."

Hermione just shook her head. She had the upper hand now. He had no evidence that would stick. It made her feel a bit giddy.

Scrimgeour continued, "And then there was all that to-do at Saint Mungo's, which you were, once again, at the center of... "

"I'm interested in possibly becoming a Healer--"

"Oh, really! And were you perhaps trying out your Healing powers on the Rehabilitation Ward? They tell me it will never be the same."

Thank heavens, thought Hermione. Aloud, she said, "But I didn't do anything, and you can't prove I did."

"But you were there, as you have been in all these other fiascoes. I ask again, what is the purpose of all this?"

You wouldn't believe me if I told you, Hermione thought.

Scrimgeour went on relentlessly, "Then there are rumors that you visited the necromancer Erechthys in Knockturn Alley and conversed with the souls of the damned dead."

She felt curiously detached now, even a little fey. "Erm... I did do that."

"Why?"

"Curiosity. I wanted to see how the other half lived... and died."

"Very funny. And we tracked you to Grimmauld Place, where you immediately disappeared. If you're Apparating without a license, I warn you--"

"I have my license. It's in my bag."

"You were seen at the French Ministry."

"I was visiting a friend who was in trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

"She was falsely accused of treason by some jealous schoolmates. She's free now."

"You were also seen in the town of Vratsa in Rumania."

"I have friends there too."

"Yes, one of whom is Victor Krum, who is known to be consorting with enemies of the Rumanian Ministry. Don't you know it's dangerous to be going abroad in these troubled times?"

"I travel with my parents every holiday. It's a tradition with us."

"But you went alone this time."

"Well, I'm of age now. I can do what I want."

"Not for long!" He crossed to an elaborate fireplace on the opposite wall, threw in some Floo powder, and shouted into it, "Yaxley, get in here."

Almost immediately, the wizard in the ornate robes, who was likely a Death Eater, came bustling in. Scrimgeour muttered, "Take Miss Granger back to her cell."

~*~

She spent the rest of the afternoon lying on the cot, kicking herself for being so flippant at the end. She had enraged the Minister beyond his control. The "Christmas Carol" skit had changed his attitude somewhat, but apparently not to the extent of removing his distrust of her and her friends. "Ron and Harry will just have to go on without me," she thought sadly.

Then, just when she thought she might have to beat on the bars to get a decent meal, Pius Thicknesse came and opened her cell door. "You may go" was all he said and handed her the Bag of Holding.

She thought it must be a trick, a trap, or something. All the clichés in all the suspense movies she had ever seen came back to her. She would be *Avada Kedavra*-ed in the back shortly for trying to escape, or the lights would go out and some unnamed monster would tear her to pieces.

But no, she walked down the corridor, up the steps and into the Atrium without so much as a Jelly-legs fired at her. Perhaps they were tailing her somehow or there was a bomb in the bag set to go off as soon as she got outside.

She got into line at the Floo fireplaces. To calm her nerves she looked about her. Only now did she notice that the Fountain of Magical Brethren was gone, and a great, black, oblong plinth sat in its place. She heard scratching noises and saw, on one side of the plinth, house-elves carving letters into the stone with what looked like a Scooping Spell. As they worked, two witches in denim robes *Accio*ed small carved stone figures onto the plinth. Those she could see were naked and posed grotesquely, one on hands and knees, another bent over backwards, a third twisted so that its head faced completely opposite to the way its feet were going. The witches stopped to argue a moment about the figures' placement, and she looked at the elves again. So far they had spelled out MAGIC IS MIG. What could the next word be? MAGIC IS MIGRATORY? MAGIC IS MIGUEL? She hoped the elves weren't misspelling whatever MAGIC was meant to be although it seemed likely. Her friend Dobby's pronunciation had never been all that great, and she dreaded to think what kind of punishments the poor creatures might have to inflict upon themselves when the mistake was discovered.

She had no time to waste on such thoughts though. She didn't even question the reason for Scrimgeour's change of heart. She was free, and she had one last visit to make before going on to the Burrow to her friends at last.

Just as she was about to enter one of the Floo fireplaces ranged along the Atrium wall, a hand pulled her back. *Oh, no*, she thought, *it is a trap. They're sending me to Azkaban. I know it.*

But the hand belonged to Percy Weasley, and he was smiling.

"They let you go, I see," he said with no hint of his usual stuffiness.

"Yes. How did you know about it?" He led her to an out-of-the-way bench, and they sat. She caught a glint of amusement in Percy's eyes. It reminded her, just a hair, of Fred and George, which prompted her to make a shrewd guess. "Wait. You had something to do with this, didn't you?"

"Of course. I'm still the Junior assistant to the Minister, aren't I?"

"But how--"

"Well, for one thing, I can tell you there was one huge furor when everyone found out that you were arrested."

"You mean it was in the papers?"

"No, actually, they tried to keep it dark, but when we went down to question Pettigrew, I saw you in that cell and asked Dawlish, the Auror who caught him, about it. He told me you were involved in the attempted bank robbery and that it was really you who captured Peter, but the powers-that-be didn't want anyone to know that. Then the Minister arrived and told me to get something to cover you up with. He didn't want the reporters seeing you."

"So I have you to thank for the blanket."

"Yes. You never even stirred when I put it over you."

"I was that tired."

"No, Dawlish told me. They drugged you in some food they brought you. Didn't want to take a chance on your crying out when we brought the reporters through."

"That explains a lot."

"I told Dad about it, and he told those people you helped--Mortlake and Ovid Bragg and Madam Prod and Ded Diggle and their families. They all owed in Howlers of protest. Oh, and Orrin Orr from the Time lab--don't know what he had to do with it, but the Minister decided he couldn't risk them writing to the *Prophet* because then it would come out who had actually captured Peter, so he let you go. He really needs all the positive publicity he can get right now."

"But what about the goblins? I thought they wanted my blood."

Percy chuckled. "Actually, they like cold, hard cash a lot better."

Hermione looked at him quizzically, but then her stomach gave a loud grumble. She clutched her middle and asked in a low voice, "Erm... you couldn't *Accio* me a snack, could you? I'm about starved!"

"Certainly!" He waved his wand and Summoned her a ham and cheese sandwich and a bottle of gillywater.

He continued his explanation while she munched and gulped. "About the goblins: you see, there was a reward put up years ago by the families of the Muggles who were killed in that explosion for information about anyone who might have been in league with Sirius. They just couldn't believe it wasn't some kind of conspiracy."

"Muggles do tend to be like that," said Hermione fondly.

"Since Pettigrew turned out to be the culprit and it was the goblins who captured him, Gringotts got the reward."

"But I bet it was you who pointed it out to them."

"No, it was Dad actually; he keeps files of Mundane news stories. But since I'm the one who's in good with the higher-ups, Dad let me tell the MM about the reward. And, of course, Scrimgeour decided to share the information with the goblins."

"Oh, Percy, thank you, and thank your father for me." Hermione gave him a hug and kiss, which left a blot of mayonnaise on his cheek. He blushed to his ear-tips just the way Ron did. "So you made up with your family?" Hermione's smile was very wide now.

"Yes, but we've got to keep that dark for the time being. Dad thinks I can be more help to the Order if certain powers think we're still on the outs."

"I see."

"So we avoid each other, and I just slip him information at set times on the lift."

"Are things so very bad here?"

He nodded and lowered his voice. "They've brought in some very shady characters, Hermione. That fellow Yaxley--I'm sure he's a Death Eater. He's just been promoted high up in Law Enforcement. And Thicknesse, the head the department, has coveted the MM's job for a long time."

"And Dolores Umbridge?"

"I don't think she's in with You-Know-Who, but she's got her own axes to grind. Watch yourself, won't you?"

"I will, Percy. You too. Are you... Will you be at the wedding?"

"Only in spirit," he said ruefully.

~*~

Hermione Flooed to Hogsmeade and made immediately for the Hog's Head Tavern.

"Mr. Dumbledore... Aberforth, are you home?" she called when she got inside.

"Whoozat? Oh, it's you," the old man mumbled as he fought his way through the curtains. He looked as if he'd been sleeping.

"I'm back, and I'm pleased to say... well, at least, I'm fairly sure... that your brother is safe now."

"I know," he said simply. "I had a dream about it coupla nights ago. He just smiled at me and said, 'Goodbye, Abbie' and walked off. That was it."

"I've brought back your bag."

"Thanks. I may have a use for it, quite soon in fact."

Hermione wanted to ask what use, but his face took on a closed look, so instead she said, "I hear the Ministry borrowed your Pensieve."

"Borrowed it? Stole's more like." He leaned over the bar and whispered, "Warn your family and your friends. They're gonna use it to interrogate anybody that gets in their way."

"Oh, I hope not."

Aberforth shook his head. "Much good it'll do 'em. The real power is there, up at the school."

"What do you mean?"

"Students. *Dumbledore's Army*." He chuckled.

"Dumbledore's gone now," she reminded him.

"Not this Dumbledore," he said. "My brother thought he knew so much, but who's the survivor here, eh?"

She smiled, not knowing what else to do.

~*~

Hermione returned to Hogwarts to say goodbye to the Headmistress. When she arrived in the office, she heard the sweetest of sounds: Professor McGonagall arguing with her old boss.

"But why won't you tell me, Albus?"

"I simply do not know, Min.... "

Hermione thought to tiptoe out of the room and let them finish, but she just couldn't do it. She had to see that face once more. She had to know that the past month really had been worth all she and Sirius and James and Reg and Kirie had been through.

"Professor Dumbledore," she cried, running the length of the room.

"Here I am, my dear Miss Granger," his portrait boomed, sounding wonderfully well and whole.

"Where have you been, Hermione?" asked Professor McGonagall, who looked just a trifle frazzled. "We were worried about you. I even heard a rumor that you were arrested...."

"I'm fine. I just had a little unfinished business. And you know Minister Scrimgeour. He still wants to be in control of everything, to know where everyone is every second of the day--especially Harry--but I just told him I haven't a clue. I did come back to say goodbye, but I'm so glad to see the professor's portrait awake and... and aware."

"You could not possibly be gladder than I am," said Dumbledore. "I understand that I have you to thank for..." he glanced at McGonagall, "a great many things."

"I would do anything for you, sir," she said softly. "So would Harry... and Ron."

"I know you all would. I am truly blessed in the loyalty and love of my friends. And I want to pass on a message from your... ahem... summertime acquaintances. Everyone is just fine--and I do mean EVERYONE."

At that word, Hermione thought she saw a ghostly figure with long hair and a guitar flitting about behind the Headmaster. She must be dreaming, but she had to ask, "Is that...?"

"Kirie Duke? My, yes. All fixed up by our resident expert, Nurse Pomfrey."

Professor McGonagall added, rolling her eyes, "He wants to come back and haunt the site of so many of his escapades."

Hermione goggled at this, and Dumbledore chuckled. "A welcome counterpoint to Peeves, I think. So you need have no further worries as to his welfare, and you can get on with the business of enjoying Mr. Weasley and Miss Delacour's wedding... and whatever comes after."

"Including your schoolwork," said Minerva McGonagall tartly, "which reminds me, I put away some books on Arithmancy you said you'd like to borrow." She bustled over to the walk-in closet and disappeared inside it.

Hermione had one burning question to ask. "Professor, I've looked everywhere and I can't find a single book on Horcruxes. There must have been some here once. Did you destroy them all?"

"Not at all. I never met a book I did not like or at least see some value in. Are you sure you have explored all possible avenues of research?"

"I think so."

"I seem to remember a bit of advice given to Harry once when he was about to face a dragon. The person said, 'Use your strengths' or something like that."

She looked at him. His eyes were twinkling. She said, "And I taught him to use an *Accio* to bring his broom to him."

Dumbledore nodded. "Something like that, yes."

"*Accio*. Why didn't I think of that? But I've no wand."

"I believe there are several in the top right-hand drawer. Trophies of old duels, you see."

"Yours?"

"No, the Headmistress's."

Hermione opened the drawer and took out a thick faggot. "*Accio books about Horcruxes*," she murmured.

Books began to pile up on the desk, several from overhead; two came through the window, two more from the shelves Hermione had straightened, it seemed, an age ago.

Dumbledore explained, "Some of them are disguised as recipe collections, but I am sure you will be able to break the code."

"Oh, thank you, Professor," she said, putting the wand away and gathering the books into her arms.

Minerva McGonagall re-entered the room carrying several more, heavier tomes. She piled them on top of the ones Hermione was already cradling. She wished for a moment that she had kept the Bag of Holding and wondered once again what Aberforth Dumbledore would be using it for.

"Goodbye," she said simply.

"We'll see you in September," said Professor McGonagall.

"Oh, yes... of course." Hermione headed for the door. She heard them continuing their discussion.

"Now, Minerva, as I was saying, I have no idea where that old list went, but I am sure everything on it has been taken care of. Why not start another one? And the first item on it can be, 'Move picture of old fogey Dumbledore to the Great Hall, so he can observe the students at their most festive and frivolous!...'"

Hermione turned back briefly to take in the homey picture: the Headmistress, arms akimbo and scowling, the Headmaster emeritus, making expansive gestures as he described yet another project he wanted her to consider, and the ghost of Kirllie Duke dancing from portrait to portrait, twanging his guitar and waking up the other old Heads. She had done what was asked of her. Nobody--well nobody in this dimension--knew more than bits and pieces of the real story. That was fine with her. She had new experience, knowledge, and confidence for the fight ahead. And she knew that a certain somebody cared her, even though he might not remember it just yet.

THE END