

No Music More Enchanting

by karelia

Hermione is offered a job before sitting her NEWTs.

Offerings

Chapter 1 of 10

Hermione is offered a job before sitting her NEWTs.

Disclaimer: Naturally, I'm JKR. Now that the books are done and dusted, I can utilize my talent to fantasize about the teacher I held a secret crush on so many years ago. Fooled you all, didn't I? J/K/R

Just/Kidding/Really

No Music More Enchanting

Chapter 1 Offering

"Harry, wait for me!" Hermione was running down the slope to catch up with him.

Harry stopped and waited for his friend. "You're taking a break from studying?" he asked incredulously.

His best friend glared at him. "Yes, can't study *all* the time, can I? Besides, whatever I don't know now that comes up in the NEWTs, I won't know tomorrow either!"

He chuckled. "*You* can't study all the time? Blimey, was I wrong!"

"I think the year away from school has corrupted me. And besides... I want to see how the memorial is coming along," Hermione said quietly, ignoring his jab at her study habits. "You know, sometimes I still can't believe it's all over, and it's been ten months already since..." Her voice turned into a groan. "It'll be tough, this..." She pointed at the nearly erected memorial not far from the gates connecting the school grounds to Hogsmeade.

Harry took a deep breath. "Yes, I guess it will be tough. But it'll bring closure to the people who were affected by the war, too. I know it'll bring closure for me. And in a way, I'm looking forward to that. It feels like I'll be able to get on with life, you know." He started walking again.

"You're right, of course," she said. "I didn't mean to sound whiny. I'm sorry. And Professor Snape deserves recognition for his actions, Harry. I do agree with you on that. I mean, all the people who were killed received proper send-offs, and he hasn't, just because his body has never been found..."

Harry held up his hand. "Hermione, I know you've always defended Snape, even before we learned the truth about him." They stopped again, only yards away from the memorial in progress.

She cast a questioning glance at him, but remained silent.

He cleared his throat. Even after ten months of knowing, it was still hard to reconcile the greasy git, the bat of the dungeons, the ~~murderer~~ of Professor Dumbledore, with the man who had loved his...Harry's...mother more than life.

Harry had never shared his thoughts with either Ron or Hermione. At first, he had to concentrate on defeating Voldemort. Afterwards, there was too much furore over finding and then burying the dead. Then there were friends to mourn. And finally, he had become absorbed in the campaign to have a memorial erected in Snape's honor since the Potions master's body had never been found and so could not be buried in a proper manner.

"I feel horrible and guilty that I went out of my way to make his life hell," Harry admitted.

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione hugged him fiercely. "Don't feel guilty, please! It's not as if he wasn't horrible to you for six years! I'm sure if you'd known, and if he hadn't been so awful, you would have acted differently."

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Hindsight is usually perfect, isn't it? *Healways* went out of his way to protect me. I just hope that my mom has forgiven him for calling her names and that he's found peace wherever he is now."

"Poor Professor Snape... Harry, I hope that *you* will find peace, too, with this..." She waved her hand again over the monument.

"Yeah, me, too. It's probably a pretty silly thought to have a monument in his honor, but I'd hate for anyone to think I still hate Snape."

"But, Harry, I think that's the best way to honor him, what he did, short of writing a biography! And, no offense, but I just can't see you writing a book." Hermione cast a wry look sideways.

Harry laughed. "Too true! That is something I'd rather leave to you!"

Having reached their destination now, the two friends stopped to admire the work wizard artists had been crafting since early spring. It was impressive, all right, although Hermione could not help but find it somewhat sinister.

"It's a bit scary, isn't it..." Harry said.

"It is," she agreed. "Never mind the white marble, it looks fantastic, but the statue doesn't exactly look like Snape. And Nagini suspended in mid-air, approaching his neck, isn't exactly my idea of tasteful either. Maybe the flower beds will make it look a bit more friendly...or at least dignified..."

"Must be a wizarding tradition neither of us understands," Harry muttered. "Maybe Ron will know. Let's go back and find him." He turned and started a brisk walk back towards the castle.

Hermione slowly trailed behind. She wasn't keen on seeing Ron just now. After all, it had been mere hours since they'd had yet another fight *No, Ron, no matter how hard you try, you will not turn me into a brood mare. I will never want more than two children, and I don't want any in the next five or ten years* She sighed inwardly and hurried to catch up with Harry. Hopefully, Ron would be keen on making peace with her after his outburst.

Just as Harry moved his hand toward the entrance door, it opened from inside, revealing Professor McGonagall and Kingsley Shacklebolt. "Oh, there you are!" exclaimed the headmistress. "Minister Shacklebolt has been looking for you, Miss Granger."

"For me?" *What on earth does the Minister of Magic want from me?* Hermione thought, but nodded at Harry. "You go ahead, Harry. I'll catch up with you in the common room."

The headmistress cast a glance at Harry, who had turned to make his way to Gryffindor Tower, and turned to the Minister. "Use my office, Kingsley. I have NEWTs to discuss with the staff and won't be back for a while." She nodded curtly towards both of them and left in the direction of the staff room.

"Come, let's make the most of Minerva's generosity," he said and nodded towards the nearest staircase. Once inside, he pulled out the chair in front of the desk and motioned for Hermione to sit down. Only when she was seated did he move behind the desk and sit down himself.

The Minister ordered tea and biscuits from a house-elf and then finally turned his attention to the student in front of the desk. "Miss Granger."

"Minister, what do you wish to speak to me about?" Hermione asked, now very curious.

"Please call me Kingsley as you've always done. I may continue to call you Hermione, yes?" He paused until she nodded her consent and then continued, "I wish to make you an offer. A career offer, so to speak, since it's probably far too complex to call it merely a *job offer*." His eyes sparkled as he looked at her.

Hermione had always liked Kingsley Shacklebolt...one could not help but like him, she figured. His deep voice always had some kind of soothing effect, and politeness seemed to be his way of life, no matter how rough the going. But she had never been subjected to his gentlemanly mannerisms nor to his sparkling black eyes on that chocolate-colored face, and she had to admit to herself that she was flattered.

So flattered, so infatuated by a decent-looking, courteous, chocolate-skinned man treating her like a woman rather than a girl as everyone else did was she that no words came to her. "Umh..." Her eyes came to rest on his hands, which lay idly on McGonagall's desk. Broad, black hands, but slender fingers, with nails just long enough to reveal a much lighter color. *No, Granger, don't even think of going there!!!*

Hermione felt color rise in her cheeks when Kingsley chuckled. She blushed an even deeper shade upon realizing just how tantalizing his voice was with that chuckle.

"Hermione, allow me to say it's a shame I'm that much older than you. Anyone who will attract your attention as *aman* can consider himself luckier than a Muggle winning the lottery. But that's not what I've come to talk about.

"You are about to join our world in a proper fashion, not by merely being able to cast spells outside the school grounds, but in every way imaginable." His voice sounded sober now, Hermione realized thankfully. She'd be able to concentrate on what he was saying rather than on what this voice was doing to her insides.

"The fact that you are one of the cleverest students to ever grace Hogwarts has not escaped the Ministry, even before I took office. You have heard of the Department of Mysteries? Yes, I know you have. You've even been there, although I don't doubt you have no wish to recall the event."

Hermione nodded, lost for words. It all was a lot to take in.

Kingsley continued, "This particular department is always looking for bright, intelligent people to join. People who have no need to stand in the limelight, for much of the work is, shall we say, beyond secret. Unspeakables are asked for a wand oath upon joining and will never be able to share the happenings of their workday with anyone outside the department. Which might explain why there are so many couples working at the Department of Mysteries." He chuckled again in this deep voice of his, sending an involuntary shudder down Hermione's spine.

"Before I continue, I must ask you if a position in the Department of Mysteries would be of interest."

"Yes! Yes, definitely. I have no idea what exactly they do, of course, but given my need to research just about everything, I could imagine working there would be interesting." Hermione felt she was babbling and stopped.

To her relief, Kingsley made no comment and simply continued, "I cannot tell you the exact nature, of course, not yet. However, I understand your strengths lie in both

Arithmancy and Potions, am I correct?"

"Well, Arithmancy, yes. Even Charms. I'm not sure I've done all that well in Potions," she admitted hesitantly. Professor Snape surely had never praised her aptitude for the subject, and for Professor Slughorn, she simply had never been important enough, despite her fame of being the boy who lived's best friend.

"Oh, don't worry. I have it on good authority that you have an aptitude for these subjects, and you're also rather adept at Transfiguration and, as you admit yourself, Charms. In any case, when the Ministry recruits someone into the Department of Mysteries, we like to make sure you come fully prepared in every respect. Working as an Unspeakable can be stressful, there are times when your working week is many hours more than the usual thirty-five, and we don't like our staff to suffer burn-out too soon."

Hermione tried to digest everything he'd just said, but could make no head or tail of where the Minister was heading with his explanations. She looked at him expectantly.

"When you join the Department, you will not have much time to go out and have fun. Your focus will be on your work. We choose our staff extremely carefully and have a very low turnover because of that. You will get to know other Unspeakables better than your best friends, simply because you'll be spending a great deal more time with them. So we like you to get any typical young adult activities, such as excessive partying, excessive anything, really, out of your system."

Hermione looked at him blankly. "Sir, are you going to send me off to go partying excessively or something like that? I've never had any interest in such..."

"No, no, if you don't want to engage in such activities, you don't have to, by any means, Hermione. What I'm saying, or rather *trying* to say is that we insist future staff go out for a couple of years to have a good time, to do what they want to do without worries, so that when they join the Department, they are ready to work hard and won't hold a grudge because they might have missed out on something." He grinned at her, his face showing an uncharacteristic mischievous expression. "Of course, you are welcome to study at a University if that is what you'd like. Travel around the world. I can even arrange for you to be locked into the British Library, although that's bound to be a very lonely venture. Go to the Amazon and find a plant that'll be the cure for Cruciatus after-effects if that's what takes your fancy..."

"Spend two years in any way you like. Do what you dream of doing, so you'll never feel regret that you've missed something when you get older. Only content people make good and useful staff. My apologies for not being able to expand further on the nature of the work, but I cannot do so until you sign a contract at least.

"What I can tell you, however, is that you will be a full staff member right from the moment you sign the contract. Starting salary is as high as any professional entry-level in the wizarding world. You will receive extensive training once you start, of course, but all with a full salary."

Hermione looked at him dumbfounded and took a deep breath. "So... I am to spend two years any way I like and then join the Department of Mysteries at a full salary?" It sounded too good to be true.

"Exactly. The only condition is that you keep me informed on how you are spending your free time. And of course, aside from a contract to be signed, I'll need a wand oath from you. Within twenty-four hours."

"Within a day? What about my NEWTs? Won't the results matter?" Hermione asked incredulously.

Kingsley laughed, a deep, amused laugh that headed straight to Hermione's core, doing funny, unfamiliar things there.

"Even if you fail all your NEWTs, Hermione, your average scores will be close to excellent. Besides, we don't choose people on their academic merit alone, although for some positions, a scholarly attitude is advantageous." He rose from his chair.

"If you decide to accept my offer, I'll be having dinner with Minerva tomorrow and will be here in her office afterwards. I will have a contract ready for you, and your salary will start the moment you sign.

"If you do not wish to accept and rather pursue a different career, then I wish you the best of luck and will, no doubt, see you at Order meetings." He smiled at her, revealing wide rows of white teeth that sparkled no less than his eyes.

Hermione uttered a *Thank you* and only just managed to walk out of the office without staggering.

The Minister of Magic sat down again, took a deep breath and called for a house-elf, who appeared instantly. "I'm in need of an owl who can fly longer than average distance, please."

The house-elf nodded and disappeared, and Kingsley rummaged around for some parchment and ink. He took a quill out of his robe pocket, dipped it in the black ink and penned a letter. There was a scratch at the window, and he opened it. Then he returned to the desk, rolled the parchment up and tied it around the owl's leg. "This needs to go to Søren Siebenthal, Rue des Vosges, Bitche, France. Please wait for his reply and return it to me at the Ministry." He fed the owl a treat and sent it on its way.

Written for sshg316 for the LJ sshg_exchange.

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Reviews feed the Muse. :-)

Animagi Inc.

Chapter 2 of 10

Hermione has various conversations and ponders her future.

For Disclaimer etc., please see Chapter 1

No Music More Enchanting

Chapter 2 Animagi Inc.

When she reached the Gryffindor common room, Hermione was so deep in thought she noticed neither Harry nor Ron until Harry threw a pillow at her, hitting her square in the chest.

"Earth to Hermione. Where are you?" Harry snickered.

"Oh. I... I was thinking," Hermione replied sheepishly.

"Blimey!" exclaimed Ron in mock surprise. "Miss Granger is thinking!"

Hermione was relieved to see that Ron didn't seem to hold a grudge against her from their latest argument. But she knew she would not find any peace, let alone a quiet space, in the common room when it was so lively, and it was still an hour to go before dinner. Unfortunately, the library was out of the question...it would be packed with students cramming last-minute facts into their tired brains.

Sighing, Hermione fell into the nearest chair.

"What's up, Hermione?" Harry asked. "What did Kingsley want?"

"He offered me a job," she said evasively, having no intention of going into details. Looking at Harry's questioning face, she added, "He was very vague about the exact nature of it, but expects me to make up my mind by tomorrow evening."

Ginny, who had just entered the room and joined the little group, gasped in surprise. "You as well? Luna was offered a position in the Department of Mysteries."

"Luna?" Anyone else would have been less surprising than Luna Lovegood.

Hermione stood up abruptly. At Ron's questioning look, she said, "I'm going to find Luna and talk to her. I'll meet you in the Great Hall for dinner." With that, she hurried out of the common room and headed for the Ravenclaw wing.

Hermione did not have to walk far to find Luna and, to her surprise, Draco. They were deep in conversation, and Draco was scowling, reminding Hermione of their former Potions professor. She still could not help but think of Draco as the ferret. However, she knew Luna had been forming an odd friendship with the blond since the beginning of the year and refrained from making any comment.

"Hermione. I thought you might want to talk. The Minister told me he was planning to make an offer to you as well." She looked at Hermione with her wide eyes as if she was seeing her for the first time.

Hermione nodded quietly, completely ignoring Draco, until Luna started speaking again. "Isn't it terribly sad? Draco's parents are getting divorced."

Divorces in the wizarding world were almost unheard of, even less so between purebloods, and Draco looked suitably stricken. "I'm sorry to hear that, Draco. That must be very hard on you," Hermione said.

"I'll live," Draco said, his voice bitter. "It's not exactly unexpected, although I hate having Mother force me to take sides." He sighed and shrugged.

"She'll come around, Draco," Luna said. "Let her get over the fact that your father has turned away from all the stupid beliefs of pureblood supremacy. Maybe she'll realize one day how silly they are."

Turning to Luna, Draco's face softened. "Thanks, Luna. I let you go and talk with Granger here. See you around." With a curt nod, he turned, but stopped when Luna spoke again.

"Draco, do find Pansy and talk to her. If she loves you, and I think she does, she won't care about your parents' divorce."

Draco closed his eyes for a moment and then nodded before he finally turned and left.

Luna continued to ponder Draco's dilemma. "I'm very sad for him. Of course, I'm happy that Mr Malfoy radically changed his attitude ever since he thought Draco's life in danger in the last days of Voldemort's reign. I *do* hope that Mrs Malfoy will come out of her silly supremacist ideas one day." She'd started to walk towards the open entrance doors and pointed to the lake. "It's such a beautiful day. Why don't we enjoy the warm weather?"

When the two young women had found a comfortable spot on the lawn near the shore of the lake, Hermione looked curiously at Luna. "So, Kingsley has offered you a job with the Department of Mysteries. What are you going to do?"

"It's wonderful, isn't it..." Luna's eyes took on an air of far-away dreaminess. "What I would love to do is go to Germany. It has so much history that parallels ours, and besides, almost any town offers plenty of culture. And so many beautiful castles! A year or two there would be just perfect. I could maybe go to a university. It would be easy enough because most people speak English. And for everything else, there are translation charms. Also, my dad told me he's been hearing rumors that the Nazis hid the Ark of the Covenant somewhere in Germany before their downfall." She turned to Hermione, her eyes wide. "What are you planning to do?"

Hermione sighed. "I have no idea. A Muggle university sounds interesting. And going abroad for a couple of years would be nice, too. I've only been to a few European countries, and if, as Kingsley said, the work is very hard at the Department of Mysteries, I'm more likely to spend my holidays just recuperating, so I guess this is our only chance to see some parts of the world..."

"Universities have long summer holidays and winter holidays, too, you know. You could travel then. That way, you get to do everything you want. It would be nice if we went together. The prospect of going to a foreign country on my own is a bit daunting."

Hermione had to agree that Luna's plans sounded interesting. Living in another country for a while would be very different from merely visiting. Studying at a university would keep her rooted in the Muggle world for another couple of years. Her parents surely would approve. She hoped Kingsley would keep his promise to bring them back soon and reverse the memory charm.

Of course, living in Germany would be ironic in a way, Hermione thought idly. That was *if* her hopes came true the next day.

She would sleep over it and make up her mind then. But really, the offer was tempting enough for Hermione to accept, even if she didn't know exactly what her work would involve. It was not going to be boring, of that she was certain.

"Are you nervous about the NEWTs?" Luna asked.

"Yes. Transfiguration will be over by mid-day thankfully. Do you want to meet after lunch, and we'll talk about it again? I think I need to mull it over. Right now, I'm a bit overwhelmed still with Kingsley's offer," Hermione admitted.

"All right. Let's do that. I never thought I'd be offered a job with the Ministry. It's very exciting..."

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Hermione's Transfiguration NEWT went better than she'd anticipated. Despite months of studying and training, she had been uncertain if she'd succeed Transforming for her practical exam. But she had managed admirably so, according to the examiner, who offered nothing but praise for her abilities.

Relieved that the first exam was over and her anxiety over NEWTs held at bay for the moment, the young witch made her way to the Great Hall for some lunch. Harry and Ron were already at the table, eating and talking. She took her seat next to Ron.

"How did yours go? Did you Transform?" Ron asked.

Hermione nodded and beamed. "Yes! I still can't quite believe it. What about you?" She looked from Ron to Harry and back to Ron, who both grinned widely.

"Bloody brilliant! All three of us!" Ron said between mouthfuls of food.

Hermione was unable to hide a relieved grin. All that studying and training together had finally paid off.

"The only thing is, we're going to have to register as Animagi now, won't we?" Harry asked. "I know my dad never did, but he didn't use his skill for the examiners to see either."

Hermione shrugged. "No big deal, is it? And besides, who ever looks at that register..."

"Why, you, of course, Hermione." Ron didn't stop grinning. "I remember a certain beetle that caught your attention..."

"Yeah, exactly. As long as we don't do stupid things while in our Animagus forms, nobody will have a reason to look! And if they do, so what." She really wasn't worried about being a known Animagus.

The three friends spent the next hour chatting about NEWTs in general, Animagi, and how this skill might even boost their future careers in particular until Luna arrived at the Gryffindor table.

"Oh, hi, Luna, how did your morning go?" Harry asked.

"It went well enough," Luna said pleasantly and smiled. "I didn't Transform, of course..."

"Of course," Ron snickered quietly.

If Luna heard his snicker, she ignored it. "I heard you did rather well. I'm very pleased for you."

It was so typical of Luna to be pleased for others even when she herself had not succeeded in the same task, Hermione felt her heart warm at the prospect of spending more time with the strange witch, who had constantly and without fail proven her loyalty to the trio. She was also one of the kindest people Hermione had ever come across. And one of the weirdest.

The Gryffindor witch rose from her seat. "Let's go for a walk, shall we?" she said to Luna. "We can plan our future outside and make the most of the Scottish summer while it lasts." She was keen to get away from Ron, preferably before Luna started talking about Germany. There was no need for her boyfriend to get worked up over something not yet cast in stone.

The two young witches headed leisurely for the lake and found a comfortable spot near the shore.

Hermione had learned during the last months of Voldemort's regime of terror how reliable Luna had proven, but she was surprised just how many interests she shared with the strange girl. By the time she was due to meet with the Minister again, her immediate future was planned out in detail...from the university of choice to memberships at libraries to long weekends dedicated to sightseeing.

"I am so pleased you decided to accept, Hermione," Kingsley said once he'd ensured she was seated. "As I told Luna already, I will be happy to arrange for any Muggle papers you may need, such as passport, residence permit and so on. The German authorities love red tape much more than the British. And if you want accommodation, I can arrange for that, too. I happen to know the owner of several houses in Munich - a wizard, and I'm sure he'll have a flat big enough for the both of you. Unless, of course, you'd rather have your own place."

"Oh, no, if it's okay with Luna, I'm happy to share a flat with her!" Hermione assured him.

They discussed more details, and Hermione was amazed at the help the Minister offered, not only pertaining to her time abroad but also dealing with the matter of returning her parents and reinstating their memory while she was still in the country. Finally, she signed her contract, gave her wand oath and at last stood up to leave.

"Oh, one more thing, Hermione," Kingsley said. "Congratulations on your success at today's Transfiguration NEWT. It may come in very handy to be an Animagus. And don't worry about registering...we might as well keep quiet about it. Tell Harry and Ron to wait a while, too, at least until other interesting things happen and the students forget about today."

One happy young witch left the headmistress' office late that evening, the issues with her boyfriend niggling on her consciousness not able to diminish her happiness over being the luckiest witch of the century. A talk with Ron would have to wait another couple of days.

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The remaining NEWTs flew by in a haze, and the day of Professor Snape's memorial ceremony arrived. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna had been invited by the Ministry to occupy the front rows, as had Molly and Arthur Weasley and other surviving Order members. Ginny had not left Harry's side since Voldemort's death, and her seat next to him was assured. At the end of the row, Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson had taken up residence upon Luna's invitation.

"I'm so pleased Pansy is on Draco's side," Luna whispered in Hermione's ear. "He's been much happier since they've talked."

Hermione was not sure how appropriate Draco sitting with them was. On the other hand, she knew he had thought rather highly of Professor Snape, especially since he'd learned of the Unbreakable Vow his Head of House had entered with his mother. She figured Professor Snape would probably prefer Draco in the first row to anyone else occupying its seats. Nevertheless, she saw many attendees stare unabashedly at Draco and Pansy.

When the Minister of Magic arrived, the crowd went quiet immediately. Kingsley Shacklebolt headed straight to the front row and came to a standstill in front of Draco. "I am pleased to see you here, Mr Malfoy." Then he nodded at Pansy. "Miss Parkinson."

The speech the Minister gave was such that by the time the statue was unveiled, every single witch and wizard present, no matter their opinion of Severus Snape before this day, deeply appreciated and felt the unfairness for the hero who had died before he could experience the satisfaction of seeing the Dark Lord fall.

It was a solemn crowd of students, teachers, Ministry employees, Order members and other invited parties who headed towards the castle to end the day with a feast to commemorate the last wizarding war's great hero.

Grateful thanks to southernwitch69 for the beta and littlebeloved for the alpha read.

No doubt you already know that reviews feed the Muse.

Colors

Chapter 3 of 10

Hermione and Luna leave London and arrive at their destination.

For Disclaimer etc., please see Chapter 1

No Music More Enchanting

Chapter 3 Colors

One last, rambunctious ride on the Hogwarts Express back to King's Cross, in a compartment busier than Heathrow at the beginning of the summer holidays, with a constant flow of visitors, ranging from soon-to-be second-years to fellow school leavers, all of whom wanted to see and be seen with the heroes who'd defeated Voldemort...after all, it might be their last or even only chance...and Harry, Ron and Hermione's Hogwarts era ended.

The three friends gathered their luggage and stepped on the platform. "It feels so strange," Hermione said, casting one last, wistful look at the train. "It's really over now, isn't it? No more school."

"Yeah," Ron said somberly. "That time is over. On to new things."

Harry grinned. "Adulthood, here we come! Let's go!"

They made their way out to the main station, and Hermione caught sight of Luna. She waved and called, "See you Sunday, Luna!"

Luna hurried over to them, abandoning her luggage for the moment. "We'll meet at the Leaky Cauldron, right?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. Five o'clock Sunday. See you then." Her eyes followed Luna as the blonde witch walked light-footed back to her belongings.

"Sunday?" Ron asked, frowning. "You didn't tell me."

"Sorry, Ron, Luna and I arranged to meet on Sunday just before we boarded the train this morning. We'll talk as soon as we settle at Grimmauld Place," Hermione promised, trying her best to sound lighthearted.

The three friends exited the station and walked onto an empty side-road from where they Apparated to Grimmauld Place.

Hermione was grateful for Harry's presence when she had finally run out of excuses to delay a serious talk with Ron. "As you know, I've accepted Kingsley's offer. And I've thought much about whether to stay here or go abroad. Ron, this is likely my only chance to see some parts of the world, to live somewhere outside England, and that is something I've always hoped to be able to do one day...even though it means we won't see each other as often."

Ron stared at her, profound disappointment written on his face. "What is so special about Germany that England doesn't offer, Hermione?"

"The Ark of the Covenant is hidden there." Hermione snickered, remembering Luna's outrageous statement.

"What?" One blank and one surprised face looked at her.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I was joking!"

"Is this it, then? You just go off without a care about us?"

"No, Ron," she said seriously. "Not at all. Unless *you* want it to be so. Honestly, if our relationship dies because we don't see each other every day, then there isn't much of a relationship to start with, is there?"

"She's right, you know, mate," Harry said. "If you're meant to stay together, then a temporary separation shouldn't be the end. It's not as if you can't visit each other! And it's not forever either!"

"I guess..." Ron said moodily. Then his face perked up. "We're going to be pretty busy with Auror training, anyway!"

"Exactly. So it won't really matter so much because you wouldn't be able to see each other as often," Harry pointed out. "And the two years will be over before you know it."

Eventually, Ron's mood improved again, and he and Harry went to the living room for a game of chess while Hermione returned to the room she had always occupied during her stays at Grimmauld Place to enjoy the freedom to do whatever she wanted now that school was over.

The next few days flew by in a flurry of activity. Trips to the Ministry of Magic were on the agenda almost daily to arrange for all the official papers and documents that might be required.

An emotional reunion with her parents ensued after Kingsley, true to his word, had reversed her memory charm and returned the Grangers to their old home. Hermione was grateful how much the Minister had done for her. He had not stopped at merely returning her parents with their memories restored, but had ensured that they'd know exactly why Hermione had deemed it necessary to remove them to safety.

By the weekend, Hermione had all the papers she might need in Muggle Germany as well as her acceptance letter from the university. After her various talks with Luna, she was looking forward to living amongst Muggles in Munich. Kingsley had suggested she'd take up chemistry, and Hermione wondered why she hadn't thought of that herself. It seemed such a good idea.

On Sunday afternoon, Hermione met Luna at the Leaky Cauldron, and they looked through Muggle tourism brochures Luna had brought along while sipping butterbeer.

"I'm so looking forward to it. I can hardly wait," Luna said, enthusiasm evident in her voice.

Hermione smiled. "Yes, me too. Next Sunday, we might be having coffee in the English Garden..."

A few days of frantic visiting parents and friends, a last get-together at the Leaky Cauldron with former schoolmates, and the day of moving abroad arrived.

Hermione rose early, even though they would not travel until evening. But sleep had evaded her since the early morning hours, so she opened the book she had bought in a Muggle store the previous day and started to read about Munich.

The young witch was not pleased about Mrs Weasley demanding that Ron spend the night...her last at Grimmauld Place...at the Burrow, but Mrs Tonks was still recovering from a fall and needed help looking after Teddy Lupin. Since Ron had continuously been evading his responsibility to keep his mother company while baby-sitting, Molly Weasley paid Grimmauld Place a visit and told her son in no uncertain terms what was expected of him.

Entirely entranced in the history of the many castles and palaces, Hermione first did not hear the knock on the door. "Hermione, are you in there?"

Looking at the clock on the wall, she groaned. "I'll be out in a minute, Harry!" The shower would have to wait; she didn't want to be late for what she thought to be the last proper English breakfast for a while.

Although sadness was ever lingering in the Weasley home, Hermione enjoyed breakfast with the still large family. Her heart warmed as she watched Harry feed small pieces of toast to Teddy as if he'd done it a million times before. He would enjoy fatherhood, and judging by the longing looks Ginny was casting at them, Hermione was certain they'd be parents in the not too far future.

After breakfast, Mrs Weasley chased Hermione out of the kitchen. "Don't worry about cleaning up. Go and enjoy your last few hours with Ron, Hermione!"

"Let's go for a walk," Ron suggested, and Hermione followed him out of the door. They walked in silence for a while before Ron started to talk. "I'm gonna miss you, you know..."

Hermione stopped to hug him. "I'll miss you, too, Ron. I know I will. But this is just too good an opportunity..."

He played with her hair as she leaned against his chest. "I know, love. Believe me, I understand. I'm glad that Auror training is supposed to be tough for the first year. At least that way, I'll be able to keep myself busy."

"And we can visit each other, Ron. Germany is not that far! The only reason Luna and I don't Apparate tonight is because we don't know where to. That's why Kingsley arranged a Portkey for us... I'll send you an owl as soon as I can, and then we can make plans to visit."

Finally, after a few hours spent frantically with showering, packing, re-packing and last-minute Floo conversations, Hermione found herself next to Luna in front of the Minister of Magic's desk.

The two witches took seats opposite Kingsley, and after a short exchange of greetings, the Minister came right to the point. "This Portkey," he said, holding up a cd, "will take you to the garden of Blutenburg Palace. Go to the main building across the two towers on the corners of the property, and on the shorter side on the right, you'll find a small door. These," he held up two keys, "will open it, but you can, of course, initiate a password so you don't have to worry about carrying a key around. Inside, go up the stairs to the top floor where your flat is located. The same key will open the door to it."

He waited for Hermione and Luna to acknowledge his words before continuing. "The caretaker of the castle is a Squib. He knows you're coming, and he will help you with anything you need, from finding the nearest shops to directions to the wizarding quarter...they have a Gringotts branch there...and, of course, anything you'll need with regard to your new home.

"The loft of the Blutenburg has two flats, each with its own entrance so you won't have to worry about being disturbed by the other residents, who by the way are also English. The rest of the building houses museums and the youth library. They all close at five o'clock, which is why I asked you here so late. This way, no Muggles are likely to see you appear out of nowhere." Kingsley smiled. "The buildings themselves are warded against Apparition, so you will have to Apparate out of and into the garden.

"Any questions, ladies?"

Hermione and Luna looked at each other. Neither had questions so far. The Minister went on to explain how to use the German PO Box at the nearby post office, which had been arranged for the two witches, then mentioned the lack of a fireplace. "But the caretaker can tell you where the nearest Floo is, so that should be no problem. And of course, you can make use of owls. The caretaker can tell you where the owlery is.

"Right. I think that's it for now. Enjoy your stay, and don't forget to owl every now and then, especially if you plan to go elsewhere for adventures."

Finally, the two witches said their good-byes and activated the Portkey.

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"Wow, look at this, isn't it beautiful..." Luna said with reverence, staring at the castle in front of them.

Hermione took a deep breath. The palace looked majestic and imposing, its large grounds surrounded by four white-washed towers, with a lake running the entire side of the garden that mainly consisted of manicured lawn, on the borders of which grew roses, lavender and other fragrant flowers. It made breathing an utter olfactory delight.

"It is," Hermione agreed, taking another appreciative whiff of the scented air. "I can well imagine settling here for a while."

The two witches walked along the palace facade and found the door the Minister had described. Behind it was a narrow corridor leading into the main part of the building, and a spiral staircase led upstairs to the loft.

"Oh, this is nice..." Hermione said upon opening the door to the flat. Through the many windows, a slowly setting sun and darkening sky bathed the interior in warm orange lights, intensifying the blue hues of the soft furnishings and the wooden floor. The entrance area opened up into a large living room filled with sofa, comfortable chairs, and low shelves along the entire wall.

"Imagine, it's big enough to have friends over, too," Luna said, obviously as delighted as Hermione was with the new situation.

The two friends walked through the living room, which opened up into a kitchen that could be easily considered a culinary aficionado's dream come true. An abundance of cast iron pots and pans were hanging above a large cooker with work surfaces and cupboards on either side. The largest refrigerator Hermione had ever seen stood in the corner at the far end, and an island in the middle provided two large sinks, a dishwasher and more working space.

Luna smiled dreamily. "I think we should take up some cookery classes, just to do this kitchen justice."

"Hm, you have a point," Hermione agreed. She opened the door at the end opposite the living room. It led to a corridor, from which three doors led elsewhere. She opened the first door. It was a small bathroom. *I'd have imagined something bigger, judging by the size of the kitchen and living room,* she thought and closed the door again.

The next door led to a large bedroom, decorated in green. "I think someone had fun here," Hermione muttered. The room was functional and rather tastefully decorated, although Hermione could not appreciate the Slytherin green. Opening the door at the far end of the bedroom mollified her considerably. It was a big bathroom with a very large bathtub and plenty of storage space.

The last door she opened was a mirror of the green bedroom, only in blue. "Oh, a Ravenclaw room. I like that!" Luna exclaimed as she entered behind Hermione.

Hermione sighed. "I guess I'll take the green one then. I'll have to do something about that color, though."

"Oh, surely, that won't be a problem. Thank you, I rather like this one," Luna replied, and Hermione turned to give her bedroom a closer inspection.

Trying to change the green to any other color proved impossible, however. Hermione knew a fair few charms that should have instigated the change, yet no matter which charm she tried, the green remained stubbornly.

A loud knock at the front door interrupted her concentration, and both witches hurried to see who the visitor was.

Grateful thanks go to southernwitch69 for the beta and littlebeloved for the alpha read.

Wizarding Delight

Chapter 4 of 10

Hermione and Luna explore the wizarding area of Munich and meet someone they've known for a while.

For Disclaimer etc., please see Chapter 1

No Music More Enchanting

Chapter 4 Wizarding Delight

Luna opened the door to reveal an old, slightly scruffy looking man. "Hello," she said.

"You are Miss Granger and Miss Lovegood, the witches from England, are you not?" the stranger enquired with a heavy German accent, staring at them with piercing blue eyes.

Both witches nodded, and he continued, "I am Herr Schultz, the caretaker of Schloss Blütenburg. You must learn where the shops are located, and you must learn your way around the wizarding district. Here are some maps where I have marked the important places."

Hermione took the maps from him. "Thank you, Herr Schultz. We appreciate your help."

He looked at her disdainfully. "And be sure to know that aside from your flat, this building is none of your business. You do not sneak around. Is that clear?"

"We wouldn't dream of that, sir," Luna assured him.

Herr Schultz looked at Luna and then regarded her with what could pass for an approving smile. "Good, young lady. You must not get into trouble!" He frowned as he turned to Hermione. "Not you either!"

Hermione only just succeeded to refrain from rolling her eyes and gladly left any niceties to Luna.

"What a creep," she said when Herr Schultz had left, after informing them of a mailbox at the front gate they were to use if they needed to contact him. By the sound of it, he did not approve of owls delivering mail.

"Do you think he's a Nazi?" Luna asked conversationally. "He didn't seem to like your brown hair as much as he liked mine."

"I couldn't care less," Hermione said, this time giving in to the urge to roll her eyes. "I just hope other Germans are nicer!"

Her hopes proved to be reality as the two witches began to explore the surrounding areas over the next few days. Shop-keepers, waiters in cafés, even strangers on the road became instantly friendly when they heard English spoken and were eager to practice their linguistic skills acquired at school or during travels.

By the end of the first week, Luna had a favorite café, which served varieties of yogi tea, and Hermione found herself partial to the local bakeries, which offered an incredible abundance of bread types.

The shopping area for magical folk was rather different from Diagon Alley. Located half-way between the old part of the city and its most trendy district, Schwabing, the entrance was a prominent gate of wrought iron with gold accents set in a long, tall wall. Across the gate was written in bold letters,

Eingang nur für Hexen und Zauberer

Entrance only for witches and wizards

"They say this openly here?" Hermione asked incredulously.

Luna smiled. "Yes, why not. It's not as if Muggles believe real witches or wizards exist. The few who know leave us alone so they can occasionally benefit from our powers I guess."

"Interesting..." Hermione murmured and opened the gate. The girls slipped through and found themselves facing a fairy wonderland. At a short distance, little houses in all conceivable shapes, ranging from the traditional German *Fachwerk*, crooked timber-framed stone buildings, to domes, to miniature castles and even tiny versions of the Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower. The narrow cobblestone street was alive with magical folk, who hurried from one shop to another, occasionally stopping at one of the moving stalls to inspect the seller's wares or to chat with friends they came across.

"No, no, you can't just walk in here, ladies," a lady occupying a small booth cried out in German. "You wait until it's your turn!" Then she turned back to the tall, blond man who'd obviously been arguing with her until Hermione and Luna appeared.

"You have no wand, and your aura does not emit magic. How do you expect me to believe you are a wizard?" the lady asked in English, obviously annoyed.

The two young witches gasped in unison when the blond began to speak. There was no mistaking his identity.

"Which part of *my wand was stolen* do you have trouble understanding? And if you are occupying a post such as this, then you will certainly know what exactly I've been taking that my magic is not obvious. I doubt I am the only one in this particular country, don't you agree?" he drawled, and the witch turned pale at his words.

"Mr Malfoy, what are *you* doing here?" Luna asked, not hiding her surprise to see her friend's father.

"Ah, Miss Lovegood, my dame in shining armor!" Malfoy bowed dramatically, took her hand and lifted it to his lips. "And Miss Granger! How splendid to see two beautiful ladies in my moment of deep distress! This person here," he pointed at the witch in the booth with more disdain than one should be allowed to muster, "does not believe I am a wizard. It breaks my heart."

Hermione let out an involuntary snort at the situation in front of her. Mr Malfoy talking about deep distress was highly comical.

Luna laughed and turned to the witch. "He is definitely a wizard. We both went to Hogwarts with his son."

"Then I need proof that you are indeed witches," the lady replied. "Show me your wand and lift something off the ground here." She pointed to the side where all sorts of Muggle rubbish lay.

Hermione and Luna took their wands out and cast *Wingardium Leviosa*, lifting an old Coke can and an old cuddly toy simultaneously, then handed their wands for the witch to inspect.

She was now satisfied. "I'll take your word that you know this man to be a wizard *Schlaumayer's Wands* is located in what looks like the Statue of Liberty, you can't miss it," she said, pointing in the general direction as she turned to Lucius.

The wizard ignored the witch and bowed to Hermione and Luna. "Thank you, ladies, for saving me from disaster. I'm in your debt. It is *highly* inconvenient to be without a wand, I must say. Now I must dash. I will see you again; Draco told me you were going to stay in Munich for a while. If you've not been to the Hofbräuhaus, I highly recommend a visit there. Especially on Sunday afternoons. But I must say good-bye. No doubt we'll meet again." With that, he rushed off towards the Statue of Liberty.

"I do wonder what Mr Malfoy is doing here in Munich of all places," Luna said thoughtfully.

Hermione had no answer. "At least we know he's changed sides! Otherwise, I'd be seriously worried..." Then she was distracted by a house that looked like a very big, red apple right next door to a much smaller prune-shaped one.

"This is cute," Luna said, her face showing delight. "Oh, and look, the Eiffel Tower houses a café. Do you think they'll have yogi tea?" She eagerly walked towards the tower, and Hermione had no choice but to follow her. She had come to like the habit of sipping tea or coffee and watching people as much as Luna. It had a soothing quality to it.

She realized with a pang that Ron would probably not enjoy sitting in a coffee house just to watch the goings-on. *Oh, well. He isn't here...* In honest moments, she admitted to herself that she had not missed him for one moment. She missed the intensive friendship with Harry and Ron and their daily banter, even though Luna was more than an apt substitute for that. But she did not miss her boyfriend. Nor did she feel particularly guilty upon that realization. *Maybe I'm just not ready for a more or less lifelong commitment...* she thought and sat down opposite Luna, almost immediately distracted by the variety of teas and coffees on offer.

After their coffee break and idle observations how similar and yet different German wizards and witches were, Hermione and Luna explored the wizarding quarter. A bookstore, *Wissen Macht Glück*, located inside the red apple building, inevitably drew Hermione's attention. To her relief, they had a considerable section of English books, and to her delight, many books were very different from the typical fare on offer at Flourish and Blotts.

German wizards and witches seemed to have an acute interest in alchemy as well as esoteric studies, and Luna soon lost herself in a book *The Ark of the Covenant From a Magical Perspective*.

Hermione skimmed through the pages of *Alchemy of the Nazis: The Legacy of Aldebaran* and was soon equally absorbed in a different world. She'd paid no notice to time until someone right above her cleared his throat.

"Excuse me, young lady, but we're about to close. You are welcome, of course, to come back tomorrow. We open at ten in the morning," said a young sales clerk, who moved on to the next aisle to inform other customers of the same.

The young witch looked at her watch. *Blast, it's nearly eight. We've spent hours here...* The book was far too interesting to put down, so she got up to find Luna and then made her way to the counter to pay for her purchase.

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The following Sunday, Luna suggested a visit to the Hofbräuhaus, one of the most famous landmarks of Munich from the days when beer was considered a staple in the local diet a few hundred years ago.

Hermione grinned. "You're not hoping to meet Mr Malfoy there, are you?"

Luna squirmed slightly. "Well... He *is* an interesting person, don't you think? I'm most interested what led him to change sides. Draco doesn't know." She looked her usual serene self again.

"Okay, fine, let's go then."

The Hofbräuhaus was nothing like a pub or even a restaurant Hermione had ever seen. First of all, it was huge, big enough to seat 3,000 guests, even though it had at least three separate public areas, and in the summer months, the courtyard offered additional seating. Inside, each table was longer than the House tables at Hogwarts, and instead of chairs, there were benches on either side. Neither locals nor tourists seemed to mind, though; they simply sat down wherever there was space, and after the first beer, the latest, lively discussions on all subjects imaginable were taking place between all present.

The courtyard held smaller tables with chairs. On this warm, sunny day, it was busier than inside, but the two witches found a table all to themselves and sat down opposite each other.

Hermione gasped at the choice of beers available. "How do I choose from those? They're totally different from English ones!" she hissed at Luna.

Luna laughed. "Oh, you could just move your finger up and down and stop somewhere and order that. That's what I'll do I think. I don't recall ever trying anything but a sip of lager my dad once brought home from a Muggle shop." She wrinkled her nose. "I hope this one here is better. Maybe we should start with a Radler...I'm not opposed to lemonade, and it might make the beer less bitter."

"Good choice, and you *must* try the Weisswurst! It's considered a delicacy well beyond Munich!" a voice drawled, and Lucius Malfoy pulled a chair and sat down at the end of the table. "I'm so glad you followed my advice to come here on a Sunday. You see, during the week it does get rather busy with all the tourists."

"How nice to see you again, Mr Malfoy," Luna said and smiled at him. "How are you and how is Draco?"

"Not bad, thank you. Draco is well, planning his binding ceremony with Pansy and traveling the world," Lucius replied and turned to Hermione. "Tell me, have you started university yet?"

"No, we're starting day after tomorrow," said Hermione and decided now was as good a time as any to question the former Death Eater. "Mr Malfoy, what exactly are you doing here?" She was not as sure of his switching sides as Luna appeared to be.

Lucius threw his head back and laughed. "Trust a Gryffindor to be blunt!" He looked around, then cast *Muffliato* before speaking in a much quieter manner, addressing both witches. "I am here on Ministry business. Elon Croaker asked me to keep an eye on the two of you amongst other things."

"Croaker?" Hermione asked. "He's an Unspeakable."

"Well deduced, Miss Granger. You see, in the Department of Mysteries, we tend to know what's going on in various countries. And occasionally, we need to explore further in order to ensure... let's say... something amounting to world peace."

"You work for the Department of Mysteries?" Luna's eyes were wide.

Lucius' expression took on an air of smugness. "Why, Miss Lovegood, did you think they only employ pretty, young witches?" he drawled.

"N... no. I'm just surprised, given your past," Luna admitted. "What made you change sides anyway?"

Lucius took a deep breath. "I've had doubts with regard to the Dark Lord's philosophies ever since I learned about *thereal reasons* for the rise and fall of the Third Reich a few years ago." He cancelled the spell and called a waitress. "I cannot resist their Weisswurst. Would you like some as well?" The wizard looked questioningly from Luna to Hermione.

Hermione shrugged. She wasn't particularly hungry, but had a feeling their first Hofbräuhaus visit might last longer than anticipated. "Why not. I've never tried them."

"Oh, yes, I'd love to try one." Luna was full of enthusiasm.

Lucius ordered and then cast another *Muffliato* before continuing. "Thinking back to my years at school, I remember quite a few Muggle-borns who could have given any pureblood a run for their money where magical skills are concerned. I realized eventually that the philosophy sprouting the superiority of purebloods has some serious flaws." He stilled again, staring at the table.

Hermione had never seen him so obviously uncomfortable and wondered how much courage it took the man to talk about his decision to turn away from the Dark. Lucius Malfoy had suddenly earned himself some respect in her eyes.

Luna gently laid her hand on his to still his fidgeting hand. "It's okay, Mr Malfoy. The important thing is that you *did* turn away from the darkness that was Voldemort. I won't judge you."

Seeing Mr Malfoy giving a grateful rather than smug or superior smile was also a novelty for Hermione. He looked much better without his typical air of arrogance.

"Thank you," he said quietly, looking at Luna now, and continued, "I think what finally made me see the light was the realization that Muggles can also alter matter just as we do by way of magic. We are born with it whereas a Muggle would need to grow spiritually and gain knowledge to the point where he is capable of eliminating gravity, levitating himself or Apparating and so on." He stopped when their food arrived.

"Oh, they are so delicious. I'm not generally keen on the rich food that comprises German cuisine, but these Weisswursts are something different. Bon appétit!" Lucius said and delicately cut a piece of sausage.

Both Hermione and Luna agreed that the white sausages, served with a potato salad, made a highly satisfying dinner.

Lucius ordered another Radler for the witches and a beer for himself, and the talk switched to more mundane matters until Luna mentioned the books they'd bought at Wissen Macht Glückhich a few days previously, remarking how different the books on offer were compared to English book shops.

Lucius ensured the *Muffliato* was still in place before he spoke. "Are you aware that such books have been banned by the German Muggle government? Do not let yourself be caught reading them, ladies." He finished his beer and stood up. "I'm sorry I have to leave you, but I am meeting a friend. It's been a pleasure, ladies, and I hope to see you again."

Once again, he canceled the spell and called the waitress. After paying the bill for all three, he turned back to Hermione and Luna and said, "If you don't mind, I'll pay you a visit at Blütenburg. And, oh, do be careful around old Herr Schultz!"

The two witches looked at him. "You know where we live?" asked Luna.

"The nature of my work... But I must go now. Good bye!" With that he turned and hurried out of the restaurant.

A/N Schlaumayer = wannabe know-it-all

Wissen Macht Glückhich = Knowledge makes happy

Schloss Blütenburg does exist in Munich, as a google search will tell you.

Ever grateful thanks to southernwitch69 and littlebeloved for the beta and alpha reads. It is due to their abilities that this story is more readable.

The Grateful Not So Dead

Chapter 5 of 10

Hermione and Luna's first day at university.

No Music More Enchanting

Chapter 5 The Grateful Not So Dead

The day before lectures started was spent with working out the easiest and least time-consuming strategy of getting to and from the university. Taking the U-Bahn was out of the question...neither witch was used to any length of commutes nor the crowds commuting involved during rush hours. Finding a sufficiently deserted area nearby to Apparate into proved impossible. Eventually, Luna made out a large oak tree with a wide canopy at the far back of the university grounds.

"I guess it'll have to do for now." Hermione sighed. They would have to find another place once the tree lost its leaves, but at least it was an adequate solution for now.

The following morning, Hermione and Luna Apparated from the Blumenburg garden to the grass patch underneath the oak tree. A tall man, wearing a long black coat, his shoulder-length black hair waving in the light breeze, hurried towards the building just as the girls arrived. "I wonder if he's a wizard, too," Luna whispered. "It looks as if he came from right here, and the car park is on the other side, so he can't have come by car!"

"Oh, I don't know, Luna... There is a gate over there, maybe he walked through that." Hermione pointed to the gate, but her friend shook her head as if certain he had Apparated. He reminded her of someone, but she could not quite place him.

"I'm sure we'll find out soon enough if there are other wizards or witches here," Hermione said, and they started walking to the building, then concentrated on finding the Department of Organic Chemistry and Multicomponent Reactions, which was the first lecture of the day and in fact the only one for the two witches on Tuesdays. Hermione was thankful it was a rather relaxing timetable with just one main subject. She'd be able to concentrate on it *and* have time for other pursuits.

Having found the classroom with mere seconds to spare before the lecture was due to start, Hermione and Luna sat down at the last desk available in the first row.

Luna wrinkled her nose. "It looks like we'll have to pay attention in this one, so close to the front," she whispered.

Hermione nodded, but didn't speak as she heard the door opening and closing and loud, hurried footsteps towards the front of the classroom. She looked up and paled, then turned to Luna, whose face had also turned very white. The tall man they'd seen rushing from the grounds into the building was to be the professor of Chemistry.

Severus Snape, in his choice of Muggle attire as imposing as in robes and cloak, had arrived and turned to face the class, which had become silent at his dramatic entrance.

His voice, as low, as quiet, as captivating as Hermione remembered it, effortlessly commanded every student's attention. "I am Professor Snape, here to teach you the intricacies of organic chemistry and multicomponent reactions, and if your command of English is insufficient, I suggest you remedy this at your earliest convenience, for not *everything* I teach will be found in your course books, even though the works chosen are by far superior to their German counterparts. Alternatively, you are free to leave this class now.

"Since this is a university class, there will be no homework given per se. However, I may take the liberty of issuing exams as I see fit, in addition to the end of semester ones, so you better ensure to make use of your time by studying the subject in detail."

If I'd had any doubt as to your identity, they're laid to rest about now.. Hermione thought tartly. It really was Snape. Alive, well, and as sarcastic and sharp as she'd remembered him from her first six years at Hogwarts.

At the end of the lecture, students hurried from the room except Hermione and Luna, who both appeared to be glued to their seats.

Snape waited until the last student had left the room, took his wand out and cast a locking and silencing charm on the door before leisurely walking from his desk to the table in front of the two witches.

"Oh, my apologies," he drawled and canceled the spell that had rooted them to their seats. "I had to ensure you wouldn't run off."

"Professor Snape! You are alive!" Hermione exclaimed and turned away instantly, embarrassed at her outburst.

"What an astute observation, Miss Granger. Now, if you've quite overcome your shock, unpleasant as it might have been, I'd like to ask you to refrain from informing your dunderhead friends of this fact." He looked from one witch to the other. "Can I trust you with this or would you rather I Obliviate you both after each class?"

"Would you like a wand oath, sir?" Luna asked. She appeared to have recovered from the shock of seeing their former Potions professor alive already.

"Why, yes, that is exactly what I'd like, Miss Lovegood." Snape took his wand out again and waited for the witches to do the same.

After the oath had been taken, Hermione could not help herself. "Kingsley knows, doesn't he?" she asked angrily, wondering what other information the Minister might have kept from her and Luna. She was more angry with herself for completely missing Kingsley's manipulation of her into choosing Chemistry as her subject of choice.

Snape regarded her for a while and only spoke when Hermione visibly squirmed. "He does, yes. In fact, he is the reason I am here. The same goes for you two. However, maybe his... contacts were incorrect with the intelligence they discovered, and you'll have two years to spend as you wish after all."

Luna looked at him curiously. "My dad told me of the rumors that the Ark of the Covenant is hidden here in Germany and that a group of Dark Muggles is after it. Does it have to do with that, Professor Snape?"

"Oh, please, that is just too far-fetched to be true!" Hermione snorted and earned herself a glare.

"Not quite, Miss Granger." Then Snape turned to Luna. "I am in no position to answer your question until I know more about the situation myself. I would, however, ask you to study wandless magic. If the situation... escalates, you may well find yourselves without wands in a possibly precarious situation."

Snape returned to his desk, retrieved two books from a briefcase and handed one each to Hermione and Luna. "You'd do well to perfect this skill."

Effectively Utilizing Magic Without Wands, Hermione read. She shrugged inwardly. It would be a handy skill to have, no matter what the future held. *No point worrying about what might never come to pass...*

Luna's approach was less practical. "Sir, you d... you don't think there'll be another war, do you?"

"Not if I can avoid it, Miss Lovegood. I have had *quite* enough of war situations," he said dryly.

Luna's relief was obvious. "Oh, good! That does make me feel better!"

"All I ask of you for now is to keep your eyes open and be vigilant. Anything out of place you might see, any sudden activity at Blumenburg, inform either Lucius or myself.

You may leave now."

"You know," Hermione said thoughtfully as they slowly walked back to the oak tree, "he seems to have lost some of his nastiness. Maybe that near-death experience did him good..."

"I wonder how he survived," Luna said. "It's a miracle, really. I don't recall anyone except Mr Weasley to survive Nagini's bite. And Mr Weasley was found immediately..."

"Well... he is a Potions master after all. Surely, if anyone knows how to counter a snake bite it would be him." Hermione had been absolutely certain Snape had died that day in the Shrieking Shack and simply figured that one of his Death Eater friends might have moved his body. But if she was honest with herself, she had wondered more than once how one of the most capable Potions masters, and one allegedly in the service of the megalomaniac who kept a human-eating pet snake at that, could have succumbed to a snake bite.

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The next few weeks passed uneventfully. Hermione and Luna settled into a routine of attending lectures, studying Chemistry, studying and practicing wandless magic and exploring the sights of Munich and its surroundings. Snape's lectures turned out to be interesting, and he hadn't talked to either witch after that first encounter, lulling the witches into believing that no sinister plots were evolving. Life in general was good and without trouble, still somewhat of a novelty to both Hermione and Luna after the intensity of Voldemort's war and its aftermath to clear up the mess his reign had brought.

Neither witch was surprised any longer when Lucius Malfoy happened upon them on several occasions, be it in cafés, the wizarding quarter or Muggle shops. It was clear to Hermione that Lucius had become rather fond of Luna, but the blonde witch would hear none of it. "Don't be daft, Hermione," she laughed. "He could have any woman on this planet and probably beyond. I'm likely the last one he'd go for!"

"Why does he turn up wherever we go, Luna? And he talks to you a lot more than to me. Maybe it's because I'm Muggle-born, but I doubt it. He really does seem to have left his racist beliefs behind." Hermione no longer disliked the man. She would never be enchanted by him the way Luna obviously was, but a friendship seemed quite likely in spite of their vastly different backgrounds...or maybe because of it. *Opposites attract*, she thought, suppressing the urge to giggle.

"Never mind. If you're right, well, I'll be very happy then," Luna said with a sheepish grin. Then she changed the subject. "Hermione, it's your birthday tomorrow, isn't it? What do you want to do?"

Hermione shrugged. "Ron, Harry and Ginny are coming over tomorrow night. I thought maybe we could all go out for dinner."

"Oh! Don't you want to spend some time alone with Ron?" asked Luna.

"Not really," Hermione said quietly, her eyes finding some interesting spot on the floor. "I don't even miss him." She sighed. "I will have to talk to him. But not tomorrow. Not on my birthday, and not in front of others. I just want to have a good time tomorrow. And they can't stay long anyway. Both Ron and Harry are working on Saturday."

The day started nicely. A Ministry owl, tapping impatiently on the window, woke Hermione up minutes before her alarm went off. She let the bird in, relieved it off its burden and fed it some treats. The bird took off again, and Hermione opened the package, wondering who would send her a present this early in the day.

She looked at the unwrapped present, her eyes widening. *The Nazis' Search for Occultum* by Søren Siebenthal, an impressive looking tome, displaying a section of the periodic table on the cover, had been sent to her. Hermione opened the book, and out fell a piece of parchment.

Happy Birthday, Hermione

I hope the book will be of interest to you.

Enjoy your birthday and have a drink for me.

Kind Regards,

Kingsley Shacklebolt

"You better come clean with regard to your agenda very soon, *Minister*, or I might just forget who you are and hex you into oblivion," murmured Hermione, though without bite, as she walked towards the bathroom to get ready for the day.

Another owl arrived just as the witch sat down at the table to have a quick bite and some coffee, this one a regal looking great horned owl.

"I'll bet this one is from Lucius," Luna said conversationally.

"You're getting to know him well, Luna," Hermione snickered and let the bird in. The owl headed towards the table and landed on the backrest of a chair, holding its leg out. The witch untied the parchment and opened it.

The silver Malfoy crest adorned the top of the parchment, and the letter was written with Slytherin green ink, which involuntarily reminded her of her bedroom of the same color. She still hadn't managed to change it.

Hermione,

Happy Birthday! As I pondered a suitable present for you, I remembered I've not hosted a dinner in simply ages. Please allow me to arrange a dinner in honour of your birthday. Bring whoever you like as long as the delightful Miss Lovegood is part of it. Let's meet at the Zauberbesen at seven. Please send a reply with my owl...she will be waiting.

Hopefully see you tonight!

Lucius

Hermione was touched by Lucius' gesture, although she had no doubt he had an ulterior motive. She handed the letter to Luna, saying, "See? He ~~do~~es like you."

Luna read the letter. "Oh! Isn't he wonderful? How kind of him to throw a party for you!" Then she looked at Hermione. "I'm sure it'll be fine with Ginny, Harry and Ron, don't you?" she asked, the tiniest hint of worry in her voice.

Hermione shrugged. "It's my birthday. So they better be fine with it." She penned down a reply and tied the rolled-up parchment around the owl's stretched leg. Then she fed it an owl treat and said, "Please take this back to Lucius. I'm looking forward to tonight."

Hermione tried not to show her surprise when Snape called her at the end of class. He waited until everyone save Luna had left the classroom. "Happy Birthday, Miss Granger." His voice sounded wry. "Do close your mouth; looking like a carp out of water is not very becoming."

"Th... Thank you, sir," Hermione stuttered. She'd have been less surprised to receive birthday wishes from the Muggle Prime Minister.

"I take it you've accepted Lucius' invitation?"

"Yes, I have," she replied, surprised he knew about it.*He must be closer to Lucius than I'd imagined...*

"Ward your flat well and properly, Miss Granger, when you go out," he said, then turned abruptly and left.

Luna and Hermione stood in the classroom, speechless. Luna was the first to recover. "Do you think he's weird?"

"Strange for sure," Hermione muttered, and the two friends walked leisurely to the back of the grounds from where they Disapparated.

The lawn of the Blutenburg garden was busier than usual, Hermione observed, somewhat worriedly, but then recognized not only Ron, Harry and Ginny but also Draco, Pansy, Millicent Bulstrode, Parvati and Neville.

"Oh, Merlin, so many of you, what a wonderful surprise!" Hermione cried out as she hugged everyone in turns.

"Happy Birthday, love," Ron said affectionately as he hugged her tightly. "I thought you might like a few more people than just the three of us here for your birthday."

"Oh, it's wonderful, Ron!" Hermione wondered who'd had the idea; she could have bet safely it hadn't been Ron's. It didn't take long to find out.

"My father told me of his hopes to throw a party for you. I hope it's okay with you to have more friends around than expected," Draco drawled after wishing her a happy birthday.

"That's fine, Draco," Hermione assured him. "It's nice to see everyone again. It seems as if it's been ages!"

The group of witches and wizards, led by Hermione and Luna, marched upstairs to share some tea and coffee and catch up with each other.

A/N Zauberbesen = Magic broom

Grateful thanks to southernwitch69 and littlebeloved, without whom this story wouldn't be what it is. You witches rock!

Reviews feed the Muse, but I'm sure you know that already.

Endangered Species

Chapter 6 of 10

Lucius invites Luna and Hermione for a weekend away. Hermione declines.

For Disclaimer etc., please see Chapter 1

No Music More Enchanting

Chapter 6 Endangered Species

Lucius Malfoy had not merely booked a table at the *Zauberbesen* like some common wizard might have done; he had hired the entire wizarding establishment and put together a classy buffet menu, which was set up along one entire wall. From the moment Hermione and her friends had entered, nobody had been left wanting. Trays with glasses filled with champagne, pumpkin juice, butterbeer and elf-wine were floating around the place and hovered nearby smaller groups that had formed. A German wizarding band was playing on a stage set up along another wall of the restaurant, their music just loud enough to be entertaining for those who wished to listen, but not so vociferous as to drown out conversation. The French doors to the first floor terrace overlooking the wizarding quarter were open to allow the mild evening air in and guests in need of some fresh air out.

Hermione mingled with various friends, moving from one group to another, only occasionally with Ron by her side. Ron seemed out of his comfort zone, but whether it was due to the heavy presence of Slytherins or the fact that it was outside England, she had no idea at first. As the evening wore on, she noticed that wherever her boyfriend was, Millicent Bulstrode was not far. The witch shrugged inwardly. As nice as it was to see Ron again, it felt no different than to see Harry or Ginny after a break.

Just as Hermione made the decision to have a talk with her boyfriend as she stood outside, breathing in the fresh, cool air, he approached her. "Having a good time?"

She turned around and smiled wistfully. "It's lovely. I never thought Lucius would do this for me."

Ron snorted. "I bet he has ulterior motives. He disappeared over an hour ago. And Luna with him."

Hermione grinned. "About time, you know. It's so obvious he likes her, but she doesn't believe me when I tell her. Good for them! I think they'll be happy together."

Ron's face had turned serious at her words. "Happier than we are at the moment, right?"

She was unable to meet his eyes. "I guess..."

"It's not working, is it?" Ron said softly and cupped her chin in his hand, forcing her to look at him. "I'll always see you as my best friend, Hermione. I'm just not sure if we'll work out together."

"I don't know," Hermione whispered. "Sometimes I wonder. If this... was right, then I shouldn't have a problem starting a family early rather than waiting years..." She was lost for more words.

Ron chuckled. "Yeah, I've been thinking along the same lines. I shouldn't mind that you want to wait if..." He sighed. "Maybe we're not meant to be more than close friends."

Hermione could not help but agree with him. "Maybe not..."

"Just tell me honestly, Hermione. Is there someone else?" Ron asked, his hand still on her face.

She looked at him, surprised. "No, Ron. No-one. What about you?"

He looked away. "Absolutely nothing has happened, Hermione. Although..." He took a deep breath. "When Auror training started, I was assigned Millicent as my partner. I was shocked that she was there at all, but anyway, we work together, and at first, I thought it was just some stupid infatuation, that she was some poor substitute while my girlfriend was away. I was so sure I'd get all excited over seeing you, spending a bit of time with you on your birthday, and forget about Millicent. Only, I haven't.

"You seem different, so distant. And I... I don't think it's just some silly infatuation with Millicent."

Hermione thought she should feel hurt. Instead, she felt immense relief. She looked at him fondly. "That's fine, you know? I probably sound strange, but I'm honestly fine with that. And I appreciate your honesty! Sometimes, I think I'm just not ready to commit myself to anyone, my alleged maturity be damned." She laughed. "Friends?"

The relief in her now former boyfriend was blatant. "Oh, yes! You'll always be my best friend! And promise me you'll be godmother to my first-born!"

They laughed together, and Hermione said, "Of course! I wouldn't have it any other way, no matter who the mother will be! And I'll see him or her off to Hogwarts when it's time!"

"Oi, Ron! We really have to leave! We have to be at work in less than eight hours!" Ginny hurried out to the terrace. She stopped abruptly and looked at Hermione. "You okay?"

Hermione smiled. "Never been better!" And it was true.

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Days turned into weeks, the Indian summer at long last made way for stormy, rainy and colder weather, causing the trees to shed their dresses...all but the oak tree in the back of the university grounds.

Luna seemed to have a permanent seat on Cloud Nine. There had not been a single day since Hermione's birthday when Lucius hadn't appeared at their flat or taken her out.

Hermione was happy for her friend, happy for Lucius, and happy she had more free time to herself, even though Luna and Lucius always insisted to include her in any cultural outings and strolls through the city. Her skills in wandless magic were improving rapidly, and she'd studied the history of the Nazis' obsession with magic and the occult in more detail, sensing it might have something to do with the enigmatic words Snape had spoken about possible trouble.

One rainy, foggy Friday afternoon in late November, Lucius met Luna and Hermione at the university after the day's lectures. "I'm planning to spend the weekend away, ladies. Would you care to join me?" He looked at Luna expectantly.

"Oh, I'd love to, Lucius! Where are we going?" Luna asked excitedly.

Hermione remained silent. She had made no plans for the weekend, but didn't feel like spending the entire weekend with the two lovebirds. She was comfortable enough being on her own, but every now and then, she did not feel like witnessing the euphoria of newly found love.

"Well... I thought we'll visit Neuschwanstein Castle. You've been wanting to go there, haven't you?" Lucius asked and turned to Hermione. "Hermione, do come with us! I'm sure the nearby hotel has plenty of rooms available at this time of the year! I doubt many Muggles would visit now!"

"Thank you, but I think I'll stay home. Do some studying, stay in bed, just relax," Hermione said.

Both Lucius and Luna tried to change her mind, but Hermione would hear none of it. A relaxing weekend was just what she needed, and eventually, the couple gave in. "Promise you'll send your Patronus if there is any trouble or even if you just feel uncomfortable," Lucius said.

Hermione could not help but smile at Lucius' caring gesture. *I bet I'll feel more comfortable at home than watching the two of you trying to keep off each other in public places...*

"Oh, Hermione, would you mind making sure my bedroom window is closed? I think I forgot to shut it this morning," Luna said, and then the couple departed.

Hermione Apparated to the gardens. If she hadn't been familiar with the grounds, she would have been lost. The fog had intensified, and she could barely make out the main building. She was glad she'd decided to stay home; visiting castles in this kind of weather was not her idea of fun.

The fog did not lift overnight, and the rain had turned into a steady drizzle. Hermione decided against going out to buy fresh bread, a habit she'd become fond of on Saturday mornings. She made some toast and coffee, settled down on the sofa, covering herself with a blanket as the moisture seemed to seep even through the walls, making her feel cold despite the efficient Muggle central heating, and started to read, grateful for the electric lighting the flat offered.

Someone knocked at the door, first once, then several times in hurried succession. Hermione peeled herself out of the blanket, uncomfortably cold instantly, and walked to the door.

Herr Schultz, disheveled and his clothing in desperate need of laundering, exclaimed, "Oh, thank goodness, you're home! Come, quickly, I need your help..." He turned back and hurried down the stairs, and Hermione had no choice but to follow him.

"Herr Schultz, what's wrong?" she asked, but his German mumblings, interrupted by his jumping steps, were too low for her to catch.

Once they'd reached the bottom of the staircase, Herr Schultz turned his head towards her, never stopping, and said, out of breath, "This way, just follow me."

Instead of turning to the door that opened into the garden, he turned into the narrow corridor that lead into the main part of the palace. He rushed through the door at the end of the corridor, Hermione closely behind him. The moment she had stepped through the door, it shut loudly.

"Ulrike! Ich hab' sie! Ich hab' die Hexe!" Herr Schultz exclaimed.

He's got me? He's got the witch? What on earth? And who's Ulrike? Hermione had no time to ponder her questions, as a tall, large, middle-aged woman with ash-blond hair and blue eyes as piercing as Herr Schultz's, rapidly approached her, threw her against a wall and fingered her sleeve for her wand.

"Ah, yes, indeed. Now, without your wand, you will not show resistance!" the woman said, sounding disgustingly satisfied. Her heavily accented speech, severe voice and very German appearance reminded Hermione of old movies depicting stereotype Nazi Germans. This woman could have played any of them effortlessly.

"What do you want?" Hermione spat, hoping to gain time in which to come up with a way to get out of there, preferably uninjured. She cast a glance around the tall windows opposite the wall she was held against. Good, one window was tilted slightly open.

The woman uttered a cruel laugh. "What is it with you Brits? I thought you are the polite type!" She nodded at Schultz, who produced a pair of handcuffs and approached Hermione with them.

"What do you want?" Hermione asked again.

Another laugh, the kind that would have colored Dolores Umbridge green with envy, then the woman said, "Why, you will open the Ark for us. Only witches can do it. And if you survive, you may leave. But I have to warn you, you wouldn't be the first one to expire trying to open the Ark." She laughed again, reminding Hermione of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Hermione was thinking fast now. If Schultz managed to put the handcuffs on her, she might have trouble getting out at all, and she had no intention of doing their bidding. She concentrated for a moment, Transformed and flew at neck-breaking speed to the tilted window, leaving behind two open-mouthed, speechless people.

Freedom once more... she thought as she breathed in the moist, cold air. The fog did nothing to dampen her eyesight, and she flew up to her flat, hoping against all hope that some window had been left open, cursing herself for her efficiency of closing Luna's bedroom window the moment she'd arrived the previous afternoon. All windows were closed. What was worse, she could not Transform back to her human form near Blutenburg, in case Schultz or Ulrike were nearby. Sending a Patronus was out of the question, too; she'd never managed so far to do it wandlessly. The Animagus approached the eaves above her flat and settled down to do some thinking. The fog would ensure that nobody saw the unusual bird on the roof of Blutenburg Palace.

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Severus Snape finally gave in to his urge and switched on the various lamps in his temporary residence. Candles were great, but on a day such as this...when the sun remained so well hidden behind layers and layers of cloud...reading was simply more comfortable with bright lighting. Besides, the other occupant of the flat was away and therefore could not mock him for preferring Muggle methods.

Snape sat down on the sofa and picked up the book he'd started earlier in the day. Teaching at university was nowhere near as tiring or frustrating as teaching dunderheads at Hogwarts, and he thoroughly enjoyed the lack of stress and resultant free time his current job afforded him. *That* part of his job. The other part so far was lying dormant, although for how much longer was anyone's guess. He had spotted Thorfinn Rowle only once here in Munich, but his former Death Eater colleague had been too elusive, even for the master spy. He'd been there one instant and gone the next, long before Snape could even approach him, let alone make up some tale as to why he was suddenly in Bavaria's capital when all the world thought him dead.

The feeling of foreboding, nagging on the edge of his consciousness since the morning, was increasing. Snape sighed and put his book aside, unable to concentrate on it.

He knew Lucius had planned to take Miss Lovegood and Miss Granger to Neuschwanstein, and if both girls were with him, they'd be safe. But would Miss Granger have accepted the invite? As far as he knew, the young witch was not in any relationship, and he could not quite imagine her to enjoy being a third wheel for an entire weekend. If she'd stayed behind on her own, and if that caretaker was in the pockets of the Nazi faction believed to be involved in some sinister plot, Miss Granger might well find herself in danger.

His mind made up, he switched off the lights, grabbed his coat and left to investigate. The cold hit him as he opened the door. If the temperature dropped any further, they'd have snow soon. Snape applied a warming charm and stayed close to the wall to escape at least some of the rain. He turned at the corner of the building and entered the door that led to the flat the two witches occupied. Reaching the top of the stairs, he knocked and waited. No answer. *Maybe she did go with Lucius... But no, it's unlikely...*

Snape gazed at the floor to see if any lights shone through, but all was dark. Taking a deep breath, he leaned against the wall. There was no point worrying if indeed she had joined Lucius and the Lovegood girl. Deciding to find out, he conjured his Patronus and sent it to Lucius.

As always, grateful thanks to southernwitch69 and littlebeloved for the beta and alpha reading.

Bird of Prey

Chapter 7 of 10

Hermione finds an open window.

For Disclaimer etc., please see Chapter 1

No Music More Enchanting

Chapter 7 Bird of Prey

Snape's suspicion that Miss Granger had declined Lucius' invitation confirmed, he left the palace and Apparated to the wizarding quarter. The young witch did have the reputation of a bookworm, so maybe she'd simply made use of the day by visiting the bookshop.

The quarter was empty, and many stores were closing already. Snape entered the bookshop and glanced around the aisles. Not a single customer was around. The only sales clerk present sat at the cash register, absorbed in a book.

When Snape approached him to ask if a young English witch had been in, the clerk said, "Nah. You're the first one here today. Nobody bothers in weather like this." He nodded at the window.

Snape returned to his flat, trying to think up a plan of action. For all he knew, she might have gone to see a movie. But that did not explain that hunch of foreboding, which had become rather pronounced over the last hour.

His thoughts were interrupted by a noise from the window. From the brightly lit room, he couldn't see anything, so he walked towards the window.

An eagle was hammering its beak against the glass. Snape tilted the window open, and the bird hopped inside.

"Did you know German law states that anyone finding a stray bird of prey is obliged to take it to the nearest zoo?" he drawled, suddenly feeling almost giddy with relief.

The eagle Transformed, and he was now facing a frazzled looking, soaking wet, shivering Miss Granger, who was glaring daggers at him.

"What happened? How long have you been out there?" he asked.

Still shivering, the witch relayed what had happened. "And I didn't dare Transform back to my human form in case they were coming after me," she finished.

It would do no good to have her die of pneumonia he decided and went to run a hot bath for her, adding some strengthening potions. "Get those wet rags off you and take a long bath to warm up again. I'll arrange for something to eat in the meantime. You must be hungry."

The young witch disappeared into the bathroom, and Snape entered the kitchen to ponder the contents of his fridge.

When Hermione entered the kitchen, he was straining the pasta. "Take a seat, it's nearly ready." He waved a hand towards the dining table.

Hermione sat down and watched her professor. "I didn't know you are my neighbor! Mind you, I was really relieved when you turned up here. I thought I might end up staying in my Animagus form until Luna and Lucius return. That would have been really uncomfortable."

Once Snape had served the pasta and Alfredo sauce and put a bowl of salad and a basket of baguette slices on the table, he sat down across from her. "Kingsley wanted to ensure some modicum of protection for you. He suggested these two attic flats for us. To be honest, it's comfortable enough, and *if* any renegade Death Eater turns up, they'll be trapped. The Anti-Apparition Wards have been active since the first wizard bought Blutenburg in 1467. It's been wizard-owned ever since."

"So what about Schultz? Obviously, he is *on their* side, whoever *they* are..." She took a few forks full before continuing. "How much do you know about this situation, anyway?" She looked at him questioningly.

Snape took a deep breath. *How much do I know...* He started, "One Death Eater, Thorfinn Rowle, spent quite some time here in Germany, recruiting new Death Eaters and making contacts with those sympathizing with the Dark Lord's cause. I saw him once here last summer. There is, to this day, a sizable Nazi movement. All underground of course, but nevertheless, it is there and active. From what Kingsley, Lucius and I have deduced, sympathizers of the Dark Lord started to collaborate with those Nazis. One faction...all Muggles...are obsessed with the occult. The Ark of the Covenant does indeed appear to be hidden here in this country, and these people believe it is filled with occultum. Naturally, they want to get their hands on it and rule the world."

Hermione stared at him in amazement. "Occultum? I've read about what it allegedly does for Muggles..." She seemed deep in thought for moments, then added, "The woman who took my wand said something about only a witch being able to open it. Is that true?"

Snape nodded. "Indeed. The last time it was opened was approximately two thousand years ago by a witch. Mind you, not just any witch can open it."

"Do they know that? And what do you mean, not just any witch?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Yes, they do know. They wouldn't go after Miss Lovegood. Or Miss Weasley if they had a chance. You are of value to them because you *would* be able to open the Ark."

He watched with near fascination her facial expressions change as she thought hard and quickly reached a conclusion, which seemed incredulous. "You can't be serious! Only Muggle-born witches can open it?"

Snape smirked. "I'm glad your brain has not suffered adverse effects from spending hours out in the cold," he said sardonically, then continued more seriously. "Have you ever looked into the genealogy of your family?"

The witch looked at him blankly. "Not much. My mum traced hers about two hundred years back, and my dad only about two generations. Why does it matter?"

"There is one school of thought suggesting only Muggle-born witches can open it, you were right there. However, what can be said for certain is that only descendants of a witch who *has* opened the Ark are able to open it."

Hermione stared at him. "But... But how? There can't have been some magical ancestor of mine, I mean, I'm Muggle-born!"

"The term *Muggle-born* simply indicates that no magic was apparent in either your parents or grandparents. It does not mean you lack magical ancestors. In fact, I am almost certain that every Muggle-born has magical ancestors. From what I concluded, following extensive research, magic is passed on genetically. The gene might skip one generation, or even ten, but it's there and can and *will* eventually resurface." He stopped, allowing her to take in this information.

Eventually, she said, "I see. I will ask my parents if we can find out more about my ancestry." Then she shrugged her shoulders and shook her head briefly, as if to get these thoughts out of her mind, and added, "This is a lovely meal by the way! Your culinary skill is impressive."

He quirked his eyebrow. "That's your imagination, Miss Granger, born entirely out of your empty stomach." He refilled her glass with a dark, red wine.

"Now, I dare say it would not be a good idea for you to return to your flat tonight, all alone. Never mind your probable discomfort at the thought of spending the night on your own, but *if* Schultz is spying on you and Miss Lovegood...and we must assume he is...then there is the danger factor to consider."

Hermione took a deep breath. "I'd hate the thought of going back there tonight. But I have to really. I left in such a hurry, thinking Herr Schultz needed help, I don't have any money on me. *And* I don't have a wand either," she said.

"You are welcome to stay here. Lucius' bedroom is empty. I don't doubt the bed is more comfortable than the sofa." He pointed at the sofa in the living room.

Hermione's relief was obvious. "Thank you very much! I really appreciate your hospitality!"

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Over the next weeks, dynamics between the four witches and wizards were slowly changing. Snape occasionally exchanged words with the two witches after his lectures, sometimes seemingly trivial, others about important issues, such as their progress with wandless magic or whether or not they'd seen any activities around the palace or the security holding up. When Lucius had returned with Luna from Neuschwanstein, the two wizards immediately set out to put several new Wards on the neighboring flat to ensure neither Muggles nor wizards would be able to enter without their occupant's consent. Snape had also charmed Hermione's bathroom window so it would remain tilted open but not allow cold air in, just in case she had to escape in her Animagus form again.

Hermione and Luna hadn't seen the old Squib since he'd lured Hermione into the palace proper, nor had Hermione encountered Ulrike again. But the two witches discussed potential danger much more often now, and Hermione no longer rolled her eyes at Luna's telling of rumors. The blonde witch was keeping in contact with her father more regularly than Hermione was with her parents, and Xenophilius' contacts had essentially confirmed what Snape had told her about the faction of Nazis.

Occasionally, Snape joined Lucius, Luna and Hermione for outings. Hermione had known since her first year at Hogwarts that the professor was a master of sarcasm. Lately, she had come to appreciate his biting wit and sharp tongue, since it was less often directed at her.

One Saturday morning in late winter, Hermione woke from a strange dream.

She was walking, neither fast nor slow, holding the hand of a not entirely human-looking, tall, ancient man she'd never seen before. They reached a junction, and he indicated for her to choose the direction. One road appeared to be leading towards a city, as many skyscrapers were visible in the distance. Another road led to the beach of a vibrantly turquoise lake. Hermione chose the third option, a road that soon narrowed to a mere path, lined with very tall trees and shorter bushes on either side.

As she walked along the path, leading ever deeper into the wood, the shapes of the flora started to blur until soon there were only colors. Even the stranger had morphed into a vivid, brilliant gold, flowing playfully beside her. Occasionally, he pointed out various shapes of the colors by changing his own shape into something resembling an arrow. "See over there, this iridescent white? It's a unicorn."

"A unicorn? This must be a magical forest," Hermione mused.

The ancient man laughed softly. "As magical as any place. It is the dimension where only One rules."

"Only one? Who?" Hermione was unable to hide her curiosity.

The old man smiled benignly down at her. "Why, love of course. Hence the lack of drab colors. You will understand when you are ready to." Part of his golden color reached out to her forehead as if in blessing.

Hermione shook her head to clear her thoughts and threw the quilt back. *Of course I'm solid. It was just a dream, silly!* she chastised herself, but felt almost sorry that the vibrant pink and green hues of herself were gone.

The dream was soon forgotten when she wandered into the kitchen and found a note from Luna on the table.

Hermione,

We've gone to the seaside for the weekend. Sorry I didn't give you any warning. I'll be back Monday morning in time for lectures.

Love,

Luna

What on earth...? Hermione shook her head. Who would go to the seaside in the midst of winter? Then it dawned on her. She rushed through Luna's bedroom into the bathroom and stopped dead in her tracks. The entire bathroom was filled with the debris of what until very recently had been a large bathtub. *She's managed to Transform,* the young witch thought to herself.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a loud knock at the door, and Hermione hurried to answer it, stopping in her bedroom to pick up her wand. She had become very careful whenever someone came knocking these days and was grateful that her new wand seemed to wield even stronger magic than her old one had. Despite her considerable progress with wandless magic, she felt more confident with her wand within reach.

"Oh, it's you! Come in," Hermione said and put her wand away.

"Your flat-mate and my flat-mate have taken off to the seaside rather spontaneously," Snape drawled as he walked into the living room and sat down on the sofa. "I cannot fathom why anyone would enjoy the sea in these arctic temperatures. Warming charms only do so much..." He looked at her questioningly.

Hermione sat down opposite him and grinned. "We have another Animagus in our midst. A rather large one, judging by the state of Luna's bathroom."

"I see. Well, the Minister owled me earlier, which is why I came over." He paused for a moment. "Have you had breakfast yet?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. I usually go out to buy fresh bread on Saturdays," she explained.

"In that case, why don't we go to Schwabing, and I'll tell you all the news over breakfast."

"Just give me a few minutes, and I'll be ready," Hermione replied and disappeared into her bedroom, all the while wondering what the Minister had told Snape.

Ten minutes later, the couple Apparated to a deserted garden, and Snape led the way to a small café situated in a quiet side road, away from the hustle and bustle of Munich's trendiest district.

As soon as they had placed their orders, Snape cast Muffliato. "One of Kingsley's men has managed to put a Tracking Charm on Rowle. He is collaborating with Nazi occultists, of that we are now certain. We also have a rather good idea where the Ark is hidden."

"And where is that?" Hermione looked at him expectantly.

"Have you heard of the Externsteine?"

"That stone formation in Northern Germany? Yes. They're mentioned in the book Kingsley sent me for my birthday. They're allegedly connected by ley lines to both Stonehenge and the Cheops Pyramid. Some Muggles apparently hold occult ritual there on the solstices." Her eyes widened. "Are you saying that is where the Ark is hidden?"

Snape smirked. "Exactly, Miss Granger. Not only ley lines connect them, but if you imagine the pyramid lowered flush in the earth, it runs 51.8 degrees to meet the stones, the same angle as the sides of the pyramid itself." His expression turned serious. "As you may know, followers of the occult place great importance on numerology and dates."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I'm aware of that. Do you have any idea as to when they'll try to open it? And what do do about it? I don't exactly fancy another meeting with Ulrike."

Snape smirked slightly at her last words. "Indeed. Typically, I'd expect it to be August 12 at the next peak of the earth's biorhythm. However, the next peak will not occur until 2013, and I'm rather certain they do not wish to wait until then."

Hermione snorted. "Considering they tried to lure me into their fangs a few weeks ago, I cannot quite imagine they did that in order to sustain me for about thirteen years," she said tartly. "So, what date do you think they have planned? And this year, I presume."

"Considering Rowle has visited Blutenburg several times in the last week, I dare say it's in the very near future. Valentine's Day, maybe, or possibly the Spring Equinox." He shrugged. "Unfortunately, we do not know for sure. Yet." He stopped and gazed at her.

A waitress brought the ordered culinary delight, refilled their coffees and left again. For a few minutes, Hermione and Snape ate in silence. Then Snape said quietly, "I do not wish to place a Tracking Charm on you. You have every right to your privacy. However, Kingsley is rather insistent that we take certain measures in order to protect you, and you cannot possibly spend twenty-four hours a day with either Miss Lovegood, Lucius or myself."

Hermione looked at him. Her professor amazed her at times. *Why would he care about my privacy?* Aloud, she said, "If a Tracking Charm is the best way, then I'd rather have that than fall into their hands again. I don't know if I'll be as lucky to escape a second time. And if they *do* choose Valentine's Day, we have barely two weeks left!"

For a moment, Snape's hand moved as if he was going to place it on her arm, but then he retreated before it could touch her. "I am meeting with a wizard tomorrow, whom I greatly respect. He may be able to help, as he knows the local occult customs as well as more protective spells than even Dumbledore knew. If you are free tomorrow afternoon, do join us. Lucius and Miss Lovegood will hopefully be back by then, too. I owled Lucius as soon as I received Kingsley's owl."

A/N The ley lines about the Externsteine are a product of my imagination, although not that unlikely, considering that many power points of planet earth are connected with such energy lines. The angle of the Cheops pyramid, and possibly many other ancient pyramids, however, really appears to be between 51.5 degrees http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Pyramid_of_Giza and 52 degrees <http://www.ask-aladdin.com/pyramid.htm>

As always, grateful thanks to southernwitch69 for beta-reading and littlebeloved for alpha-reading.

And more grateful thanks to everyone who has reviewed. Reviews feed the Muse better than the best chocolate.

Pondering Voices

Chapter 8 of 10

Some things come to light.

For Disclaimer etc., please see Chapter 1

No Music More Enchanting

Chapter 8 Pondering Voices

Luna and Hermione cast a Disillusionment Charm on each other before making their way to Snape and Lucius' flat next door. It was only afternoon, but although winter was waning, days growing longer and nights becoming shorter, it was clearly trying to hold on as best it could with temperatures near arctic and dark days abounding. The sun seemed to have faded out of existence, and seeing full daylight even around midday had become a rarity. The weather suited Hermione's foreboding mood, which prevailed, even though she found herself looking forward to spending the afternoon in her professor's company.

The two witches walked silently along the wall of the building, trying to evade some of the snow, which was falling with increasing intensity now.

"Ugh, I'll be happy to see the end of the winter. I don't remember it being this horrible, even in Scotland," Hermione said as they reached the top floor.

"Oh, I don't mind it," Luna replied serenely. "Gives Lucius an excuse to hold me tight to keep me warm."

The door was opened from inside. "Ladies! Do come in!" Lucius waved them in, grabbed Luna in a hug and kissed her as if they'd been apart for weeks rather than barely an hour, and closed the door.

When the witches reached the living room, Hermione stopped abruptly. On the sofa sat the strange, ancient man of her dream. "How... what...?" she stuttered, and Luna and Lucius cast her worried glances.

The stranger rose from the sofa and bowed slightly, facing Hermione. "My apologies for having intruded in your dream, Hermione Granger, without even introducing myself to you. My name is Neveron, and I am very pleased to meet you in person." He held his hand out, and Hermione took it, knowing within herself, with utmost certainty, that this stranger could be trusted.

"Today only allows for a short meeting, but I do hope we will meet again and soon." He let her hand go and turned to Luna. "Luna Lovegood. What a pleasure to finally meet you. Xenophilius is immensely proud of you." He shook Luna's hand as well until Lucius and Severus cleared their throats almost simultaneously.

"Neveron is the current owner of Blütenburg Palace. Has been for a number of years in fact. We hope he can shed some additional light on what is currently happening here," Snape said and turned to the ancient wizard, who had taken his seat on the sofa again.

Once everyone was seated, Neveron spoke. "Severus has updated me on what you all know, so I won't waste time reiterating.

"Some years ago, representatives of the Muggle government approached me with the request to house a museum here, in honor of the author Michael Ende, whose works are loved by Muggles and wizards alike. I agreed, as I thought the idea rather wonderful, as Michael was a wizard whom I had the pleasure to meet several times.

"Unfortunately one of the representatives was a nazi...which I wasn't aware of at the time...and the main reason she was interested in utilizing my place is its vast underground tunnel system, which is part of a network that covers the entire country and even beyond. It was this tunnel system, through which many Nazis escaped at the end of the last Muggle world war. Of course, I was not aware at the time...I spent the war years elsewhere.

"By the time I learned what those government representatives were doing, the contract had already been signed, and it only expires at the end of 2012."

The witches and wizards remained silent, taking in the information Neveron had given.

Eventually, Snape asked, "What role does Schultz play? Do you have any idea?"

"Oh, yes," Neveron said. "He came to me shortly after the museum opened. My old caretaker had recently retired, and Schultz knew about the wizarding world, being a Squib himself, but he was sufficiently anchored in the Muggle world to be comfortable amongst them. He used to be quite a decent person until he was lured into nazi beliefs. Ulrike Strauss, the local leader of the occult followers and a Muggle, paid him to provide information about our world, and she most likely promised him something akin to magical powers...initiation into Magick...and eventually he became her spy.

"Then Rowle turned up and informed Ms Strauss of the location of the Ark. How he procured this knowledge, I have no idea. Possibly from some sympathizers in Egypt where the Ark was thought to be hidden until recently." He opened his hands outward.

"When do you think will they try to have the Ark opened?" asked Lucius. "And, more importantly, how can we prevent them?"

Snape nodded in agreement, his attention focused on the ancient wizard.

"I believe they will strike on Valentine's day," Neveron said, his voice grave. "As to preventing it..." He shrugged. "I don't know how we could prevent it. It might be better to

beat them at their own game. Let Hermione open it and then take its content and disappear." He looked intently at Hermione.

"Oh... I don't know... How could I do that?" Her mind was whirling. *I can't just go in there, find the Ark, open it, take whatever is in there and disappear to wherever with it...*

"Make no mistake, Miss Granger. They *will* try to kidnap you and make you open the Ark. How they'll do it is anyone's guess, but be assured neither Rowle nor Ms Strauss will shy away from *any* measure in order to make you comply with their wishes." Snape looked at her with an expression she could not define. There was not even a hint of sarcasm in his voice, and if she didn't know better, she'd have thought his face expressed more than a hint of worry.

Neveron nodded. "So, our best bet is to prepare you for this scenario." Seeing her frightened expression, he bent forward and put his hand on her arm. "Don't be afraid, child. Know there are forces much stronger than these misled humans, and they're here to protect you. We will not let the evil ones harm you."

Strangely enough, Hermione felt better as he spoke. Inwardly, she shook her head. It was not like her to simply calm down with soothing words; normally, logic ruled her actions, and Neveron's words sounded more like those based on some type of belief system rather than actual facts. She stood up and walked towards the window, suddenly restless.

Questions raced through her mind as she paced along the living room wall from one window to the next. *Why me? What do they want? Don't I ever get peace? Is it not enough I spent the latter part of my childhood help defeat the most evil wizard? Do I need to defeat evil Muggles now, too?*

"Sometimes, it helps to simply allow yourself to *be*. Brooding and sulking only lead so far, you know." She knew the voice, had known it for years, but now that it sounded neither a sneer nor sarcastic, not even sardonic...although she did detect the tiniest level of amusement there...it was exactly what she needed. More soothing, more satisfying than the sweetest music.

The memory of Kingsley's voice, doing funny things to her on a level not understood, came to her mind suddenly. This one was different. Not only was it laced with comprehension, it was a voice full of compassion, knowing *exactly* how she felt, a voice whose owner had gone through the very same troubles himself.

Hermione took a deep breath and looked up straight into the eyes of Severus Snape. She smiled uncertainly. "Thank you... I think..." she whispered, unable to give volume to her own voice.

"Look, Hermione!" Even though spoken softly, very softly, it clearly was a demand, and as if in confirmation, his hand captured her chin gently but firmly, ensuring she'd not look anywhere but his eyes.

Hermione's eyes widened. She had never been subjected to Legilimency nor had she learned Occlumency, but as she met Snape's eyes and was instantly drawn into his mind, her breath hitched as the realization that he opened his mind to her hit.

There was Kingsley opposite Snape in a living room. "I understand your choice of recruiting Lucius. But why Luna Lovegood? Why Hermione Granger, Severus?" he asked. "Don't get me wrong. I stand by my word. You choose your own partners for the Department of Mysteries. I'm merely curious."

Snape raised his head to meet the Minister's eyes. "Miss Lovegood because she doesn't give a rat's arse about anyone's opinion. She always makes up her own mind, no matter how ridiculous her opinion might appear to anyone else. She is the witch with the most refreshing character in that respect, and she'll be an asset to the Department of Mysteries."

Kingsley nodded at his words. "I wholeheartedly agree. What about Hermione?"

"Hermione Granger." Snape paused and appeared to study his hands intently. "Hermione Granger because she is not only one of the cleverest witches anyone has come across but look at her! She is intelligent, passionate, compassionate, practical, fluent in both the Muggle as well as the wizarding world, and she is open-minded, not exactly a common characteristic in our world."

Kingsley's dark eyes fell upon him, and Snape looked down, avoiding the eyes of the powerful wizard.

Kingsley let out a deep breath. "I was asking out of simple curiosity, Severus. I completely trust your judgment. Do I detect some kind of... liking for Miss Granger?"

Snape looked up sharply. "And what if you do?"

Kingsley grinned. "You know, I can't blame you at all. If I were younger, I'd make sure to give you a run for your money. But alas." He sighed. "Twenty years age difference may be acceptable, but a lot more than that is not." His face turned serious. "Best of luck, Severus."

Before Hermione could digest the scene she had just witnessed, Snape spoke again, this time in the physical. "Come. Neveron's time is limited, and we have something close to a plan." He led her gently back to the sofa, ensured she seated herself and then sat down next to her, neither too far away nor too close.

"I believe we will be most successful if we beat them at their little game. The Ark, or rather its contents, must not fall into their hands, for if it does, the darkest of times will arrive here on earth," Neveron said, looking from one to another. Once he'd ensured himself of everyone's attention, he continued. "Occultum and white gold are what is believed to be inside it, and whilst wizards occasionally utilize this element to hide their own magic, Muggles are after it for its power and magick inducing qualities. Considering it is a group of racists after it, you can only begin to imagine how these people will utilize it."

Hermione shuddered at the thought. It would be worse than having Hitler and Voldemort in power combined.

The ancient wizard nodded towards her. "Yes, Hermione Granger, the world would be one large prison and humankind forced to do whatever these evil forces demand. We all would be reduced to a race of slaves.

"So we all understand that the Ark's contents must not fall into their hands. As these people are obsessed with occult numerology, we needn't worry that they strike between now and Valentine's Day, maybe not even then, who knows. My suggestion is that we go ourselves to the Externsteine and remove the Ark. We will take it to the Department of Mysteries in London where no Muggle will be able to reach it. Eventually, we'll return it to its rightful place beneath the Cheops Pyramid in Gizeh." Neveron looked from one to another, awaiting their response.

"You mean, I won't have to open it?" Hermione asked.

Neveron nodded. "Correct. If we succeed with this plan, you will not have to open it. However, there is a possibility that the Ark will open by itself once you are near it. I have no doubt it is you who is capable of opening it. Muggles who follow the occult have two main obsessions: numerology and genealogy. If *they* think you are a descendant of the last witch who opened the Ark, then you can be quite certain that you are. Which also means they will ensure not to kill you."

"What a relief," Snape said dryly. Turning to Hermione, he said, "Neveron's idea sounds better than anything Lucius and I have been able to come up with. Would you agree to follow it?"

Hermione shrugged. "I like it better than being forced *by them* to open it. And I'd rather not be on my own on that occasion."

"So, when?" asked Lucius.

"Next Sunday. We can meet here again and then Apparate together. It will be dark by that time, and there'll be no curious eyes watching unless they have stationed guards, which is doubtful." Neveron turned to Snape. "I suggest, though, Hermione and Luna stay here with the two of you until then and not go anywhere alone. It would be unfortunate if Hermione were kidnapped now."

"Oh, yes. I like that," Luna said with enthusiasm and turned her head to look at Lucius. "Would you like that?"

Lucius smirked. "I would indeed. Just don't expect to be let out of bed, darling."

Luna giggled, and Hermione rolled her eyes. "We better go and get some stuff from the flat right away. I can't stay in the same clothes an entire week."

"Yes, I guess you're right." Luna's enthusiasm had dwindled rapidly at her friend's words.

Neveron stood up. "Regrettably, I must leave. I shall see all of you next Sunday." He nodded at everyone, and after saying a last good-bye, Snape accompanied him to the door.

Lucius turned from Luna to Hermione. "Shall I go with you, ladies, to pick up your belongings? It would not do to lose you to these nazis in the last minute."

"Oh, don't be daft, Lucius. Who in their right mind would voluntarily go out in this ghastly weather?" Luna said and pointed at the windows. Snow was accumulating on the lower portion of the glass, and it was snowing heavily now.

"We'll hurry and be back shortly," Hermione said in agreement with Luna. She was hoping to have a few minutes alone with her friend, needing a female to talk about what had happened between her and Snape earlier.

The professor returned from the door and let himself fall onto the sofa.

Lucius appeared to be highly perceptive. "Girls talk, I assume?" he asked amusedly. "Go on then. But if you're not back in ten minutes, I'll come for you," he added sternly.

"I agree with Lucius. You two better hurry," Snape said.

The two witches grabbed their cloaks and made their way down the stairs. The moment Hermione heard Snape close the door to his flat, Luna turned around, her entire face a question mark.

"What's up between you and Snape?" she asked. "You like him, don't you?"

"Yes..." Hermione said slowly. Then she told Luna what had happened. "He seems different now than when we were at school, that's for sure." She shrugged. "I don't know what'll happen. Maybe there is something."

She opened the door and shuddered as the cold hit her. "Let's hurry, come on." She pulled Luna along for a few yards, as close as possible to the eaves to escape the worst of the snow and cold.

As Hermione turned the corner, closely followed by Luna, she tripped over something and swore. Suddenly, she felt herself sliding down, Luna right behind her.

Grateful thanks to southernwitch69 for beta-reading and littlebeloved for alpha-reading.

It is not mere rumor that reviews feed the Muse.

The Patronus

Chapter 9 of 10

Hermione and Luna are trapped. And grateful for the skill of wandless magic.

For Disclaimer etc., please see Chapter 1

No Music More Enchanting

Chapter 9 The Patronus

Before Hermione hit the bottom of the slide, she heard a loudly spoken, "*Accio wands!*" and helplessly felt her wand, fastened loosely inside her sleeve, follow the call of a wizard. Behind her, she heard Luna softly swear. *Thank Merlin, I'm not totally alone in this!* she thought with relief.

The floor the two witches landed on was wet, whether only from the flurry of snow that had come in with them, Hermione was not certain. A heavy door banged loudly, and someone was laughing maniacally.

"Feel free to explore; you'll only end up in the river, and I dare say it's a wee bit cold to survive a swim! Not that you can do anything without your wands," an evidently English voice yelled from the other side of the door, followed again by maniacal laughter.

"Rowle," Luna said quietly. "The river. Hm, maybe we *should* explore."

Hermione wandlessly cast a drying charm on her and Luna's clothes. She sighed with relief as the biting cold was replaced with dry air. "I'll be forever grateful to Snape for his advice to learn wandless magic!"

"Yes, it does come in handy," Luna agreed and looked around. It was barely light enough to make out each other's shape.

Luna squinted and then pointed at one wall. "There is a door; I wonder if it's open. Let's see what our options are. I don't particularly fancy spending any amount of time

here." She carefully moved towards the wall, Hermione following her.

The door was locked. "Let's check out the entire room before we decide anything," Hermione said and slowly moved along the wall to look for any more possible openings.

Each one of the four walls housed a heavy iron door. "I guess we could open every one of them and see where it leads," Luna suggested. "As far as I know, only the palace has Anti-Apparition Wards up. Who knows; we might be able to Apparate out of one of the tunnels."

"Lucius said he'd come after us if we didn't return within ten minutes," Hermione said. "What if he falls through the trap door as well? Maybe we should stay at least close to this room."

"Yes, and, please, let's make sure we stay together," Luna said. She moved her hand over one door. "Hm... it doesn't feel as if there is any water in this direction."

Hermione looked at her. "You can *feel* water?" she asked, surprised.

"Oh, yes. I realized that not long ago. When Lucius took me to the seaside, I started sensing it a couple of miles before we reached the shore. Mind you, that was salt water, my Animagus' natural habitat. I'm not sure about a river. But maybe I should check out all doors and see. We *do* know the Isar River isn't far from here."

"Yes, it's only a ten minute walk to the river bank," Hermione agreed and added, "I haven't a clue which direction the river is from here, though." She followed Luna to the next door and watched her friend move her hand over it, shake her head, and move on to the next.

"No," Luna said sadly. "I can't sense any water at all." She slowly walked back towards the slide that had brought them to this room. "It's gone!"

Hermione looked around. She could make out each door, but the slide was nowhere to be seen. "Damn! I suppose that means they closed the trapdoor." Her hopes of Lucius finding them shrank rapidly. *Patronus! I'll try...* Aloud, she said, "Let's try and cast a Patronus. I've never managed it wandlessly, but it's worth trying again."

Luna nodded. "Yes, let's. But in turns, okay? Do you want to go first?"

"All right." Hermione concentrated on a happy memory for a moment and then cast the spell. *Expecto Patronum!* Nothing happened. She sighed. "You try!"

Luna cast the spell, and a flimsy hare appeared for a mere moment. "Damn!"

"Luna, tell me your happiest moment!" Hermione demanded. Maybe exchanging happy experiences, they might be able to increase the likelihood of casting a Patronus.

Luna smiled. "Oh, that's easy. There are many happy moments I remember, but the happiest was when Lucius told me I'm beautiful, unique, clever, and that he would walk barefoot around the world if it made me happy." She quieted for a moment. "And, you know, he would even cut his hair if I asked him, he'd said. What is your happiest memory?"

Hermione pondered. Voldemort's demise came to her mind, but it really was no competition to a very recent one. "I think... I... Snape opening his mind." She shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. I feel kind of silly. But, you know, the man was like the most secured bank vault for years, and then he went and invited me to tour his innermost thoughts. I felt so incredibly honoured, so... privileged. It made me feel very special." As she recalled the memory, a wave of comfortable warmth washed over her.

"Now, cast your Patronus, Hermione."

Hermione did, summoning every happy emotion she had felt at the time. A silvery shape burst forth from her fingertips, eliciting a triumphant, "Yes!" from Luna. Only it wasn't her Patronus...or rather, her Patronus was no longer an otter. But it was, without a shadow of doubt, a Patronus. She quickly composed a message for Snape, and the silvery shape nodded and flew off.

"You did it!" Luna cried.

"Hm..." Hermione didn't know what to say. "It... My Patronus is an otter, Luna."

Luna laughed. "Not anymore. Okay, now that's done, what next?"

"The doors," Hermione suggested, amazed she was able to keep a clear mind on the situation.

Luna sighed. "Okay, let's see if we can open any." She walked towards the one Rowle had slammed and stopped short of casting *Alohomora*. "No. We do not want this one open. Rowle doesn't need to know we can do magic without wands..."

Hermione tackled another door. First she tried to open it with the handle, then she cast *Alohomora*. It opened silently. "Let's try the other doors and then decide on one." She walked to the next door, and Luna approached the last door in the room. Both opened to reveal nothing but darkness. Only the first door Hermione had opened offered a glimpse of light, coming from a sconce a distance away.

Hermione took a deep breath. "Okay. The question is whether this light is a trap or not. They would expect us to take the easiest route and that would be one that provides light. On the other hand, it might be a candle charmed to burn indefinitely..."

Luna carefully walked into the corridor towards the candle. Hermione followed hesitantly. If the door locked them out of the room, at least they'd be trapped together, and she was certain Rowle and his accomplices were keen on keeping her alive...until she'd open the Ark for them.

Luna whispered, "Nox." The flame remained. "I think this might be charmed to burn all the time."

"What do you want to do?" asked Hermione. "See where this leads?"

Luna nodded quietly and started walking gingerly in the direction away from the room they'd landed in.

Candles, all of them lit, scattered their path. Occasionally, they crossed a fork, but as only one path was lit, it was easy to choose which way to go.

Suddenly, Luna stopped and took a deep breath. "Water."

"Will you be able to swim in the river, though?" Hermione asked worriedly. As far as she knew, her friend had only Transformed a couple of times, and only once in a natural habitat.

"Yes, I'll be fine," Luna assured her. "But what about you? If there is a door that opens beneath the water level, how can we get *you* out? Oh, never mind. Let's find the river first and then see what choices we have." She started walking again, now breathing more deeply.

After a few yards, Hermione asked, "Are we getting closer to the river?"

"Yes," said Luna. "Not far to go now." She had hardly finished her sentence when they reached another iron door.

Hermione looked at it closely. "It's not leading right into the river, Luna. Look at the gaps." She cast *Alohomora*, and the door opened into nothingness.

"Listen! The river is right underneath!" Luna stuck her hand out and captured some snow flakes. The Isar River gurgled peacefully below them.

"Okay, I'll wait until you Transform and fly to the other side of the bank, then I'll Transform and swim over. I'll swim down-stream until I find a boat ramp or ladder."

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Lucius looked at the clock above the kitchen door. "It's been twelve minutes now, Severus. I have a bad feeling." He continued pacing between the kitchen table and the sofa in the living room.

"If it were anyone else, I'd say they've lost track of time. However, neither Miss Granger nor Miss Lovegood strike me as irresponsible these days. Let's go and see what they're up to." Snape got up from the sofa, walked in long strides to the door and grabbed his cloak. He turned back to a still pacing Lucius. "What are you waiting for?"

Lucius went to one of the windows in the living room and tilted it open. "Just in case they were trapped. If Hermione manages to escape, at least she'll be able to come in."

"How thoughtful." Snape smirked. "And are you wearing your swimming trunks in case Miss Lovegood requires rescuing?"

Lucius glared at him as he grabbed his cloak, then his expression turned smug. "I can tell you've got it bad, Severus. You can't fool me. Why don't you just whisk her away and profess your love? Sometimes, that sneered-at Gryffindor bluntness isn't a bad thing, you know."

Snape ignored his friend's words and rushed down the stairs, taking two steps at a time. "Let's find them first. Then I'll deal with it," he muttered as he opened the front door.

They walked in silence along the building, entered the other front door and climbed up the stairs. Snape knocked and stood back.

After a while, Lucius knocked, this time louder. "They're not in there. There's no light either," he said, pointing to the gap between door and floor.

"Where could they be, though? Come on, they left, and I'm quite certain they headed straight to their flat. I didn't notice anything amiss between our flat and this one, did you?" Snape asked.

Lucius shook his head slowly. "No, I did not either. But that doesn't mean anything. We know that Rowle has been at least near here several times lately, the last time only today."

As they stood there on the dark landing, waiting, hoping for the door to open, a silvery shape approached.

Lucius burst into laughter as it came nearer. "It seems, my dear, your feelings are reciprocated."

A larger than life-sized bat hovered in the air in front of Snape. "Trapdoor near corner, fell through. Will try find water and way out."

Lucius' eyes widened. "That bastard," he muttered. "That's Rowle's work. He's always been good at conjuring traps." He straightened. "Right. Let's go down to the river!"

The two wizards swiftly descended the stairs, went out the front door, and Severus stopped. "Don't be daft. We both know where to go. We can Apparate from here."

Lucius looked sheepish for a moment, then nodded. "Let's!"

The two men Apparated to the bank of the Isar, and Severus led the way down-river. "Neveron mentioned a door in the tunnel that opens just above the water, not far from the cellar of the palace." He was walking at a swift pace now, knowing a possible destination, while scrutinizing the opposite bank of the river.

Abruptly, Snape stopped. "There." He pointed to the other side of the river.

"I can see the door," Lucius said, squinting his eyes.

They did not have to wait for long before the door opened and a bird flew out and rapidly headed towards the opposite bank. A dolphin splashed into the river at almost the same time. It somersaulted near the other side and then leisurely continued downstream.

Lucius ran along the bank, his eyes focused on the dolphin. "Yes, baby, find a boat ramp so you can Transform back!"

Snape stood rooted to the spot, intently watching the bird cross the river, land and Transform. He heard a laugh that echoed his own relief, followed by words. "My Patronus reached you?"

He wrapped his arms around her. "Well, I don't know if it was *your* Patronus. I remembered yours being a rather delightful otter, not a Doberman-sized bat!"

The witch looked up into his eyes, her own eyes teary. "I'm so sorry." Her voice hitched, and she swallowed hard. "Luna and I both tried to cast a Patronus, and I was just so relieved in the end to be able to cast one at all without a wand. I never thought it might frighten you!"

He chuckled softly. "It didn't. You've done well! Few wizards or witches manage to cast a Patronus without a wand." His arms tightened around her out of their own accord.

Hermione sighed, and it sounded perfectly content. "Just... just don't let go, okay?"

"I'll be happy to oblige, but be aware that if I don't let go now, I might never let go."

"That's just fine with me." She wrapped her arms around his waist as tightly as she could.

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The next days flew by like a dream. Luna moved into Lucius' bedroom, and Snape had made his own available to Hermione. The first night, as he attempted to find sleep on the sofa in the living room, Hermione came out of the bedroom.

"You know, I feel bad. Your bed is large enough for both of us, and I don't see why you should sleep out here. It can't be comfortable!"

From then on, the new couple spent every minute together. The two witches Apparated with Snape every morning to the oak tree, which was still sprouting green, luscious leaves to everyone's amazement. Even the local newspaper had run an article about the oak tree that had never shed its leaves this past fall.

After lectures were finished for the three, they Apparated back to Snape's flat where Lucius was usually waiting for his witch.

Sunday, and with it Neveron's visit and their planned excursion to the Externsteine, was drawing nearer, but Hermione tried her best not to think about it, and both Lucius and Severus tried their best to keep her mind off the trip by offering distractions.

On Saturday, the first day without snow or sleet in weeks, Lucius approached her as she lay on the sofa, snuggled up to Severus, and interrupted her reading. "Hermione, my sweet?" he started, eliciting a giggle out of Luna. "Severus and I decided today would be a good day to celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" Hermione looked at him blankly.

"Oh, so many reasons. Life, love, tomorrow's success, Voldemort's downfall, you name it, we'll celebrate it!"

Severus snorted. "*You* decided on the celebration, Lucius. My decision was more along the lines of working out a plan for tomorrow."

Lucius shrugged. "So, let's get ready and go to the trusted Hofbräuhaus. We can do both there ~~and~~ and enjoy the beer and weisswurst."

Severus cast a questioning glance at Hermione. "What do you think?"

Hermione nodded. "It's been a while since we went there. And I'm getting hungry."

"All right, then." Turning to Lucius, Severus quirked an eyebrow and said, "I hope you realize that since ~~you~~ you are inviting, *you'll* pay."

Lucius let out a long-suffering sigh and rolled his eyes. "Fine. Let's go then."

Uncounted beers and sausages later, four rather rowdy witches and wizards returned to the attic of Blumenburg Palace. One witch in particular was looking forward to the next day and even more so to Valentine's Day.

Ever grateful thanks to southernwitch69 for beta-reading and littlebeloved for alpha-reading. Without your helpful quills, this story would not be half as readable.

Reviews are at least as good as chocolate if not better. They feed the Muse, too.

Seven Grangers

Chapter 10 of 10

Hermione, Severus, Lucius, Luna, and Neveron visit the Externsteine. Kingsley visits the four, and there is reason to celebrate.

For Disclaimer etc., please see Chapter 1

No Music More Enchanting

Chapter 10 Seven Grangers

Hermione awoke and slowly opened her eyes. Feeling Severus' arms around her midst, she smiled. It had taken her no time at all to get used to waking up next to her man morning after morning and beginning the day with making love. His attentions so far had not ceased to amaze her, both in bed and out.

She suddenly remembered what day it was and a wave of excitement washed over her. The arms around her tightened, and the man next to her mumbled, "You are beautiful."

Hermione abruptly turned around. "Am not."

"Good morning to you, too, my love," Severus said, smirking. "Tell me, Hermione, have you ever seen you through *my* eyes?"

She looked at him. "N... no," she said hesitantly.

"Exactly. So, kindly refrain from disagreeing with me in matters you know nothing about." He sounded stern, but Hermione thought she'd happily listen to him recite the alphabet all day long. His voice was more enchanting than the sweetest tones of a violin. *And his hands more capable than those of a musical genius*, she thought idly.

Her eyes widened as Severus smirked. "Mind in the gutter again, Miss Granger? Tsk, tsk. We'll have to do something about that..." Action swiftly followed his words, and time passed unnoticed.

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Late in the afternoon, Neveron arrived, and after sharing a light meal together, the group prepared to leave for the Externsteine, hundreds of miles north of Munich.

Neveron cast Disillusionment Charms on everyone...without a wand, Hermione noted. "I will require minimal time to create a replica of the Ark, but I cannot do so until I see the real Ark. So, let's allow for that. With the smallest measure of luck, we should be on our own in any case." He held out his hands, and Hermione and Luna took one each. Then Severus and Lucius joined hands with their witches, and they Apparated just outside the giant standing stones.

The sun was about to set, and the stones stood stark against the darkening sky. The three wizards cast detection spells on the area as the group slowly approached the largest stone.

"How do we get up there? Apparate?" Hermione asked.

"No, we don't want to risk disturbing any wards Rowle might have placed here," Severus said. "There is a hidden entrance on one side."

Neveron stepped forward, his hands stretched out as if feeling for the entrance. "There," he said softly, and a wooden door became visible, its washed out color contrasting the sandy beige and red hues of the stones. As Neveron stopped in front, the door opened, and he entered, motioning for the others to follow.

Hermione noticed a narrow staircase winding upward and followed Neveron, who was already climbing up and seemed to dimly glow, just casting sufficient light for the others.

They climbed higher and higher until finally a door abruptly obscured any further ascent. "Come, Hermione," Neveron said. "I believe the Ark to be behind this door. If it is and you are the descendent of a witch who opened it, the door will yield to your demand."

Hermione took a deep breath and wondered whether or not to cast a spell when the door silently faded away to reveal a very large room. Everyone but Neveron gasped. The walls were shimmering with a golden glow, and placed in the center was a large trunk, its front decorated with an array of the most perfect crystals and gemstones that sparkled in the reflection of the soft light emanating from the gold of the walls.

The ancient wizard laughed softly. "It has been a long, long time."

Hermione wondered what he meant, but she was too overwhelmed seeing the Ark of the Covenant, the very Ark of which legends were made of, which hardly anyone even knew whether or not it existed in the physical realm.

A strange sensation washed over her as she pondered what to do, and suddenly she *knew* exactly what to do, as if some outside force had whispered the instructions to her.

The young witch stepped forward and slowly but deliberately walked to the center. As she came closer, she raised her arms toward the trunk, silently asking it to open.

The lid rose slowly until Hermione let her arms fall to her sides. She was now right in front of the Ark, but could not see inside it. As she realized her lack of height, she felt herself rise until she was eye-level with the top of the trunk. It was filled to the brim with a white-golden substance.

This is what they are after... Hermione looked reverently at the white gold and then thought, *But it must not fall into the wrong hands.*

Instinctively fully aware of what was to be done now, the witch set to work. She filled one small vial to give to Neveron, then a larger one for herself, Severus, Lucius and Luna, should they ever need to hide their magic. If this project of finding and protecting the Ark of the Covenant was any indication for her future career, anything unconventional would likely come in handy at some stage.

Floating back to the floor, Hermione made eye contact with the ancient wizard, who nodded slightly and pointed to the side of the wall where now an exact replica of the original Ark stood.

Next, Hermione rose her arms again, looked at the lid of the Ark and slowly moved her arms downward. The lid closed at an equal pace to her arms lowering. When it shut, she took a deep breath. *May you be safe from evil forces...*

Neveron stepped forward to stand next to Hermione and moved his arms in an upward movement. The Ark of the Covenant slowly faded out of sight. "It will be safe inside the Department of Mysteries for now," Neveron said and turned to look at the other wizards. "We'll place my replica where the Ark stood, and then we can Apparate from here. It won't matter if wards are broken now." He smiled. "Thank you. You have prevented an unspeakable evil tonight. The wizarding world has every reason to be proud of having such fine souls in their midst."

Before anyone could speak, Neveron disappeared...there was not even the typical *pop* of Disapparition.

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Late that evening...Lucius, Severus, Luna and Hermione were getting ready to break up the spontaneous celebration Lucius had evoked by popping a bottle of champagne...an owl scratched at the window to be let in. Lucius opened the window, and the owl flew straight to Hermione.

The witch untied the parchment from its leg and opened it.

"It's from Kingsley!"

"Go on, read it to us. What does he have to say for himself?" asked Lucius.

Hermione started to read aloud.

"Dear Hermione,

Well done! I cannot find the words to express what a great job you've done! Please tell Severus, Lucius, and Luna the same. The Ark has arrived and is stored safely in the Mystery Hall of the Department of Mysteries until we find a secure way to return it to its home in Egypt.

I trust plans are underway for V-Day. I have the entire Auror Department on call from the day before until the day after except for a small emergency contingent to remain here in London.

I will meet all of you on Wednesday to discuss details.

Regards,

Kingsley

"What the hell? He's coming on Wednesday?" Hermione asked, her eyes wide. The Minister himself overseeing a project, in which she played a part, made her uneasy somehow. Despite all the publicity she had received along with Harry and Ron after Voldemort's downfall, it was something she'd never get used to.

Both Lucius and Severus suddenly looked somewhat sheepish. "Sorry, love. Forgot to mention it. He owed me a couple of days ago."

"Lucius?" Luna's voice sounded unusually stern.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I forgot. Severus mentioned it very briefly, and then you distracted me." He looked nonchalant.

It was so typical of Lucius to not accept blame, Hermione thought, amused.

Wednesday before Valentine's Day arrived far too quickly for Hermione's taste. She was relieved when Severus suggested they'd skive off lectures today and happily succumbed to the need to stay prolonged hours in bed.

It was late afternoon when Kingsley arrived, just in time for an apéritif, which the foursome had started to make a habit of since the day the Ark had been opened.

Kingsley wasted no time and got straight down to business. "Is there enough Polyjuice Potion?" He looked questioningly at Severus.

Lucius replied, "Severus had some stock; I procured the rest from a trusted source. We have about twice as much as we anticipate we require."

"Wonderful. Now to the details..."

They discussed the plan, strategy, and possible difficulties until late that evening. Eventually, everything seemed to have been covered, and Lucius opened a bottle of wine. "You simply must taste this, Kingsley. It comes from a vineyard that is exactly one square kilometre in size, south facing, growing above the Moselle River. The grapes are not even picked if the first frost appears before November first or after December 25th, and the largest ever harvest yielded just enough to fill two hundred bottles. It is absolutely divine!"

Hermione and Luna wrinkled their noses simultaneously, eliciting a dry laugh from Severus. "Would you like some French Red instead?" he asked.

"Oh, that would be lovely," said Hermione. "Sorry, Lucius, but I just can't get into this sweet wine, no matter how much you praise it," she apologized.

Lucius smirked. "Isn't it funny how women can happily consume an entire pound of Swiss chocolate, but refuse to learn to appreciate the frost-induced sweetness in wine?" he asked idly.

The Minister laughed. "Honestly, I don't mind not sharing! This is some wine! I wish they sold it in London." He twirled the glass in his hands, took another sip, then turned to Hermione, his face showing utter mischief not at all befitting a Minister.

"Say, Hermione, has Severus ever let you in on the secret of your bedroom décor?"

Severus glared daggers at him, and Hermione gasped in surprise. "You did that? I was wondering what on earth had happened since no spell I tried got rid of the Slytherin colors." She shrugged. "I got used to it..."

Severus snickered. "Did you ever try a simple *Finite Incantatem*?" His face took on a look of smugness as he took in her astounded expression. "Tsk, ts, Miss Granger. Sometimes, simplicity is what is called for."

Hermione scowled. "Anything else you've *forgotten* to mention up until now?"

Now, Lucius snickered. "Oh, Severus, how can you have secrets from her? You know women! They *always* find out! You better come clear about your alter ego, too, then!"

Severus sighed. "Spill the beans, Lucius, why don't you..."

Kingsley stood up rather abruptly. "Erm, I'll better leave you to your domestic bliss and go back to London. Tomorrow is going to be a long day."

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Later, when they'd retired for the night, Hermione decided to bring up the subject of withheld information again.

"Severus, what else is there you haven't told me? What is your *alter ego*? Why did you decorate my bedroom like that?"

Severus cast *Lumos* and looked at her intently. "As you know, the reason you were offered the position with the Department of Mysteries is because Kingsley recruited me and left it up to me whom to pick as my team. I knew I wanted Lucius. After nearly two decades of being friends with him, he finally saw the light and swore off his silly beliefs with regard to bloodlines.

"You know the reason I wanted you and Luna on the team. But, as you no doubt have deduced by now, there is more to my wanting you." He stopped and took a few deep breaths before continuing. "I... Hermione, I've never been one to date. I loved Lily since the day I met her when I was a mere child, and after she died, I could never envisage falling in love with anyone. I was afraid, not only of rejection, but more so that I might betray her as I did Lily, even though I had never, ever meant to. Please believe me."

Hermione placed her hand on his arm and squeezed it lightly. "I believe you, Severus. I have always believed you are a good man, even when everyone thought you were siding with Voldemort."

A breath of relief escaped him, and he continued. "When I pondered the possibilities of whom to recruit, you came to mind. At first, it was merely because I know you are bright. Eventually, I realized I was fooling myself. I started noticing you in your sixth year, and of course I denied it to myself. It could not happen.

"But then, the... Voldemort took over, you left school, Voldemort thought me dead after he'd instructed Nagini to kill me, and then Potter, with you and Weasley's help, took him down. Suddenly, there was new life ahead for me, a brand-new start, with no master, only my own conscience to follow."

He snorted derisively. "I spelled your bedroom in the hope that you might come to me for help. Don't laugh. Please!"

Hermione could not hide a grin, but she had the strength to refrain from laughing out loud. "I'm in love with you, Severus. I don't know how it happened, but I do know I'm happy every moment I'm spending with you, and I feel incomplete when you're not near me."

Once a reaffirmation of a growing love between them was complete, Hermione took up the subject again, squirming, but feeling it was necessary to make away with secrets.

"Alter ego? We might as well get it out of the way now," she said amiably.

Severus groaned. "I'm beginning to understand what Lucius means when he says women are insatiable in every respect.

"I have been studying the occult for decades. It started as a simple request from the Dark Lord in my early Death Eater days, but it intrigued me, so I researched it. The occult and alchemy go rather hand in hand, and it was quite easy for me to find connections between the Nazis' obsession with both subjects, and eventually, with Neveron's help, I had enough material for a book. Which was then published by a Muggle publisher under a pseudonym.

"I used the pseudonym then to take some time out after Lucius had found me in the Shrieking Shack. I spent a month in Northern France."

"*The Nazis' Search for Occultum*," Hermione said softly.

"The very same," Severus confirmed. "And it's banned here in Germany because the Muggle government is somewhat... shall we say, touchy about the subject. Mind you, it didn't hurt the sales one bit." He smirked.

"And if you want to know anything else, I suggest you'll look. My mind is open to you, but I've talked enough for a day, you know!"

Hermione had heard enough and felt her trust in him grow, now that any secrets were resolved.

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"Thank goodness! It took him long enough," Lucius sneered, which Hermione was certain was because of his need to hide his relief rather than his irritation at having had to wait for nearly an hour to receive a message.

A Patronus in the shape of an eagle had just relayed a message to Lucius, Hermione and Luna, causing all three to breathe sighs of relief, silently or otherwise.

"Externsteine, midnight tonight," the eagle had whispered and dissolved.

"When did Severus change his Patronus form?" Luna asked curiously.

Lucius snorted. "When he fell in love with Hermione, I think. Or maybe when he saw her new bat Patronus.

"Right. We have work to do. Luna, love, get ready to leave. Hermione, will you be all right on your own here?"

"Yes. I'd rather be here in case Severus sends another message or needs to escape. You two go and meet the Aurors," Hermione said. She hoped Severus would have at least his hands free to take a new sip of *Polyjuice* every hour while in captivity. Knowing that he *could* Disapparate made her feel more confident about the entire plan to catch Rowle and possibly some of the nazis. Neveron had lifted the Wards over Blutenburg partially...nobody could Apparate into the building, but it was now possible to Disapparate out of the building or within.

Lucius and Luna Disapparated from the living room, leaving Hermione behind to ponder what lay ahead. She felt a modicum of confidence that all would work out well. Neveron had been a tremendous help where wards and the lack thereof was concerned. He sided with her when both Severus and Lucius insisted she should stay behind because if the Muggle nazis got wind of her being there, they'd try everything to capture her again. She would hear none of it.

"I have every right to witness the event! If not for me, you wouldn't be involved in this! And besides, I was the one to save the Ark!" she'd yelled at the two wizards. Eventually, with Neveron's cool reasoning, they had given in and worked out a strategy that would be least likely to have her discovered.

The minutes passed at a snail's pace. Lucius and Luna had only left half an hour ago, and Hermione felt as if it had been an entire day. *How long does it take them?* she wondered, her worry and, with it irritation, increasing. She rose from the sofa, her book abandoned, and started pacing from one window to another. *How is Severus doing as Polyjuiced me?* she couldn't help wondering about once every minute.

Finally, after the longest hour of Hermione's entire life, she heard some commotion outside and rushed to the door. "Oh, Merlin!" she exclaimed as the door opened. "I thought you'd never come back!"

She was unable to hide her sobs, ignoring the fact that not only Lucius and Luna were there but also some of her friends and Aurors she'd never met.

Luna hugged her fiercely, followed by Lucius, who hugged the two witches together. "Now, now, it's all going well, my sweets. They didn't kill you on two occasions, Hermione, and they won't kill Sev-as-you when they think they're so close to having the Ark opened! Calm down." He patted her back. "Look, we've brought some friends for you."

Hermione looked up straight into the face of an astonished Harry, surrounded by an equally astonished Ron, a smirking Millicent and a grinning Ginny. She smiled wryly.

"Sorry. Got a bit emotional here..." she said sheepishly.

"It's okay, Hermione," Millicent said before anyone else had a chance to speak up. "I know the feeling."

Hermione gave her a grateful smile, wondering what on earth had happened that she would feel kinship with the Slytherin witch, but figured it was fine. "Thanks, Millicent."

"Hermione? You all right?" Harry asked, incredulous.

Hermione grinned. "Yeah. I'm fine. Just nervous. Don't know why. I mean, the Ark is safe, and tonight should be a ball compared to fighting Voldemort."

Harry looked from Hermione to Lucius to Luna. "Is that Snape's name I've been hearing? What have you not been telling me?"

"Oh, yes, you see..." Lucius explained his friend's existence to three pairs of bulging eyes.

Millicent giggled and then said rather soberly, "If there is one thing I'm grateful for, it's being sorted into a House whose Head was *capable*. I know he wasn't liked outside Slytherin, but if every House had a Head like him, Hogwarts would be one united front. He was the best Head of House anyone could ever ask for."

Hermione had never disliked Millicent, but she now was wondering why she'd not really *liked* her. "You know... you're right!"

Two sheepish, friendly smiles were exchanged, and the two witches took off to the kitchen. "Food is what we need before the big trip."

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Once Harry and Ron had overcome their shock of their best friend being with the long thought dead Potions master and once the entire crowd had been fed with pasta and tomato sauce created by Hermione and Millicent, both of whom were no doubt channeling the afore-mentioned Potions master's culinary skills, Lucius spoke up.

"It's fifteen minutes to midnight, people. Hermione, is the Polyjuice ready?"

Hermione nodded and pointed to several vials placed on one of the shelves.

Lucius continued. "Right, those of you wanting to be Hermione..." he cleared his throat dramatically..."take one dose of the potion and keep the vial with you in case you need more." Then he turned to Hermione and handed her a vial. "This is yours. Are you ready?"

Hermione swallowed hard. "Yes."

Once everyone had taken their dose of Polyjuice, the group cast Disillusionment Charms on each other and Apparated as one to the Externsteine.

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Three people, Severus and two Hermiones, led the way after revealing the door opening to the inside of the largest standing stone, followed by four Hermiones and a few others, all Disillusioned.

When they reached the top of the narrow staircase, the door was already open. Severus stepped into the room and narrowly avoided a vocal gasp, seeing Hermione in the center of the large room, right in front of the Ark.

"Open!" the Hermione in the center of the room shrieked.

Rowle stepped forward, closely followed by Ulrike and Schultz. "As if!" Ulrike said bitterly. "You've failed! She can't open it!" Ulrike started to sob. Then she turned to Rowle and cried, "Thorfinn, you *said* she is the one to open it! You have failed me!" Her cries were hysterical now, doubly so echoed by the walls.

One Hermione stepped forward, canceling the Disillusionment Charm. "Oh, dear!"

Immediately, another Hermione stepped forward, now clearly visible as well. "Do we have a problem here?"

A third Hermione approached the center and chimed in, "I dare say we do."

Rowle and Ulrike looked positively owlish, and Schultz tried to retreat, only to be held up by another Hermione and a couple of Aurors, all pointing their wands at him.

It took mere minutes to disarm and bind Rowle, Ulrike and Schultz. Harry, still Polyjuiced as Hermione, Apparated Rowle straight to the Ministry with Ginny following in his tracks.

Two Aurors held Ulrike and old Schultz. "You are under arrest. Hope that the Muggles come and get you, for if you're still here for us to take by the morning, we will not waste time."

Schultz whimpered, but Ulrike looked like an amazon...proud and unwilling to yield to anything.

There was a loud pop, and Kingsley appeared. "Hermione, Severus? Lucius, Luna? Will you please Apparate with me to the Ministry? The remaining Aurors will clear up here!"

The real Hermione, Severus-disguised-as-Hermione, Lucius and Luna followed Kingsley's instructions immediately and Apparated straight to London's Ministry of Magic.

Ten minutes later, all were back to their normal physical selves and found themselves the subjects of big applause.

Luna and Lucius basked in it. Severus felt uneasy.

"Do you like this?" Hermione asked him.

"No. It's not my kind of idea of having a good time," Severus said in reply.

"You know..." Hermione said while smiling politely into the room. "I've always wanted to visit Egypt."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Only, I thought it would be so much more exciting to do so with a worthy partner, you know?"

"I see." He looked at her and relished the mischievous grin on her face. "Well, in that case, Miss Granger, are you ready to Apparate?"

"Oh, Severus, yes!"

Two pops were heard in very close succession by those standing near, and when Kingsley asked a few minutes later for Hermione and Severus to come forward to receive the Order of Merlin, First Class, one wizard yelled, "They've gone off to Egypt!"

~Fin~

A/N: Most grateful thanks to southernwitch69 for beta-reading and little_beloved for alpha-reading. Equally grateful thanks for my LJ friends who never told me to stop whining when I did because Lucius spent a great deal of time in my head, whispering in the most demanding tones what to write. He will probably always be a demanding sod, but otherwise he's become rather agreeable since the events of Deathly Hallows. And last, but by no means least, a big thank-you to sshg316, who wrote the following prompt for the 2007/08 Winter Exchange SSHG Exchange on LJ:

After Voldemort was defeated, Snape's body disappeared. After a futile search, he is assumed dead. Harry ensures that he is considered a war hero, a memorial is erected and life goes on. After taking her NEWTs, Hermione decides to leave the wizarding world for a while (you decide why). She decides to attend a Muggle university (you decide where). On her first day of classes, she is shocked to find that one of her professors is none other than Severus Snape. How does he react to seeing Hermione? What will draw them together?

Reviews feed the Muse.