

The Properties of Silver

by madqueenmab

Nominated for three New Library Awards!

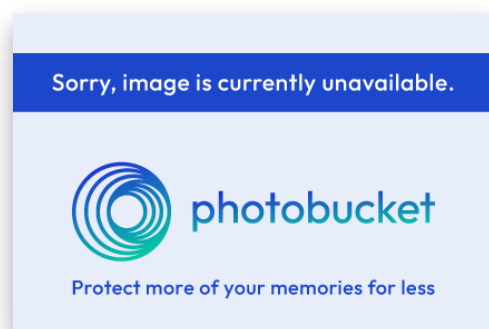
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Eight Key Lessons

Chapter 1 of 5

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I'm proud, honored, grateful and giddy to learn this piece has been nominated for The New Library Awards. If you're looking for good reads, check out their multi-category, multi-ship, multi-faceted and wholly enjoyable recommendations at http://community.livejournal.com/the_new_library/

Eight Key Lessons

Her first night home after fourth year, Hermione stayed up till three telling her parents about Harry and Cedric, Crouch, Jr. and the tournament, the Death Eaters and what it meant these days to be Muggle-born. In short, she told them that war was coming and that it was a war she meant to fight in. Her parents didn't fuss. They didn't dither. They didn't bluster or bewail or second-guess their decision to send her off to Hogwarts. She knew they wouldn't. Grangers didn't fuss, dither, bluster, bewail or second-guess. (It was funny. Outside of school, she reminded herself a bit of Malfoy, perpetually aware of her Family and That Which they Did or Did Not Do).

The next day, Mum and Dad took her to their dental practice, where they made films of her new and Pomfrey-improved teeth.

"You're our daughter," said Mum. "We raised you to do what is right."

"We're proud of you," Dad said. "You know your grandfather would have been too." Hugh, her father's late father, had a good ear for languages. After the Second World War, he had been stationed as a translator in Poland, documenting atrocities and trying to help far flung families reunite. "There's evil in this world," Grandad Hugh used to say, his eyes not on Hermione but somewhere grim across the channel. "You've got to fight that evil with all you have, or all you have is nothing." Moody reminded her a bit of Grandad Hugh. Or rather, Crouch's Moody act reminded her.

What Mum and Dad didn't say was that the X-rays were to identify her body if the worst that could happen happened. They didn't tell her, but she understood.

Hermione didn't tell them that in her world dental records were worth roughly half a Knut. She thought of Crouch, Sr. and how he wound up a bone. She didn't tell her parents about that. Since her Hogwarts letter came, it was the first detail of the magical world she consciously kept from them.

She finished unpacking that night. She put Rita Skeeter's jar on her bookshelf. It was probably not the wisest thing to keep her cooped up--the reporter could have deadlines and an editor who'd come looking for her when she missed them--nor was it particularly kind. But Hermione wouldn't trust her silence without a wand oath, and it was summer hols. The Animagus would have to wait till September, when Hermione would next be allowed the use of her wand. The Ministry of Magic had off kilter priorities. The legal consequences of blackmail and false imprisonment were, in many cases, neither as swift nor as harsh as those for an underage magic violation. Hermione had looked it up.

Still, it would be best all around if she wasn't caught.

She told her parents the beetle was a summer project for Care of Magical Creatures.

She brought Rita a new green leaf every day. Good summer fruit too. Dad grew the most delicious strawberries.

She tried not to worry all that much about it.

One Saturday morning, midway through June, Professor Dumbledore arrived with a violet haired witch in tow. Hermione knew she was in trouble when he introduced his companion as Auror Tonks.

*

Mum and Dad were delighted to see the Headmaster again. He had delivered her letter in person four years ago, and the Drs. Granger still associated him with their relief upon learning their clever daughter wasn't mad or epileptic or suffering from some sort of brain tumor. Her magic had manifest quite spectacularly when a teacher who accused her of plagiarizing a book report ("I don't care how science-minded she is. Nine-year-olds don't read *The Origin of Species*," the woman had insisted) had de-evolved briefly into an Australopithecus, and had burst forth regularly thereafter, bouncing a six-year-old neighbor safely out of his bullying brother's reach, causing the family's entire book collection to self-alphabetize, and compelling a rival for the school penmanship prize to turn in page after page in flawless Cyrillic. So when Dumbledore asked if he and the Auror could have a word with Hermione in private, Mum and Dad readily agreed.

For the first time, Hermione wished they were a bit less enthusiastic about all things Magic.

She followed the Headmaster and the Auror out into the garden. Dumbledore conjured three squashy chairs, and the Auror ("Just call me Tonks," she said) changed her hair to match the cushions. Hermione stared. She'd never seen a Metamorphmagus before. It distracted her for half a breath until she remembered her imminent arrest. If she ever got out of this, she'd start thinking more like a Slytherin. Malfoy would have just filed the dirt on Rita away for later use. Hermione was supposed to be clever. What on earth had possessed her to involve a jar?

The Headmaster cleared his throat. He looked profoundly uncomfortable. "Miss Granger," he asked, "what do you know about unicorns?"

This was it. Even if she dodged arrest, she was going to be expelled. He was quizzing her to see if she'd cut it as Assistant Groundskeeper. The Slytherins were going to die laughing, but at least she'd be around to help Harry. Maybe the boys would come visit Saturdays at the Hut. Maybe they'd lend her their textbooks. "Unicorns have powerful magic, particularly as it pertains to healing. Their tails are--"

"Good, good. But what do you know about catching them?"

"They're quite fast," she said. "They're drawn to the innocent. Though there are exceptions, they tend not to reveal themselves to those with bad intentions or to anyone who is not a vir--"

"Just come out and ask her," Tonks broke in.

The Headmaster shifted. "I'm getting there..."

"Merlin's pimply arse, Albus. So *this* is why Remus said you ought to take a witch along."

The only Remus Hermione knew was Professor Lupin, and he had nothing to do with the beetle up in her bedroom. Maybe they *weren't* here to arrest her. Her pulse slowed to normal.

"Miss Granger," the Headmaster began. "I assume you have an interest in helping the Light through its current crisis?"

"Of course I do."

"With that in mind, we would like to ask that... that you consider, that is if..." he paused, blushed, and turned towards the Auror "... perhaps it's best you take it from here."

Hermione had no idea what was going on. The Headmaster never talked to anyone else like he talked to Harry, but he also never talked like this. Like he was embarrassed or something.

"Thanks heaps, Headmaster," said Tonks. "Right. Hermione. Okay. Because this is always the first question I ask new witches of my acquaintance. Slept with anyone lately? Ever?"

"What?" When in doubt, Hermione tried to be polite. When in shock, however, all bets were off. "Why? Been reading up on me in *Witch Weekly*?" Forget blackmail. She should have *stepped* on that bug upstairs.

"Gods, no. I'd have to be Imperiused to read that tripe."

That was the moment Hermione began to like Tonks.

And she was on their side; the Headmaster said so. They wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important. So she answered. "Alright then. No. I've never slept with anyone." It had been a close thing though, with Viktor, and she probably would have slept with him if Rita Skeeter hadn't had her so paranoid. Forget Caesar's wife. Potter's friends must be above reproach. That was the key lesson of her fourth year (the key lessons of her first, second, and third years, respectively, were that while logic can have more power than magic, friendship outweighs both, that it's not just girly foolishness to keep a mirror handy and that there's good reason a day lasts just twenty-four hours).

The Headmaster looked a bit more comfortable but still awkward. Hermione was beginning to wish this whole conversation had never begun.

"Great," Tonks said, and she shook her head. "That's the easy question."

"There's a harder one coming?"

"This is for the War, mind you. We're not here asking for grins."

"What's the next question?"

Now Tonks looked uncomfortable.

No one spoke for a few seconds.

"Miss Granger," said the Headmaster, "we need the assistance of a witch who can keep a secret."

"My cousin said you're great at that, by the by. He bet you'd be just the witch for the job."

Someday Hermione was going to write up a list of things in the Wizarding world that royally teed her off. The assumption that everyone knew everyone else's genealogy was going to rank pretty high.

"The cousin Tonks is referring to has, ah, along with a certain hippogriff, benefited first hand from an important secret your third year," said Dumbledore.

It took her less than half a tick to figure out he meant Sirius Black. Hermione felt warm down to her toes. She'd never admit it to the boys, but sometimes just *thinking* about Harry's godfather, it was like snogging Viktor, and her heart felt as large and as volatile as an Erumpent. She thought of Sirius' smile and the glint in his dark eyes. He'd recommended her. Her. "Whatever you need, I'll do it."

The Headmaster beamed.

Hermione was only fifteen. She still had a few key lessons to learn, including that one should always get details before committing. Because in his next breath Dumbledore said, "Excellent. We need you to agree to marry Professor Snape."

Ron always said the Headmaster was a bit mad.

Surely he must be joking.

She was fifteen.

And a student.

His student.

Not to mention it would completely blow her chances with Sirius (another key lesson Hermione had yet to learn: she was born a female and so in no way destined for Sirius Black).

"Breathe, Hermione." That was Tonks. "It's not that bad."

Had Tonks ever *met* Snape?

"You don't have to actually marry him," said Dumbledore. "We just need you to *agree* to marry him. I would like to tell you some things. I presume I can count on your discretion?" Her first key lesson of the War: technicalities can be very important, but secrecy even more so.

When she answered yes, the air crackled, and it felt somehow binding, solemn as a vow.

The Headmaster told her about the Order. He told her Professor Snape was a spy and as such among the Death Eaters with some regularity. He told her how in the last war Voldemort's followers had used physical threats as well as magical ones, and though he didn't say it, when Tonks met her eye, Hermione guessed that the Headmaster meant rape. Dumbledore went on. "The thought of Professor Snape doing such things, even in the name of keeping his cover, is patently unacceptable. He has led Tom to believe he literally cannot participate, that all teachers at Hogwarts are under Abiding Abstinence Charms--"

"But, sir. No such charms exist." She'd read quite a bit on Sex Magic just in case she got carried away with Viktor. "There's no magic that can permanently surmount free will. That's why the Imperius is such a drain on the caster."

"Correct indeed, Miss Granger, and so we need an alternative. That's where you come in. Tonks' cousin..." He paused, as if to make sure she knew who he was talking about. She nodded for him to go on. The reality of the War began to sink in a bit more then. Anyone could be listening, even in her parents' sunny garden. "... has found a Medieval betrothal charm, an archaic thing, that, if entered into freely, enforces fidelity."

She didn't like to sound of that overmuch; she'd quite liked Viktor's furtive hands on her skin. But she stayed quiet and listened. She was starting to learn. Another new key lesson (two in a day--things certainly came at her much quicker in real life than at school): in war even more than the classroom, it's always best to have as much information as possible.

The Headmaster explained. The charm was based on a Truth-for-Faithfulness exchange, wherein a wizard pledged his honesty in exchange for a witch's sexual fidelity. Sirius had worked out a way to reverse the roles of witch and wizard, thus keeping the Potions master chaste. He couldn't find a way to sidestep the requirement that a virgin participate or they would have asked someone older, but both he and Dumbledore were fairly certain having the virgin in the wizard's role and someone more experienced in the witch's would not in any way undermine the spell. "What do you think?" asked the Headmaster.

She doubted he'd appreciate her real thoughts, which were: ew, ew, ew. Someone had actually *slept* with Severus Snape. "Is it binding?" she asked. She'd do anything for Harry, anything, but she hoped to Godric she didn't have to wind up as Madam Snape.

"Not a jot," Tonks assured her. "The spell's based on the giving and acceptance of a bride price, see? I know. Sexist rot. But all it takes to break the betrothal is mutual consent or return of the binding gifts."

"Will there be side effects? On me I mean?"

"You may give off a slight aura of unapproachability," Dumbledore acknowledged. "Nothing obvious, just a vague sort of sense you are matched to another."

"If I wanted, would I still be able to...?"

"Not on school grounds, there are rules against it," said the Headmaster, "but yes. You aren't pledging any kind of fidelity."

"What about Professor Snape? If he, er, breaks his word?"

"Boils everywhere, blindness, and terrible pain."

Hermione winced.

"Won't do his mood much good," said Tonks.

Potions next year was going to be awful, ten times worse than usual at least.

Dumbledore said, "Well, the spell ought to allow him to still... ahh..."

"Shake hands with the unemployed?" Tonks suggested.

"Exactly."

Not in any way an image Hermione ever wanted in her mind. Her kingdom for a mental *Scourgify*.

"Do you need time to consider, Miss Granger?" asked the Headmaster.

She paused a moment. High time she thought like a Slytherin. "I have a condition," she said.

"What is it?"

"I want my Trace off." That should solve the Rita problem nicely, not to mention a host of others.

"Miss Granger..."

"I've been reading *The Prophet*. The Ministry's not doing a thing to fight this. I'm Muggle-born and a friend of Harry Potter. I want to be able to protect my family. Besides, you know the trouble the boys get into. It might be to our advantage to have my unexpected force in reserve. I won't abuse it, sir, and I won't breathe a word of it, not to Harry or to Ron. About the Trace or Professor Snape." She cringed a little, just thinking of the hard time her best friends would give her about the latter.

Dumbledore studied her a moment. "I think the Order can find a way to arrange that. We've plenty of magic between us and a few discreet higher-ups in the Ministry. Very well. We're agreed?"

Again she felt the air hum.

"Yes," she said. The word meant something more powerful than a casual agreement. She could feel it. Magic and power were at play.

AN: Rating will go up once Hermione and Severus are, respectively, of age and back from the dead.

Thanks to all who reviewed and all who (*Imperio!* says madqueenmab) are going to review!

The characters aren't mine. The concept is not mine. If you think any of this is mine, you belong in St. Mungo's, which is also not mine.

Seven Honest Answers

Chapter 2 of 5

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Prompted in part by a fleeting, foolish crush the summer after her fourth year, Hermione assists the Order in an experimental charm meant to protect Severus Snape as he resumes his role as double agent. Six years after the war's end, it appears the charm has a few unexpected consequences... even though Snape's long dead.

Seven Honest Answers

Hermione promised her parents she'd be back before dark.

She Apparated (Side-Along, but still) for the first time to the dingy house at Grimmauld Place, which was the first Secret-Kept location she had ever visited. All these firsts had her feeling wildly sophisticated, like she was seventeen, at least. Maybe Sirius would notice. He was there (his shirt was only half-buttoned!) along with Professor Lupin (who she could tell had lost weight even before he hugged her) and Mad-Eye Moody (who responded to her "not to be rude, sir, but how do I know it's really you?" as if he'd never been paid a nicer compliment). They, along with Tonks and Dumbledore, were going to represent the bride's (Professor Snape's) family, their five magics combining with hers and her Professor's to total seven, a powerful number to enhance the spell.

"Snively's lucky day, isn't it?" said Sirius. "Finally related to a handsome thing like me." And he winked. (Winked! At her!)

"And awfully modest, too," Professor Lupin said. Professor Lupin was so smart--that's just the kind of thing she wished she'd been quick-witted enough to come up with. If *she'd* said it to Sirius, it would have been a little like flirting.

Instead, she said, "I hear you were the one who discovered the ritual. That must have been really interesting research."

"It was *something* of a contribution," came a voice from the shadows. Professor Snape. He didn't wash his hair over the summer, either. "That and the de-Doxying. Who knew Black was such an *indoor* dog?"

Sirius' features turned cold and hard, a bit like his old fugitive posters.

"Now, Severus, Sirius. Do try for civility," cautioned Dumbledore. He produced a small bag from one of his pockets and began to sprinkle what looked like blue salt on the kitchen floor.

"Manners, Snape. Like the Headmaster says. Don't you have anything to say to your affianced?" Sirius said the last word a bit like Malfoy did Mudblood. Lupin frowned and touched Sirius at the elbow, as if to still his wand arm.

"I hope you won't return to school expecting some kind of favoritism, Miss Granger."

Not from *him*, at any rate. Not unless she sprouted green and silver scales all over. She almost said it. Professor Snape had been rude first, after all, and it was the kind of thing Sirius would like, only she wasn't sure it was the kind of thing she wanted to be liked for. "I assure you, Professor," she said, "I won't."

"Hermione is doing you a favor," reminded Lupin.

"Miss Granger is assisting the Order in this," said Professor Snape, "as am I."

The funny thing was, he was right. More so than Sirius and even Lupin. She hadn't agreed for his sake, but for the sake of their side. The kind of distinction that her Granddad Hugh would understand.

Moody and Tonks began to comb the blue salt on the floor with what looked like long silver rakes. Dumbledore chalked a circle around it. "Miss Granger," he said, "please come stand in the center. You others, circle around." They all did as he asked. A swish of his wand, and the chalk circle erupted in heatless, waist-high, white flame.

Sirius sighed melodramatically, a hand to his forehead. "Our gitty greaseball finally got himself a girl."

Hermione wasn't sure, but she thought she saw Professor Lupin kick him in the shins.

*

The ceremony was simple. Everyone outside the circle would ask her a question (Professor Snape, as the bride, would get to go twice) to which she must provide a complete and honest answer. The strength of the spell depended entirely upon her honesty; if she were less than forthright, Professor Snape could still fornicate (ew!) as he (or, worse, as Riddle) pleased. Dumbledore explained this was from the days of arranged marriages when it was in the interest of the bride's family to be certain of the groom's full disclosure about things like estates, debts, and prior wives secreted away somewhere.

Sirius said they wanted to be sure she could keep their precious Sevvie in the luxury to which he was accustomed.

Lupin frowned again. Moody's eye wheeled horribly. Tonks looked at Lupin. Dumbledore and her soon-to-be-fiancé ignored the lot of them.

"When you've answered the question to Severus' satisfaction, the flame will burn silver, at which point the interrogator will gift you with their part of his bride price," Dumbledore explained. Sirius snorted. The Headmaster continued, "Originally these gifts were somewhat grander, but Sirius assures me the spell will work just as well with tokens, provided you accept properly, greeting the giver by name and saying, 'I humbly accept your gift and with it the gift of your Line.' Which of course means Severus' line--we're his family in this, after all. Once we've gone a full round, you will take Severus' hands and draw him through the flames to your side. And, Miss Granger, do keep the tokens. Only by return of gifts or through mutual consent can this betrothal be broken."

Professor Snape looked more angular and sour than she'd ever seen him. Once the War was over, mutual consent wouldn't be a problem.

*

The first question was Professor Snape's. The last would be his as well. "Miss Granger. How is it that so charming a young witch is even eligible for this ceremony?" If she didn't know better, from the tone of his voice she'd have guessed he was sampling his own Sarcasm Serum. But this was Severus Snape. Being mean just because he could.

"Well, sir. I meet the requirements."

The damn flame stayed white.

"I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific."

"Severus, there's no cause to humiliate her," said Lupin.

"We already know the requirements," Hermione said. "I'm a witch. I can keep a secret. I'm a virgin."

Not even a hint of silver in the fire.

"It's the truth! I've never slept with anyone. I almost did with Viktor but--"

"That manner of detail is unnecessary, Miss Granger. I merely wish to know how it is you've failed to succumb to the questionable charms of your compatriots."

"You want me to say something bad about Harry and Ron." He could have just said that instead of going on like he'd swallowed a thesaurus. Half the reason the boys struggled so in Potions was that they hadn't worked out that *coalesce, integrate, and commingle* were all Snape for *mix the ingredients together*.

He smirked.

"You'll have to ask an entirely different question for me to do that, Professor." She wished she'd set *him* on fire first year and not just his robes. She wished she'd been a bit more imaginative with her third-year hex. Horrible big nose like that; wouldn't it be just tragic if everything he touched began to smell like overcooked cabbage? "Ron and Harry are my best friends. Whatever their flaws, they're both sweet and loyal and, frankly, easy on the eyes." More so than certain scowling professors. "Neither of them has any idea, really, that I'm a girl, and the side-effects of this spell means they're not likely to figure it out any time soon. So, Professor, the answer to your question is that the subject never came up, no doubt due to the questionable nature of my own charms. Satisfied?"

He said nothing. The flames flared silver. She was sure he was sneering at her--like *he* was much of a prize--and was glad the brightness encircling her stopped her from seeing it. Without another word, he handed her a cracked and empty potion bottle.

She took it from him, saying, "Severus Snape, I humbly accept your gift and with it the gift of your Line."

*

Sirius was next to speak, butting in before Dumbledore (who looked a bit put out at the interruption) had his turn. Hermione blushed, letting herself imagine for a heated instant that he'd jumped in out of eagerness to talk to her. He winked again (though her answer to Snape's question had reminded her once more that she was a plain, awkward wren of a girl, so it was more likely some kind of post-Dementor facial tic than an attempt to win her over). "What exactly do you think of our Severus, Hermione?" He beamed and puffed up a bit, like his lungs had more fun than air in them.

"I don't think his question was very nice," she said, stalling. She was going to have to sit in his classroom for the next three years, after all.

"The git," was Sirius' emphatic reply. He was especially handsome when he was having fun, but if Ron or Harry were ever half as mean, she'd really let them have it. Still, neither Ron nor Harry ever smiled like that. After all that time in Azkaban, she supposed Sirius was due for whatever fun he could get. Besides, in a not even all that terribly round about way, the handsome wizard was rushing to her defense. Professor Snape's question did seem specifically designed to humiliate her.

She looked over at the Potions master, who stood between Moody and Dumbledore. His face looked gaunt by the white fire. Something in the way the shadows danced about made her wonder if he'd look the same way dead. His eyes were unblinking and utterly without spark. She hoped she didn't have to answer this one in much detail; if he held that expression much longer, she'd join Neville in his Snape-mares.

"To be honest," she continued, "I don't think much about him when I'm not in class. Even when we're at school. He's kind of in the background as far as I'm concerned. He's just . . . there."

Lupin looked very strange.

Sirius grinned.

Snape scowled. He seemed to be concentrating. Maybe he wanted the silver as much as she did.

"I don't go around thinking about my teachers--" She could practically *hear* the boys crow Lockhart's name. "--though I'm sure they're all very interesting people. I'm a student. I'm busy with other students."

"But what about Snape, Hermione?" Sirius asked. This white flame death-light wasn't doing his looks much good, either.

"Professor Snape," she said, like Sirius was Harry. "If he were a fairer teacher, I'd be fonder of him."

Finally. Silver flames.

Sirius looked a bit disappointed that his question hadn't yielded more shrewish stuff. He passed her a chipped teacup. She touched his hand an instant longer than necessary and set the cup beside Professor Snape's broken bottle. So much junk. She was starting to feel like Harry at a Dursley family Christmas. Sirius looked into her eyes when she spoke; for all his posturing, he knew this was important magic.

"Sirius Black, I humbly accept your gift and with it the gift of your Line."

*

Dumbledore's question was much more diplomatic. "Would you care for a Chocolate Frog, Miss Granger?"

"No, thank you." She didn't often indulge in sweets (just because she was friends with boys didn't mean she ate like one), and when she did, Hermione preferred quality stuff: creamy texture, not too sweet and not in the least inclined to attempt escape.

Silver flamed promptly. Dumbledore unwrapped a Frog, popped it in his mouth, and presented her with the card. It was Agrippa. Too bad she'd promised not to tell the boys. Ron still needed that one.

"Albus Dumbledore, I humbly accept your gift and with it the gift of your Line."

*

"Why'd your parents name you Hermione, girl?" Moody asked gruffly and without preamble. Hermione liked her name well enough and thought the accusing tone a bit rich from someone who responded to "Mad-Eye."

"They thought it was pretty," she said, and paused, hoping Sirius would agree with her. She looked around the white-lit faces; every member of the circle looked curious, maybe even a little apprehensive. It wasn't *that* interesting a question, nor did it have the potential, as Professor Snape's had, for salacious revelations. "Also, their first date was to 'The Winter's Tale.'"

The flame stayed white, which was ridiculous. There was nothing more to the story, full-stop.

"But why'd they *do* it?" Tonks asked, rapt.

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

Professor Snape sneered. It was like he was under a curse. All his facial expressions--the sneering, the scowling, the smirking--were bound to start with the letter *ess*. Hermione imagined him simpering, swooning, slobbering, and so almost missed his curt, "How you made it through four years at Hogwarts with no understanding of wizarding culture boggles the mind."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Hermione," said Lupin. "How far have you got in History of Magic?"

"Second Goblin Rebellion."

"So that's what, Muggle 12th Century?"

"Yes." Professor Binns' pace was glacial.

"Well, you've not got to this point yet, and as a Muggle-born you'd have no way of knowing it, but Shakespeare was a fairly infamous Squib."

"Nasty gossip, too," broke in Tonks.

"And he had a third nipple," said Sirius.

Lupin continued, his demeanor calm and open, just like in the classroom (she hoped Professor Snape was paying attention: this was how an engaging teacher taught). "Every single one of his plays betrayed the secrets of some pure-blood family or other. He took plenty of liberties, exaggerated here and there, and changed the names a bit--"

"Please tell me the Macbeths were the Malfoys."

"The McGonagalls, actually." That was Professor Snape. The one person she could think of who looked meaner when he smiled (smiled--there it was again, that *ess*). "So much for Gryffindor loyalty."

"The magical community was more than a bit put out," Dumbledore said, his voice mild.

"No one likes their dirty laundry aired in public like that," Tonks said. "The Ministry locked up his last dozen plays in the Department of Mysteries' vault before they could be performed and passed the first version of the Statute of Secrecy."

"And," Moody paused, letting silence build while the white light flickered terribly, blanching everyone's skin, "a group of powerful pure-bloods set down a Taboo. Any witch or wizard with a name from one of his plays..." Moody shuddered at the word. "...is cursed, at least in part, with that character's fate."

"Which," said Dumbledore, "explains your brief stint as a statue."

"I've read all the plays," said Moody. "Even the ones at the Department. You've got to know what you're up against. Steer clear of jealous men, young lady, especially if they fixate on their friends. Constant Vigilance!"

Everyone jumped.

Clearly, she needed to say something more. The flames weren't yet silver. "My parents had no clue, obviously. They're Muggles, you see. And I'm not too worried. The worst of it, the statue bit, is behind me. At least they didn't go to Hamlet. Jealous boyfriends I can handle, but if I were an Ophelia, there'd be nothing for it but to go crazy, hand out a bunch of plants, and drown."

"Do not speak that way of Odile Knell," came Professor Snape's voice, colder and fiercer than it had been third year in the Shrieking Shack. And no wonder. Odile Knell's work established Potions as a serious discipline rather than haphazard home-brewing. By the age of twenty-two, the witch had perfected Veritaserum and was well on her way to inventing a draught that would allow her to converse with the dead. She drowned collecting Swan-of-the-Marsh Lilies--rare, night-blooming flowers associated with clarity of vision.

"I'm sorry," said Hermione. "I had no idea that's where Ophelia came from. I meant no disrespect. I didn't even know about Shakespeare 'til now. That's the truth, and you know it. I'm speaking in the circle."

Silver flashed.

Moody handed her a handkerchief. She pinched it between thumb and forefinger and only at its barest corner. She was ninety-eight per cent sure she'd seen him use it to polish his eye.

"Ma--Alastor Moody, I humbly accept your gift and with it the gift of your Line."

*

Tonks just asked if Hermione wanted to see her change noses.

"If you wouldn't mind terribly. I've never met anyone with your particular skill set before."

"Do Snape's!" Sirius called out.

"Can't you do something more interesting?" Hermione asked. "Can you go cross-species, like a trunk or something?"

She didn't look at Professor Snape--he might have taken her request the wrong way, and then she'd really get it--and she didn't look at Sirius--what if he thought she was siding against him?

Tonks complied with a spectacular Toucan beak just as the flame went silver, then gave Hermione a Butterbeer cork.

"Er, I don't actually know your name. The Headmaster introduced you as Auror."

She mumbled something.

"Sorry?"

"Nymphadora."

Hell, at least it wasn't Shakespearean. "Nymphadora Tonks, I humbly accept your gift and with it the gift of your Line."

*

Professor Lupin smiled at her. If he was still in contact with Dumbledore, maybe that meant he'd come back and teach someday. After Crouch-as-Moody, they were due for someone actually on their side. Lupin looked briefly at Sirius, then asked, "Any idea what Harry'd like for his birthday, Hermione?"

Sirius' face came alive.

"I don't know, really. I hate shopping for Harry."

At this, Professor Snape looked mildly interested.

"He's so grateful for any little thing. I always feel so bad. His uncle's horrible to him. His aunt, too." Dumbledore looked pointedly away; Snape, weirdly, looked a bit like Lavender when she was eager for a bit of gossip. Hermione continued, "He never had a proper present before Hogwarts, and they treat him like their personal house-elf all summer."

In the silence that followed, she realized that the heatless white flames were soundless as well. Sirius looked punched in the gut. She wasn't sure anymore that he was entirely stable (who would be, after Azkaban?), or really the best person to fancy (as if a person can help who they fancy), but she was absolutely sure he loved Harry.

"Usually I get him something to do with Quidditch."

Snape muttered something about puffing up the arrogant boy further.

"Look, if you'll just let the flames go silver, I promise I'll give him something lousy for Christmas, like a homework planner. Ron, too."

The flames burnt silver.

Lupin presented her with an old button. She felt sad just thinking of all his threadbare shirts.

"Remus Lupin, I humbly accept your gift and with it the gift of your Line."

*

It was Snape's turn again. Hermione felt ill. With the right question, she'd have to reveal that Harry still had the Map. Or that they really had stolen from his stores. Or that they were the ones who'd sent Malfoy that bag of ferret feed anonymously through the school post. Or, worst of all, she'd have to share that horrible first-year conversation when she and Ron had to explain to Harry about sex. His aunt and uncle hadn't told him anything except: you-keep-your-eyes-off-the-neighbor-girl-and-your-hands-above-the-sheets.

Professor Snape looked at her. He didn't look cruel for once, just curious.

"Why did you agree to participate in this, Miss Granger?"

Easiest question of the day. She quoted Granddad Hugh. "There's evil in this world, sir. You've got to fight that evil with all you have, or all you have is nothing."

Instant silver.

She started to trust him, truly and not just because Dumbledore did, in that exact instant. He understood. He didn't need anything more.

Wordlessly, Snape passed her a single dragon-hide work glove, a hole worn through at the thumb.

"Severus Snape, I humbly accept your gift and with it the gift of your Line."

She didn't like him, not even a little bit, but she trusted him now, without question.

She took his hands and drew him through the flame to stand beside her in the circle.

*

True to her word, Hermione was home well before supper.

Dumbledore had her Transfigure a sweet wrapper into a lock-box to double check her Trace was off. No reprimanding owls appeared. She put the glove, button, cork, handkerchief, card, teacup and bottle in the box, locked it, shrank it, and tucked it away in her school trunk.

"Do your best not to dwell on your connection to Severus," Dumbledore said.

"It's going to be weird."

"Not if you forget. At least as much as you can." The word *forget* had a bit more weight to it; it fuzzed in her brain like a non-sinister *Imperio*.

Though her parents invited him, the Headmaster declined to stay and dine. He'd promised to join Hagrid.

Hermione smirked (all that time with Snape--it must be contagious). Her parents' cooking was much, much better. She could smell bread baking.

After dark, she freed Rita. She bound her with a wand oath. The older witch raised a questioning eyebrow, a paltry attempt at intimidation, especially considering Hermione had spent her afternoon with Severus Snape. She offered no explanation as to how she'd got around the restrictions on underage magic. Far better to have an adversary assume she was terribly powerful as opposed to merely clever.

The reporter Disapparated from the garden, and Hermione was alone in the twilight. She heard her parents laughing inside the house. They had the radio on and were singing off-key. In peacetime, she'd have thought, *how embarrassing*. But for now, she listened a moment, smiling, before going in to join them, her head full of protection spells and obscure charms she would research further in the morning.

*

War came at her then. Came at all of them. Too fast and too messy and too wrenching to be neatly distilled into key lessons. The girl who did that already seemed impossibly young. The girl she was now still learned lessons, and plenty of them, but those lessons were too complicated to be succinct.

Umbridge came to Hogwarts, and from the way she took the old toad on, Hermione learned a good deal about strategy.

Sirius died, and from the way Remus mourned, Hermione learned a great deal about love.

She did think of Snape then, of their situation. Maybe if Dumbledore's *forget* had been less emphatic, she'd have remembered McGonagall wasn't the only professor in the Order. If only she'd had Harry go to him...

Once school started up again, she was going to ask the Headmaster about that *forget*.

She forgot again by September.

Lavender ran after Ron, and Hermione learned more than she ever cared to about envy.

Ron dropped Lav-Lav, and Hermione learned more than she cared to admit about relief.

Then suddenly those lessons seemed very small. Because Dumbledore died and Hermione learned more than she thought possible about betrayal. She thought about Snape then. Oh boy, did she ever think about Snape. Her a-fucking-fianced. If only they'd done the ceremony the traditional way. What she wouldn't give for the chance to force seven honest answers out of his fork-tongued, fuzzy-toothed mouth.

At the funeral, she watched Lupin and Tonks, and that was a lesson in moving on.

She also watched Harry and Ginny, and that was too sad to be a lesson at all.

Six weeks later, on a warm, soft July night, she sat with her parents on the couch where they'd taught her to read. With their full consent and understanding, she looked into their minds and, with a tap of her wand, spooled up the thread that her childhood wove through their memories. She bound up every slight hint of *Hermione*, starting with the opening lines of the first play her parents saw together: "If you shall chance, Camillo, to visit Bohemia..." She spoke the words aloud. When this was over, she would go to them, speak the rest of the speech and their true memories--first the play and its character, then the girl they named for her--would unspool intact. Her parents' eyes clouded, confused. "On your first date, you went to see Hamlet," she whispered, and kissed them each on the right temple, exactly on the spot where moments before she had pressed her wand.

She left her childhood home; Harry left his.

Moody died, and Hermione learned that death got more shocking with familiarity, not less.

Ron left them, and as a lesson that was unspeakable. She and Harry went around like a cart with square wheels.

Ron returned, and she learned that forgiveness, like many important things, comes slowly, but that it probably matters more because of it.

Then Malfoy Manor. Gods above, no lessons there. Just pain, hot and twitching and enough to reshape her bones.

The deaths were coming faster now: Dobby. Fred. Ohgodohgodohgod. Remus and Tonks. Colin. Cho. Ernie. Professors Vector and Sinistra. Alicia. Lee. Augusta Longbottom. Seamus. Snape. Harry too, for about three and half minutes.

And then it was over. They ate sandwiches, and it was strange that sandwiches still existed.

*

She and Ron had sex for the first time the morning after Fred's funeral. She'd spent the very last of her Building Society savings on a hotel room in Muggle London; he

couldn't face The Burrow just yet, and they both wanted to be as far from Hogwarts as possible. There was no awkwardness to their movements or their joining, a function, she supposed, of being aware of each other (for good or ill) every day for the past seven years, and of what tips Ron picked up as youngest of five very appealing brothers (Percy, though he'd come 'round right in the end, would never fully qualify). It was... lovely, actually, which she hadn't expected at first go. She looked at the freckled constellations of his face and neck and chest above her, and though Hermione never went much in for that Divination rot, she knew her future was spelled out there. They were beautiful together, and even if Ron didn't last all that long, he got her quite thoroughly off three times, twice before and once after. In the stillness that followed, they held each other and cried: he for the first time in the War, she for the last. Then they scrubbed each other's backs in the Enlarged tub and made plans. They weren't going to be like Harry and Ginny, whose future they could see (Hades, even *Trelawney* could see) clear as any Muggle film: a cheerful, chaotic cottage brimming with cheerful, chaotic children named for the dead. No, not them. Marriage and children eventually (three, said Hermione, because look how well you and me and Harry did, navigating childhood like strands in a plait; nah, two, said Ron, so no one gets lost in the middle), but first they were going to travel. Atlantis, Bali Hai, Roswell. Every last bit of the magical world they'd given so much to save.

"Suppose I'll wind up more like Bill than Dad," said Ron. "What I always wanted."

"More like yourself," Hermione corrected. "Pass the shampoo, please."

No more tents, though. They were going to stay in hotel rooms. Or, on warm nights, free under the stars. They were going to have epic spats and smashing make-up sex. They were going to drink foreign beers. Learn foreign magics.

"You could write books about it," Ron said. "Harry 'n I always understood better when you explained."

"Gadding about and writing things down. That sounds like a very Lockhart plan."

"Most charming smile, eh?"

She smiled. She actually felt charming the way Ron looked at her.

He smiled back and Summoned a pair of drinking glasses. He filled them with tap water. "We'll toast again with stronger stuff," he said, and kissed her. "But I don't want to leave this bath just yet." He handed her a glass, then ran his hand down her side. It came to rest at her waist, and warmth thrilled through her, knowing just what that hand could do.

They clinked glasses.

"To the Lockhart plan."

"Ronald, Lockhart was a fraud."

"To living the life of Lockhart then, only for real."

All hail Melusin and Bloo, my most magnificent betas! Without their input this chapter would be too light on commas, too heavy on caps, confusing, and generally an unfunny mess. Any tendency it has towards messiness at this point is entirely my own fault.

Thanks to all who reviewed and all who ("Imperio!" says madqueenmab) are going to review!

The characters aren't mine. The concept is not mine. If you think any of this is mine, you belong in St. Mungo's, which is also not mine.

Six Years in a Nutshell (pt 1)

Chapter 3 of 5

Nominated for three New Library Awards!

Prompted in part by a fleeting, foolish crush the summer after her fourth year, Hermione assists the Order in an experimental charm meant to protect Severus Snape as he resumes his role as double agent. Six years after the war's end, it appears the charm has a few unexpected consequences... even though Snape's long dead.

Six Years in a Nutshell (pt 1)

If Luna Lovegood had been with Hermione and Ron in the bath (which she most certainly would not have been--Luna was not that kind of girl), she could have reminded them that it's bad luck to toast with water. The Lockhart plan came down around their ears, and fast. The only place they ever visited was Australia. They didn't even go there together, and they definitely didn't learn Aboriginal magic or sample any of the local brews. Hermione went alone; she didn't want to take Ron away from his grieving family, and though Harry had volunteered to accompany her, she didn't want to be the cause of him leaving Ginny for the first time since they'd patched things up.

The Ministry had established wards against International Apparition to prevent any Death Eaters escaping, so George loaned her enough money for the plane fares. The Weasleys (and Harry, who practically was one) saw her off at Heathrow--Arthur still so shocked and grief-dulled that he barely expressed interest in the baggage claim and flight status monitors. Her heart broke a little at that, then beat feverish and fast when a green security light flashed in her peripheral vision, then felt banded all around with iron when she kissed Harry (on the cheek) and Ron (decidedly *not* on the cheek) farewell. And that was why she had to go alone--if she didn't let them out of her sight now, when everything was fresh, then she knew she'd never be able to, ever, even if she lived as long as Flamel. "I'll see you in two weeks," she promised.

Two weeks, fifteen minutes and forty-eight seconds later when she'd neither returned nor owled, Harry and Ron found an all-night Muggle travel agency. As Gringotts (with whom, Hermione suspected, their relations would be strained for about a century or so) had frozen Harry's account, he and Ron also borrowed from George, who said he was thinking of going Goblin and charging interest--a feeble joke, but his first without Fred. They tracked Hermione down to a Muggle jail cell in Queanbeyan. The New South Wales Police had not been best pleased with the frenzied girl who'd illegally entered the dental practice of recent immigrants Wendell and Monica Wilkins. She had brandished a stick at them, poor sooks, then insisted they sit still and listen to her recite Shakespeare. As Australia's wizarding community was considerably more protective of its Muggles than anyone in Britain was, it took two dozen *Obliuates*, a sizable chunk of the trio's political capital, and some impressive wheeling-and-dealing on the part of Minister Shackbolt to secure Hermione's release.

No one in either hemisphere understood what had gone wrong. Australian Healers dressed up as Muggle dental patients and ran dozens of surreptitious tests. Back home, Metis Townsend, Head Unspeakable (who hadn't been seen in public since 1922), met privately with Hermione. Townsend looked over the younger witch's spell-work in a

Pensieve for twenty hours straight and still couldn't figure out why the Memory Charm had gone pear-shaped.

Hermione had lived her whole life in fear of failure and rightly so: it turned out that when she failed, she failed spectacularly. She passed a drained and quiet week on the ratty sofa at Grimmauld Place, refusing even the comfort of a bed. She stared out of the window. Not talking. Not reading. Not even crying anymore. She felt skinless.

Ron and Harry's presence helped a good bit. George's, too, reminding her with his awkward, lonely stance that she was not the only one who had suffered an unimaginable loss.

And then there was Molly. "Not a word to Arthur, dear," she said, pressing a mug of cocoa into Hermione's hands, though it was summer now and much too warm to drink it, "but I don't believe anyone's completely Muggle, at least not so far as the deepest magics are concerned. Your Mum and Dad loved you--still do, even if they don't know it. They're intelligent people. They knew that Australia plan of yours was sound. They knew it was your family's best chance at coming out of this unscathed. What Dumbledore sent the three of you to do... alone..." She shuddered. "Well, from what Ron's told me, I hate to think what might have happened if you'd let your focus waver for even a minute, Hermione. And it would have done, if you were looking home over your shoulder. Your parents knew it. When you cast that spell, their magic, gut magic they didn't even know they had, was working hard, too. They loved you, and they wanted you safe. If I was a gambling woman, I'd bet my wand it was their extra willpower that made the charm stick like that. They'd say you did the right thing if they could--I know because I'd feel just the same about any child of mine."

Molly, Hermione realized, was a good deal wiser than anyone gave her credit for. A good deal stronger, too. A shame that as the War retreated from immediate memory, people began (affectionately and all in good fun, but still) to speak of her taking out Bellatrix Lestrange as if it were little more than an impressive display of her already famous temper.

*

Money was a problem. The full contents of Harry's vault (which the Goblins confiscated shortly after the trio's return from Australia) covered less than a fifth of the damage to the bank. Hermione's savings were completely spent. Ron had never had any money to begin with (and it took a whole lot of convincing on Bill's part to stop Gringotts from taking the other Weasleys' savings). The Ministry offered to negotiate with the Goblins on behalf of the heroes, to which Ron said, "Good luck." When that failed, it offered the trio a sizable payment for services to the community, which Harry declined on their behalf, as it wasn't right to accept money for that kind of thing (when Ron objected, Hermione pointed out that as soon as they got word of it, the Goblins would confiscate it down to the last Knut. Better be skint solo than skint in the Ministry's pocket, after all).

At that point, the *Daily Prophet*, in a decidedly pro-Harry phase for the moment, called for a wizarding boycott of the bank. Hermione quashed that right away, insisting, in a rare interview, that the peace they'd fought so hard for could only endure if they worked together to create a culture of respect between all Magical Beings. Perhaps that helped their cause with the Goblins, who finally stopped insisting on immediate payment in full. Instead, they agreed to a fifty-year repayment plan. It wasn't ideal (especially as they would have to conduct their banking in the Muggle world, depending on friends to change money for them; as part of the deal, none of them were permitted within one hundred feet of Gringotts or any of its subsidiaries), but it was a compromise. As Harry had said--they couldn't go about acting as if they were above the law simply because they were clever and powerful. That's what got Riddle started to begin with.

Thank goodness for Grimmauld Place.

Some Black ancestor had charmed the house so it could only be owned by wizards, which meant the Goblins couldn't take it and that they still had a place to live.

A sprawling, run down place to live.

They had plenty of friends, too. Friends who were fresh out of school and just starting careers. Friends in need of a place to hang their hats. And if they paid their rent in Muggle money, the Goblins would have no legal claim on it. Percy assured them on this point, twice, and in great detail. He'd been more than happy to assist them with the bank contract. Ron told the others he wondered if he was actually related to Percy, who appeared to prefer fine print to sex.

Hermione borrowed Molly's books on Household Charms (if she'd known how complicated they were, she wouldn't have turned her nose up at them for so many years) and Arthur's Muggle toolbox. The boys helped. Harry was pretty reliable with the hammer and nails. Ron, who'd kept hitting his own thumb, did his part with the wand-work. They left the kitchen and library as they were, added fourth and fifth bathrooms, and converted the rest of the house into bedrooms. Harry took the master suite. Ginny, Hermione imagined, would share it, at least unofficially, after she left school. Ron (they'd promised his parents they'd at least pretend to have separate bedrooms) took the converted drawing room where they'd slept on the floor that first awful night of their quest. ("Why would you want this room?" Hermione asked. He shrugged and said, "That night... you let me hold your hand.") Hermione took Sirius' old bedroom. (Not because of that old crush; she cringed a little just thinking about it. Then Dumbledore's *forget*--it must have been one whammy of a Memory Charm to be that specific and to endure so long after his death... If she'd only had that Dumbledorean finesse, things would've gone right with Mum and Dad--dissolved for an uneasy hour or so. She mulled over how sad it was that Snape had died before they could even thank him and how strange it was she kind of had a dead fiancé. Hermione didn't fight when she felt the *forget* roll in again. Of course she was sorry he'd died. But Severus Snape's was just one tragedy among far too many. She'd wind up on the Closed Ward if she didn't let herself forget a bit.) No, she took Sirius' room out of her trademark practicality. No one could un-stick those bikini photographs, so the room would be harder to rent out.

The remaining five bedrooms went to Pavarti, Hannah, Susan, Justin, and Dean; Dean had begun an Apprenticeship in Magical Portraiture, and his ability to add or subtract painted luxuries from her frame made negotiations with old Mrs. Black so much easier that they gave him a discount on his rent. They played a lot of Snap and drank a lot of Firewhisky and stayed up late most nights. Other friends were always coming and going, and the house seemed full of life, like it had never even seen a War. The boys said it was kind of like being back at Hogwarts again only without Houses or homework or Quidditch.

Ron and Harry began their Auror training. Hermione accepted a position on Shackbolt's new Committee for Legal Reforms. She spent her weekdays in business robes and her weekends in overalls, keeping up with household repairs. The repair work (on the pipes and ducts, especially) often required her to contort into odd positions, which meant that Ron was always around to help, and that the pair developed a (not at all undeserved) reputation for public displays of friskiness.

She spent very little time in her own bedroom, but eventually she discovered that the bikini pictures were only bikini pictures in the eyes of people who hadn't figured out Sirius' leanings. For those in the know, the bikini-clad women dissolved to reveal dark-eyed, wiry, petulant, shirtless men. As those models, more often than not, had stern mouths and sharp noses, Hermione wondered if Sirius' hostility to Snape was, like the bikini girls, meant to mask other yearnings entirely. She didn't share her theory with Harry; if you considered Snape's thing for Harry's mum, Lupin and Sirius' open secret, the fact that Tonks was Sirius' cousin, the poorly rhyming sonnets to Lupin (scoopin', troopin', regroupin'... that wretched rat should never have been let near a quill) that the Aurors found amongst Pettigrew's effects, and that mysterious photo of a drunk and ill-clad James nuzzling a drunk and (thankfully) still-clad Pettigrew, even without a Sirius yen for Snape in the mix, that whole generation began to look entirely too incestuous. Instead, she developed a Mirror of Erised-like spell for the pictures, so that they would display images appropriate to the viewer's interest and mood. To Hermione, they generally showed the current weather in New South Wales.

When the International Apparition ban was lifted, Hermione returned to Queanbeyan to get her teeth cleaned.

And so the first year passed.

*

In their second year of Auror training, Ron and Harry took an exam in Gobbledegook. The test was the first of three basic language exams (as full Aurors, they needed to be able to communicate at least minimally with all manner of Magical Beings), and to everyone's surprise, Ron, whose Hogwarts-era (lack of) study habits were largely unchanged, outscored the other candidates (Harry included) by a wide margin. Indeed, his scores were perfect. "Must be Bill's influence," Ron said, shrugging it off. "He was always around The Burrow when he was learning this stuff. Taught me the best swear words." Everyone, landlords and tenants, sat gossiping in the kitchen, tucking into Kreacher's latest stew. "If you ever want to really make a Goblin mad, tell him *Na dnob noi tcefnis tin*. Means 'my bladder's fuller than your purse.'"

Ginny, who was in town for a rare two weeks in a row between Quidditch matches (which was probably to blame for Harry's abysmal Gobbledegook scores), snickered.

"Good to know, Ron. Especially since *some people* have such a hard time pissing off those easygoing Goblins."

Harry and Ron looked chagrined, and Hermione could feel herself blush. Everyone else laughed. She squeezed Ron's hand and told him she was proud.

She had another dental appointment in Queanbeyan the day of Ron's Mermish test. She didn't bother giving a fake name as her parents' memories had been thoroughly wiped of the Shakespeare incident. Mum said she had a lovely smile. Dad said it was good to hear a home accent and asked how recently she'd immigrated. The Drs. Wilkins were alarmed at the tears in their patient's eyes, and Hermione lied, inventing a dentist phobia. "But you two are the best I've ever been to," she assured them. They beamed, and Hermione made an appointment for her next check-up.

She got home late. She went straight to Ron's bed like she always did when she felt shaky or fretful. He sat up with her late into the night. In the morning, she realized she hadn't even asked about the Mermish test. She watched Ron sleep. At rest, he still looked very much like the boy she knew in school; awake, he was too on edge for that. Not that he didn't relax; they all (except poor Justin, who was still all potions and nerves) were able to unwind at least a bit, now. But even at his most comfortable, his ease seemed like little more than an old school cloak: familiar, but only a surface layer and all too easily cast off.

She remembered him on the Quidditch pitch, inconsistent with the Quaffle. No way would he let a single one in, not now; the War had honed his reflexes too much for that. Not that either of them would know. He'd only been to one match since the War (when Ginny's Harpies made the finals), even though the Cannons kept offering freebies. The noise got to him. The crowd, too. The players and balls zinging around like errant curses. Hermione felt a sore tightness salting her throat. They were safe and at peace and together. Still, it hurt knowing how much they'd changed and why they'd had to. She looked at his dear face, his long, almost (though she'd never tell him so) spidery eyelashes. She remembered the grin she hadn't seen since school, his unabashed joy on the day the crowds changed the words to 'Weasley is our King.' She still felt terrible about missing that match, though she'd had, well, a *sizable* excuse, and he'd stopped giving her a hard time ages ago. She hummed a few bars, and his eyes opened.

"Wazzat?"

"Sorry. Just thinking."

"Always thinking." It was an observation, nothing more. Sleepy. Mellow. Back at school, it would have been a gentle (or not-so-gentle, depending on the drama of the moment) tease. Even in the tent, it would have been. She kissed him.

"I'm a bad daughter and a bad girlfriend," she said. "Where's Harry? Let me pick a fight with him. Then I can be a bad friend, too."

"What are you talking about?" Ron propped himself up on his elbows.

"I didn't ask about the test last night."

"First time you ever forgot about a test."

"Well, it wasn't *my* test. How'd you do?"

"I beat Harry."

"So, good then?"

"The best. I beat everyone."

"Again? Ronald, that's wonderful."

"I think it's because of the Triwizard, you know? When we were underwater all that time. Maybe the Merfolk were talking, and some of it kind of stuck in my head."

"But I was underwater, too, and I don't know a word of Mermish."

"You weren't under as long. Krum came and got you." Another measure of how much things had changed. Not a whiff of envy there. They'd all grown up, she supposed.

"But Harry was there the whole time."

"Yeah, but he was busy with his strong moral fiber. And they spoke to him in English."

"Then it's English you'd have heard, not Mermish."

"I suppose."

"Can't you just accept that maybe you're good at languages? Mum called it 'the ear.' My Granddad Hugh had it."

"Is that one of those Muggle things with the batteries? 'Cause Dad was working on one and kind of got it wedged in."

"That's a hearing aid, Ron. Entirely different."

When he got top marks on his exam in Banspeak--thank goodness *that* test was over--the boys' practicing had the other residents very jumpy, particularly Dean, who missed Seamus like mad and remembered his friend's Banshee Boggart--Ron said that George must have got Percy to fudge the results as a joke.

The Ministry doubted that. Percy resented the very idea. Official examiners spent a fortnight testing Ron in the thirty-two known magical languages. Their results were startling but conclusive: Ronald Weasley was a Morphmouth.

"But those are really rare," Ron said. He'd Floo'ed her office moments after the revelation.

Hermione looked it up. One every few decades. Dumbledore had been the last.

"Wouldn't someone have noticed?" Ron asked.

Hermione felt a sad little tug at her heart for the boy she'd grown up with, who wasn't the smart one, wasn't the predestined one, wasn't the oldest or youngest or cleverest or most rebellious or most troublesome; the boy who, nevertheless, was in the thick of things. It was criminal how they'd missed it. How she'd missed it. He might be right in wanting just two kids, though she'd like to think they'd never let one of theirs feel adrift in the middle.

She read a bit more and told him, "It's not quite like being a Parselmouth where you know so innately it doesn't even seem like a different language to start with--which makes sense since you didn't hear the pipes second year, right? Morphmouths need to listen a while before knowing how to speak." Which, considering how rarely he listened back at Hogwarts, may have put off the discovery a few years. She didn't say it aloud; he was so pale beneath his freckles. He needed her to be gentle. "It explains a few things, actually. You've always done spot on imitations. And don't forget the way you were able to open the Chamber... No one else could ever have picked out the right word in all Harry's hissing."

Maybe if Ron had been with them in Godric's Hollow, he'd have noticed something off about Bathilda. Maybe he'd have heard it, somehow, in the sounds she made when she didn't speak. Then, maybe Harry would've had his own wand when the Snatchers came, and maybe she wouldn't wake nights with Cruciatius heat echoing in her blood.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. She remembered her Mum's saying: May bees sting worst of all.

Ron shook his head. "It's weird. You'd think at least Dumbledore would have noticed."

"Perhaps he did."

"C'mon. He'd've got me training."

"And lose his monopoly on information in thirty-two languages?"

In the two years since the War, Hermione had gone considerably off Dumbledore. Minister Shackbolt gave her unfettered access to the Ministry archives; still hoping to restore her parents, she dedicated the majority of her lunch hours to researching Memory Charms. In the course of her investigations, she'd uncovered the file on Ursula Barret, Muggle primary school teacher. Ms. Barret had been subject to no less than five *Obliviates*. One was at the behest of the Ministry, on the occasion of Harry turning her hair blue. The remaining four were down to Dumbledore, who'd interfered at wand-point every time she went to the authorities with concerns about how the Dursleys treated that quiet, skittish, Potter boy.

"Maybe he thought it'd distract me. My place being pretty much with you and Harry," Ron said.

"Maybe," she replied. It was rather futile railing against the late Headmaster. After all, his scheming worked in the end, which the apologists were quick to point out. Ron was right when he said she'd drive herself mad tallying the cost.

"It would've been dead useful with that old Lockhart plan of ours, though," Ron said, smiling.

Hermione smiled too. It had been ages since they spoke of it. Their life together was a good one, even if it hadn't gone as they expected. They'd travel someday, she was sure. When money was easier, and she'd found a way to track her parents from afar on the offhand chance they shrugged off the spell at random. Until then, she had to stay near London. She didn't want them coming home to find she wasn't there.

"Bet you Lockhart couldn't even learn to speak troll," Hermione said, though she felt nostalgic discussing the plan, even as a joke. She missed that bathtub feeling, drunk on relief and each other and the future at once. "Not if he studied for ten years."

"Troll's easy."

From his expression, she guessed Ron felt nostalgic, too. But not quite in the same way, she'd bet. More for the plans they never followed through on than the high spirits they had when they made them.

"So says the Morphmouth." They'd made it through the War. They loved each other. That was plenty.

"I'll say it in thirty-two languages, if you ask nicely."

"What do you say we head home, and you can whisper thirty-two sweet nothings in my ear?" So many people lost lovers in the War. So many people lost friends. They were lucky, and they knew it.

"Now, that's what I call nice asking. What language do you want?"

"Anything you like, so long as it's not Banspeak."

*

The third year was the year of weddings, which had them down a few tenants. She and Ron stood up for Harry and Ginny and for Hannah and Neville. She threw rice for Oliver Wood and (of all people!) Millicent Bulstrode and daubed on henna for Pavarti Patil and Marcus Belby. When George married Verity, the fireworks went on for hours, and he did without a best man.

Only Ron knew that Hermione took a strong Calming Draught before each celebration and a dose of Dreamless Sleep after. That terrible year began at a wedding (for the rest of her life, she'd never once forget to Floo Fleur and Bill on their anniversary), and even dancing with Ron, she was a twitchy, jumbled mess, certain that every swish of silver dress robes was Kingsley's Patronus again.

When their turn rolled around (everyone, it seemed, got a kick out of asking them when, exactly, that would be), it was going to be the Registry Office and the pub and not a single frill more. Once they had money and time for a proper honeymoon--Ron wanted to hit the Forbidden City at the very least--they'd do it. No rush. They were barely into their twenties. A whole lifetime stretched ahead.

*

She ran into Rita Skeeter at Flourish & Blotts four years after the war. It was almost enough to put Hermione off the bookshop for life; Skeeter was working behind the tills, and judging from the number of times her name was listed on the store's employee of the month plaque, had been doing so for some time. However, as she appeared to be selling books now instead of writing them, Hermione was civil. The (ex, Hermione presumed, unless she was working on an undercover expose on the lives of shop-girls) reporter wore her hair in fat sausage curls, teased into a painful looking topiary. Hermione kept an eye on the *Witch Weekly* headlines for the next few months on the chance Skeeter somehow spun a scandal from their interaction. No story appeared, but there was an article on Curling Charms, another promising Heroine Hair in Ten Easy Steps, and a list of the top salons to go to for a Granger. On the society pages, Narcissa Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson could hardly hold their heads up under the weight of their ringlets.

For the first time in years, Hermione broke out the Sleekeazy.

A few weeks later, she dropped by Percy's office to invite him over for a round of drinks (Susan, heaven help her, had developed a bit of a thing for him and had promised to take Hermione's turn doing dishes for the next three weeks if she'd pretty please just have him over). Percy's new secretary informed her he was out for the afternoon being very busy and very important at a top secret meeting. Would she care to leave a message?

Hermione couldn't breathe. She couldn't fucking breathe. She turned around without a word. Because his secretary's springing curls outweighed his secretary by half a stone. And his secretary, having somehow hem-hemmed her way out of Azkaban, was Dolores Umbridge.

She couldn't think of a more fitting punishment for the evil old hag--both the position (every pot had its lid) and the hair. Better practice *Renervate* because Ron and Harry were going to keel over cold when she told them. She missed Colin Creevey more than anything. She'd gladly swap her well-thumbed copy of *Hogwarts, A History*, her Order of Merlin (first class), and her Prefect's Badge for a photograph of this.

Hermione marched into the first salon she saw and asked for a 1920s style bob. She'd been thinking of trying one since first meeting Metis Townsend. She was sure she'd made the right decision when the beautician cooed and asked, "Are you sure, dear? You know, if you just rinsed out that Sleekeazy, you'd have a perfect Granger."

"I still will," Hermione muttered. The new style suited her, framing her face instead of overwhelming it. Her eyes looked bigger, her features almost delicate. As a bonus, fewer strange witches and wizards stopped her on the street with Chocolate Frog Cards for her to sign. She hadn't realized before just how recognizable her hair had been. Harry laughed when she told him and said he might go in for some Muggle scar reduction surgery. Ron just nibbled deliciously at her newly exposed neck.

At her six-month cleaning, Dad said she looked sharp. Mum said the style really suited her. "You have such a pretty face. No sense hiding it with all that hair."

Hermione smiled. "My Mum said the exact same thing hundreds of times when I was growing up."

"Wise woman, your Mum."

"She is that."

Oddly enough, she felt happy after. She Apparated home. "It was just so good hearing them say something normal like that," she told Ron.

"Just glad you never listened to them sooner," he said, and tousled her hair. "You look so good, I'd never've had a shot." He slung an arm around her shoulder.

"I don't know. I'm told I have exceptionally low standards." She winked.

"Who the hell told you that?"

"Gin 'n George, for starters."

"Traitors!"

"And Professor Slughorn tells me he could introduce me to plenty of quality fellows who'd be honored."

"Hermione, *McLaggen* was in the Slug Club."

"And I'm sure Cormac would agree wholeheartedly that he's quite the superior specimen."

"Indeed. If I could only eat Doxies like he could, the War would've been won in two weeks. You coming to bed?"

"In a bit. I've got some thoughts to sort out."

"About your parents? You need me to sit up with you?"

"Not at all. Just daydreaming about *McLaggen*." A lie, actually, but she wasn't about to tell him what she'd just realized: they never fought. Never. Never, ever, ever. After years of fighting like cats and dogs. Fighting *about* cats and dogs. Weird. Weirder still that she missed it. Not the fights, exactly, but the zinging, swooping rush feelings that went along with them. The tumult that had always been a part of her and Ron. She never used to hold back with him, and she knew damn well he never did with her. But now she was so careful. He was, too. Tender. They were in love, after all. Maybe the long peace between them was natural.

Maybe. But Harry and Ginny fought. Her parents had, too. And, good God, Bill and Fleur. Who would have thought that teeny blond could rival Molly's temper?

She had a sudden, horrible, wartime feeling deep down in her gut. Fear.

Hermione Granger, whose beaded evening bag was the most visited display in the British Museum's subterranean Wizarding Wing, who'd drowned child-Riddle (he'd taken the form of a wet-eyed orphan, first whimpering that he was lost and afraid and in need of saving, then railing that her goodness was all for show, that she'd never really help anyone, ever, that her very breathing was a waste) in Helga Hufflepuff's cup, whose hair, apparently, was the envy of straight-locked witches the world over, was afraid. Not of Ron. No, never that. But afraid of fighting with him. Of poking too mercilessly at his sore spots. Part of it was how close they'd come to losing one another in a War that made even casual acquaintances dearer. Part of it was that they weren't children anymore. But part of it was that dark thing best left in silence.

Ron had *left* them.

They didn't speak of it. Never had, if she discounted the screaming on his return. They never would, she supposed. They'd go on as they were, as they had been, come to think of it, ever since the Forest of Dean--Ron at her side, Ron *taking* her side, and she'd never know how much of it was for what they had together now and how much was to make up for what he'd done then. The lion's share was for their here and now; it had to be. Just as the lion's share of her tenderness towards him was because he was Ron, who she'd heard screaming for her even above the volume of her own retching at Malfoy Manor; Ron, who wore socks to bed rather than give her a hard time about stealing the covers.

She thought of the Riddle-boy she destroyed in the Chamber. He was scrawny and underfed, like Harry was first year. He wore ill-fitting clothes, like Ron in his hand-me-downs. How fast that child changed his tune. ("It's not real," she remembered Ron's voice. "Hermione, don't listen. You've got to fight it--fight him.") From *You'll never hurt me; you can't; you're all sweet; you want to help. Please, Miss, I'm afraid; please help to You're nothing, worthless; everything in you that's not like me is just pretend* less than an instant. Riddle's power had come as much from seeing to the guts of people as it did his magic. She wouldn't go so far as to say he was right, but he did see. What the boys never once acknowledged, though she suspected Dumbledore knew from the beginning: there was real ruthlessness within her. It stayed quiet most of the time, or cloaked itself as competitiveness, or burred to the surface as righteous indignation. But if it ever erupted in full force... no. She could banter with Ron. They could share gentle jibes. But they could never, ever, have another knock-down-drag-out. The damage she could do him. The Riddle-things she could unleash.

Best go to bed. Ron's sleeping warmth could almost always calm her. She shivered and told herself that her fears were pure foolishness. After all, she *had* drowned the wretched guttersnipe, forcing his dark head into the cup until he thrashed himself to steam. She'd won out over him; she could certainly govern herself. Their world was at peace. She had nothing to fret over. No cause for complaint: she was respected, had plenty of friends, a decent and challenging job, a fabulous new haircut, *and* a handsome boyfriend over whom she had the permanent moral high ground.

Hell, no wonder so many ex-adversaries wanted to be her.

*

Ron proposed later the next year. Hermione accepted.

He bought the ring at Romilda's. The proprietor, Romilda Vane (for the moment--formerly Romilda Sloper before Jack came to his senses, briefly Romilda Smith before she came to hers, and currently angling for Romilda Boot), gave him a bit of a discount when he referenced a certain Chocolate Cauldron incident. Romilda had surprised them all by learning from her two failed marriages and channeling her general frivolity into a hugely successful business venture. The rings she made (through a secret formula involving Veritaserum, silt from the Danube and Amazon Rivers, the sting of a Fat-tail Scorpion, and the cream filling of American Muggle snack cakes) were designed to alert the wearer if for any reason her prospective marriage was ill-advised. The ring Ron chose was pretty, if understated (after all, the discount wasn't all that generous, and they still had Goblin repayments to consider). The band was silver because Romilda hadn't quite worked out the formula for any other metal (something about Twinkies and platinum didn't quite mesh). The stone was a single pearl because, Ron said, their love was rather pearl-like: beautiful, luminous, and built up through years of perpetual irritation.

Molly got weepy. Arthur got Floo-happy, which resulted in a bit of an impromptu party at The Burrow. In another life, Hermione might have given her future father-in-law a crash tutorial so they could phone her parents with the news. She sighed and helped herself to some Firewhisky. And then to some more. And just a titch more. Ron and Harry kept pace; Ginny went home early as she had a five a.m. training session. At one point, Harry taught them a depressing dirge about some dead wizard named Odo, which somehow led to Harry and Ron spilling (theoretically confidential) details of their latest corruption case (it had involved knitting patterns, Slughorn, Gwenog Jones, and a half dozen pregnant Nifflers), which somehow led to them owing Slughorn an invitation to a non-existent fete in his honor to be held next Thursday at Malfoy Manor, which somehow led to an elaborate plot to smuggle a dozen red and gold ferrets into Draco's bed, which somehow led to the perfectly logical conclusion that Draco was,

without question, a were-ferret. Then Ron and Harry passed out, and in the space of the two or three seconds before she joined them, Hermione looked at her shiny, pretty ring and at her boys' shiny, pretty drool and thought how nice it would have been to have grown up in peacetime so they could've had fun like this more often.

She didn't even notice the hangover when she woke up.

She didn't notice because her bloody-fucking-finger hurt so bloody-fucking much.

Let us now praise Melusin and Bloo, my most excellent betas, who put up with my spelling, cannon, and grammatical dunderheadery so you all don't have to. They are patient, witty and wise; I strew virtual rose petals in their paths.

Thanks to all who reviewed and all who ("Imperio!" says madqueenmab) are going to review!

The characters aren't mine. The concept is not mine. If you think any of this is mine, you belong in St. Mungo's, which is also not mine.

Six Years in a Nutshell (pt 2)

Chapter 4 of 5

Nominated for three New Library Awards!

Prompted in part by a fleeting, foolish crush the summer after her fourth year, Hermione assists the Order in an experimental charm meant to protect Severus Snape as he resumes his role as double agent. Six years after the war's end, it appears the charm has a few unexpected consequences... even though Snape's long dead.

Six Years in a Nutshell (pt 2)

Hermione's ring finger had swollen to roughly the size of a garden slug. Roughly the shape, too. But whereas garden slugs were mottled puce, Hermione's skin was as red as her fiancé's hair and covered all over in rough, sweaty, white bumps. It looked like some pickled thing that belonged on the shelf of Snape's old classroom. She did what any thinking woman would do in such a situation. She thwacked Ron's seeping head, hard (with her right hand, obviously; the left was in no shape to touch anything). He woke with a confused yelp, which woke Harry in turn. They stared. Ron Summoned for dittany (which ever since the War he'd come to believe was some kind of panacea). Harry rubbed his eyes and Summoned for his glasses.

Five Cooling Charms (which did jack-all for the stinging heat in her finger), four Expansion Charms (so the damn ring would be big enough to wriggle off), three hefty doses of Hangover Potion, two Apparitions (Hermione was in no state for anything other than Side-Along), and one inordinately confused Ginny later, they sat in the kitchen at Grimmauld place, the silver ring in the center of the table.

Hermione spoke first. "I'm going to hex her halfway to Antarctica. No. I'm going to give her the old Skeeter treatment. Someone Conjure me an enormous jar."

Ron said, "Hermione, there isn't any *her*, I swear it."

Harry said, "Maybe Ginny and I should leave you two alone..."

"Don't be an imbecile. That goes for both of you. I mean, Romilda-I've-got-a-sham-scam-of-a-secret-formula-Sloper-Smith-Who's-Her-Next-Victim-Vane."

"Sorry, but what's going on?" Ginny blinked.

"Hermione's engagement ring went berserk. You should have seen it, Gin. Her finger looked like my Aunt Marge's."

"Keep laughing, Harry, and I'll show you another finger entirely," said Hermione.

"I do love you," Ron said. "You know I do."

"Don't get all mopey. Of course I know. Clearly, the ring's flawed."

"But a Romilda ring's never been off before." That was Ginny.

"Not helping, Ginevra." That was Ron.

"Least I'm using my head, Ronald."

Hermione and Harry exchanged their patented sometimes-I'm-quite-glad-to-be-an-only-child look.

"Maybe something stupid triggered it?" Harry suggested. "Something easy to fix."

"Maybe because I didn't ask your father's permission?"

"Dad would hex you for a sexist pig if you tried any such thing."

"Hermione, your parents are Muggles."

"Even so."

Uneasy quiet descended. For the first time in over five years, Hermione had forgotten about Australia.

Finally, Ginny spoke. "Maybe it's 'cause you never called off your engagement to Snape."

Had any of Grimmauld Place's remaining tenants been standing outside the kitchen door, they'd have heard something along the lines of: "*Severus* but don't Snape? He remember did was half Bludger in the clip love time, you with Gin. How in my the practice? Mum! Hell did you find out?" But Susan, Justin, and Dean were sleeping off their hangovers, blissfully unaware of the downstairs goings-on, and so spared the trouble of untangling the chaos that was the heroes of the wizarding world shouting

simultaneously.

Hermione said, "I don't remember half the time, Gin. How the hell did you find out?"

Ron asked, "Severus Snape? Did a Bludger clip you in practice?"

And Harry insisted, "But he was in love with my Mum!"

To her husband, Ginny answered, "I know that, dear. You've told us."

To her brother, she said, "Fabrizo Snape, Ron. Wilbur Snape. Of course, Severus."

To Hermione, she said, "Overheard Tonks tell Auntie Muriel." Ginny shrugged.

"Auntie Muriel?" Hermione asked. "How? When?"

"Snape with the potions?" asked Ron.

"He loved her since they were kids," said Harry. "There were all these silver memories..."

"When we were hiding out at Muriel's place. Tonks came round to make sure we'd got there safe, and Auntie Muriel started going on about how Ron'd run off with you, like you were some kind of--not to sound like Mum but--scarlet woman. Especially since Harry was out there as well, and you three were completely unchaperoned. Well, Teddy was due any day, and Tonks was probably feeling a bit hormonal, and she always did like you, Hermione, so she told the old biddy where to shove it, and midway through the rant, she let slip there was a spell stopping you from seeming all that pursue-able, anyhow. I asked her about it after, and Tonks explained the whole thing. I swore up and down I'd never tell, and then the two of us had a good laugh over how Snape would never get laid again in his life. Don't make that face at me, Harry. We didn't *know*, then. And yes, Ron, I mean Snape with the potions. Who do you think I meant, Snape with the tap shoes?"

Silence returned briefly to the library as all four contemplated a tap-dancing Snape.

Then Harry asked what, exactly, Ginny meant by "explained the whole thing," and Hermione told them. With every word she spoke, she felt Dumbledore's *forget* retreat a bit more until the fact that it had ever worked seemed preposterous. "But Snape's dead," she concluded. "So that really isn't the problem. Let's just get your money back from Romilda, skip the ring entirely, and put the cash in the honeymoon kitty."

"I don't know," said Ron. "We thought Yaxley was dead, and he turned up four years later in Argentina."

"Snape's different. There was a body," said Harry. He'd rallied for a Hogwarts burial and got it; that was right in the aftermath when everyone (well, everyone except Gringotts) was giving him his way. Only Ginny's conspicuous eye rolling and "spy or no, he still turned plenty of us over to the Carrows" had stopped Harry from planting Everbloom Lilies at Snape's grave. He'd also wanted the tomb to stand beside Dumbledore's, exactly like it except in black, but Hermione had convinced him otherwise. Too Taj Mahal (Muggles had no idea that Shah Jahan had actually completed, then veiled, the black marble shadow version), she said. Snape's obelisk stood peaceful at the edge of the forest where, though the shadows of tall trees fell across it at regular intervals, at least those of the White Tomb never reached.

"Are you sure it was a *dead* body?" Ron asked.

Shakespeare's third nipple! Any minute now, they'd be revisiting the vampire theory.

"Dead as can be," said Harry. "They did all kinds of tests in case he'd beefed up on some kind of antidote beforehand. He was really, truly, tragically, and conclusively dead."

"And so, clearly, he isn't the problem," said Hermione.

"I don't know," said Ginny. "Tonks never explained the betrothal terms. How would you go about breaking it off?"

"Dumbledore said through mutual consent or return of the binding gifts. But Snape's dead."

"So?"

"So we can't still be betrothed."

"Dumbledore didn't say, through death, mutual consent, or return of binding gifts."

Hell's bells. "But I'm the only one in any position to consent, and I do--" wholeheartedly "--so one hundred percent of involved parties consent."

"I don't think you can trick magic that way," said Harry, frowning. As if whatever the hell happened when he was dead that time in the forest made him the ultimate authority on magical loopholes.

"So just give back the gifts," said Ron. "Simple enough."

"Yeah," said Harry. "Easy as that. Why are you frowning, Ginny?"

"Hermione didn't tell you two who did the binding."

Sirius Black.

Albus Dumbledore.

Alastor Moody.

Nymphadora Tonks.

Remus Lupin.

And Snape, of course.

All dead. Really, truly, tragically, and conclusively dead.

Ron's, "Oh, bloody hell," summed the situation up nicely.

*

Ron took it better than she could possibly have hoped, actually. He didn't yell or sulk or cast pterodactyls as canary payback. "We'll sort this out," was all he said. "We've sorted out worse." That dark, wartime thing they never spoke of flickered briefly between them, and Hermione wondered if his equanimity was because of that, and because the betrothal was another loyal thing she'd done for the War that he hadn't.

Harry, who'd grown more than a touch sentimental about Snape, pouted a bit that the engagement was a betrayal of his mum. Ginny (who handled Harry's piques so much better than Hermione or Ron ever had at school) calmed him somewhat, pointing out that it was yet another sacrifice the man had made on the altar of Lily's memory. Hermione wasn't all that keen on that particular metaphor (commitment to her couldn't be all that odious; after all, Ron seemed perfectly willing), though she suspected the sacrifice Gin meant was never having sex again. Hermione wasn't overfond of soppy Harry, and she liked wig-flipping Harry still less, so, in hopes of speeding the return of plain old Harry, she neglected to point out that nowhere in the silver Shrieking Shack memories did Snape so much as hint at intentions of post-Lily celibacy. Nor did she mention that, as the Order went to the trouble of securing a virgin for the ceremony in the first place, at some point their ex-professor must have moved out of Palmdale. That meant he'd either found some new flower to obsess over or sainted Lily wasn't all that saintly, neither of which was a scenario Hermione cared to present to Harry in his current state of mind.

Once her husband's sour mood had sweetened a bit, Ginny Weasley-Potter threw her head back and laughed.

Ron glowered at his sister, but Hermione found the response reassuring. If Ginny was laughing, this couldn't be a big deal. They'd put things right in a tick. It would only take a bit of research, and Hermione was tops at that.

She hadn't counted on the library at Grimmauld Place yielding nothing.

Ditto for the Ministry and the British Museum. Hogwarts barely crossed her mind, though she owed Madam Pince to double check. Nothing, and no surprise here. It was a just a school library, after all. No matter that it had seemed to be an unsurveyable continent all those years ago.

If it weren't for the incontrovertible evidence (her finger swelled and burned the second, third, fourth and fifth times she tried the ring) that the ceremony with Snape had worked, Hermione might have wondered if Sirius had pulled the "ancient betrothal charm" *ex rectum*.

They consulted with Romilda, who went over her top-secret notes and said nothing had gone wrong with the formula. When Hermione showed her the photo they'd taken of the second ring attempt, the younger witch looked ill. "I've never seen a match so bad," she said. "Dump the chump and get on with your life."

"I'm standing *right here*," said Ron.

*

She tried returning the gifts to the binders' heirs.

Harry tried *Reparo!* on Sirius' teacup to no avail. Then, he actually threw it away. Hermione's heart rose and fluttered Snitch-like in her throat; her best friend was finally happy enough, loved enough, and secure enough to just chuck the broken thing, no matter that once upon a life ago, it had touched his godfather's hand.

Moody had left everything to the Unfindable Home for Retired Aurors. Even with Ron and Harry's department connections, it took over two weeks to make contact. The representative that the home finally sent waited with Hermione in silence for three hours (well over the one hour it would take for any ingested Polyjuice to wear off), then cast a containment sphere around the handkerchief and floated it into a familiar trunk with seven locks.

Tonks' cork and Remus' button made excellent excuses for the four of them to visit Teddy Lupin, who was singularly unimpressed with those particular gifts. He was, however, delighted with the toy broom that Harry brought along. He proved himself both his mother's son (by crashing it into the side of Andromeda's cottage) and his father's (by insisting no one fuss a whit about the attendant bruises and cuts).

Hermione wasn't quite sure how one went about returning a Chocolate Frog Card to an academic institution (and Ron, who *still* needed Agrippa, lamented she had to at all), but with the exception of their few quest-related essentials, Dumbledore had left his things to Hogwarts, so it was time for her to return to school. Ron and Harry went every few weeks (apparently, Professor Longbottom grew some *spectacular* extracurricular Dragonweed), but Hermione hadn't been back since (weirdly enough) Snape's funeral. She wouldn't trade her Hogwarts years for anything, but (Dumbledorean Memory Charms excepted) she was less adept than the boys were at forgetting and so was less nostalgic. After all, she'd spent a good deal of her schooldays lonely. Insecure. Spread entirely too thin. Oh, yes, and in fear for her life. Headmistress Sprout (hats off to the governors; she was an uninspiring witch, but an inspired choice to lead the rebuild--that crackerjack Hufflepuff combo of gentleness and grit) accepted the gift, delighted. She'd been looking for Agrippa for *years*.

Hermione didn't bother asking Dumbledore's portrait for help untangling her Snape mess. Early in his apprenticeship, Dean had explained (and Hermione actually *listened* when her friends discussed their studies) that portraits worked a bit like the Muggle Internet--they could gather and report information from myriad sources, but, though a skilled painter could Charm an approximate personality, they had neither private memories nor actual consciousness. She didn't talk to Snape's portrait, either, though she did wonder how the canvas rendition of her fiancé would respond to a cheeky "Hello, darling."

She had one more bit of business before meeting Hagrid and Neville for lunch (in Hannah and Nev's quarters, thank goodness. No rock cakes this visit, and no stepping back into the Great Hall, cluttered now with children instead of the wounded and the dead). She asked the Headmistress if she could meet with the Slytherin Prefects, then went down to the dungeons to do so. She waited in Snape's old classroom (Slughorn had wheeled the governors into cushier digs). Even Percy Weasley--who himself was a bit like the Muggle Internet where finding tedious official information was concerned--had been unable to locate Snape's will so, as per wizarding tradition, in the absence of living relatives, his estate went to his school House. When the Prefects--a girl called Ivy Suskind, who stood before Hermione as pale and conclusive proof that the Malfoys weren't the only Slytherins to have bred themselves monochrome, and a boy called Julian Block, whose school bag appeared to outweigh Hermione's third-year one--approached on the Headmistress' heels, she cast *Muffliato*. The pair accepted Snape's bottle and glove after a brief explanation.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't circulate this story, however," said Hermione. "It's somewhat private."

Ivy sniffed and drew her wand. "I assume you'll want a Vow or something."

"Not at all," said Hermione. "I'm trusting you to remember that Severus Snape was a private person. Quite enough has been written about him already. But if one of you two choose to reveal it... " She shrugged. "It won't make all that much difference to me."

Ivy said, "Our House looks after its own."

Hermione smiled; Neville had told her how his Slytherin students praised Snape as often as they did Salazar, desperate for post-War proof that they weren't bound to turn out Dark. Most of the boys wore their hair long. Many charmed it black. It drove Neville nearly round the twist; they let it fall in their faces to hide the fact that they daydreamed in class. Hermione (wisely) declined to point out who, exactly, Nev sounded like when he went on about his students that way. "I'm sure you do," she assured the Slytherin Prefects. "I'm sure you'll both make Professor Snape proud." That, actually, she was less sure of. She couldn't quite see Snape being conclusively proud of a student (unless it involved flattening Gryffindor at Quidditch).

"You trust us? Just like that?" Julian asked.

Ivy shot him an almost-but-not-quite-Snapeworthy glare.

"I trusted Professor Snape," Hermione said, "and I regret I didn't trust him more." That was the truth, despite his new-found beyond the grave ability to utterly cock-up her love life. "There's nothing to stop you two from following his lead."

Ivy looked at Hermione like she'd grown a second head; Julian smiled. It probably wasn't easy these days to be a Slytherin. Both seventh-years looked so young. Tiny. Like they could fit in a not-all-that-Extended handbag. Draco, Pansy, *et al.* probably looked much the same back when they intimidated the holy hell out of her. *She'd* probably looked that young when she hared off with the boys to take down Voldemort. "You two were what, third years, during the War?"

Ivy's face looked a bit pickled. Julian's smile disappeared. "Second," he said.

"It must have been a terrible time here." Terrible for all involved, save the psychotic snake who started the whole thing, of course. Him and Percy's secretary.

"It was." Ivy nodded, then actually smiled.

Hermione thought about how their class was going to leave school, and then the class after theirs would, and then Hogwarts would be wholly populated with students who had never seen the castle at war. "Thank you both for your help," Hermione said.

As the Prefects turned to leave, Julian asked, "Is it true you invented a whole new charm for that famous bag?"

He reminded her a bit of Ron at the end of fourth year, finally asking Viktor for his autograph. "I modified a standard Extension Charm to make it Undetectable, like they do with Ministry cars. The only change I really made was to add a Load Lightener so I could actually carry the thing around." She gestured to his book-bag. "Looks like you could do with some help."

Julian nodded.

"I won't do it for you," she said and thought of the hard time Professor Snape always gave her about helping the boys. She had known even then he was right but had helped them *more* just because he was so nasty about it. "What I can do is owl you my notes. Look them over, try on your own and let me know if you have any questions." Ron and Harry would blow a Muggle gasket if they heard her help a Slytherin, but the War was over. At some point, they all had to start believing it.

The War was over, but her engagement to Snape was not. Back at Grimmauld Place, Ron's silver ring still burned.

*

In bed now with Ron, there was something decidedly rote to their coupling. They touched each other to prove it was their right to touch each other. Hermione remembered laughing with him in the hotel bathtub. Ron blushed when she told him if she'd known it felt like *that*, they'd have needed a private tent and the Horcrux hunt would have taken a few years, at least. It hardly ever felt like *that* anymore. More sex didn't necessarily mean more fun. Who knew?

Most nights it was like dialing a telephone. Pressing the same buttons in the same order to elicit a standard connection.

And she seldom *rang*.

Ron had no idea. She never imagined she'd be the sort of girl who faked it, never imagined she'd ever have cause to fake it; she knew it was a preposterous, poisonous thing to do to a relationship. It was like Alicia said (Merlin's Muggle Aunt, the older girl had seemed so sophisticated way back then) up in the tower, primping for the Yule Ball. Faking an orgasm is the best way to make sure you never actually have one. Because having heard a faker once, Ron worried when the noises didn't measure up the next go round.

She couldn't tell him. Not when he'd been so ridiculously patient with this whole Snape situation. So the next night, she moaned a bit louder.

They were in love. They were (yes, they were) going to get married someday. They should be able to talk about things like that. They should be able to talk about anything.

Things would perk up once she shook Snape loose; they had to. Until then, she was up cloud high without a broomstick.

Then there was *that night*. Ron behind her for a fun change, pumping right away. Their standard foreplay had her going enough to avoid unpleasant friction, which was always important. But Hermione felt no fevered thrumming, even with Ron's avid fingers at her clit. She sighed and felt a surging burst of irritation at Severus Snape; this was his fault, obviously; she and Ron had always been impulsive and playful before. Then, to her horror, once the man was in her mind, she couldn't get him out. She shut her eyes. Ron's bedroom became their old Potions classroom. The two of them were back at school and being very naughty. Oh, yes. Out after hours, and anyone could catch them. Oh yes, that was it. *Snape* could catch them. He could be watching them. Dark eyes in the shadows. Expressionless. No way to tell if he's pleased or repulsed. No way to tell, except--there's his hand, smooth as milk, pale as milk, milking himself. Faster and faster, keeping pace with Ron. Hermione moaned. In her mind, her eyes met Snape's, unblinking. Ron pounded away, oblivious. Those Snape hands. That Snape cock. Gods!

In the moment she cried out, Ron faded away completely, and it was *Snape-Snape!*--who took her from behind. Her first proper orgasm in weeks had her so thoroughly mortified, she nearly missed Ron's post-coital, "Good, eh?"

He was seldom insecure enough to ask. He'd noticed something different. She had to lie. "Always is," she said and cuddled up to him. The problem with faking it was that a girl couldn't ever stop. Not without opening herself up to all kinds of conversational ugliness. Salivating Cerberus. If Severus Snape could reach out from beyond the Veil to claim her hand, why the hell couldn't Alicia Spinnet reach on through and slap Hermione resoundingly about the head?

*

Harry offered to break out the Elder Wand to override the spell. He looked a little relieved--they'd returned the wand to the White Tomb nearly six years ago, and by this point even Dumbledore must have begun to fester--when Hermione said she couldn't see it doing any good, as the late Headmaster had used it to call the binding fire in the first place.

Ron suggested tracking down the Resurrection Stone and reviving Snape just long enough to call things off. The trio spent an uneasy afternoon in the forest, casting unsuccessful *Accios*. At the Three Broomsticks afterwards, each sheepishly admitted relief they hadn't been able to unearth it.

"It'd be an ethically murky kind of thing to do, anyhow," said Hermione. "Not to mention setting a bad precedent."

"And the Dead don't want to return," said Harry. Hermione was moved by his placid tone. She thought (not for the first time) that one the War's few great boons was that her temperamental best friend now lived life facing forward, not back. "They've gone... on."

"Snape might've been fine about coming back, though," said Ron. "He always was a bit contrary."

"He was that," Harry said. "Remember that wjamacallit potion he tested on Trevor?"

"Eww, yes," said Hermione. "Shrinking Solution. Even though one of the base ingredients is fresh toad eyes."

"Remember the look on his face when we took the Cup first year?" said Ron.

"And the way he showed Fudge his Mark in the fourth?" said Hermione.

"How about the way he took out Lockhart?" Harry added.

"I don't think *anyone* could forget that." Hermione laughed.

"Anyone except Lockhart," said Ron, who still felt a bit guilty.

Harry's next idea was to borrow a Pensieve (the perks of being a war hero included regular access to Ministry swag) so the boys could help her go over the ceremony to

look for clues. It was sad and strange seeing everyone alive, and it was going to be stranger and sadder still returning to the kitchen at Grimmauld Place with fresh memories of them standing there. Hermione bent low to the ground, in case there was something special about the blue salt Dumbledore had scattered. She made a note of who stood where, on the off chance it wound up mattering. She listened to Snape speak, then Sirius (what had she been *thinking?*), then Dumbledore. Harry and Ron exchanged an uncomfortable look when Moody warned her younger self off jealous, friend-fixated paramours. That same look cropped up whenever the subject of Slytherin's locket did--someday, she was going to bloody well make them explain what had happened when it opened. She watched the circle, Snape, and her younger self startle when Moody cried out, "Constant Vigilance!" She jumped a bit as well, even knowing it was coming. At least the boys (despite Auror training!) jumped even higher. Hermione opened her mouth to tease them, then shut it. Right before her eyes, her younger self (how could she possibly have gone decades with that terrible hair?) smartassed Snape about Odile Knell, and Hermione felt a familiar fizzing, electric crackle.

An I-know-which-bottle-will-take-us-safe-across-the-fire kind of crackle.

An I-know-what-slithers-in-the-walls kind of crackle.

An I've-figured-something-out-about-Professor-Lupin kind of crackle.

A why-not-let-the-teeth-shrink-just-a-bit-more-kind of crackle.

An Umbridge-deceiving, I-knew-there-was-something-dodgy-about-that-book, let's-see-how-much-stuff-I-can-fit-in-this-bag, maybe-I-really-am-a-know-it-all, wild, delicious, brilliant kind of crackle. Hermione Jean Granger had An Idea.

"Get thee to a Muggle bookshop," she muttered. The boys, never having read Shakespeare, looked utterly confused.

*

Hamlet. Act IV, Scene V. The essential ingredients of Odile Knell's last potion were *right there*, and wizardkind had been too hung up on their centuries-old scandal to even see it. If he weren't already dead, Snape would absolutely *die*. Slughorn, too. Any first year (except Neville, maybe, and Harry, and Crabbe and Goyle, actually, who she hadn't thought of in *years*) knew full-well all Knell's potions shared a common base. All Hermione had to do was work out the order and ratios of the extras, and she'd have it. The Mother of Potions' last great effort: a draught that would allow the drinker to converse with the dead.

Rosemary, for remembrance. The bard even explained Knell's rationale for including the herb.

Pansies. Shakespeare explained those, too. For thoughts. Hermione took that to mean focus and concentration, so she'd wind up talking to the right deceased.

Fennel. Muggle hippies used it as a breath freshener. Wizards used it for eloquence. The brew would need lots and lots of fennel. Pulverized, probably, as the plant's roots, fibers and juice all had magical properties.

Columbine and Rue. Those mystified her for several weeks. She didn't know of a single potion that used either. After nearly a month of listening to her frustrated whinging, Harry (in one of his more brilliant moves since the War) sighed and said he wished Snape's book hadn't burned in the Room of Lost Things. The Prince's Potions text was gone for good, but it might just be worthwhile tracking down Snape's later research. She owed Julian Block, who owed back a copy of Snape's notes on a book on obscure ingredients and substitutions, along with a polite note asking if she'd be willing to write a letter recommending him for a Ministry position. Hermione wished she'd known earlier that the easiest way to wrangle a Slytherin was simple quid pro quo; how much easier would her life have been if she'd only known how dead useful a properly handled Slytherin could be?

Snape's notes were a mess, but there was no question the man was brilliant. Imagine. Squandering a mind like that in teaching. Dumbledore's doing, like as not. Hermione bristled at the waste of it. Just think of the cures he could have perfected; the name he could have made for himself. Eventually, she found his suggestion of rue steeped in columbine nectar as an addition to Draught of Living Death. Finally, a breakthrough. The juice was benign until the addition of rue, at which point it became a potent, slow acting, and often hallucinatory toxin. The Knell potion would bring Hermione to the brink of death (well, more like to the brink of the brink of the brink of death), thus reducing the gulf between her and her soon-to-be-ex-fiancé. She freely admitted she was nervous at the prospect of drinking it. No one would drink so toxic a brew frivolously; indeed, the human body could sustain ingestion once, maybe twice, in a lifetime. Hermione suspected Knell crafted it that way on purpose-- to stave off mourners' addictions. The Mother of Potions' genius was staggering. The rue, though completely non-magical on its own, was able, when combined with columbine nectar, to temporarily bind the drinker's magic. Odile Knell's clever safeguard: making sure the ingredient that activated the potion would also render those who spoke to the dead powerless to command them.

The rest of the potion was simple enough to figure out after that.

Violets. Just sweet enough to remind the drinker that life was rich and pleasurable and well worth living, which should prevent a focused mind from succumbing completely to the poison.

And then the last ingredient: the one Knell drowned retrieving and so never got the chance to add. Swan-of-the-Marsh Lilies, for clarity of vision.

*

Hermione's luck was changing. The potion was ready (at least, her quintuple-checked Arithmantic calculations *said* the potion was ready) in time for the sixth anniversary of Voldemort's fall. Perfect timing. Folklore held that the Veil thinned a bit for each soul on the anniversary of his or her passing, just as it did for all souls at Halloween and on both Solstices. Not to mention that the annual Ministry shindig, which was stifling and dull and a scab-picking reminder of who, exactly, hadn't lived to celebrate, would be the perfect cover as they sneaked back down to the Death Chamber. Harry and Ron were coming, too (no way would she be daft enough to wander about the Department of Mysteries alone on the brink of the brink of death and with her magic bound to boot), loaded up with a wide array of healing draughts in case her calculations were off. They bribed Susan, Justin, and Dean with a half month's free rent to Polyjuice themselves for the party so the heroes wouldn't be missed, telling them nothing about Snape, only that they didn't feel up to attending this year.

Ginny was to stick near the Polyjuiced trio to make sure they didn't act all that much out of character. She kicked Dean-as-Harry hard when he looked in the mirror, licked his (Harry's?) lips, and said, "Harry Potter on Victory Day? I'm going to get laid like carpet!" Hermione was a bit put out that she wouldn't actually get to wear her new (and damned expensive) dress robes, but at least Susan-as-Hermione looked sexy as hell. Susan whirled around, showing off, and Hermione saw (with a high degree of satisfaction) that Ron was right: she did have quite the pleasing bottom. Justin-as-Ron was generally too on edge to be all that convincing, but as Ron never seemed all that comfortable at formal events, he wouldn't arouse much suspicion. The real trio, the fake one, and Ginny all carried their old DA coins. Two hours after the start of the festivities, Hermione's warmed against her skin--Ginny's signal that the coast was clear.

*

She could *hear* the Veil this time. Murmurs, solemn but somehow tender, like when she would fall asleep in church as a child. She thought she heard the distinct sound of a word she knew, but the word slipped from her mind before she remembered what it meant. One of the whispers rose and fell in an unfamiliar tune that she felt she would someday memorize.

"I didn't know, mate," Ron said to Harry. He shook his head and listened, hard. "It's like trying to hold on to water."

Hermione shivered at the quiet sound of a laugh. A laugh she knew years ago; the laugh of someone (she couldn't remember who) she used to know at school. "Let's get this over with," she said. She uncapped the Knell potion.

"If you do talk to him--" Harry began. "Sorry, *when* you talk to him, do you think you could, you know, thank him?"

"I'll try," said Hermione. "I don't know how long the potion lasts."

Harry looked crestfallen. Ron too.

"I should probably be able to, though," she said. "It shouldn't take long convincing him to break the engagement. It's not as though he was ever fond of me."

"Do you think you could ask him to say hi to Fred, too?" Ron asked. "Fred and all of them?"

"Of course I will. You two keep the bezoars handy. If I'm not back to rights in half an hour, take me straight to St Mungo's. I've written up my notes on the potion, and you have the draught that ought to neutralize it. My powers'll be out for a bit, so--"

"Hermione," said Ron. "You've told us already. We know what to do."

"Trust us. We're Aurors," Harry said.

"Now *that's* encouraging."

"Hermione," said Harry, "quit stalling."

She raised the vial to Ron, to Harry, and then to her lips. As the liquid hit her tongue, Harry flinched; Hermione felt like an insensitive harridan--of course he felt uneasy when loved ones toasted him then ingested unknown potions. Remember how well it worked out for Dumbledore? Then Hermione felt nothing, but only briefly. She felt very cold, then very hot. Her skin felt like she'd been dipped in oil, then covered in chalk. The potion had no taste. Or rather, the potion had no describable taste. Her senses crisscrossed; she tasted sound and heard texture, and everything she saw had odor instead of color. She walked, woozy and bandy-legged, toward the Veil, which rustled with the scent of empty bottles and summer lightning. One of the boys called her name. Harry, probably--Ron wouldn't sound so soapy bright. One of them, Ron (his voice had loam in it, like good brown beer) said, "Steady, there." He laid a calming hand on her shoulder, and his touch was very feathery and yellow. Hermione did not like this. No, she did not like this at all. She felt the language build in the spaces between her bones. It rose in her throat.

Severus Snape!

Only the words she used weren't *Severus* and *Snape*. The words she used meant Severus Snape, but they meant something different and deeper as well. Her stomach roiled, and she felt its contents tilt and re-tilt like a kaleidoscope. This was a *terrible* idea. At school, she'd envied Harry his Parseltongue, even knowing it might be a bit Dark. Even now, she envied her Morphmouth boyfriend. To have a natural born gift like that... Everything Hermione ever mastered, she had mastered through research and practice and sheer stubbornness. But now, speaking a sudden language, with words that weren't words and that had meanings she had yet to properly learn, Hermione's old envy cracked and crumpled with the distinct texture of walnut shells. She felt the language again and cried out.

Severus Snape!

The Veil smelled metallic, now. Like iron. No. Like blood. Hermione was shivering, and that felt tectonic. She felt like she was the entire world, or like she'd swallowed it. She had to make this stop. She had to reach him. Severus Snape, Severus Snape, Severus Snape.

Severus Snape!

She could *feel* her veins, a tangle of snakes. She heard the blood beat in her ears, and the sound tasted like her mother's bread dough, only salt-spiked. Harry and Ron were calling for her, but their voices were going stale and musty.

Severus Whatever-your-pretentious-middle-name-is Snape!

Ron and Harry faded away entirely. Everything went white and fuzzy, like a very tepid snowstorm. The sensory hodgepodge stilled. Hermione heard his voice.

No middle name, actually, as befits the elegance of understatement

Understatement! The man had never been understated in his life.

The horrible gut roiling returned. Her head felt full of sour milk, and Hermione knew she had to make her point now, before she heaved up the potion all over the chamber floor and lost her opportunity for good. The language built and built inside until, finally, the words tore from her throat.

Severus Snape, you owe me a fucking husband!

Brief silence.

Very well.

Relief. She'd done it. He'd agreed. Engagement broken. She had to stop her head's swimming and tell the boys. And then take a nap. A nice, long nap. The chamber filled with the scent of new-turned earth. A strange glow came to the Veil, and the scent grew stronger. When Hermione breathed deep, she tasted the sound of a zipper unzipping. Somehow, she'd fallen to the floor. She had a vague sense of Ron and Harry beside her, wands out. Screaming something about look-at-that-silver-thread, and oh-bloody-hell-it's-unravelling. Then a flash.

Then Snape.

Naked.

Empty-handed.

Looking rather put-out.

When he spoke, she tasted a vivid burst of citrus.

"There had better be good reason for this disruption; Black just dealt me a pair of aces."

A Haiku for My Betas:

Melusin and Bloo

Witty, wise, and generous

They fix my mistakes!

Thanks to all who reviewed and all who ("Imperio!" says madqueenmab) are going to review!

The characters aren't mine. The concept is not mine. Nor, for that matter, is Hamlet. If you think any of this is mine, get thee to St. Mungo's, which is also not mine.

Five Quarrels (pt 1)

Chapter 5 of 5

Nominated for three New Library Awards!

Prompted in part by a fleeting, foolish crush the summer after her fourth year, Hermione assists the Order in an experimental charm meant to protect Severus Snape as he resumes his role as double agent. Six years after the war's end, it appears the charm has a few unexpected consequences... even though Snape's long dead.

Five Quarrels (pt 1)

Unless she counted Quidditch--and Hermione Granger tended *not* to count Quidditch--she'd never really seen the boys tackle a crisis without her. She had her Grand Theory of How She and The Boys Got Important Things Done: Harry brought luck and daring. Ron could generally be counted on for sound intuitive flashes. Her provenance was efficiency, competence, and logic. At this particular moment, however, she was hopped up on the Knell potion, utterly be-toggled, and about as useful as a Niffler with a gold allergy.

She was horribly aware of every single hair on her head and on her body. It was of paramount importance that she count each and every one of them, and that she name them, too. One, that was Altair, two, Wallabert, three, Heloise, four, Prudence... Snape--if it even *was* Snape--would just have to wait.

Besides, she was pretty sure that Snape didn't have anything better to do because he wasn't real. Or rather, he wasn't currently real. He was formerly real. Currently dead. She was hallucinating. Also, she was in desperate need of some serious Muggle psychotherapy; no healthy, Hogwarts-educated brain hallucinates an unclothed Severus Snape.

"Hermione!" That was Ron. Beer voice. She liked beer. "What did you *do*?"

She'd lost count. She'd have to start over. One, Altair, or was it Aesop? Two, Wallabert. Three? Who was three again? Well. So much for the renowned efficiency of Hermione Granger.

Her boys did surprisingly well without her (maybe she should feel bad for all those times she'd wondered how they'd managed to keep their shoes tied all those years ago when she was Petrified). Auror training, she supposed. Terribly inconsiderate of them to wait until *after* Hogwarts and the War when their Auror skills really would have come in useful. A pair of wand flicks secured Snape (Not Snape. Couldn't be. She and the boys were co-hallucinating. That thrice-cursed experimental potion. They were all mad. They had to get home--and fast. They needed to alert Ginny and the others--where had she put her D.A. Galleon?) in that weird, silver rope Aurors used instead of handcuffs.

Harry, wand directed at Snape's (it couldn't be Snape, but it was something. It was solid enough to point a wand at) throat, asked, "What was my Mum's nickname for her sister?"

Ron, wand directed, well, *lower*, asked, "Why did you give me a week's detention in second year?"

Hermione knew she really ought to participate. The boys relied on her so. She oofed, and stood, and drew herself up to her full, and not very impressive, height. "Where are your clothes, Professor?" She tried to *Accio* her wand. It didn't work. She gestured for it, vehemently. Too vehemently. Somehow, she wound up on the floor again. So. It seemed competence had gone the way of efficiency.

Snape (if it was Snape) spoke. "I don't believe I know you, let alone your mother or her sister."

"See? It's not really him," said Ron. "Either that, or he's lost his mind."

"As for your--" Snape paused, looked Ron over, then sneered "--question. If I wanted perfect recall of all my students' transgressions, I would Transfigure myself into a Muggle computer."

Harry, who had finally got contact lenses, brushed aside the hair he had taken to wearing long over his forehead, revealing his all too familiar lightning bolt.

"Oh," said Snape. "Potter. You're not as stringy as you once were. In that case, Tuney." He pronounced the last two syllables as if there'd never been a more loathsome word. "Now, which of you three epic lackwits is going to explain all this?"

"It's Professor Snape," squeaked Hermione from the floor. "It's really the real him. You can tell because Professor Snape *never* answers my questions." So what if efficiency and competence were off on a hard-earned mini-break? Logic was hanging on strong.

*

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were very good at sneaking. Renowned for it, even. If Hogwarts had offered classes in stealth, they could've sat their NEWTs third year. If anyone could successfully smuggle a newly-back-from-the-dead teacher-turned-spy-turned-murderer-turned-hero-turned-whatever the fuck he was now out of the Department of Mysteries, right under the collective noses of the celebrating wizarding world, Hermione was confident it was the three of them.

She had failed to account for several factors.

First, that Harry's Invisibility Cloak had been an essential component in the success of their numerous escapades.

Second, that Dean had Harry's Invisibility Cloak, as he was upstairs being Harry and Harry was known to never let the Cloak off his person.

Third, that a naked (don't look... don't look... don't look... oh, my... shoulders, bum, thighs, calves... turn around, Professor, pretty please), tethered, formerly dead war hero, even Stunned and Silencio'd (as per the Aurory's post-Voldemort when in doubt subdue and secure for questioning policy), is neither easily wrangled nor particularly inconspicuous.

Fourth, that when one ingests Knell's Deathspeak Draught, one regains magic well before wits.

Fifth, that her own first instinct was always to be of use.

Sixth, that her D.A. Galleon was actually quite easy to locate.

Seventh, that a message via Protean Charm, once activated, could not be un-activated, even by the great and useful Hermione Granger.

Eighth, that this was the Victory Celebration, and every remaining member of Dumbledore's Army had their coins out for proud display.

And ninth, that Minister Shackbolt was an avid gerontophile, attempting to mend his McGonagall-trampled heart with a romantic stroll through the Department with Metis Townsend, Head Unspeakable.

Hermione's first thought on encountering the pair was that she hoped Unspeakable Townsend didn't notice she'd copied her haircut. Her second was that she really ought to be a bit kinder towards the slow and the foolish, if this was the kind of brain-clutter they had to put up with on a regular basis.

"You really shouldn't pad about here naked," said Townsend, who seemed only slightly startled by the foursome's presence. She Conjured a heavy black cloak that settled around Snape's body. "It's indecent, and besides, there are delicate experiments in some of these chambers."

Hermione stared at the dark cloak on her ex-naked ex-teacher. He looked properly... Snape-ish now, instead of, well, nude.

That's when it hit her: he was back. He was actually back.

She began to shake a bit.

What had she managed to *do*?

"Don't worry, Hermione," said Metis Townsend. "The Veil's stable. I'd have been alerted if it wasn't."

"The Veil? Severus?" Shackbolt stammered, sounding like Cornelius Fudge for the first time since taking office. "What in the name of Godric's gold garters is going on?"

"It seems this young lady finally decided to show up for work," the Unspeakable said and nodded at Hermione.

Until that moment, Hermione had been relatively sure the potion's effects were finally fading. Now, she questioned that conclusion.

"Hermione doesn't work for you," Ron said. "She's on that reform committee."

"She's an Unspeakable," Townsend said. Clearly, the hallucinations were clinging strong. Either that, or Snape's unexpected return was not to be the night's sole surprise. "She'd never have been approved for that Time-Turner if she wasn't one."

"Sorry," said Hermione, "but you must have me confused with another witch. The Time-Turner was way back in my third year. I'm not an Unspeakable. I do legal work. I'm up for promotion next month."

"And I trod the boards in the Music Halls. It makes no difference. You are what you are; what you were, and what you always will be. You couldn't have got into the Department, otherwise."

"The door was open. Just like in fifth year."

"The door was open to *you* and therefore to your companions. Just as it was that first time. These chambers are well-warded. Only Unspeakables and those in the company of Unspeakables can enter."

Maybe she *was* free of the potion-fog after all because that made the tiniest bit of sense. It had never quite sat right with Hermione that they'd been able to waltz right into the Department of Mysteries all those years ago. That lack of security had been preposterous, even for the disaster that was the Fudge administration.

Of course, that meant it was *her* fault they'd needed the Order to bail them out that night. Without her along, they'd never have been able to get in and so would never have been in such danger. She couldn't look at Harry; in a way, it was her fault Sirius died.

Just like it was her fault Snape had been yanked back from wherever he'd been all this time.

"Why didn't anyone *tell* me?"

"We're Unspeakables." Townsend's voice was prim. "We do not speak of it."

Sometimes, Hermione hated wizard-logic.

"I still would like an explanation," the Minister said. "Severus Snape! Alive!"

"I don't properly know what happened, Minister. It was something of a mistake. I only wanted to talk to him," she tried to explain.

"With your permission, Minister, we'd like to get him somewhere more comfortable while we sort this out."

When Harry spoke, Hermione almost didn't recognize his voice. He put all of his War Hero gravitas into it. He sounded like he fully expected the Minister to go along with his suggestions. Hell, *she* felt practically *Imperio'd* by the smooth tone, confident that everything was well under control, and she knew from experience that Harry had plenty of moments when he couldn't be counted on to know his cock from a Chizpurfle.

The Minister hesitated despite the full force of Harry's burgeoning savoir-faire.

Hermione realized that Severus Snape was much more complicated alive than dead. He had nowhere to live, for one thing. His estate, such as it was, had gone to Slytherin House. They probably had all of his clothes, too.

Ron must have been thinking along similar lines. "We'll take him to Grimmauld Place," he volunteered.

Nice of him to ask his housemates first. Also: was she the only one disturbed that they'd invited a dead man into their home? An ex-dead man. Snape, who she'd somehow managed to bring back. Snape, who neither of the boys had liked much in the first place. She looked at Harry and Ron. Could they possibly have forgotten that the last man in their acquaintanceship to regain corporeality had been a serpentine megalomaniac intent on killing them all? Apparently so.

Harry beamed at Snape. "Yes," he said, "Grimmauld Place. We'll be able to talk there."

A change came to Snape's posture. Hermione was so out of practice watching him that she had no idea what it meant.

The Minister for Magic looked profoundly uneasy.

Hermione remembered that dead Snape, while much lauded and lamented, had never been formally cleared of those pesky murder charges.

"He's with us, sir," said Harry.

Shackelbolt puffed his cheeks and looked indecisive.

"He'll be with a pair of top Aurors at Grimmauld Place," Ron said. He looked at Hermione, smiled, and added, "Not to mention a newly-revealed Unspeakable." And the Harpies second-string Chaser, an apprentice painter, a twitchy owl-trainer, and a Healer-in-training with a crush on Percy Weasley, most of whom had attended Hogwarts under the grim Headship of Severus Snape and none of whom, she imagined, would be the bit least pleased at his sudden appearance at the breakfast table. Hermione upheld the proud tradition of Unspeakables by not actually speaking that bit.

"What could possibly go wrong?" Harry asked.

Hermione could think of a few possibilities, actually, including but not limited to: the man's re-emergence had done irrevocable harm to the life/death continuum, and they were in for all kinds of trouble; the man was a new kind of Inferius and under orders to kill them all; the man had done something Dark to claw his way back and would have to do more Dark things to stay here; the man had crossed back with the shades of Riddle, Lestranger, and Macnair, *et al.* inadvertently along for the ride; the man was mad from his time Beyond and on the verge of unleashing all kinds of chaos; the man was none too pleased at being back (the incomparable Lily Potter remained Beyond, after all) and was planning to off himself at the next opportunity, leading to all kinds of uncomfortable questions.

The Minister shifted.

Snape, for his part, struggled hard against the spells he'd been hit with; his dark eyes flicked back and forth between Shackelbolt, Townsend, the boys, and Hermione.

"Let them go, sweet-pea," said Metis Townsend, "and then let's wander some more."

"Very well," the blatantly besotted Minister acquiesced, and he offered the Unspeakable his arm. "I hereby release him to your care." He waved a lazy hand. Harry grinned. Saved by the Minister's libido! Circe's cuticles, Harry got away with *everything*, didn't he? No wonder the Slytherins were so resoundingly bitter back at school.

Hermione looked at Snape. He, in turn, just looked sour. Hermione had no idea if that sourness was due to the prospect of accompanying them, or to his general discontent at being bound and under guard, or to some understandable disorientation at finding himself once more in the company of the living. It might also just be the slant of his face.

Something in her softened. Just the barest bit. There were very few people who she liked to see unhappy, fewer still if she discounted those who'd died and those locked up in Azkaban. "It'll come out right, Professor," Hermione said. Odds were good that it actually would, provided there was no malignant magic to his unexpected comeback, and that he really was just plain old Snape--contemptuous, absolutely, but not actually contemptible. After all, Shackelbolt had said *released*, not *remanded* and *care*, not *custody*.

"Go. Get some sleep. Come back tomorrow," said Metis Townsend. "Bring your project with you."

Hermione guessed that meant Snape. Her project. Ha! She looked at him once more. Now *there* was a readable expression. If he wasn't seriously ticked off and itching to hex them all to Cornish Pixies, then she'd start stealing socks from house-elves.

"Ron? Harry? Let's just go home."

"You don't need a Healer or anything?" Ron asked. "You were pretty out of it back there."

"I think the potion's worn off," she said, "but we might want someone round to check if he's all right." If they were going to take him in, they might as well do the thing properly.

"We're going to loosen the ropes and end the Silencio, Professor," Harry said. "I'm sorry we did that in the first place. Instinct, you know?"

Professor Snape did not look remotely understanding. Hermione gripped her wand tight, just in case.

"There's plenty of spare clothes for you at home, too," said Ron.

The ropes dissolved. Snape drew himself to his full height. The way his robes fell, there was no way to guess he wore nothing at all underneath. He cleared his throat. At that exact moment, they heard footsteps. Many, many footsteps. Someone (George? Neville?) called out, "We got a signal to meet down here. What's going on?"

"Oh, no," she whispered. "The D.A. I used the Galleons. That stupid potion! I thought we'd need their help."

Harry, Ron and Snape had no time to respond. What was left of Dumbledore's Army appeared on the scene, coins glowing and wands drawn. Snape stared. At Neville (bug-eyed), Hannah (giggling nervously), George (grim-mouthed), Ginny (fiery through and through), Terry (quaking slightly), Lavender (slack-jawed), Michael (blatantly tipsy), Anthony (squinting his one remaining eye), Padma (trying to hide the fresh love-bite she'd got from *someone* at the party), Parvati (still holding a champagne glass), and Luna (perfectly nonplussed). He looked from Harry to Dean-as-Harry, from Ron to Justin-as-Ron, and from Hermione to Susan-as-Hermione. "So this is Hell, then," he muttered.

*

Hermione was not looking forward to being known as the Girl-Who-Brings-Sour-faced-Gits-Back-From-The-Dead. It had been an accident, for one thing, and she was too much of a perfectionist to want her mistakes made public. It would also make her a jolly big target for any sore loser pure-blood who wanted her to replicate the experiment's results...but with the unlamented, but not in the least forgotten, Tom Marvolo Riddle. Not to mention the step-back it would be, healing-wise. Their world had lost so much. Lost so many. They would all break a little more if the space between the living and the dead began to look tantalizing and bridgeable.

Harry, bless his instinctive soul, understood; he'd spent the bulk of his life staring down that gap, after all. He paused only an instant before speaking. "The Ministry's had him in hiding since the War; there are plenty of Death Eaters out for revenge."

The group appeared to swallow this.

The excessive champagne they'd also swallowed was likely a factor, as were the boys' trust-us-we're-Aurors grins.

Weirdly enough, only Luna was skeptical (if the bubbly made the rest of them trusting, it had the reverse effect on her). "Why's he back *now*? You haven't caught any one new."

Ron and Harry looked a bit stumped.

"He's working for the Ministry," Hermione improvised. "For the Auror Office. Deep undercover. He's been investigating... ah... rumors... about... Fenrir Greyback. There've been a few sightings in the Yukon. He's just here to give his report and to... ah... catch up with old students." The more she spoke, the less credible she felt.

"The rumors were only that," Snape said, following her lead. "But the local shamans have promised to keep watch."

"So why'd you call us down here?" asked Luna.

"Miss Granger did that in error," Snape said.

So much for keeping her mistakes under wraps. His spying instincts were to blame, she supposed. Build trust with truths about small things in order to get away with big lies. His spying instincts, coupled with his natural inclination towards taking her down a peg or so. Dying had not improved Severus Snape much, especially if she dismissed the pre-cloak ogling as entirely the fault of the hallucinatory Knell potion, which it unquestionably was.

"Hermione was a little drunk," lied Harry.

Hermione fumed. Death had left Severus Snape unchanged, but it might well improve Harry-bloody-Potter. "I wouldn't have *made* the mistake if I'd had full possession of my faculties!"

"Hermione's *still* a little drunk. We've been celebrating with our... um... mate, Severus," said Ron. "He's been in hiding for the last few celebrations and so never got to properly raise a glass."

"But we've raised a few too many," said Harry. "So we're leaving, now. He's... ah... only starting to come out of hiding, and we think it's best done gradually, you know? So don't go telling, alright?"

There were murmurs of assent.

"And do remember what happened to Marietta," Hermione warned. "By now, we're all a bit too grown up for spots."

The black-clad man beside her let out a quick breath. If the black-clad man beside her weren't Snape, she'd be pretty sure it was a laugh.

*

When they entered Grimmauld Place (sans Ginny and the fake trio, who returned to the party to maintain cover), Snape flinched. He stared down the long entryway. No Moody voice sounded. No desiccated Dumbledore rose up. Hermione had painted the hallway a good sunny yellow, and they'd hung one of Dean's better landscapes.

"The spell's been gone for years, sir," Harry said. "A whole lot's changed here, actually."

"He, er, it, always backed right down for us," said Ron. "What'd it do when you actually showed up here?"

"Offered me Muggle sweets and twaddled on about the magnificent force of love." Snape turned his cold gaze to Harry. "I assume the folderol about Greyback meant you wanted to wait for some privacy before bringing me up to date?"

The four of them should find somewhere quiet to sit and talk, somewhere easily defensible should Snape prove other than what he seemed. Hermione had a feeling they were in for a late night. The kitchen would do. The men followed her there. One door and no windows meant Snape would have to fight his way, wandless, through the three of them if he tried to bolt. It was near perfect, actually; Snape wouldn't know where they kept the Floo powder, and they'd warded the room against Apparition and Disapparition last year after a series of unexpected visitors sent Justin briefly to St. Mungo's. They settled round the polished table.

Snape looked Harry up and down. "You're alive. I can only shudder and conclude you botched it somehow, and that *he's* still out there." The man rubbed his left arm. Hermione sat near enough to him to see the skin. Pale, smooth and unblemished, save where it was shot through with vivid veins. She watched the pulse in his wrist. She fought the absurd desire to take that wrist between her thumb and forefinger to count the beats, just to be sure he was real. Good thing it was Severus Snape who'd returned: a dour man whom they respected when all was said and done but hadn't known well enough to like, or to mourn as anything other than could-have-been. If it had been someone like Tonks or Fred, she doubted their hearts could've born the joy.

"Harry killed Voldemort, Professor," she said. "He's been dead six years."

"Like you, actually," said Ron. Dear Ron. Sometimes she wondered if she loved him despite his lack of tact or because of it. Now was not one of those times. She loved Ron despite. Most definitely despite.

"Dead?" Snape asked.

"Yes," said Harry. "You both."

"I knew about me, Potter, as my consciousness exceeds that of a Flobberworm. The other... Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Wrong, sir?" Harry asked.

"Yes, wrong. Troublesome. Perturbing. Incommodious."

The boys blinked. Ptolomy's toenails. All she needed was Neville beside her, haplessly trying to disjoint a salamander, and it'd be the dungeons all over again.

"I don't know what you mean," said Harry.

"I was dead," Snape said, as if explaining a tediously simple concept.

"Yes, you were," Hermione agreed right away, lest he start rattling off more synonyms.

"I am now alive once more."

"We'll probably want to test that hypothesis under controlled circumstances at the Department," she said, "but a cursory inspection indicates that yes, you are."

"So I'll ask again. What's wrong? What looming calamity did you revive me to stave off?"

The ego on that man!

Ron and Harry looked at her: always willing to let her field the tricky questions. Snape studied her, too, waiting for an answer. She'd have to check his current appearance against his Pensieve looks, one of who knows how many tests they'd do at the Department to make sure Snape actually was Snape. The firm set of his lips looked different (determined, rather than pinched and joyless), as did his unwavering gaze (engaged rather than cold). The difference was a question of expression more than physicality, but still a bit suspect. He'd worn a rotation of roughly three facial expressions back at Hogwarts: bored, livid, and supercilious.

"Well," Snape asked. "Why have you brought me here?"

Somehow, Hermione knew now was *not* the time to complain about an aching ring finger. "You see," she said, "it wasn't strictly intentional."

"You told Kingsley you'd made a mistake."

"Minister Kingsley. And yes, I did."

"Yes, you told him so, or yes, you made a mistake?"

"Er, both."

"I see."

"It was a good mistake, though. Like Muggle penicillin."

"Or like Every Flavor Beans," Ron added. "If Bott hadn't dropped his tuna melt into the Beanerator all those years ago, all we'd ever have is boring flavors like banana or marmalade."

"I see," Snape repeated.

"We're glad you're back." Harry beamed, stood, and bounded towards Snape.

"Do not *think* of embracing me," Snape said. A vaguely ill look flashed briefly across his stern features. Hermione wondered if this was Snape's general Harry-distaste shining through or if he, like her, found Harry in mawkish mode fairly objectionable.

"Yeah, Harry," Ron said, "no hugging. 'Specially before he gets some clothes on."

Harry sat back down, called for Kreacher, and asked him to track down some clothes for Snape. A gummy grin stretched across the aged elf's face when Harry explained that the professor was a friend of Good Master Regulus.

"Good Master Regulus?" Snape asked. "What do you lot know about Reg?"

"He was a hero," said Harry. "Just like you."

Typical Harry over-simplification. Accurate though, when all was said and done.

Snape looked thoughtful. "That explains what he was doing with the rest of us."

"Us? You mean there were other Death Eaters who turned?" Hermione felt a sudden rush of cold; it was almost like drinking the Knell potion again. The Wizengamot had convicted at least a half dozen of Voldemort's followers who claimed at trial to be wartime saboteurs. "Who?" she asked, Summoning parchment and quill.

"Reign in your activist impulses, please, and rest assured I know of no other spies. I meant it explains what Regulus was doing with the rest of us... Beyond."

Hermione looked at Harry and then at Ron. She knew she wasn't the only one feeling chilled.

Silence built. Finally, Ron spoke. His voice was tight and very small. "Did you see my brother there?"

A strange softness came to Snape face...another expression she'd never seen before. He swallowed. She watched his Adam's apple bob. "Time was not... distinct. Nor are my memories. There was a general sense of well-being, coupled with a series of images, none of which account for a full... How many years did you say?"

"Six."

"None of which account for a full six years."

"What images?" Harry asked.

Snape frowned. Hermione expected some scathing permutation of *mind your own business, Potter*.

"I remember the snake," he finally said, and massaged his throat. Skin stretched smooth over the notch at its base, over tendons and veins, running taut and unmarked to the strong line of his jaw. No bite marks. No scars. "I remember Potter's eyes, which turned into Lily's eyes--"

Everyone in the room held very still when their former teacher spoke the name of Harry's mother.

"--which turned into Lily's voice--"

Everyone's posture relaxed the second time he spoke her name; Hermione couldn't explain why, but it felt as though they'd passed through hostile waters and had settled on some peaceful shore.

"--admitting, *finally*, that if she'd just got off her high Hippogriff and accepted my apology, dozens of people need not have died. Then Potter--not you, boy, your progenitor--came over to shake my hand."

"Couldn't have been Harry, anyhow," said Ron, "as right after you died, he was off with Dumbledore."

"With Albus?" Snape asked.

"Long story," said Harry. "We'll get to it."

"Harry, Ronald, please stop interrupting."

"There was a soft, silvery fog, and eventually Regulus was there. Sirius, too. Reg rolled his eyes and said, 'I *told* you so'. Then Fred Weasley--" Here, Snape nodded at Ron, whose expression was very strained. "--swirled into existence and told Sirius to pay up. He'd lost the bet fair and square, and Black--he had this rucksack all of a sudden--counted out fourteen clementines. I'm shocked the cur even knew how to count so high." Snape paused.

His audience leaned forward, rapt. Hermione felt privy to something extraordinary, both the tale itself and the fact that Snape's speech had such an uncharacteristically high information to insult ratio. Some things could only be spoken of with sincerity, she supposed, even for Severus Snape.

He continued, "The whole plane had the feel of a very disorganized and very lazy summer party, one to which I'd been known to have lost the invitation, which made the other guests all the more pleased I was able to attend after all." He paused. He seemed to be speaking not for their sake but for the sake of actually saying the words aloud. "Charity Burbage was there at one point. She slapped me, hard, but then said she knew I couldn't have acted otherwise, and that things were right between us so long as I didn't cheat at croquet, which leads me to believe at some point there was croquet, though I have no memory of it. We played cards often. No one would bet against Alastor because he still had that eye. Nymphadora won a dozen grapefruits off Potter, who, naturally, sulked. Lupin's nostrils flared when he bluffed. Regulus and I were the only ones with decent poker faces. I remember Black dealing for seven card stud, and then I saw a thin, bright, silver thread. I don't believe anyone else noticed it, which was odd considering how it glowed. I'd never seen anything like it. It looked... alive. I checked my hand. I had a pair of Aces--hearts and spades, if it matters--and I felt... torn. I wanted to play that hand, and I wanted to follow the thread. From my presence at this table, I would hope even you three can deduce which course I opted for."

For once in his life, Ronald Weasley hit upon the only appropriate verbal response. He whispered a reverent "Wow."

A crack sounded, and Kreacher appeared, thin arms carrying the "clothes of brave Master Regulus for the friend of brave Master Regulus." The clothes in question were a pair of 80's-era acid washed jeans and a soft t-shirt, whose faded words asked *If They Can Send a Muggle to the Moon, Why Not Send All of Them?*

Snape looked at the garments like they were unscourable cauldron scum. He gestured at the jeans. "Tell me those faddish monstrosities aren't back in fashion."

"I think these are Regulus' actual clothes, Professor," said Harry, and Kreacher bobbed his gleeful, sparse-haired head, bowed, then cracked out of sight. Harry waved his wand, and the jeans turned a more palatable dark blue.

"Mind you put them back later," Ron cautioned. "You don't want to put Kreacher off his cooking."

"I'm sure we can Transfigure something you like better," Harry said, meaning *Hermione* could Transfigure something he'd like better. Neither of the boys were much good with sartorial charms, except for the odd Denim Darkener, and that, she suspected, was only to disguise how rarely they did the laundry.

"It matters little," said Snape, rising to go and change. "What I do want is to hear about the War."

*

Harry and Ron did most of the talking, which freed Hermione to study Snape. Considering how strange it was that he was here at all, it shouldn't have seemed all that much more strange that the man would put on Muggle clothes without complaint, that he'd sit and listen to the boys without sneering or interrupting, or that he'd be so drawn in by their account that he'd lean forward, elbows resting on the table. But it did. It seemed... un-Snapely, if that was even a word. Before, he'd done little more than veer from cool to stern to hostile. The Snape at their kitchen table was far too earnest. Far too interested.

This had Hermione far from at ease.

She shook her head. She was being unfair. Paranoid. A bit like Harry before he up and decided Snape was the bravest of all brave men. Naturally, Snape would be interested in the War. She would be, too, if their positions were reversed.

Of course, she'd have questions about *how* she'd returned, too, a subject about which Snape didn't seem the least concerned. Severus Snape and his silver string (she'd make him repeat *that* account under Veritaserum back at the Department), as if that was explanation enough. The man seemed to accept his return as his due. The man assumed they'd hauled him through the Veil because they were desperate for his help. The man was in for a surprise on that count. Except for a tiny finger issue, which could've been resolved with a simple *I don't want to marry you either, and besides, I'm dead and so well out of the running; now please go away and leave me to my poker game*, they were managing perfectly well on their own, thank you very much.

When Harry explained about Riddle's Horcruxes, Snape didn't look horrified or even all that surprised. Hermione knew that he'd killed (and she knew thinking that way was unfair; he'd had to, and everyone--even, apparently, the Potters and Professor Burbage--accepted that). What if he'd borrowed one of his Master's spells to make the most of a bad situation? The Knell potion wasn't meant to bring anyone back; her research and calculations hadn't even hinted at the possibility. But her calculations hadn't factored in the potential consequences of something--a Snapecrux?--tethering him to this plane, giving him opportunity to cross.

"How many?" he asked.

"Seven," the boys chorused as one.

"I take it that wretched ring...?"

"Yes," said Harry, "and the diary back in second year, Slytherin's locket, Hufflepuff's cup, Ravenclaw's diadem, Nagini--"

"Really? A live animal?"

"Not anymore," said Ron.

"Nagini," Harry continued, "and, er, me."

"That one I knew about, thanks to Albus' hints," Snape said, rubbing his own forehead. "I take it your camping trip was an ongoing effort to locate the others?"

"Yes," Harry said.

"So your actions weren't as haphazard as they looked from the other side?"

"Actually," Hermione said, "they generally were."

Harry glared at her before continuing the story. Something in his posture reminded her of first-year Harry: nervous, out of his depth, eager to please. Echoes of how he carried himself around Remus, Sirius, and Dumbledore. Around anyone who'd had close ties with his parents. She watched Snape's face to see if he'd noticed. He was the only one alive with significant memories of the Potters. If he was up to something, Harry's devotion was something he could use.

Hermione had to calm the fuck down--and fast.

She had to check her Knell calculations for the probability of lingering paranoia.

This was Snape.

He was on their side. Or at least he had been, back where there were any sides to speak of.

And he couldn't be up to something, not yet. He'd only been back a few hours.

Harry recounted what happened the night he left the Dursleys.

Snape said he'd like to see George at some point. He had regrets about the ear.

"We saw in the memories how it would've been worse for him without you," said Harry.

"Besides," said Ron, "he says in a way, he's glad it's gone. It stops him from seeing Fred when he looks in a mirror, you know?"

A pained twist came to Snape's mouth.

Hermione hadn't really cried since that long-ago morning with Ron in the hotel. She'd teared up exactly twice: the first time in her parents' dental chair, and the second when she heard George make that pronouncement. Was it that much of a stretch to think Snape would feel the same?

It shouldn't have been. Not if she was as kind a person as she liked to think she was.

Ron and Harry had invited him into their home, and (a few disasters disregarded) their instincts were generally sound. The boys seemed to trust him, now. Maybe she should try to do the same; after all, she'd done so before. Perhaps it was just ingrained habit; Hermione was bound to disagree with the boys about Snape, whatever their

stance.

"What happened the night they took the Ministry?" Snape asked.

They, he said, not *we*.

She shouldn't feel so on edge.

The man had proved himself time and time again.

The Knell potion had been horrible and disorienting, but it hadn't felt in the least Dark. If there'd been something untoward about Severus Snape's sudden arrival, she'd have noticed. Failing that, the boys would've noticed. The Minister would have noticed. Metis Townsend or Dumbledore's Army would've.

Snape interrupted Harry to say it was good they'd Confunded at the cafe instead of killed. "It gave me the chance to set them all on a hare-brained Hinkypunk hunt. I told Voldemort that you three'd done the same thing to Lockhart a few years back, due to a wand malfunction. I told him, to find Potter all he'd need to do was track down the right backfiring wand. He wasted weeks trying to find every broken wand within a thousand miles, and as an added bonus, all his followers significantly underestimated your little threesome's wandpower and control."

On a number of occasions (both drunk and sober), Harry, Ron and Hermione had regretted not having a chance to thank Snape. Now he was here, sitting at their kitchen table, dropping the facts of what he'd done to help casually into conversation. A simple thank you seemed insipid. For the first time in ages, Hermione felt a bit shy. The boys continued their telling.

Snape smiled when they told him what they'd found out about Regulus. Another new Snape expression. His former smile looked smug. This one looked content.

Snape scowled (now *that* was familiar) when they told him how Umbridge had got her toady little hands on the locket.

He told them Voldemort had been in a towering fury after their chaos at the Ministry, and that the Order's protection spells on Grimmauld Place had reduced Yaxley to little more than a gibbering puddle of goo.

He commended her for taking Nigellus' portrait with them when they abandoned number twelve. He'd have had a devil of a time getting the sword to them without it.

Perhaps it was her standard reaction to praise, but Hermione began to warm to him a bit more.

Only a little bit more and only for a little bit. Because when the boys got to their adventures in the Forest of Dean, Harry and Ron actually told Snape what happened with the locket. They told Snape. Snape! What they'd held off telling her for over six years. The stupid, secretive little prats. As if she'd have minded hearing Ron could be a jealous git--as if she didn't know already. It was one thing to trust Snape; it was another entirely to share things with him they never had with her. Just because he asked. Just because he happened to be back from the dead. That was no kind of credential, especially as the back from the dead thing was largely down to her. She'd had to help the boys fight a *Troll* to get this kind of acceptance.

Harry and Ron prattled on, their explanations excitable and dovetailing. Snape nodded, taking it all in. She remembered back in first year when the boys first started including her. It took her a while to get used to their conversation. The interruptions. The way they finished each other's sentences. She'd felt so glad to be a part of it; she felt she finally had a place in the magical world.

Now Severus Snape had a place with her two best friends, at least for the moment, and no one had even asked her.

Snape said all the right things. That itself was suspect. This wasn't her insecurity talking, no, absolutely not. It was an impartial observation. Before, Severus Snape had never been the least bit pleasant or accommodating.

He said her revealing Harry at the Lovegood house without question saved Xenophilius' life.

He said he hadn't heard what happened at Malfoy Manor, but that they'd weathered it with impressive fortitude and presence of mind.

He said only foolish Gryffindors would even think of breaking into Gringotts, and that only the three of them could possibly have got away with it.

He wouldn't meet their eyes, though, when they described the browbeaten appearance of Neville Longbottom. He didn't seem surprised to learn about the Hog's Head passage or the Room of Requirement hideout. His frowned when they told him what happened to Crabbe. His frown deepened a bit more with every fallen friend they named.

Of the countless people to whom they'd given their account of the War, Severus Snape was the only one who asked no questions about Harry's temporary death in the Forbidden Forest. He nodded as if that whole episode actually made sense. Perhaps it did once one had personal experience of the Beyond.

Just after they recounted Voldemort's final, fatal confrontation with Harry, a flushed and prickly Ginny arrived.

Snape stood, but he wouldn't meet her eyes.

Ginny, for her part, acted like Snape wasn't there at all.

"You three should be happy to hear I covered for you. No one suspects a thing." Her voice was terribly cold and somehow tired, too.

"Thanks, Gin," said Ron, who after a lifetime of living with her should really have been better at reading Ginny's tone.

"Justin's crashing elsewhere, if you care." Ginny said. "He didn't really feel like being around."

"Okay," Harry said. He, at least, seemed to know he was in trouble. *They* were in trouble. Hermione was willing to bet a week's pay the Potters were headed for a serious row.

"Dean's not coming home, either, not tonight."

"So he was right about scoring, then?" Harry asked. Perhaps she'd been too quick to credit his perceptiveness. "Harry Potter on Victory Day, right?"

"Not. This. Victory. Day."

Hermione would never tell Ginny so--especially not when she'd steamed herself to a right temper--but the youngest Weasley reminded her a good bit of the family's matriarch.

"And Susan?" Hermione asked evenly, hoping to diffuse things a bit. Until they knew exactly what was going on with Professor Snape, it was in their best interest to present a united front.

"Went home with Percy."

"Bloody hell," said Ron. "I hope he doesn't still think she's *Hermione*."

"That's the least of this household's problems," Ginny said. "I thought you were going to *talk* to him. Just a few words to clear that ring thing up. What the hell is Severus Snape doing in my kitchen?"

"We were just telling him about the War," said Harry.

"War stories! I could give you War stories! *Neville* could give you War stories that'd have our *Headmaster* halfway to Azkaban. How *could* you, Harry? Why him? Why now?"

"Ginny..."

"Six years, Harry! Six years of it's-wrong-to-use-the-ring-and-the-dead-don't-want-to-return. Six years and now--"

"I didn't--"

"Why him?"

"It wasn't--"

"Why not Fred?"

Beside her, Ron made a choking sound. Ginny looked at him, and in an instant she was sobbing. Raw, hysterical wartime sobs. Ginny let Ron put an arm around her shoulders, but she beat her fists against Harry's chest when he tried to embrace her, and when Hermione approached, the goblets on the shelves began to shatter with angry wandless magic. Hermione's heart did a sullen, pained little thwump, but she backed away. Best give Ginny the space she needed, even if her stomach clenched like it always did with rejection. Hermione slipped out of the room, the sound of Harry's "Ginny, please, listen, Gin" in her ears.

Snape followed. He loomed tall over her in the narrow hallway. "At some point, we must speak about how I came to be here."

"Yes. We do need to have that conversation." She felt tired to the marrow. Ginny's outburst carried throughout the house.

"Now, though..." He paused. "Sentimental though it sounds, I should like to watch the sunrise."

He went out onto the front steps. She went upstairs to her bedroom. From the walls, Sirius' old bikini pictures--the ones she'd hit with an Erised-esque spell--showed a series of comfortable looking beds. Hermione didn't climb into her own, although she was exhausted. She stood at the window, looking down at Snape. If asked, she wouldn't be able to say if she was watching him because she wanted to keep tabs on him or because she was afraid he'd melt back into nothing. Snape sat on the top step. He looked east towards the park where all those years ago Death Eaters had been posted to catch their comings and goings. The park was much less shabby now; the Muggles were gentrifying. Hermione had lived through nights far more terrifying than this one. Longer nights, grimmer nights, nights that were stranger and more exhausting. Still, she'd never ended a night in quite so improbable a manner, staring down at Severus Snape while he watched the London sky turn from black to grey to mauve.

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The characters aren't mine. The concept is not mine. If you think any of this is mine, you belong in St. Mungo's, which is also not mine.