

Soul Man

by julymorning

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Red House

Chapter 1 of 17

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Author's Note: All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Red House

There's a red house over yonder

That's where my baby stays

The red-brick house sat at the end of a row of red-brick houses, bounded on one side by the cracked asphalt of the street and on the other by a scraggly field of wild grass and brambles. The white trim painted onto the window and door frames was cracked and peeling. Divots in the brick testified to the level of local air pollution. In the distance to the east, the rusted chimney of a textile mill loomed. It juxtaposed neatly with the spire of York Minster rising into the grey clouds on the southern horizon. Both towers provided unrepentant evidence of mankind's achievements; each was beautiful and ugly in its own way.

Hermione Granger put a hesitant foot on the steps leading to the front door of the house and looked back at her companion uncertainly. 'You're sure about this?'

Kingsley Shacklebolt shoved his hands into the pockets of his Muggle jeans and shrugged. 'Everything was clear and above-board. The will just finished probate yesterday. The house is yours.'

Hermione fingered the Yale key in her hand. Less than a month had passed since the discovery of Severus Snape's last testament in the headmaster's office at Hogwarts. *Why has he left this place to me?* But the answer was obvious: everyone else Snape knew was either dead or already in possession of a home. With her parents' decision to remain in Australia, Hermione had resigned herself to living at Grimmauld Place with Harry and Ron until yesterday, that is, when the letter from the Ministry had informed her of her new acquisition.

Snape, dead and gone, buried on the grounds of Hogwarts with all of the other casualties of war. Grief, sharp and fresh, squeezed her chest. *Sixty-two days*, she thought. *It has only been sixty-two days. I'm allowed to feel sad still.* She catalogued the list of fallen heroes in her mind, finishing with her former professor. She had not seen the memories Harry had taken from him, but she knew that it was he who had led them to Gryffindor's sword and he who had given Harry the final piece of the puzzle. Snape couldn't have known that Harry would survive; otherwise he might have fought harder for his own life.

And now there was this house – Spinner's End – the last unexplored relic of the man who had given and given of himself for twenty years and continued to give from beyond

the grave. It was enough to make her cry again, had she not been standing in front of the acting Minister of Magic. Determined to keep her dignity intact, Hermione turned her focus to the building that was now hers. If Snape's office at Hogwarts was anything to go by, the house would be filled with grotesqueries. Had he practiced the Dark Arts here? Would there be any lingering traces of what had surely been a miserable youth? Nobody had been inside for almost a year; she could imagine, at the very least, mould and mouse droppings. *Could I even live in this house? I bet it's disgusting...*

'Are you going to go in or what?' Kingsley interrupted. 'If we stand out here much longer, we're going to get soaked.' He angled his head to look up at the lowering sky.

'Right.' Hermione nodded determinedly and climbed the steps. The key turned easily in the lock, and the door glided smoothly open. Her first reaction was one of disappointment: where were all of Snape's books? For obviously he had possessed many, many books shelves were built onto every wall, ceiling to floor, and over the spots where the windows and fireplace must be. She could not even see any doors to the other parts of the house.

'Ooh,' Kingsley murmured over her shoulder. 'Creepy dark in here.'

Ignoring him, Hermione lit her wand with a non-verbal *Lumos* and passed over the threshold into the front room. Originally, this space had been a lounge and a dining area: two threadbare armchairs sat forlornly on the brown shag carpet in the near half of the room; through a wide archway, she could see a scarred oak table that, judging by the ink stains, had probably done duty as a desk rather than an eating surface. Dust motes danced through the air in front of her wand.

'Erm, Kingsley?' Hermione asked. 'Any idea how to get into the rest of the house?'

'Not a clue.' He stepped around her and headed for the back of the room, beyond the dining table. She followed, passing her wand-light over the shelves, looking for cracks.

'Here,' Kingsley murmured. He was standing in the back left-hand corner of the room. Hermione peered into the gloom and saw a set of hinges. Experimentally, she reached out and tugged on the nearest shelves. With a faint creak, they swung toward her and revealed a staircase that travelled up behind the back wall of the room to the first floor. The stairwell was pitch-black. *Are there any windows in this house at all?*

Kingsley had crossed the room and was examining the right-hand corner. Leaving the upstairs for later, Hermione approached him just as he gave a tentative push against a section of shelving. The wall opened away from him, and light, grey and rainy but nevertheless illuminating, filtered into the front room.

'This looks like the kitchen,' he said, walking forward. She strode behind him into a space half-heartedly brightened by yellow linoleum and wallpaper. Cabinets, worktop, refrigerator, hob: a perfectly respectable, if grimy, Muggle kitchen. Curiously, Hermione opened a few of the cabinets, but they all appeared to be empty. So were the oven and the refrigerator. She twisted the hot tap in the sink: clean, steaming water poured out. *At least Snape paid his bills!* A battered electric kettle and toaster sat on the worktop near the hob. Looking up, Hermione saw a coffee press on top of the fridge. A small round table with two chairs was nestled into the corner of the room under the windows.

'Look out here,' Kingsley said, drawing Hermione's attention to the heavy door that stood at the far end of the room. It led into a small laundry area washing machine but no tumble dryer fitted with, naturally, more shelves, which held a few bottles of household cleaner and one lone hammer, the plastic on its handle blue and worn. A screen door opened into the back garden.

Despite the rain, Hermione wanted to see what was out there. Pulling up the hood on her jumper, she descended a few stairs onto a concrete walk that passed through the sparse grass of the yard to a wooden shed against the back wall of the garden. The shed wasn't locked; peering through the doorway, Hermione could just make out a rusty lawnmower and a bottle of weed-killer. Between the shed and the back of the house, someone had strung clothesline; wooden pins hung on it, covered in lacy cobwebs.

Returning to the kitchen, Hermione found that Kingsley had made his way into the front room and was now standing in the doorway to the staircase.

'Where do you think these go?' he asked, motioning.

'They go up.' Lighting her wand again, feeling a twinge of trepidation, Hermione ascended the stairs carpeted in the same brown shag to a dim hallway. To her left, she discovered an entirely unremarkable bathroom and another small room whose walls had not escaped Snape's shelving obsession. To the right of the stairway was a small bedroom: low single bed, desk, chest of drawers, wardrobe. Brief investigation revealed these items of furniture to be as empty as the kitchen cabinets. And at the far end of the hallway, a closed door, dark and forbidding.

When she opened it, Hermione decided that inheriting this house hadn't been a waste after all. In contrast to the rest of the place, this room was light and clean. Two windows looked onto the street in front of the house; a third gave an eastward view across the scraggly field. The four-poster bed still bore the frame for a canopy. Its dark mahogany contrasted beautifully with the small pine dressing table between the front windows and the twin pine wardrobes on either side of the east window. A tall bureau, its drawers shallow and elegantly carved, made up the set.

'I'll take it,' she said delightedly to Kingsley, who was hovering in the hallway.

'You sure?' he asked, eyes glinting speculatively. 'What do you think this place would fetch on the market?'

'I'm not selling it,' Hermione said firmly. 'I would have made it into a memorial for Professor Snape, but I'm going to live in it now instead.'

Kingsley raised one eyebrow. 'To each his own, I suppose. Sure hope you're going to tear down some of those shelves.' He walked away; Hermione heard his light tread going back down the stairs.

She ran her hand over the mattress on the four-poster bed and gazed dreamily around the room. In her mind's eye, she imagined what it might look like if she had the money to renovate. Light carpet in here instead of this horrible brown stuff maybe grey or beige with sheer drapes over the windows. A canopy of pale green muslin for the bed and a matching skirt for the dressing table, darker green bedclothes. *I reckon I could knock out most of the walls up here and have one huge bedroom and one huge bathroom.* The idea of a separate shower and tub seduced her. She wandered to the opposite end of the hallway and inspected the plumbing *I could even put jets in the bathtub...*

Reluctantly, she focussed her eyes and pulled her mind back to the present. First, she would have to deep-clean everything, maybe even repaint the trim outside. Get duplicate keys made. Seed the back garden. Mentally compiling a list of 'house tasks,' she ambled down the staircase and into the kitchen. No dishes in the cupboards she would have to buy or borrow some. Sitting down at the little round table, she pulled some parchment from her bag and began to write. After a few moments, she looked up to see Kingsley standing just inside the shelf-door, seemingly inspecting the blank wall there.

'What is it?' she asked.

'The stairs run right above here,' he answered, pointing. He cocked his head thoughtfully.

'So?'

'You said, "those stairs go up" and where stairs go up, they also go down.'

Intrigued, Hermione hurried from her chair to stand next to him. 'You think there might be a basement?'

'If there were...' He ran his hands lightly along the wall. 'If there were, this is where the entrance would be. Don't you think?'

Hermione narrowed her eyes and looked closely at the stretch of wall. She couldn't see any seams or hinges. Placing both palms flat against it, she gave a firm push, but

nothing happened. Balling her hands into fists, she rapped her knuckles lightly against the wall.

'You're not going to find out anything that way,' Kingsley scoffed. He walked across the room into the laundry area and came back bearing the hammer. Holding it by the head, he pounded on the wall with the handle. Low booms echoed through the room. 'It's hollow,' he confirmed.

'How do we get down there?' Hermione asked wonderingly.

'Exterior entrance?' Kingsley suggested.

'I didn't see one,' she said.

'Best leave it alone, then,' he cautioned, returning the hammer to its shelf. 'If you can't get in, nothing can get out.'

'I'll find a way,' Hermione said determinedly.

Kingsley wrinkled his brow in concern. 'If you do find a way,' he said, 'don't go down there alone. Get Harry or Ron to go with you.'

The image of a giant snake in an old woman's bedroom erupted in her mind. Did Kingsley think it had been Harry and Ron doing the protecting all these months? 'I will,' she promised. *Like hell.*

He made his way back to the front door. 'When will you move in?'

'As soon as I can,' she called to him, gathering up her things and taking one final, lingering look around the double front room *Must remember to put the paperbacks on those shelves that are doors otherwise they'll be too heavy to open. I wonder who got all of Snape's books.* She thought ruefully that, however horrible this house might have been, it couldn't possibly be worse than the ancestral Black home with its dark corridors and screaming portraits. Flash of Kreacher, skulking in his lair behind the kitchen. Remus Lupin's last visit, his argument with Harry. That narrow upstairs hallway where Sirius had lived, his room rummaged by Snape last summer. The bedroom of teenaged Regulus, gone forever into the cave by the seaside. The entire place held the bittersweet breath of too many people loved and lost. *Snape is one of those people,* she thought suddenly that stark, grey bedroom he had sometimes slept in, the swishing sound of his black robes sweeping malevolently through the dirty kitchen or the darkened library. There was more of Snape at Grimmauld Place than in this lonely house in northern York.

'Coming?' Kingsley shouted from the road.

She stepped onto the front stoop and locked the door carefully, depositing the key in the pocket of her jeans.

'Back to the Ministry?' he asked when she approached.

'No,' she said, gazing at the late-afternoon sky. The air was damp with drizzle. 'I think I'll go into York and have a look around.'

'See you later, then.' He walked round the far end of the house. A moment later there was an abrupt *crack*. Hermione hoisted her bag securely on her shoulder and strolled down the street.

At the bottom of the close, she turned into another street and followed it to Water Lane where she caught a bus going into the city centre. It let her off a few minutes later just outside Bootham Bar. The façade of York Minster loomed over the stone gateway; through the arch, she could see the famous Heart of Yorkshire window. Tourists streamed in and out of the west doors of the cathedral.

Hermione walked slowly along High Petergate, the medieval buildings on either side of the narrow street so close together that they seemed to meet overhead, and emerged into the Minster Yard. The cathedral was huge, one of the biggest in the country. Its spire seemed to touch the low, heavy clouds. With a start, she realised it was touching the clouds, and that the rain was going to start pouring any minute now. Unfurling her umbrella, she continued onward into Deangate, pausing to admire the statue of the Roman emperor Constantine in the cathedral garth.

Beyond the eastern end of York Minster, she passed St William's College, another fabulously medieval building, and at last found herself standing under the archway of Monk Bar, sheltering from the rain with a load of other bedraggled pedestrians. There was enough history in this city to keep her occupied for years. Even as she stood there under the ancient stones, she noticed a sign for the Richard III Museum. And the libraries! The Minster had one, surely, and the city must have its own archives. Hadn't Alcuin, Charlemagne's court magician, been from York?

Yes, Hermione thought with satisfaction. *I could definitely live here.*

She Said She Said

Chapter 2 of 17

Hermione embarks on her research project and meets her patron for the first time.

She Said She Said

She said, 'I know what it's like to be dead

I know what it is to be sad'

It took Hermione just under a week of concentrated effort to whip Spinner's End into shape for habitation. Ron and Harry, on fire to examine the ins and outs of Snape's former abode, volunteered to help her clean and were disappointed to discover that the house was free of arcane implements and dribbly candles. Hermione set them to work in the back garden while she blitzed the interior, following up the standard household spells with a good, old-fashioned Hoover and dustcloth. Moving in and unpacking was easy after that, although she was startled to learn that even her extensive collection of books didn't begin to fill the available shelving. She decided to decorate the empty space with pictures and potted plants.

Though she would have preferred a few days to get used to living in her new house, the following Monday saw Hermione back at work at least, if her current occupation could be called 'work.' Research was the activity she enjoyed most, and she considered that getting paid for it was more like a reward than a wage. Inspiration for her

current project had come upon her at some point during those interminable weeks she had spent wearing Voldemort's awful locket around her neck. When the aftermath of the final battle had at last faded to memory, she had remembered her idea and holed up in the Hogwarts library for three days drafting a research proposal, which she'd then submitted directly to Kingsley Shacklebolt on Harry's recommendation.

'What is this?' Kingsley had asked, leafing through the neatly written sheets of parchment in the shambles that had once been the Minister of Magic's office. 'You want to study Horcruxes?'

'I think somebody ought to, yes. If we had known more about them to begin with, we might have been able to prevent so much of what's happened in the last few years.' She had paused to gather her courage, then continued: 'There's nobody left alive in Britain who knows as much about Horcruxes as I do, except for Harry and Ron, and they're not exactly research types.' She had kept her gaze direct and confident.

'What is it that you want from me?' Kingsley had asked, confused.

'The Ministry ought to be sponsoring this project, in my opinion. You can give me access to any documents the Ministry have on the subject. You can get me unrestricted passes for as many libraries as I might need to consult. And... there's the Veil in the Department of Mysteries. I'm sure it'll turn out to be pertinent.'

Hermione had felt almost faint after reciting her list of demands, but Kingsley had simply nodded. 'What you're asking for is unprecedented,' he had admitted, 'but not impossible. It's a good idea. Give me a week or two to do some convincing.'

'There's just one other thing,' Hermione had said, floating through a high of both terror and boldness. 'Funding. I know the Ministry's finances aren't what they should be, but...!' She had trailed off, shrugging.

To her surprise, Kingsley had grinned smugly and leaned back in his chair. 'Now, there,' he'd said, 'I think we can set you up without a problem.'

Ten days later, the letter from the Ministry had arrived. All her demands met, everything she'd asked for granted, a small office thrown into the bargain, and all the money she could possibly spend. She'd Floo-called Kingsley from Grimmauld Place almost immediately.

'What's the catch?' she demanded. 'This work isn't exactly pressing. Why all the generosity?'

The expression of smugness had reappeared on Kingsley's face. Without preamble, he'd explained, 'The money is coming from an American dilettante. He contacted us two years ago, after the death of Sirius Black was publicised, and asked to set up exactly this sort of project.' He had rolled his eyes. 'As you can imagine, nobody was in any position to indulge him at the time. I thought of him as soon as I read your proposal and gave him a call. He was thrilled to give you a grant.'

'And what does the Ministry get out of it?'

Kingsley had grinned. 'Sacks and sacks of gold.'

So, with an unlimited number of Galleons at her disposal, Hermione had commenced work. She had started with a series of empirical observations.

Item: The commission of murder damages the human soul by tearing it.

Item: A torn piece of soul can be housed in an object other than the body of the soul-owner.

Item: Pieces of soul are anchored to the earth-plane as long as the object in which they are housed remains intact.

Item: Death does not occur if any piece of a person's soul remains so anchored.

Item: Death *only* occurs under the following conditions: (a) the individual possesses one piece of soul, whole or damaged; (b) that piece of soul resides within his body; (c) the biological life of the body is extinguished.

Next, she had made a list of possible conclusions to be drawn from those observations.

1. The human soul is divisible.

2. The soul is separate from the body.

3. The soul can exist outside of the body.

Finally, she had written down a series of unsubstantiated assumptions.

Item: The damaged soul is 'unnatural.' Intentional damage to the soul is of itself, as well as a result of, an act of 'evil.' (cf. Dumbledore)

Item: Damage to the soul reduces one's 'humanity' in both personality and appearance.

Item: Destroying an object in which a piece of soul is housed either a body or a Horcrux releases that piece of soul from the earth-plane.

Her lists had raised more questions in her mind than they had answered, but as far as Hermione had been concerned, there had been one particular question she would have to address before she could even begin work on the others: *what is a soul?*

She had inveigled a pass to the Bodleian Library and gone to stay in her parents' house in Oxford. Living there without her mother and father had depressed her, but the furniture needed to be sold and the house cleaned before the new owners closed escrow. She had completed these tasks in between visits to the library. There, surrounded by the oiled wood and leather tomes of the Lower Reading Room, she had immersed herself in philosophy: Plato and Aristotle, Avicenna and Aquinas. She had made detailed notes; she had consulted dictionaries and commentaries. The atmosphere in the reading room was perfectly suited to her needs: the warm air freshened by gentle spring breezes through the open windows, the silence interrupted only by quiet footsteps and the scratching of pens.

The scholarly atmosphere in Oxford had suited her too with its tranquil, sandstone colleges and secluded, elegant gardens. In the evenings, as the days grew longer, she had taken walks up and down the river, stopping at a pub every now and then to drink a glass of cold white wine. On Sundays, when the library was closed, she had rented a punt and spent hours drifting through the leaf-dappled sunshine, her notes spread across the bottom of the boat. Those weeks had been largely solitary, as she had dealt with her grief and come to terms with life out from under the shadow of Voldemort. She was not unaware that, in beginning this research project, she had provided herself with a new goal now that the sense of direction offered by her efforts to protect Harry and end Voldemort's reign of terror was gone. She was also displacing her feelings of mourning, but she considered this to be healthy; nobody, in her opinion, ever felt better from wallowing.

Soon enough, however, she'd returned to London, moving into Grimmauld Place permanently, or so she'd thought at the time. She had written up her notes and sent them off to her patron in America. She had been afraid that her work so far would disappoint him. Her philosophical enquiries into the nature of the soul had led her, inescapably, to believe that most of the ancient philosophers, while of course employing impeccable logic, had drawn some seriously inaccurate conclusions. Using her lists and the information she had gathered in Oxford, she had drawn up a brief summary:

The soul (*psyche* or *anima*) is one of three parts of the human being, the other two being the body and the spirit. It is the essence of basic humanity and is the part from which self-consciousness derives. It provides the human being with will, consciousness, and personality. The soul is incorporeal and, therefore, separate from the body and able to subsist without it. Because the soul is subsistent and not composed of matter, it cannot be destroyed through any natural process. It is divisible, however, though how this is possible without a material nature is unclear. The soul is anchored to earth when it resides in the body or

within some designated object. When these residences are destroyed, the soul remains in existence but departs from the earth-plane. Although the soul can subsist without the body, it is not clear whether the converse is also true: that is, whether the body can subsist entirely without the soul. Most authorities agree that the soul is not the animating force of the body this function is usually reserved for the spirit (*pneuma* or *spiritus*) but this theory is by no means proven.

It was terse, dry, and to the point, but uninspiring to say the least. She had waited to find out whether, having evaluated the meagre returns of his first month's funds, her patron would withdraw his support in disgust or, perhaps, boredom. Hermione could not imagine anything more disheartening.

She should have let her imagination work a little more freely; when, just a few days before she learned of Snape's bequest, a letter from America had arrived at Grimmauld Place, she had discovered that there was indeed something worse than losing her funding.

Dear Miss Granger, the letter began:

I read with interest the summary you provided of the research you have undertaken so far. It has, no doubt, suggested to you, as it has to me, abundant lines of further inquiry. As it happens, I will be coming to Britain very soon for an extended stay. It would please me very much if you and I could arrange to meet regularly while I am in the country to discuss your progress. I am myself something of an academic and would be delighted to assist you in whatever small tasks you think appropriate. There are, in addition, certain specific topics in which I am personally interested that I believe would fit well into the scope of your investigation. Do not send a return owl; I will come to see you at your office in the Ministry when I arrive. I look forward to meeting you a great deal.

Yours sincerely,

Edward Teach

Hermione, though perhaps naïve, was no fool; she had read between the lines of the letter and seen the clear message shining through the polite words: *interference. This man is going to stick his nose in. How like an American.* An 'extended stay' promised a lengthy project as well. She had not planned to devote any longer than the summer to this endeavour; there were her N.E.W.T.s to consider, after all. She could probably put off her exams who would deny the Friend of Harry Potter anything? but she disliked the idea of doing so indefinitely, especially for the sake of satisfying some stranger's whimsy.

There was also the matter of Severus Snape's will to consider now, which had been preying on her mind since learning of her inheritance, and it was this investigation which occupied her first day at the Ministry since moving into Spinner's End. She had permission to look at any files she wished; straight away on Monday morning, she strode into the Records archive and Summoned Snape's last testament.

The document was incredibly straightforward, written on a single piece of parchment in Snape's familiar, slanting hand.

I, Severus Snape, being of sound mind and body, hereby bequeath the following items to the designated beneficiaries:

To Draco Malfoy or, secondarily, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, any of my books such as may be found within my home or personal chambers.

To Professor Minerva McGonagall, or, secondarily, Oxford Famine Relief, all other personal effects such as may be found within my home or personal chambers.

To Hermione Jean Granger or, secondarily, Arthur Weasley, or, tertiary, St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, my home at Spinner's End, York, to occupy or sell according to need.

To Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, any further assets such as may remain.

It was dated the previous September. Hermione understood, with disappointing clarity, why he had felt the need to include secondary and tertiary beneficiaries: there had been a very real chance that none of the individuals named in the will would survive him. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes. *How hopeless he must have felt! And how alone imagine having to consider leaving your personal stuff to Oxfam!* Wiping her cheeks, she returned to her tiny office, slightly ashamed of having used her research privileges to invade the privacy of a dead man, and opened her notes once again.

The previous week, in between strenuous cleaning, she had taken down accounts from Harry and Ron of their experiences wearing Voldemort's locket. She was tallying these with her own hastily written memories in order to put together a definitive, first-hand description of the effects of extended contact with a Horcrux when someone knocked on her door.

'Come in,' she called out distractedly, shuffling through her parchments in search of a particular piece of information. When the door opened, she looked up to find a man in a Muggle suit standing there.

Her first thought was: *Wow, I've never seen a monochrome man before.* His skin was light brown. His hair was light brown. Even his eyes, she noticed, were light brown. Her second, slightly less analytical thought was: *He's terribly good-looking, nevertheless...*

'Miss Granger?' he asked in what was obviously an American accent. 'Edward Teach.' He extended his right hand, smiling.

She stood hastily and shook his hand, stammering, 'I'm so sorry, Mr Teach, I wasn't expecting you so soon. Won't you sit down?'

Still smiling, he hitched up his trousers at the knee and settled comfortably into the one chair she had provided for visitors. 'I see I've interrupted your work,' he said politely.

'No, no,' she protested, cheeks reddening. He raised one eyebrow and looked pointedly at the parchments strewn across her desk. 'Well, yes,' she amended. 'But it's all right, really. How was your journey?'

'Fine, thank you. Got in yesterday morning, in fact, so I'm all rested now.'

His teeth were perfect, she noted. He looked well-muscled under his suit, too. Suddenly, Hermione felt unkempt and shabby in her rumpled robes. 'Are you staying in a hotel?' she asked, casting around for something to say.

'No, I've rented a flat, as you call it.' He shifted, crossing his legs and leaning one elbow on the arm of the chair. He glanced briefly around the small, bare office and commented, 'I thought they'd give you a bigger space.'

'Well, I do most of the work elsewhere,' she explained. 'I'm only in here today because what I'm doing at the moment doesn't require the use of a library.'

Teach twitched his lips into a knowing smirk. 'I'm told you're right at home in libraries.'

Hermione blushed. 'That's true,' she admitted.

'So what is it that you're working on at the moment?' he enquired, pointing to her notes.

'I'm putting together a preliminary account of Horcruxes. I have a bit of personal experience with them,' she added modestly.

'That's right you carried Voldemort's locket around for months, didn't you?' He leaned forward eagerly. 'What was it like?'

She blanched at the keenness in his tone. *What does he think it was like, wearing a bit of malevolent soul around my neck day in and day out?*

He noticed her hesitation and sat back hastily, looking remorseful. 'Oh, I'm so sorry,' he said apologetically. 'I've put my foot in it. Sometimes my interest just gets the better of my manners. Please, Miss Granger, do forgive me.'

'No, please, it's all right.' She shook her head ruefully. 'It wasn't the greatest experience, I'll admit, but I'm okay, really. That's what I'm putting in the account, actually. Just let me finish writing it up properly, and you can read it.'

'Good,' he said earnestly. 'I look forward to it. Let me apologise again for interrupting you. I just wanted to drop in and meet you briefly. We can schedule a real meeting for later.'

'Of course,' she said, pulling her planner out of her desk drawer. 'What would be a convenient time for you?'

'A week from today?' he suggested. 'I've still got some settling in to do.'

'Is ten o'clock all right?' she asked, making a note with her quill.

'Absolutely. See you then.' He stood and offered his hand again, which she shook dutifully, then departed with a brief wave.

Hermione leaned back in her chair and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. *A week isn't so bad. From the look on his face when I mentioned the Horcruxes, I thought he was going to ask to move into the office with me.* She would be able to finish this section of work in peace and maybe even have time to plan a party for Harry, whose eighteenth birthday was in three weeks. Her first thought had been to ask Molly if they could hold the party at the Burrow, but now the desire was growing in her to host it at Spinner's End. She could put streamers and balloons in the back yard, perhaps get in some plastic garden furniture... She had no doubt that everybody would be dying to see the inside of Severus Snape's old house. Well, that was fine by her; their curiosity would raise the subject of Snape himself, and she might be able to pick some brains about him in the process. *Yes, pick some brains. And see if anybody might know how to get into that basement.*

Living on a Thin Line

Chapter 3 of 17

Hermione hosts a birthday party for Harry at Spinner's End and meets one of her new neighbours.

Author's Note: Many thanks to Angel Mischa, my fantastic beta.

Living On a Thin Line

Now another century nearly gone

What are we gonna leave for the young?

Hermione stood in the doorway of the porch, sipping lager shandy and watching her guests mingle in the back garden. She was pleased with the way the birthday decorations had turned out, despite having had to put them up at night when no neighbours might inadvertently witness her performing magic. She hadn't been able to see what she was doing, but now she looked on her accomplishment with approval. The sun was sinking in the sky, and a bank of rain clouds hovered to the east, black behind the vibrant red of the rusted mill chimney. Soon, the party would move inside.

The adults had claimed the garden chairs and sat in a wide semi-circle, Minerva McGonagall in the centre with Molly and Arthur Weasley flanking her. Andromeda Tonks cradled baby Teddy at one end of the arc; Hagrid, in a wooden chair conjured for him generously by Hermione when the flimsy plastic one had collapsed beneath him, sat at the other end, chatting with Harry and Ron. George and Percy reclined on a blanket spread over the lawn next to Ginny, who was weaving a necklace from the long strands of grass that grew against the garden wall. The group seemed subdued now that twilight had arrived, but the celebrations had been loud and cheerful earlier when Hermione had brought out the birthday cake and they had sung for Harry. His opened presents rested in a little pile on the table next to the food Hermione had prepared: devilled eggs and sausage buns and a vegetable platter and cupcakes—nearly all of which had been eaten.

There were people missing from this gathering, Hermione thought sadly. Luna and Neville had been invited, as had Bill and Fleur, but they had sent their regrets. And then there were those who would always be present, but only in the minds of the other guests: Fred, Lupin and Tonks, Sirius, and Dumbledore. Hermione turned around fiercely and walked back into the kitchen. She would *not* cry again, not at this party. Her gaze fell on the blank wall just inside the kitchen door, and thoughts of Snape rose in her mind. He would never have been invited to a party for Harry, of course, but Hermione missed him suddenly. It seemed somehow inappropriate to be holding a celebration in his old house—inappropriate to be enjoying the house at all—when the only way they could all be there was because he was dead.

'Hermione?' Ron poked his head inside the back door. 'It looks like rain. Should we all come in now?'

'Yes, of course,' she said hastily, facing him with a smile. 'I'm just going to do another bowl of punch.'

She busied herself in the kitchen while everyone came inside, making for the front rooms where she had put the settees from her parents' house. Ron and Harry carried in the food and the presents while Ginny carefully took down the streamers and balloons in the garden. She rushed in just as the first drops of the downpour began to fall.

'Thank goodness,' she said, shaking out her long, red hair. 'Just in time.' She grabbed the bowl of punch Hermione had mixed and took it into the front of the house to place on the battered dining room table.

Ron rummaged in the cupboard over the refrigerator and emerged, grinning, with a bottle of Firewhisky. 'Time for the good stuff,' he said and rescued three tumblers out of the dish drain. He poured a generous measure into each one and passed two of the glasses to Hermione and Harry. 'A toast,' he announced. 'To Harry—may your coffin be made from the wood of a hundred-year oak, which I shall plant tomorrow.'

They downed their drinks. Hermione giggled. 'I'm not sure that toast I taught you works so well for wizards, Ron!'

'Hey,' Harry protested, 'one hundred and eighteen years is a respectable old age, even for wizards. I won't be complaining.' He refilled their glasses and held his up. 'To everyone who isn't here—may their memories live as long as we do.'

Hermione drank, thinking of Snape. Ron, echoing her thoughts, said, 'Yeah, even grumpy old Professor Snape. Without him, it'd just be another boring party at the Burrow.'

Harry tilted his glass in acknowledgment. 'Pity his house turned out to be so normal.'

'Well,' said Hermione, smiling mischievously, 'not *that* normal.' She led them to the doorway and pointed at the wall. 'Do you see that?'

'Yeah,' Ron laughed. 'It's a wall.' He made a grab for her glass, which she twitched out of his reach. 'I think you've had too much to drink.'

Hermione rolled her eyes. 'The stairs go right above here, you see? And where stairs go up,' she prompted, looking at her friends expectantly.

'They go down,' Harry murmured, inspecting the wall with new interest. 'Are you saying there's a basement?'

'That's what Kingsley thought the first time we came here, and I think he's right,' Hermione told them. 'But if there is, I don't know how to get in.'

Ron ran one hand over the wall. 'It doesn't even look as if there's a door here,' he said doubtfully. 'There aren't any cracks or hinges or anything.'

'The hinges might be on the other side,' Harry pointed out. 'But you're right there ought to be something...' He knelt and slid his fingers carefully along the join where the wall met the floor.

'But it's Snape's old house,' Hermione reminded them unnecessarily. 'That means it could be concealed by magic.'

Pulling his wand out of his pocket as Harry stood up again, Ron brandished it over the wall and said *Alohomora!*

Hermione favoured Ron with a disdainful glance. 'You didn't really think that was going to work, did you?'

He shrugged sheepishly. 'I figured it was worth a try. Anyway,' he added defensively, 'you're not exactly giving it your best shot. You've been living here almost a month already!'

'Yes, Ron,' she said, exasperated, 'but I didn't want to go casting spells at it willy-nilly. What if Snape enchanted it to seal itself permanently if someone tries to break in? Or worse,' she continued, 'put some kind of trap on it?'

Chastised, Ron put his wand away. 'I didn't think of that,' he said apologetically. Hermione rolled her eyes again and finished her drink.

Harry was still staring at the wall thoughtfully. 'This reminds me of something,' he said, shaking his head as if to clear his mind. 'But I can't think where...' He trailed off and touched the wall again with his fingertips.

The door to the front room swung open and bashed him in the elbow. George poked his head round. 'Sorry, mate,' he said, seeing Harry rub his arm. 'What are you kids doing in here?' He came into the room, pushing the door closed behind him.

Noting Hermione's forbidding look, Ron said, 'Just sneaking a drink. Want one?' He poured some Firewhisky into a fourth tumbler.

'Bottoms up,' said George, drinking the whisky in one gulp. He put his empty glass into the sink and ushered them out of the kitchen. 'Mum was starting to wonder where the guest of honour had got to.'

The party continued. Hermione, sitting on the floor of the front room with her back resting against the shelves, basked in the familial atmosphere and tried not to let her mind settle on any thoughts that might disrupt her contentment. Just after nightfall, Andromeda left, taking Teddy home for bed, and Hagrid and McGonagall followed, returning to Hogwarts together. Arthur and Molly stayed a little longer and insisted on helping Hermione tidy up, but eventually they departed too, leaving the younger generation sprawled across the living room floor in various states of relaxation. Crookshanks sauntered in through the kitchen and climbed into Hermione's lap, circling for a few moments before curling into a ball and tucking his nose beneath his tail.

'Does he like his new home?' Percy asked, pointing at the cat.

'Oh, I think so,' Hermione answered languidly, her voice made slow and mellow by all the whisky and punch. 'He's already brought in some mice from the field out back.' She tipped her head back against the shelves and let it rest on the row of books behind her.

The boys started a game of Exploding Snap at the dining room table; Ginny went into the kitchen where Hermione could hear the rattle and clang of pots and pans. She knew Ginny was fixing dinner and wanted to protest, but didn't bother. *She'll just remind me that I hosted the party and ought to let her do a bit of the work now.* She got slowly to her feet and stretched, enjoying the sensation of muscles cracking and joints popping as she raised her arms over her head and arched her back. Crookshanks, made restless by her movements, trotted to the front door and looked back at her expectantly. With a low sigh, she opened the front door and followed him outside.

The rain had stopped, and the air now held a green, damp smell as everything started to dry in the gentle summer heat. Hermione could feel her hair frizzing in the humidity as she stepped onto the pavement and looked out over the field that bounded the end of the street. The streetlamps glowed hazily. She turned around, intending to walk to the bottom of the street and back, but was instead startled to find a boy standing in her path, looking up at her accusingly.

'Do you live in Spinner's End now?' he asked in a thick Yorkshire accent. Shaggy brown hair, which clearly hadn't seen a pair of scissors in a long time, hung into his blue eyes and fell to either side of his thin face. His baggy clothes were streaked with mud.

'Yes,' Hermione answered calmly. 'I moved in a few weeks ago.'

'What happened to Professor Snape, then?' the child demanded.

His question jolted Hermione into a state of alertness. 'Did you know Professor Snape?' she enquired curiously.

'Yeah,' the boy answered shortly, narrowing his eyes at her. A guarded expression crept across his face. 'Where's he gone?'

She sat down on the curb and stretched her legs out in front of her, patting the ground beside her. The boy complied, settling next to her, but continued to regard her with suspicion. 'I'm Hermione,' she said, extending her hand. 'What's your name?'

He shook firmly, smearing dirt across her palm. 'Mark.'

'I'm afraid I have some bad news, Mark,' she said gently. 'Professor Snape passed away a couple of months ago.'

For a moment the child looked stricken: his cheeks paled, and his blue eyes darkened with unhappiness. Then his face became shuttered and he shrugged. He picked up a stick from the gutter and dragged it along the crack between the pavement and the curb. 'It happens, I guess,' he said.

'Are you all right?' she asked.

'Yeah,' he said defiantly. 'How'd you get his house?'

'He left it to me in his will,' she said simply.

'Who are you, that he ought to leave his house to you?' Mark asked, looking her over appraisingly. 'You're never his daughter.'

Hermione smiled. 'No. I used to be one of his students.'

At this, Mark laughed outright, raising one eyebrow in a ridiculously adult expression of mockery. 'He told me about his students. He said he taught at a school for the mentally challenged.'

It was such a Snape-like thing to have said that Hermione didn't have the heart to be offended by this statement. Coughing to conceal her amusement, she admitted, 'Well, I suppose we all have our little mental challenges.'

'You were having a party today,' Mark said abruptly. 'I could see from my bedroom window.' He pointed up the street at the house one over from Spinner's End. 'What were you celebrating?'

'It's my best friend's birthday today,' she answered him.

'Professor Snape was my best friend,' said Mark forlornly, starting to peel the outer layers of bark from the stick in his hand. 'He used to give me lemonade. He was teaching me how to play chess.' He turned his head and looked at the front door of Spinner's End wistfully.

Sadness tore at Hermione's heart, a mixture of pity for this boy, who had lost a best friend who was a neighbour and a grown-up instead of a child his own age, and grief for Snape, whom Hermione had never imagined to have a life outside of Hogwarts. Yet here was the proof that Snape's life hadn't been all magic and misery somehow, during his summers at home, he had found the time to get to know and, eventually, befriend a neighbourhood child. Mark was, Hermione thought ruefully, probably the only person who would now grieve for Snape as a friend rather than as a brave, but ultimately unpleasant, hero of war.

'I have a friend who's really good at chess,' Hermione said suddenly. 'Maybe you could come over at weekends and keep learning from him.'

'Nah,' said Mark, throwing down his stick and standing up. 'Thanks anyway, though,' he added.

'Well, just for lemonade, then,' Hermione amended, desperate now not to leave the boy alone in his sadness.

'You make it with real lemons, like the professor did?' he asked, cocking his head to one side.

'You can teach me his recipe,' she offered, and finally Mark smiled.

'Kay,' he agreed. 'Sunday afternoons. That's when I used to come over.'

'Sunday afternoons it is,' Hermione confirmed.

'Right,' he said. 'Bye, Hermione!' He turned and trotted up the street, disappearing into the next house over and closing the door behind him with a slam.

She stood on the pavement for a few more minutes, pleased that she had won over Snape's young friend and etching a reminder into her brain to pick up lemons at the market on Saturday. Then she whistled for Crookshanks and went back inside, joining Ginny in the kitchen. As she passed through the doorway, she glanced at the wall where she thought the entrance to the putative basement might be, and a thought that had been hovering in the back of her mind swam to the front, making her pause and regard the blank plaster with deep satisfaction: *I've got a conduit to you now, Severus Snape bet you didn't think I'd meet your little friend! And now I'm going to unravel your mysteries, one by one.*

What Is and What Should Never Be

Chapter 4 of 17

Hermione's patron sends her research down a new path.

What Is and What Should Never Be

And if I say to you tomorrow

'Take my hand, child, come with me'

Hermione was in her office again for a meeting with Edward Teach. So far, these encounters, which occurred once every ten or so days, had lasted an average of fifteen minutes apiece, a majority of that time taken up by small talk. She'd learned that Teach was educated to university level, not yet thirty, and came from a pureblood line of what had once been Southern aristocracy 'before the war.' She assumed he'd meant the Civil War. He had been fascinated by her completed account of Voldemort's Horcruxes and seemed content to let her get on with things but his most recent owl had hinted at a wish to see more purpose and direction in her research. Had she yet formulated any questions to answer or hypotheses to test, he wanted to know? Made a list of sources to consult? Spoken to the Minister about contacting other magical governments regarding their knowledge of or experiences with Horcruxes? She'd done the first, made a stab at the second, and shrunk from the thought of doing the third. She remembered Barty Crouch Sr. and the Quidditch World Cup and had, thus, no desire to go anywhere near the Department of International Magical Cooperation.

Lost in these thoughts, she started at the sound of a knock on her door and schooled her features into a welcoming smile as her patron entered the room.

'Good morning, Miss Granger; you're looking well,' Teach said, composing his long limbs in her guest chair and lacing his fingers across his knee.

'Thank you,' she responded. She stacked some parchment together notes on various texts about Dark magic and asked, 'Would you like to see what I've been working on this week?'

'Not yet,' he answered, waving the papers away for the time being. 'I want to talk about something else.'

Not altogether surprised, Hermione rested her chin on her hands and waited politely.

'What do you know about Sirius Black?' Teach asked.

This was something Kingsley had mentioned, she recalled; she was struck by an uncharacteristic desire to be circumspect and said merely, 'A little. What particularly do you wish to know?'

Teach leaned back in his chair, into what Hermione's mind classified as the characteristic alpha-male posture, and explained, 'It seems to me that if we're interested in the soul, we ought to examine what happened to him. More than any public figure in recent years other than Voldemort, his history is bound up with the fate of his soul.'

'I'm beginning to see what you mean,' Hermione said thoughtfully. 'Please go on.'

He began to tick points off on his fingers. 'First, his imprisonment in Azkaban. The Dementors, as we know, are one of the few things on earth capable of damaging a soul. What was the state of Sirius Black's by the time he escaped? Second, his encounter with the Dementors by the lake at Hogwarts, from which he was saved by Harry Potter. How close did they come to relieving him of that essential part of himself? Finally, his demise. What is this Veil you all have here? Is that where souls go when their bodies die? If so, what does it mean if the body goes there too?'

Hermione pondered this for a few minutes, watching Teach watch her. She had not given much thought before to this aspect of Sirius's history, and in a way, doing so was distasteful to her. He had been a friend; she did not want to turn him into an object of intellectual curiosity. Eventually, she commented, 'You're very well-informed. Most people don't know what happened to him.'

Teach had the good grace not to grin as he admitted, 'I have contacts all over the place.'

Shrugging, Hermione pulled a fresh piece of parchment in front of her and said, 'All right. What, specifically, do we want to know?'

Teach talked; Hermione wrote. After perhaps half an hour, he paused, and she sat back to look over what she had written.

Questions re: Sirius Black

1. Where do souls go when they leave the earth-plane?

2. What happens if the living body leaves the earth-plane with the soul?

3. Can either the soul or the body, in such a case, return to the earth-plane?

4. Is the Veil the earthly entrance to the soul-plane?

5. If it is possible to conceive of a soul outwith its living body, is it possible to conceive of a living body outwith its soul?

Hermione repressed her laughter at the first and third questions: *Souls go to King's Cross Station, and yes, you can come back*. She refrained from saying this aloud, however, considering that Harry's case might have been exceptional, and promised to give this topic priority for the time being.

Teach nodded briefly but made no move to leave. Noticing her questioning glance, he shifted in his chair and said, 'There is one other thing.'

'Yes?'

'We've known for a long time about soul magic in America,' he said, looking slightly uncomfortable. 'It was something the Native Americans had, apparently. Wizards who crossed the ocean hundreds of years ago wrote about the kinds of magic they encountered in the native population. No one knows any more how to perform that kind of magic, but the accounts of it describe spells and potions that can send the soul on a journey outside of the body or summon the spirit of an ancestor to ask it for knowledge or advice.'

Hermione's heart rate sped up. *Summon the spirit of an ancestor...* A tiny spark ignited in the back of her mind, almost unnoticed by her. Mentally, she turned away from it, hoping it would burn out on its own before she was tempted to feed it with fuel. Resolutely, she focused on Teach and asked, 'You mean like astral projection and trance potions?'

'Something like that,' he confirmed, 'but as I say, the knowledge has been lost. Miss Granger...' here he leaned forward, and his eyes brightened with that same eagerness she had seen before '...what if we could discover it again? Imagine what we could do, the people we could speak to!'

Against her will, the tiny light in her mind grew from a spark to a match flare. Even in her grief, first over Sirius and Dumbledore, and then over her friends fallen in battle, she had distrusted the idea of the Resurrection Stone, with which Harry had been so fascinated. *The dead should be left in peace*. But what if she could talk to the dead without disturbing them? Would they, like portraits, only know the things they had known in life? Or did death open up new realms of knowledge and understanding?

'Your eyes have glazed over,' Teach said cheerfully, drawing her back to reality. 'What were you thinking about?'

Hermione shook her head, stopping her train of thought in its tracks, and grinned at him. 'I'm sorry I'm distracted.'

'Is it anything I can help with?' he asked generously.

She started to shake her head again, then stopped, thinking of a way to dodge his enquiry *Maybe he can...* Opening her bag, she pulled out the letter Harry had sent the day before and smoothed it on the desk in front of her. 'I've just moved into a new house,' she said carefully, 'that used to belong to a wizard. We think there's a basement and a place where there might be a door to it, but...' She trailed off. Leaning across the desk, she handed him the letter. 'My friend Harry says it reminds him of the entrance to this room in Hogwarts called the Room of Requirement. In order to get in, you walk past the blank wall three times, thinking of what it is you require, and then the door appears.'

Teach skimmed through the letter. 'I see. And you've tried this in your house?'

'All night!' she said, frustrated. 'And nothing happened. Either I'm not thinking the right things, or the door doesn't work that way.' She shrugged and took the letter back, folding it into her pocket. 'What do you think?'

'Are there wards on it, maybe?' he asked.

'None that I can find,' she answered.

'In that case,' he said decisively, 'it sounds like something I've seen before in the houses of, well, really well-known people who like their privacy. The charm is similar to the Fidelius - it hides an entrance or a doorway unless the caster reveals it. But instead of telling you where it is, like with the Fidelius Charm, the caster has to open the entrance in front of you.'

Hermione groaned involuntarily. 'I hope you're wrong!'

'Why is that?' Teach asked, looking insulted.

'Because the caster of this particular charm is dead.'

'Oh,' he said, taken aback. 'That would certainly be a problem.'

Her blunt statement seemed to have killed the conversation; after a few minutes of uncomfortable silence, Teach said his good-byes and departed, leaving her to contemplate the questions they had devised. Something was niggling in her memory, something she had thought of weeks and weeks ago in Oxford, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. The more she strained at it, the more elusive the memory seemed, so she focussed on something else and left the room, travelling in the lift to the

lowest floor and following the narrow stone stairway to the Department of Mysteries.

In the circular, revolving entrance, she went through the motions of eliminating doors until one opened onto the amphitheatre-like room at the bottom of which stood the crumbling stone archway and the tattered Veil itself. Cautiously, she climbed down the carven tiers, keeping her eyes firmly on the placement of her feet until she reached the floor in the centre of the room. There, she sat on the lowest tier and stared at the Veil in front of her, remembering what Harry had told her of Sirius's death: the look of surprise, the laugh, the graceful sideways tilt until his body had passed behind the curtain, Harry's lunge after him, Lupin's restraint. It seemed to her a very strange way to die. Even as she sat there, she could hear the faint whispers that appeared to twist the ragged curtain as if in a gentle breeze. *Is Sirius the owner of one of those voices? Are the souls of all the world's dead making those sounds?*

And suddenly, as always happens, her elusive memory coalesced into clarity. Hurriedly, she left the Department of Mysteries and grabbed her bag from her office before rushing into the streets of Muggle London. She walked quickly through the late-afternoon sunshine until she reached Charing Cross Road where she slowed down and began to scan the shop fronts of the bookstores around her. Eventually, she reached one that looked likely and went inside, following the twists and corners and handmade signs so ubiquitous in used-book stores, until she found the psychology section. Running her fingers over the spines, she selected the book she wanted and flipped through it calmly, recognising instantly the term she had been trying to think of: collective unconscious. Jung's work had had nothing to do with the soul, but when she combined his idea with what she had read of Plato's description of the soul in Oxford, a novel theory occurred to her: what if there were such a thing as a *collective soul*?

Leaning against the bookshelves, she allowed her imagination to follow the thread. Plato had written that souls were incorporeal and eternal; like believers in reincarnation, he had also suggested that souls were reborn into subsequent bodies. *Maybe there is no such thing as a soul-plane maybe there is a collective soul here on earth, to which our individual souls return when they die!* She pictured something like the Oort Cloud, hovering invisibly everywhere on earth with souls zooming in and out of it as some people died and others were born. Could it be that passing through the Veil simply returned one's consciousness to the collective soul? If that were the case, what had happened to Sirius's body? Would a collective soul explain the ability to speak to the dead?

Reeling with questions, Hermione staggered from the bookstore and into the street, narrowly dodging out of the way of a passing taxi. Finding a shadowy alleyway, she Apparated to York and strolled to a teashop in the Shambles. Within minutes, she was writing furiously, determined to record every piece of speculation that entered her brain. This work was far beyond her Ministry remit, but for the moment, she didn't care. There was always some possibility that she could link the research to Horcruxes perhaps damaging one's soul prevented it from returning to the collective but she would worry about that later. For now, she was seduced by the idea that the souls of the dead were here, on earth, and could communicate with the living. There were ways of achieving this, Teach had said, and they must be written down somewhere! Spells to summon souls, potions to send your own soul wandering from its body if they existed, she would find them.

And far in the back of her mind, as the weeks passed and she travelled to library after library, searching out texts and rare manuscripts and correspondence, that tiny flame continued to flicker, ignored, but burning all the same. It represented the temptation she would not be able to resist if she allowed herself to acknowledge it, the desire that had burst into being without warning at Edward Teach's words, the name of the person whose soul she would summon if only she knew how...

Quicksand

Chapter 5 of 17

Hermione sees something strange at Spinner's End.

Quicksand

I'm torn between the light and dark

Where others see their target divine symmetry

Despite being constantly in and out of stuffy libraries, Hermione noticed that a beautiful, dry autumn was beginning to set in. The leaves on the trees grew into a deeper green as the days shortened, and the sun seemed to hang at a lower slant in the sky. Her birthday was drawing nearer, too; Ron and Harry had mentioned throwing a party for her in Grimmauld Place. It cheered Hermione that the three of them still spent so much time together, even living hundreds of miles apart, though Hermione admitted this was less of an impediment in the wizarding world than in the Muggle one. She listened to all of their stories about training for the Aurory and enjoyed gossiping with them about their friends from school, though the person she most wanted to hear news of Draco Malfoy, the heir to Snape's library seemed to have entirely dropped off the radar of their circle of acquaintances. Neither Harry nor Ron appeared particularly dismayed about this. They were keen to know how her research for the Ministry was progressing, and she kept them satisfied with small tidbits, but she couldn't bring herself to tell them all of it, especially the part about communicating with the souls of the dead. She sensed that Harry, especially, would disapprove, so she kept it to herself. Harry's putative reaction triggered a doubt in her mind it made her wonder if what she was looking into was ethically dubious but she reminded herself that communicating with the dead wasn't the same as manipulating them.

Because it was autumn and the weather was invigorating after the sweltering heat of the summer, Hermione decided to take a few days at the end of the second week in September to do some work around Spinner's End. She was able to tidy up the interior with a few swift flicks of her wand, but in this neighbourhood of Muggles, working in the garden would have to be done the traditional way. She had staked out an area of the back garden to grow herbs and vegetables and was hoeing diligently when she heard a shout from somewhere up above.

'Mark?' she called, craning her neck at the house two doors down. She could just see him leaning out of the window of his attic bedroom. 'Come on over!'

A few minutes later, he emerged from her back door, not yet dirty but looking somehow scruffy still, carrying a blue, plastic pail half-filled with loam.

'What have you got there?' she asked curiously.

'It's for worms,' he said shortly. 'Can I have some of yours? I use them for fishing down at the river.'

'Of course,' she said. They set to digging and composting, and by early afternoon, Mark had a good handful of wriggling earthworms rooting happily through his pail of dirt. Noticing the sheen of sweat on his face, and feeling rather uncomfortably warm and sticky herself, Hermione invited him inside to cool off and have some lemonade. She had taken to keeping a pitcher of it in the refrigerator; Snape's recipe seemed designed to make enough for an army, and neither she nor Mark was adept enough at cooking to know how to reduce the measurements without ruining the flavour. They sat together at the little round table by the open kitchen windows, fanning their faces with pieces of the previous day's newspaper.

'How come it's not getting any cooler in here?' Mark complained eventually, echoing Hermione's thoughts.

'Maybe we need a cross-breeze,' she suggested. 'I'll prop open the doors down here; you run upstairs and open the windows in the bedrooms.'

Mark abandoned his lemonade and trotted up the stairs while Hermione wedged pieces of cardboard underneath the bookcase-doors to keep them from closing.

'Hermione, the window in here won't open,' Mark called down.

She followed his voice up to the small bedroom where she discovered that the window, which looked onto the scrubland to the east and the ancient chimney of the textile mill, was stuck fast. The two of them together, pushing with all their strength, were unable to budge it. Curiously, Hermione inspected the casement but didn't find any obstructions.

'Maybe it's painted shut on the outside,' Mark suggested. 'A lot of people do that.'

'Let's go outside, then, and see,' Hermione said. They went out of the front door and around the corner of the house. The windows on the ground floor, she saw, were indeed painted closed, but she had always assumed that was because they couldn't be used anyway, obscured as they were by Snape's bookshelves in the front room. She raised her gaze to the first floor, doubting whether they would be able to tell anything from so far below. At first, she couldn't see anything at all; the sun was hanging just above the ridgepole of her roof, and it blinded her as she glanced upward. Blinking to clear her watering eyes, she shaded them with her hand again and squinted at the casement of the upstairs window. There was no extra paint that she could see...

'Er, Hermione?' Mark asked, pointing straight at the window. 'Is there someone else in your house?'

She shifted her gaze and noticed, with a rush of panic, a figure standing in the very upstairs window whose frame she had been inspecting so narrowly. She blinked, thinking it was a trick of the light. The glare of the sun was too great to make out any details, but there was clearly someone there, black and indistinct, looking right at them.

A chill of fear seized Hermione. She tore around the side of the house, Mark at her heels, wrenched open the front door, and thundered up the stairs. She flung the door of the small bedroom back with a bang and rushed forward, only to find that the room was empty. She and Mark looked at one another, bewildered.

'The other rooms,' Mark exclaimed suddenly and rushed up the hallway into her bedroom. He jerked open the twin wardrobes, revealing her witch's robes, and stopped short, non-plussed. 'What are all these costumes?'

'Never mind that,' she said hastily. 'Come on.'

They searched the entire first floor of the house, then descended the stairs, closing the shelf-door behind them. The ground floor was clearly deserted, as was the back garden and the shed. They returned to the kitchen table, sipping the lemonade that had now grown watery from melted ice.

'He must've run out the front,' Mark opined.

'How could he have had enough time to do that?' Hermione countered.

'Dunno. Magic.' Mark gave a sardonic little smile that looked completely out of place on his youthful features. Hermione had seen him wear the expression before and could only assume he had picked it up from Snape himself.

'There's no such thing as magic,' she said weakly.

'Maybe it was a ghost, then.'

'There's no such thing as ghosts, either,' she said. 'It must have been a shadow or an illusion from the sun's glare.'

Mark shrugged, then asked, 'How do you know there's no such thing as magic? It could be real. People have all kinds of stories about it. We learned in history lessons in school about witch-burning.'

'Yes, but those women weren't really witches,' Hermione explained. 'They got burned because they were outcasts or because people were afraid of them. People are usually afraid of things they don't understand.'

'Yeah,' Mark agreed sullenly, 'that's what my teacher said, too.'

They worked in the garden for the rest of the afternoon, sometimes in companionable silence, sometimes talking about the other things Mark was studying in school. He was an inquisitive child; Hermione could understand easily why Snape would have enjoyed Mark's company. At dusk, she sent him home for his tea and went inside to shower.

The warm water soothed her, but as she washed her hair, she found herself still shaken by the memory of the mysterious man in her house. She and Mark had searched every inch of Spinner's End there was definitely no one here now besides her and she reasoned that whoever it was must have come inside earlier in the day. She had left the front door unlocked while she worked in the garden. *Won't catch me doing that ever again.* But she felt violated by this invasion of her private space and wondered how on earth she would ever manage to sleep that night.

'Hermione...'

Someone was touching her. She drifted, floating in a warm river of sensation, as fingertips stroked along her cheek, down her neck, through the valley between her breasts, across her stomach, between her thighs, past her calves, to the bottoms of her feet. She was naked; the hands on her were calloused. Then the hands changed to lips, closing over hers, sliding softly along her collarbone, tugging gently on her nipples. She arched her back, begging for more, and heard a soft laugh. The lips shifted to the swell of her breast and sucked hard. Invisible strings tightened throughout her body, aching to be strummed.

'Beautiful...'

She sensed a body next to her now, warm and hard, and the swish of soft hair over her belly as hands spread her legs. A tongue slid along the insides of her thighs, making her shiver, and slipped sensuously between her inner lips. The pleasure was paralyzing. Fingers dipped inside of her, stroking and plunging slowly. She raised her hips, pushing against them, the strings tightening further, and heard her own gasp as the body settled on top of her and hands lifted her knees. Lips descended on hers, hot and firm and delicious, and she opened her mouth eagerly for the kiss. Hip-bones dug into her pelvis; something hard and blunt pressed against her inner lips. Suddenly, she exploded, the strings inside her body bursting into a vibrating chorus of liberated pleasure, every muscle in her body twanging like a plucked rubber band. She gasped again, a ragged, breathy sound, and heard the voice moan into her ear:

'Hermione...'

Hermione was dreaming. She knew she was asleep and wanted to return to the dream she had been having before, in which something wonderful had been happening to her, but her mind had shifted into that strange world in which she was floating outside of her body, asleep in bed, dreaming that she was sleeping even as she slept. She could see her thin form curled up under the duvet, the bedside lamp lit, warming the room with its glow. Her vision shifted; she was looking across the room now. Someone was standing, back to the window, between the twin wardrobes. In the dream, she sat up cautiously on one elbow; her heart began to beat faster. It was a young man

standing there, clothed in black, with a pale face and pale, long-fingered hands. His hair was black, too, long and thick, and it swept around his shoulders. His eyes were large and dark, deep-set in his face; his nose was long above thin lips. He seemed familiar, but all wrong somehow: too young, too alabaster-smooth. The more she looked, the more striking his eyes became, long-lashed beneath straight, black brows. His expression was guarded as he stared back at her almost defensively.

Suddenly, she remembered that she was dreaming: the picture before her became alarming and incongruous. She struggled to wake up. It was difficult, as it always was to wake deliberately from a dream, to go from REM sleep to consciousness swiftly. She couldn't seem to move or open her eyes. Finally, she began to notice the cotton of the sheets over her body. Slowly, she realised that she had not sat up at all; she was still wrapped around herself in the foetal position. She lifted her eyelids carefully. The room was dark and cold; her lamp was off, the way she had left it, and the only light came from the streetlights outside. Relieved, she heaved a deep sigh and sat up only to fill instantly with debilitating fear.

The man was still there, across the room, staring at her. She knew she wasn't dreaming now, but the atmosphere of the dream lingered.

Hermione screamed, expelling part of the fear in the sound, and leant over in one fluid motion to snatch her wand from the bedside table. It was pointed at the man before she finished turning back toward him; her non-verbal *Incarcerous* streaked across the room as she leapt from the bed, sleep-dishevelled and wild-eyed.

The spell slammed into the east window and cracked it, making her jump. When the flash dissipated, she saw, quite clearly, that there was nobody there. The room was empty.

She sank onto the carpet, sobbing in relief. *Mark was right it is a ghost.* The thought comforted her much more than she would have expected. If the man was a ghost, he couldn't hurt her. Clutching her wand tightly and trembling, she went down to the kitchen and put the kettle on. While she waited for the water to boil, she wondered who the ghost might be. The obvious choice was Snape, but then the figure hadn't really looked much like Snape. He had been young, probably not much older than she was now, with no hint of lines on his face or emptiness in his black eyes. On the other hand, she reflected, perhaps Snape, in his youth, had looked like that, before the bitterness of his life was etched onto his features and his expression became that of a perpetual frown. Could ghosts appear as a younger version of themselves? *Yet another thing for me to look into.*

As she drank her tea, the relief leached away and doubt began to set in. She knew she hadn't dreamed the apparition, but what would Ron and Harry say if she told them about it? 'You were still asleep. It was just a nightmare.' What she was less sure about was whether she had simply imagined the event altogether. Certainly the man had been no pearly-white spectre like Nearly-Headless Nick or the other Hogwarts ghosts. Had her mind created some remnant of Snape, suggested by the fact that she was living in his house? But she remembered the figure at the window, pointed out to her by Mark, and shook her head firmly. She had not imagined it. But was it really Snape? There was an easy way to find out, she supposed. Harry had told her and Ron briefly about the content of the memories Snape had given him; he had definitely mentioned seeing the scene in which Snape agreed to spy on the Death Eaters for Dumbledore. That had been just after the death of the Potters; Snape would have been about twenty-one years old then, she guessed. She resolved to ask Harry, tactfully and circumspectly, without telling him why, if she could see those memories.

I'm becoming rather secretive and sneaky, she thought as she washed her teacup and went back upstairs. *Professor Snape would be pleased.*

Custard Pie

Chapter 6 of 17

Hermione seeks more information on soul magic from an unlikely source.

Custard Pie

I may look like I'm crazy

I should know right from wrong

Before Hermione had a chance to plunder Snape's memories, she was due to attend another meeting with her patron. His letter said that he had spent the previous several days ringing contacts in the United States to find out whether they could provide any leads regarding the soul magic in which he was so interested. When she arrived at the coffee shop just outside of Paddington Station where he had requested she meet him, she saw him sitting at a sidewalk table, drinking a cappuccino and tapping one foot impatiently.

'Finally!' he exclaimed when she approached and joined him. 'I thought you were never going to get here.'

'Am I late?' Hermione asked, suddenly flustered, and checked her watch.

'No, not at all,' he answered her reassuringly. 'It's just that I've got some good stuff here, and I couldn't wait to put you onto it.'

'What is it?' she wanted to know, feeling a rising tide of excitement.

Teach pulled a crumpled piece of parchment out of the pocket of his suit jacket and handed it to her. 'One title, that's all. But it's better than nothing.'

She inspected the parchment, which bore the words *Ars Magica Mundi Novi* in Teach's bold writing. 'This? I've heard of this book. There aren't any copies of it.' She dropped the parchment on the table in disappointment.

'I know!' Teach exclaimed. 'That's why it's so likely to be the one we're looking for.'

'And how is that supposed to help us?' she demanded. 'The last known copy of the *Ars Magica* was destroyed in the Cotton Library fire in 1731. Wizards have been searching for a lost copy of this book for centuries. Nobody has ever found one. I wouldn't even know where to begin looking!'

A smug smile crept onto Teach's tanned features. 'What about private libraries?' he asked.

'They've been searched, too,' Hermione objected.

'All of them?'

'Most of them,' she asserted. 'There might be a few families who haven't allowed archivists to inspect their collections, but God only knows who they are.'

'God... and maybe us.' His grin became broader now. 'I was given a name, too, when I made those calls. Someone whose library hasn't been searched. And you're in a perfect position to do it.'

A hideous foreboding slithered up Hermione's spine. 'Who?'

'Lucius Malfoy.'

The words dropped like a lead penny between them. After a moment of shock, Hermione unfroze, rocketing out of her chair in outrage. 'Have you lost your mind?' she cried. 'There's no way in *hell* I'm going into Malfoy Manor again!'

Teach stood up too and extended a calming hand. 'It's okay, Miss Granger you don't have to go there. Please, sit back down. I'm sorry, I didn't mean...'

'No,' she interrupted, dragging a trembling hand through her thick curls. 'I'm sorry. Sometimes I overreact.' She returned to her chair, breathing deeply to calm herself. 'My one and only experience in Malfoy Manor was... unpleasant, to say the least.'

Teach looked as if he would have liked to ask her about it, but wisely refrained from doing so. Instead, he said thoughtfully, 'I'm told Malfoy is in prison, anyway.'

'Yes...' Hermione agreed carefully. She didn't want to go there, and she *wouldn't* go there, but already her agile brain was working out a way to get the information, nevertheless. The match-flame in her mind grew again suddenly as another idea occurred to her. Cautiously, she offered, 'There might be a way to find out whether the book is there. Lucius Malfoy is in prison, that's true, but... his son isn't.'

'Do you know his son?' Teach asked, excitement returning to his expression.

'Sort of,' Hermione hedged. 'We're not close. But I would say he owes me a favour.'

'Right,' Teach said decisively. 'We'll send him a letter.'

'Okay,' Hermione agreed. 'As soon as I get back to the Ministry.'

Teach cocked his head at her quizzically. 'Why not now?' And he gave a piercing whistle. On cue, a grey pigeon dived from one of the windowsills above and landed directly on the table between them, deftly avoiding Teach's cup of coffee. Tearing a strip from the parchment they had been looking at, he handed it to her, together with a pen. 'Go on,' he urged.

This man is completely insane, Hermione thought as her eyes darted around them. People at the other tables were staring at them now, eyeing the pigeon with disgusts *it possible that the Americans never signed the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy? It wouldn't surprise me.* Surreptitiously, she picked up the pen and scribbled a few words on the parchment, asking to arrange a meeting with Draco as soon as was convenient. Teach tied the parchment blithely to the pigeon's leg and tossed the bird into the air. Near-by coffee drinkers craned their necks curiously to watch it fly away.

'What?' Teach asked defensively, catching Hermione's expression of disbelief. 'Carrier pigeons. It's perfectly normal.'

'Yeah,' Hermione said doubtfully. 'I'm going in to get some coffee. You want another cup?'

'Please,' he replied, nodding.

After standing in the queue for a few minutes, Hermione emerged into the morning sunlight again bearing two cups of coffee. As she sat back down, she noticed that Teach was watching her appraisingly, his mobile features unusually solemn. 'What?' she asked.

'I thought I would have a more difficult time convincing you to look into this soul magic,' he answered directly. 'It's not really much to do with Horcruxes.'

'It might be,' she argued. 'We'll have to wait and see.'

He nodded slowly. 'True. But I'm not a complete idiot, Miss Granger, and you're not very good at dissembling. You have a personal interest. What is it?'

'I don't,' she denied hotly, taking a defiant swallow of coffee that burned her throat on its way down.

He leaned forward suddenly and put his elbows on the table, gazing at her intently. 'What we're investigating is not simple, safe magic,' he said. 'It could be dangerous. We have to be honest with each other. You can't keep things from me.' His tone was vaguely threatening.

Hermione swallowed convulsively, her eyes locked on his. 'I'm not hiding anything. Why would you think that I am?'

'Because I know whose house you live in,' he said simply.

The flame in her brain exploded into a conflagration. *Yes! Talk to Professor Snape... Find out why he let himself be killed surely he could have saved himself! Find out why he left his house to me, why he's haunting it...* Thoughts whirling uncontrollably, she stared at Teach in mingled horror and hope, unable to deny her secret wish any longer.

'I thought so,' he affirmed quietly. 'Were you in love with him?'

'What?' Hermione blurted, astonished. 'Of course not! Do you even *know* anything about Professor Snape?'

Teach's tanned face reddened instantly, but he was saved from having to respond by the return of the carrier pigeon. Casting a furtive glance around the pavement, Teach untied the scrap of parchment from its leg and shoved it off the table. He passed the note to Hermione without a word, pretending to be suddenly deeply interested in the design on the tabletop.

She unfolded the parchment and read the short message. Puzzled, she looked up at Teach and said, 'He wants to meet me at the Ascot train station in an hour.'

Teach shrugged. 'Commendably prompt.'

'I've never been there,' she complained. 'I can't Apparate.'

He turned to look over his shoulder pointedly, then faced her again. 'This is Paddington Station.' He fished a roll of banknotes from his pocket and handed her a twenty-pound note. 'Take a train.'

She took the money hesitantly. 'You're not coming with me?'

'That would be a little awkward, don't you think?' He stood and straightened his trouser-legs. 'Let me know what you find out.'

When he had gone, Hermione gathered up her bag with a huff and stalked down the street, on the lookout for a shady alleyway. She wasn't going to march into Paddington on his command and she knew the trains to Ascot left out of Waterloo anyway. Instead, she ducked into a shadowy doorway and Apparated to Reading, which was the nearest city to Ascot that she knew well enough to travel to in such a way. From her arrival point across the river, she walked into the city centre and made her way to the station, where she bought a single to Ascot.

After a half-hour ride on the stopping service, she climbed from the train at Ascot station and saw Draco Malfoy immediately. Tall and pale, thinner than when she had last seen him, and dressed in a scruffy, baggy suit, he was lurking on the platform next to the drinks machine. He looked her up and down without interest as she approached and, with a lazy gesture, said, 'Come on, then.'

She followed him through the tiny lobby, past the taxi rank, and into the small car park where a flight of concrete steps led down to a path overhung with ancient oak trees. 'What is this, Malfoy?' she hissed when they were out of earshot of the other travellers. 'Why do we have to meet in a random train station like spies out of a bad novel?'

He paused with one foot on the steps and gazed up at her contemptuously. 'Don't be any more stupid than you can help, Granger,' he said impatiently. Pulling a pouch of tobacco from his pocket, he began to roll a cigarette. 'It's not a random train station. Come on.' He turned his back on her and trotted down the stairs.

Exasperated, she hurried after him, catching him up as he passed beneath the canopy of oaks. 'Why are we here, then?' she demanded.

Wordlessly, he pointed to the sign posted by the side of the path. White letters on a royal blue background read *Ascot Racecourse*. A white arrow directed them further up the path.

'We're going to the races?' she asked incredulously.

Draco nodded and continued onward. She matched his pace, bemused, and watched him in silence as he smoked his roll-up.

'What is it that you want from me, Granger?' he asked finally, keeping his eyes straight ahead.

'I want to know about your library,' she stated firmly. 'Does your family keep a catalogue of the books in it?'

'Of course,' he said briefly. The path turned into a tunnel beneath Ascot High Street, and they emerged on the other side into an open green space. Straight ahead, the red brick viewing stands of the racecourse rose into the air. They passed through the ticket booth, Draco casually Confounding the clerk, and climbed into the open-air stands. Draco eased his long body into a seat and patted the one next to him, motioning for Hermione to sit.

She allowed Draco several long minutes to watch the horses, powerful and elegant in their speed, before saying, 'Could I see the catalogue?'

Pale grey eyes cut toward her narrowly. 'Are you wanting a specific book, then?'

'Maybe,' she answered evasively.

'You tell me which one, and I'll see if I can help you,' he offered. 'I'm not going to let you rummage through my father's things.'

'I never intended to *rummage*,' she countered scathingly. 'Believe me, the last place I want to go is back into your house.'

Draco flinched. 'Tell me what book it is,' he said tiredly. 'If we have it, you can see it.'

Surprised, she snapped without thinking, 'You're being unusually nice, Malfoy.'

He turned to her stonily. 'I owe you. I may not like you, but I'm not completely without honour.'

Silenced by the pained expression in his eyes, she pulled Teach's parchment out of her bag and handed it to Draco.

He read the title, sighed, and crumpled the parchment into a ball. 'We used to have this one. Father lent it to Professor Snape.'

'But that's great!' she said excitedly. 'It means you've gotten it back. Snape left his library to you in his will.'

Draco shrugged maddeningly. 'Maybe. Maybe not.'

'What do you mean, "maybe"?' Hermione demanded, beginning to grow frustrated. 'Do you have it or don't you?'

'You must have read the will,' he commented, starting to roll another cigarette. 'Did you not notice *which* books he left me?'

Confused, she focussed blindly on the horses, trying to remember exactly what the will had said, and after a moment, it came to her... *such as may be found within my home or personal chambers...* 'So...' she murmured, 'he might have hidden some books elsewhere...'

'Looks like it,' Draco said succinctly. He cocked his head sideways, listening to the announcer read the results of the race. With a discreet flick of his wand, he conjured a betting slip out of the air and regarded it with a smirk of satisfaction. 'Do you want some beer?' he asked Hermione suddenly.

'Beer?' she repeated, mystified.

'My treat,' he assured her, waving the betting slip. 'Lager or stout?'

'Er... lager,' she answered weakly.

Three hours, nine races, and four pints of lager later, Hermione staggered drunkenly behind Draco into The Stag on Ascot High Street. Making her way to a table in the sunshine of the beer garden, she marvelled at how many people were sitting in the pub. *It's Friday afternoon, for heaven's sake. Doesn't anyone go to work any more?* Draco came out with the next round and plopped his lanky frame onto the bench opposite, spilling beer over the tops of the pint glasses.

'You have to admit,' he said, slurring slightly, 'I've been really kind to you this afternoon. I think it's time for a confession.'

'You want to confess something to me?' she asked warily, taking a long swallow of her beer. 'That's new.'

'Dozy cow,' he said affectionately, favouring her with a drunken grin. *You* are going to confess to *me* why you want that book.'

'I'm not.'

'You are. My good looks, charm, and persuasive manner are irresistible to women.'

Hermione eyed his rumpled suit and messy, over-long hair doubtfully. 'I don't think so, Malfoy.'

'Come on!' he exclaimed, thumping his pint glass onto the wooden table. 'Or I'll die of curiosity, right here. You'll have a time explaining that. Everyone will think you poisoned my drink.'

'Fine!' she shot back defiantly. 'I'll tell you. I want to find out how to contact Professor Snape.'

Draco dissolved into giggles. 'What are you on about, Granger? You can't contact him, he's dead.'

'That book will tell me how,' she replied defensively.

'You think so?' he asked, lifting an elegant eyebrow. 'Cause I don't. Father showed me what was in that book. The spells and potions and stuff are all wrong.' Seeing her angry expression, he laughed again. 'You don't think it's been tried before? Nobody knows how to make that stuff work. Although,' he amended pensively, 'if anyone could have figured it out, it'd be Snape. Did you find any notes or anything in his house?'

'Nothing,' she said disappointedly, her face falling.

'Cheer up, Granger,' Draco said encouragingly. 'There might be other ways. You're a Muggle-born just use a Ouija board or something.'

She sneered at him and downed the rest of her pint. 'Thanks for your help,' she said sourly.

'What d'you want to talk to Snape for anyway? That nosy git,' he slurred.

'Dunno, really,' she dodged. 'Curiosity.' She grinned.

'Come to dinner with me,' Draco blurted.

'What? No. You're drunk. So am I. I'm going home.' She rose clumsily to her feet and picked up her bag.

'Keep in touch, Granger,' Draco called as she stumbled back into the pub. Entering the loo, she locked herself in a cubicle and concentrated hard, praying that she wouldn't Splinch herself. A moment later, she twisted on the spot and, after a brief sensation of squeezing, appeared in the front room of Spinner's End with a loud *crack*. Hastily, she checked to make sure she had all her parts, then pushed her hair out of her face and looked up. And screamed involuntarily.

The man was standing right in front of her, so close she could have touched him if she wanted. She could see, with remarkable clarity, every fibre of his black robes and every shining strand of his thick, dark hair. Charcoal eyes bored into hers pitilessly. His tall, thin form towered over her.

She fumbled for her wand with fingers numbed by paralysing fear. Extracting it at last from her bag, she pointed it at the centre of his chest. 'What do you want?' she whispered, stepping back cautiously.

He remained silent and motionless; the more she gazed at his face, the more convinced she became that this ~~was~~ Snape. Despite the lack of lines, the long nose and the shape of his high cheekbones and obstinate jaw line were the same. Even the colour of the hair was the same, although not, she had to admit, the vibrancy and lack of grease.

'What do you want?' she repeated, more firmly this time. In response, the figure seemed to shimmer, then fade away, as she watched in amazement.

When it had disappeared completely, she dropped her wand on the shag carpet and collapsed next to it. Her entire body was shaking convulsively *I've got to get out of here. There's no way I can sleep here tonight*. Gathering all of her courage, she snatched up her wand and her bag and thundered up the stairs to her bedroom. She stuffed a change of clothes into the bag hurriedly and took one final glance around the room. Everything was quiet and normal.

Still shivering, she Apparated to Grimmauld Place.

Drowse

Chapter 7 of 17

Hermione sees the memories and, with a little assistance, discovers the basement.

Drowse

It's the sad-eyed good-bye

Yesterday moments I remember

The library at Grimmauld Place was lit warmly by the roaring fire Harry had built to combat the deepening chill of the autumn weather. Earlier in the day, while she had been watching the horseracing from the grandstand, Hermione had felt refreshed by the breeze and the view of oak leaves changing slowly from green to gold. Now, as she sat shivering on the sofa, arms wrapped about her chest, she was intensely grateful for the blaze and found herself wondering what she would do in Spinner's End without a fireplace of her own when winter came.

Ron came into the room carrying a spare duvet and joined her on the sofa, tucking the bedclothes around her shoulders solicitously. 'Now,' he said, patting her on the back, 'tell us what happened.'

Hermione raised her head and met Harry's sombre green gaze. She felt certain he knew what she was going to ask of him. With a deep breath, she described the man in the window and the nighttime invasion of her bedroom, finishing with the appearance of the figure in her sitting room earlier that evening.

'The old bastard's just trying to scare you, Hermione,' Ron commented when she stopped speaking.

'Maybe,' she said reluctantly, keeping her eyes focussed on Harry. 'But I need to know if it's really Snape.'

'Who else could it be?' Ron asked doubtfully.

'His father?' Hermione offered, but the suggestion sounded dubious even to her own ears.

Harry finally shifted, standing slowly from the shadowy armchair in which he had been resting. 'Do you want to see the memories?' he asked, a shade of weariness in his tone.

'I know it would be imposing, Harry please, I don't want you to feel pressured or uncomfortable,' Hermione said apologetically, shrugging off the duvet and approaching him. 'You don't have to show me if you think it's too personal.'

Briefly, he looked at Ron indecisively; then, coming to a decision, he squared his shoulders and said, 'It's not personal to me it's personal to Snape. You have to keep what you see a secret.'

'Of course,' she promised.

He led her upstairs to the study, gesturing for Ron to stay behind, and extracted a small corked bottle and a shallow stone basin from the glass cabinet. He set them on a dusty table next to the horrible Black tapestry and faced Hermione seriously. 'Remember: not a word to anyone else,' he admonished her.

She nodded and watched as he left the room, closing the door gently behind him. Hermione picked up the bottle and stared at the whirling haze inside it. Half an hour's worth, perhaps, of Snape's life was contained within it. The melancholy thought struck her that it was a poor record of a courageous, tragic life that had spanned nearly four decades. She shook the bottle gently and watched the agitated cloud of memories twist and writhe. *If I stand here looking at it any longer, I'm going to lose my nerve.* Shuddering slightly, she pulled out the cork and poured the gas into the basin, where it coalesced into a liquid sheen. Then she closed her eyes tightly and plunged her face into the bowl.

Children on swings there's Spinner's End that scrubland used to be a playground! And that must be Harry's mother and his aunt...

Hermione watched in fascination as Snape, a skinny, unkempt child who reminded her irresistibly of Mark, befriended Lily Evans and, as he grew older, fell hopelessly in love with her. Unaccountably, Hermione began to grow angry as the scenes played out before her eyes, eventually becoming positively enraged. Her heart grew heavy with pity at Snape's teenaged, self-centred blindness, then indignant when Lily rejected her childhood friend. It bled when Snape realised his information had led to her death. Through her amazement at the strength of her sympathy and her confusion over the source of her trembling fury, she forced herself to watch carefully as Snape fell in front of Dumbledore in supplication.

Moving for the first time, she stepped around their forms to stand just behind Dumbledore, from which position she could see Snape's face clearly.

My God... It's the same person! Even the expression he wore when Dumbledore outlined his plan for Snape was the same. The grief melted from his visage in the face of what he was being asked to do, to be replaced first by cold resentment, fearful astonishment, then finally defensive caution. Thick black hair, not yet made greasy by constant exposure to potion fumes, framed his tear-stained cheeks. The luminous black eyes still held emotion; Hermione wondered briefly when they had become so empty and hopeless until her brain quickly supplied the answer: it must have been when Dumbledore finally admitted that Harry would have to die in order for Voldemort to be defeated. She understood now that Snape could never have withstood such apparent betrayal.

But the scene was changing again. Weakened by fear and now anger, Hermione realised she would have to witness that death-blow to Snape's hope if she stayed in the memories; pulling determinedly, she wrenched herself out of the Pensieve and stumbled away from the table, staring around the musty study in consternation. *Professor Snape is haunting my house, but why? Is he trying to scare me, as Ron suggested? Or is he just somehow there?* Seeing Snape's wretchedness had made her feel suddenly ashamed at having run away from his image. *Maybe he's lonely.*

The longer she stood there ruminating, the more determined she became to go back to the house straight away. She couldn't bear the thought that she had fearfully rejected the remnant of a man who might only wish to be in the comforting presence of the living, breathing heir to his home. Her terror seemed, in retrospect, to be the height of ingratitude and selfishness.

Hermione returned the swirl of memories to the bottle and corked it carefully, almost lovingly. Anger rushed through her again as she placed the bottle on its shelf in the cabinet. *I'm not the only one without enough pity,* she reflected bitterly, thinking of Harry's mother. Her antipathy toward Lily Evans seemed to grow with every step she took down the stairs toward the library. *Professor Snape should've known she wouldn't understand his position. It's easy to define oneself as part of the oppressed minority or the powerful majority but what role is there for a powerless member of the majority?*

She paused outside of the door to the library and narrowed her eyes, running her mind back through her train of thought and examining it dispassionately. *Oh, no,* she realised: *I'm jealous.* Shaking her head to dispel the knowledge, she opened the door.

'Well?' asked Ron, looking up from the newspaper in his lap. 'Is it Snape?'

'Yes,' she answered, hefting her bag back onto her shoulder. 'I'm going back.'

'Are you sure?' Harry enquired, gazing at her worriedly.

'It's stupid to be afraid,' she said firmly. 'He can't hurt me. He's just a sad, lonely ghost.'

Ron glanced at Harry doubtfully and shrugged. 'You wouldn't rather stay here?'

'I shouldn't. I can't go running off every time I get spooked. Besides,' she added, smiling at her friends, 'I've dealt with worse than ghosts.' She hugged Harry, thanking him for allowing her to view Snape's memories, and spun on the spot, returning to Spinner's End in a single, breathless instant.

The house was quiet and dark when Hermione popped into the living room. Watchfully, but calmly, she went into the kitchen and switched on the lights, hanging her bag over the hook on the back door. She tuned the radio to some classical music and busied herself cooking dinner, which she ate at the little table by the windows. Doing the washing-up afterward soothed her, and she found that she was relaxed enough to go up to bed with a library book and a cup of hot, milky tea for company.

She took a long time undressing, putting her dirty clothes into the hamper by the wardrobes and slipping on a white cotton camisole. She closed the curtains slowly, gazing into the street below and then looking out over the eastern scrubland, trying to picture the swing set and merry-go-round she had seen in Snape's memories. The shrubbery behind which he had hidden to spy on the girls was still there, but ragged and untended. She wondered whether it had been painful to him to return to this place, summer after summer. Her estimation of Snape had always been that he was a practical man; it was a bit jarring now to realise that he had lived half his life under the sentimental shadow of an ancient guilt. The man Hermione knew would have considered the debt repaid after the first time he had saved Harry's life; who was this new Snape who continued to sacrifice himself until eventually he gave his own life, not for personal satisfaction or for the principle of liberty, but because a long time ago he had accidentally wronged a dead woman?

Then she realised, as she turned away from the window and crawled beneath the bedcovers, what his guilt actually comprised. It was not so much that he had contributed to Lily's death; rather, he had understood that Voldemort meant to kill her son and, probably, her husband and the thought had made Snape glad. Lily, alone! For Snape, it would have been an opportunity. And only when Lily had died, too, did Snape understand the grief he would cheerfully have caused her. His sense of obligation was to himself, to prove that he was no longer a man who would joyfully contrive at another person's misery for his own gain. *I suppose he never was able to prove that to himself. At least he proved it to the rest of us in the end.*

'Hermione...'

The hands were touching her again, slowly stroking her back beneath the thin fabric of the camisole. Fingers brushed along her ribs and cupped her breasts gently, thumbs rubbing over her nipples. She moaned and arched her back against the warm body next to her. The bedclothes rustled; strong arms pulled her close. A hand slid down her back and rested on her bum briefly before sliding between her thighs.

She could feel the moisture at her core as a fingertip swept across her clitoris. She opened her legs and hooked one knee over bony hips, pressing her pelvis against the

hardness next to her. Lips fastened on her neck and sucked softly. Warm breath blew past her earlobe, and then she heard the voice whisper:

'Go downstairs.'

She couldn't move the pleasure was too great, the trembling strings in her body were too taut. She moaned again, and the puff of whispered laughter lifted tendrils of hair from her neck. The finger between her legs pressed down firmly, and she exploded, crying out, her muscles thrumming violently.

'Go downstairs.'

Hermione awoke with a start, sitting straight up in bed. Her body felt as limp and powerless as a wet noodle, and she could still feel a faint pulse of pleasure at her core. Erotic dreams were not something she was accustomed to; in fact, most of the time she couldn't remember any dreams she had, so this experience was doubly new. The dream-lover had been familiar, however, and she suspected she must have dreamt something similar before, although she couldn't remember when.

Weakly, she climbed out of bed and made her way to the loo, using it with a sense of relief. Her reflection in the mirror over the sink caught her eye as she was washing her hands: her brown eyes were bright, her pink cheeks more flushed than usual, her bushy hair tousled and dishevelled from... *What is that?* She leaned in closer and pushed a tangle of curls away from her neck. There, just below her ear, was a faint red mark that looked for all the world like a love-bite. *How on earth did I do that to myself?*

Puzzled, she wiped her hands on a towel and left the bathroom, intending to go back to bed, but stopped at the head of the staircase and looked down in surprise. Dim light was shining at the bottom, although she knew she had closed the bookcase-door earlier in the night. She fetched her wand from her nightstand and tiptoed cautiously down the stairs, holding the wand loosely in her right hand. Not only was the door at the bottom of the stairs hanging open, so was the door on the other side of the room Hermione could see that the dim light was coming from the kitchen.

Swallowing hard to master her fear, she edged along the bookshelves and peeked through the doorway. And found herself looking, not at a blank wall, but at a narrow flight of wooden steps, at the bottom of which sat a small, shaded lamp.

The basement!

Careless of her bare feet, impervious to the chill of the house despite being clothed only in a thin camisole and a pair of knickers, she went joyfully down the steps and stood at the bottom, observing the room around her with a deep sense of satisfaction. Her impetuosity felt a bit stupid; at all the horror movies she had ever seen, she had screamed at the heroine not to go down the shadowy staircase alone. But there was no feeling of danger here; the soft illumination from the red-shaded lamp was comforting, even welcoming.

The basement stretched the entire length of the house, rough and unfinished, and divided into two sections by the staircase. The walls were bare drywall, decorated by a few forlorn posters stuck up with blue-tac. Threadbare rugs covered the cement floor. To her right, the section of the basement beneath the kitchen was set up like a sitting room with a worn red armchair and sofa grouped around a low, scarred coffee table. She padded toward the chair, her toes sinking into the Turkish-patterned carpet. Behind the little ring of furniture, the cast-iron furnace hovered in the corner, dark and cold as she had not yet put the heat on for the winter. Against the wall leaned a free-standing bookcase, filled not with books as she would have expected, but with records. Next to it, on another ragged table, was an old-fashioned record player, the cover closed and dusty.

She turned, looking back across the basement, and saw that the area beyond the stairs, beneath the front rooms of the house, had been turned into a makeshift Potions laboratory. *Jackpot.* Potions texts filled the shelves built into the drywall. A wardrobe against the far wall, one of its doors hanging ajar, promised a wealth of potions ingredients. The centre of the room was taken up by a long work surface, plain, with two pewter cauldrons atop it. And in the corner, a desk, its surface covered with quills, parchment, and open books. She made her way toward the desk, observing as she passed that the cauldrons were clean and empty, and saw above it, high on the wall, a small vent. It must open near the ground at the front of the house, she reasoned, and she was amazed she had never noticed this.

The parchments on the desk were filled with the familiar, cramped slant of Snape's handwriting. Unable to bring herself to touch them, Hermione leaned over them instead, trying to read his notes. *Antivenin.*

Despite her huge size, it is evident that N. is not a python, for they immobilise their victims by squeezing... Cobras can grow to enormous size, and experiments with her venom on rats suggest the pattern of a neurotoxin: contraction, inhibition of muscle function, respiratory failure from paralysis...

Hermione reeled away from the desk in horror, her mind's eye filled with the image of Snape on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, convulsing, shivering, blood pouring from his neck, life draining from his eyes. Could she have saved him? Maybe antivenin would have helped him, but then again, maybe not, with that great gash in his neck. What would have killed him first suffocation or blood loss? Surely the blood loss, she hoped: the human body doesn't hold that much to begin with, and exsanguination takes mere minutes although she didn't remember the blood so much as his face, the light dying out in those blank eyes.

Gripped now by guilty panic, she rifled through the parchments and the books on the desk. Nothing there suggested that Snape had succeeded in developing an antivenin. In fact, besides these notes, there was nothing there at all! She opened the desk drawers one by one, but found nothing other than spare quills, ink, and blank parchment. The books on the bookcase were perfectly straightforward Potions manuals. *There must be something personal here!*

Turning back toward the sitting room, she noticed a tea mug on the coffee table, furred inside with mould. The cushions on the sofa were indented at one end, as if someone had sat there habitually. She flicked through the records on the shelves. There were at least a hundred of them, some from the 1940s and 1950s. The shelves at eye-level, however, held the records that had clearly been Snape's, music from the sixties and seventies. It was almost a treasure trove, these old records in mint condition. Hermione wondered if this basement had been Snape's private refuge as a teenager, a warded place where his parents couldn't go. She moved across to the record player, its plastic lid closed and covered with a thick layer of dust. She swept her arm across the top, dislodging the dust, and saw a record on the turntable inside. She lifted the lid carefully and switched on the unit, the low hum of electricity filling her ears. The record began to spin. It would be so easy, she thought, to move the needle into position and listen to the last music Snape had played for himself in this house but she couldn't do it. Sadly, she switched off the machine without ever touching the needle.

Carefully, she searched beneath the chair and sofa and under their cushions, but found only some lint and a few old pennies. She dropped onto the sofa and crossed her arms in frustration. How tempting it would be to stay down here, searching for something personal of Snape's, reading in this basement refuge, listening to the music Snape must have enjoyed! But there was no point, she realised sadly; whatever he might have owned that would reveal him as a person to her, he must have kept elsewhere. It did not escape her that the *Ars Magica* was nowhere in evidence, either. The feeling grew in her that Snape himself had opened this room to her, surely for some purpose, but she was at a complete loss as to what that purpose might be.

Reluctantly, she returned to the stairs and climbed. At the top, she noticed the door, a plain wooden panel that had been hanging open over the stairs the whole time she had explored the basement. The hinges were on this side no wonder she and Harry and Ron had failed to find them. Now that she had seen the basement, she felt certain she would be able to enter it again, and this assumption was proved correct when she pulled the door shut behind her and it failed to turn back into blank wall.

Wearily, she trudged back to her bedroom and lay down again, pulling the duvet over her chilled body *Sleeping is going to be impossible now,* she thought, but before she knew it, she was waking to the sound of an owl tapping on the brightened east window of her bedroom.

Sleep okay? read the note from Harry when she had untied it from the owl's leg.

Snatching up a quill from her dressing table, she wrote back: *You're never going to believe what I found...*

Kiss

Chapter 8 of 17

Hermione has an unusual meeting with Teach.

Kiss

I want to be your fantasy

Maybe you could be mine

Hermione found something hilarious about the way that Harry and Ron broke their necks to Apparate to Spinner's End when they received her short note. The three of them spent the morning crawling over every inch of the basement, moving bookcases, lifting the rugs and searching beneath them in short, inspecting the room and everything in it for hidden compartments or concealed storage spaces. In the end, they found nothing, as Hermione had assumed, and returned upstairs dusty and sweaty.

'At least you have his notes on antivenin,' Harry remarked while he helped her make sandwiches for lunch.

'Fat lot of good that does,' Hermione responded sullenly. 'It's too late to use them for anything.'

'Too bad we couldn't find his diary,' murmured Ron from the other side of the kitchen. 'Not that it would have been that interesting. "Today I taught a load of dunderheads, worked some evil for my Dark Lord, and went to bed alone as usual," he mocked.

'Ronald!' Hermione rounded on her friend, exasperation from their fruitless search bursting forth. 'The poor man is dead; don't ridicule him in his own house.' She slapped a cutting board down on the table in front of him and handed him a knife and a head of lettuce. 'Get chopping.'

'Sorry,' he muttered, slicing into the lettuce.

A tapping on the kitchen window drew Hermione's attention as she was spreading egg mayonnaise on the bread. Ron opened it and took the letter from the owl waiting there, feeding him a piece of lettuce as payment. It ruffled its feathers in pleasure and flew off again a moment later.

'It's from Teach,' Hermione said, tearing open the envelope. 'I completely forgot to tell him what I found out from Malfoy yesterday!'

'You saw Malfoy yesterday?' Ron echoed suspiciously. 'What for?'

Hermione explained, though not in great detail her caution about what she was researching was growing daily about her request for a book from the Malfoy library. Both Ron and Harry looked sceptical at this, but neither opted to object. She suspected they would reserve their indignation for later, when she wasn't present to hear it, and read the letter from her patron.

When she was finished, she looked up at her friends in confusion. 'He wants to meet with me today. In fact, he wants to have dinner.'

Ron laughed abruptly and punched her lightly on the shoulder. 'I think he fancies you.'

Hermione shook her head. 'I doubt that. *He* thinks I was in love with Professor Snape.'

Ron laughed again at this statement, but Harry eyed her doubtfully. 'You weren't, were you?' he asked.

'No,' she answered. 'Don't be silly.' Suddenly uncomfortable, she turned back to the mayonnaise and finished smoothing it across the slices of bread before her.

They ate in companionable silence for a while. Ron finished first, as always, and leaned back in his chair with a speculative gleam in his eye. 'Where is he taking you for dinner?' he wanted to know. 'Cause that'll be a dead giveaway whether he fancies you or not.'

Hermione blushed. 'Bentley's Oyster Bar.'

'Isn't that in Mayfair?' Harry asked. 'It's supposed to be quite nice.'

'More than quite nice,' she admitted. 'But he's rich. Of course he'll want to go someplace nice.'

'Oysters,' Ron commented. 'Aren't they supposed to be an aphrodisiac?'

'How do you know that?' Hermione asked suspiciously.

'One learns,' was all he said, grinning.

'If he wanted to give her an aphrodisiac, he wouldn't need to buy her oysters,' Harry pointed out. 'Ashwinder eggs, anybody?'

Hermione flushed to the roots of her hair this time and began to clear their plates away. 'Enough. I've got work to do this afternoon if I'm to have anything to show him tonight. I'll see you two later.'

'I'll bet it's not your work he wants to see,' Ron said cheekily, standing up and Apparating away as she lunged at him.

'Ignore him,' Harry said apologetically. 'You want help cleaning up?'

'No, thanks,' she said. 'You go on and enjoy your afternoon.'

He hugged her. 'Have a good time tonight.' A moment later, he was gone, leaving Hermione to stand in the kitchen and wonder just why, indeed, her patron wanted to take her to dinner. It wasn't an unwelcome invitation: she was a great lover of seafood and didn't get the chance to eat it nearly often enough. *Not to mention*, she thought as she set the dirty dishes to washing themselves, *it's not often I have dinner with handsome, wealthy men.* The evening was looking more appealing by the second.

Though she would rather have eaten Ashwinder eggs raw than admit it to anyone, Hermione spent a great deal longer than usual over her appearance that night. Witch's robes were out of the question beyond the fact that she would be eating at a Muggle restaurant, she had not once seen Teach wear anything other than a well-tailored suit, and she half-wondered if maybe magical culture in the United States were a little less isolated, and less archaic, than the wizarding world in Britain. She chose instead to wear every woman's faithful stand-by, the black cocktail dress. Her version was not as clingy or revealing as some she had seen most notably on Ginny Weasley but it was well cut and, she thought, flattering to her figure.

Dressing herself was the easy part; doing her hair was another matter altogether. If there were charms for taming one's mane, she had never come across them, and she stared at her damp locks in the bathroom mirror for a long time, wishing she had been graced with straight, smooth hair. She would even have settled for glossy curls, but there was no getting around it: her hair would always be a bushy, frizzy mass. In the end, she opted for a bit of mousse and hoped it wouldn't rain while she was out.

A bit of mascara and some lip gloss, and she was ready. She gazed at herself critically for a moment, feeling a bit stupid *He's seen me in my oldest, rattiest robes, with my hair unbrushed and no make-up. This can only be an improvement.* Resolutely, she picked up her handbag and gave her hair one last fluff before Apparating to a shady alleyway beside Piccadilly Station.

Teach, looking impossibly handsome and well-groomed, was waiting for her outside of the restaurant when she walked up and took her arm in a gentlemanly fashion to escort her inside. The maitre d' took their coats and led them to the oyster bar where they sat on stools and ordered drinks.

'I thought we'd have a little appetiser before the meal,' Teach said, glancing through the menu. 'Mediterranean or Atlantic? Steamed or Rockefeller?'

She stared at him for a moment before realising he was talking about the oysters. 'Oh... er, Atlantic. Steamed.'

The barman took their order and disappeared. They talked about the weather until he reappeared ten minutes later, carrying a bucket of freshly cooked oysters and two small bowls of melted butter. The barman began shucking, placing each liberated shellfish into a cut-glass dish on the bar in front of them.

'So, what did you find out from the Malfoy boy yesterday?' Teach asked, dipping a steaming oyster into his butter dish and eating it with every evidence of perfect enjoyment.

'They had the book you were right,' she said. 'But his father lent it to somebody ages ago, and now it appears to have been lost.'

'Did he say whom it was lent it to?' Teach asked.

'No,' Hermione lied easily. 'But it doesn't matter. Malfoy said that everything in the book is wrong, anyway.'

'Oh,' Teach said, chewing thoughtfully. 'Still, it would have been a nice starting point.'

Hermione nodded noncommittally and continued eating. Privately, she decided that she would continue her search through Snape's things nevertheless even if she didn't find the *Ars Magica*, she might come across something else of use to her. Her recent fascination with Snape had not abated, despite her experience of his most intimate memories; if anything, it had grown, and she was determined to satisfy it, one way or another.

'Any luck getting into your basement yet?' Teach asked suddenly.

She choked, catching the oyster she was eating with her teeth just before it flew out of her mouth. 'Not yet,' she lied again when she had got her breath back.

'Shame.'

By the end of the meal Dover sole for Hermione, smoked salmon for Teach they were both pleasantly inebriated. Teach had insisted on ordering a different wine for each course of the meal, including a dessert port that left Hermione feeling light-headed and reckless. When he ordered Irish coffee after their dessert plates had been cleared away, she groaned inwardly; she was still sober enough to realise that she would be suffering one hell of a hangover the next day.

With an effort, she returned her concentration to the conversation she and her patron had been having throughout the meal. 'I disagree,' he was saying, and for an uncomfortable minute she couldn't remember what he was disagreeing with.

Then he continued, 'There *does* need to be some kind of infrastructure. The transport networks are a perfect example. A well-regulated Floo network, like you have here, would drastically cut the number of accidents we have, as well as create difficulties for the criminal elements in society. We could catch so many more law-breakers if the magical government kept a record of the origin and destination of each Floo trip! We could do what the Muggles do, and restrict international travel to government-registered departure points, and require that everyone leaving the country present valid identifying documents...'

He rambled on and on, and Hermione fell into a sort of daydream, sipping her coffee *He really is gorgeous... It doesn't really matter what he's saying, it's just those lips... and those eyes.* Lost in thought, she failed to notice when he stopped talking and leaned forward intently, brown eyes flashing.

'Penny for your thoughts,' he whispered.

She opened her mouth to respond automatically and caught sight of his eyes, which were focussed on her lips. In any other circumstance, she would have blushed, but the fact that she had been doing the same thing to him only a moment earlier was not lost on her. 'I'm sorry,' she said in a low voice. 'I didn't hear a word you were saying. I was... distracted.'

He smirked slightly and raised one eyebrow. 'Distracted by what?'

She looked up at him from beneath her eyelashes and gave a small smile, but didn't answer.

Teach settled back into his chair and ran his eyes over her appraisingly, gaze lingering over her cleavage for a moment, before standing up and offering his hand. 'Can I take you out for a nightcap?' he asked quietly.

Hermione rose to her feet slowly and deliberately and placed her hand in his. 'Why don't we have a drink at my house?' she asked, secretly amazed at her own, alcohol-fuelled boldness.

He nodded and led her from the restaurant's dining room back down the stairs to the bar. She waited by the entrance while he collected their coats, then followed him down the pavement to a deserted side street. The night was clear and crisp; the voices of partying Londoners carried from the direction of Piccadilly Circus. Teach pulled her further into the shadows, resting a burning hand on her waist, and draped her coat around her shoulders.

'Are you okay to Apparate?' he asked her.

'Yes,' she said, a little breathlessly, and leaned closer in toward him. He wrapped his arms around her, and she tilted her head up to meet his eyes. They stood that way for a long moment, during which she was hoping he would kiss her, but he did nothing. Finally, his brow began to furrow, and he said, 'Are you sure you're all right? I can Apparate us, if you want.'

'Oh!' she exclaimed, embarrassed. 'I was waiting... I mean, yes, I'm fine.' She tightened her grip on him and spun on the spot, squeezing them through space to materialise with a *pop* in the darkened kitchen of Spinner's End.

Then she finally got the kiss she had been expecting. He pulled her tightly against his body, so that she imagined she could feel the contour of every firm muscle of his chest through his linen suit, and his lips descended on hers. The heat was almost unbearable; Hermione deepened the kiss after only a few seconds and felt his hands slide up her back and into her hair, his fingers massaging the back of her head and neck. His mouth tasted deliciously of Bailey's.

He broke off after a little while, half-panting, and ran his hands through his hair. Hermione flicked her wand, and the lights came on; she saw his bright eyes and swollen lips and wondered if she looked the same way.

'About that drink...' he prompted, grinning at her.

'Of course,' she said and moved toward the cupboard, Summoning a pair of tumblers from the draining board.

'Do you mind if I use your bathroom while you do that?' Teach asked.

'Not at all,' she answered. She told him how to find the stairs and watched his retreating form a little greedily before turning her attention back to making their drinks. She extracted the bottle of Firewhisky from above the fridge and poured a couple of fingers into each glass, adding a splash of cold water from the pitcher she kept in the refrigerator and mixing it in slowly with a glass stirring rod.

Several minutes later, just as she was starting to grow impatient, she heard Teach's footsteps descending the stairs and gave the mixture in the glasses another little stir before picking them up and turning toward the kitchen door.

When Teach walked in, he was buttoning up his coat and wearing a rather embarrassed expression. She tried to hand him his drink, but he shrugged her off.

'What's the matter?' she asked, confused.

'I'm sorry, Miss Granger,' he said and shoved his hands uncomfortably into his pockets. He looked a little confused himself. 'I didn't realise you were attached, or I would never have presumed... For what it's worth, I had a lovely time with you tonight.'

'What in the world are you talking about?' she demanded, setting the drinks on the table with a thump.

He lifted his shoulders in a shrugging gesture that made her see red. 'Your boyfriend, upstairs. He didn't seem too pleased to see me.'

'My *boyfriend*?' she asked incredulously.

'Please convey my apologies to him,' Teach said awkwardly. 'Have a good night, Miss Granger.' He twisted in place and disappeared.

Hermione stood in the kitchen, fists clenched, until suddenly she understood what he must have seen. Lifting her head, she shouted impotently at the ceiling, 'Thanks a lot, Snape!' Her voice dropped to a sarcastic mutter as she picked up the tumblers from the table and dumped their contents into the sink. 'Thank you so very fucking much.'

'Miss Granger! Pay attention!'

She was sitting in the Potions classroom in her school robes, a stack of blank parchment on the desk before her. At the firm command, her head snapped up. Snape was pacing the front of the classroom, black robes swirling about his legs.

'Why do we regulate the Floo network?' he demanded.

'To restrict the movement of wizards and witches,' she answered promptly, not bothering to put up her hand. Glancing around, she saw that she was the only student in the room. The other desks were bare and unoccupied.

'At last, an answer not quoted straight from a book,' Snape sneered at her. 'And why is it advisable to restrict movement?'

'Because people with limited choices are less likely to question the status quo.'

'Explain.'

She struggled for words, glancing helplessly at the blank parchment, but found herself unable to answer.

Snape slammed his palms down either side of her on the desk, his long greasy hair almost touching her face. 'Do I have to spell out the connection for you?' he demanded angrily.

'Yes,' she whispered. 'I don't understand.'

He rolled his black eyes at her and stalked to the chalkboard. There, he began to draw a series of shapes. He was drawing clouds, Hermione realised.

Suddenly, he dropped the chalk on the floor and turned around. His face had youthened, his hair thickened: he now resembled the man she had seen in her bedroom at Spinner's End. It was almost like looking at a different person. When he spoke again, her sense of being in the presence of a different Snape intensified.

'Hermione,' he said calmly, 'you must not continue down this path.' His expression was solemn.

'Why not?' she asked.

His face twitched into a smile, and he laughed softly. There was something familiar about his laugh, she thought. 'Always questioning,' he murmured.

'Never answering,' she shot back at him.

He approached her slowly, skirting the edge of the desk and coming to a pause beside her. Bending down, he whispered into her ear, 'Let me distract you...'

And then she was in the hands of her dream-lover again, the Potions classroom dissolving around her into a fog of physical bliss.

When Hermione awoke the next morning, she remembered the dream vividly and had the distinct impression that her subconscious had been frantically trying to reveal something to her, but what that was, she had no idea, nor what it might have to do with the Floo network, except that Teach had been talking about it at dinner that night. She was not nearly so mystified by the second part of the dream, however; in fact, she had a pretty good idea what had happened, and through the haze of her hangover, she managed to jot down a note on a scrap of parchment from her bedside table:

Item: What, exactly, is a ghost?

Item: Why do ghosts appear to people?

Item: Can ghosts communicate through dreams?

Bad Moon

Chapter 9 of 17

Hermione learns more about Snape from Mark and investigates the nature of ghosts.

Bad Moon

I fear rivers overflowing

I hear the voice of rage and ruin

Hermione found herself at loose ends not long after her dinner with Teach. He sent a terse note to let her know he would be travelling on the Continent for a few weeks she hoped his flight to sunnier climes was unrelated to the disastrous conclusion to their evening and Harry and Ron told her they would be away for Auror training for some weeks as well. She wondered what, precisely, such training comprised and where it might take place, but contented herself with imagining something like an American summer camp, complete with obstacle course and teamwork activities.

The school year had begun not long before, so she found herself spending many of her evenings tutoring Mark. It was a fairly lame excuse for her to have company; he didn't need much help, and it was only her luck that his studies hadn't progressed beyond the point she herself had reached in the Muggle curriculum. He would be starting secondary school the next year, and then her formidable brain would be next to useless to him.

One evening found Mark at her house, working on science prep. He sat at her scruffy dining room table, head bent so low over his work that his shaggy hair brushed the book in front of him, a plate of cheese and crackers and a glass of juice near his elbow 'brain food,' Hermione called it. He had told her that he liked to do his homework at hers; he found it difficult to concentrate at home where the television was usually on.

Hermione was seated at the other side of the table, making some notes on ghosts her new side project. She hadn't told Mark who their resident spectre was, but he seemed to approve of the project anyway: for him, unexplainable phenomena were things to be figured out, not feared.

'Hermione,' asked Mark abruptly, looking up from his papers, 'what's avocado?'

Startled, she answered automatically, 'It's a tropical fruit. You've probably seen one it looks like a pear with a knobby green skin over it.'

Mark wrinkled his nose. 'That doesn't sound right to me. What's a fruit got to do with solutions?'

'Erm... Maybe you'd better explain why you're asking.'

'Okay,' he agreed, pushing his textbook across to her. 'They're making us study solutions and suspensions again, even though we did it all last year. Professor Snape was showing me how to calculate molarity in his lab at Christmastime and said that a mole was something to do with avocado, but I've forgotten what it was.'

'He was... *what?*' Hermione gasped, gripping the edge of the table with white knuckles. 'You've been *in his lab?*'

'Yeah...' Mark answered slowly, beginning to look alarmed. 'Why? What's the matter?'

'You...' she stammered speechlessly. She wanted to ask: *Why didn't you tell me about it? When we thought there was a man in the house, why didn't you suggest looking downstairs? Why would Snape show you, of all people, something so suspicious? What else do you know about this house that I don't?* But, of course, she could ask none of these questions, so she continued to gape at him, aware that her reaction must seem out of all proportion to his remarks.

Seeking to calm her, Mark went on, 'He was pretty uptight about it, you know. I wasn't allowed to touch anything unless he said. But he let me play around with some scales and beakers and stuff so that I could learn how to make different concentrations of sugar-water. He said it would help us improve our lemonade recipe.'

'Improve the lemonade recipe?' she echoed limply.

'We did really well at it,' he said, smiling proudly. 'We made all these different concentrations and then tasted each one. The best one ended up being about half sugar and half water the others were too sweet. Then we decided how much lemon juice to add. That was different, obviously, because lemon juice doesn't dissolve in water, so it wasn't a solution and the professor couldn't use the same maths. Then he scaled everything up so that we could make a really big pitcher of the stuff.'

'Professor Snape did all this?' she asked doubtfully.

'Yeah. He said we could refine the recipe as I got better at maths. Then we could say we had created the best possible lemonade and prove it scientifically.' Mark's face fell. 'Although I guess we won't ever do that now.'

'Oh, Mark,' Hermione sighed, resting her hand over his comfortingly. 'You can still do it one day yourself. It'll be a memorial to his memory.'

He shrugged. 'Maybe. So, do you know what avocado is, then?'

Hermione shook her head regretfully. 'I'll find out for you, though.'

'Kay.' He leaned back over his work and said indistinctly, 'If you're going to answer a question for me, I should answer one for you. It's only fair.'

Laughing, Hermione said, 'All right. I've got a question for you. Did Professor Snape keep a journal in his lab?'

Mark raised his head slowly and favoured her with that same appraising, adult expression she had seen on his face the night she met him. 'You want to go snooping through his private life?' he asked evenly.

It was on the tip of her tongue to make a heated denial, but something in Mark's eyes changed her mind. 'Yes,' she said simply.

'He might've kept one,' Mark mused. 'That's not a fair question, though. You've got to ask me something I can actually answer.'

Hermione pondered this for a moment before saying, 'Why did you like Professor Snape so much?'

Mark grinned. 'Easy. Because he was clever.'

'Is that why you like me?'

'No,' he said immediately.

'Why, then?' she pressed.

He answered, 'Because you liked Professor Snape, too.'

During the weekdays, Hermione was building up quite a complex picture of the nature of ghosts. Using Teach's money and the Ministry's contacts, she was able to acquire passes to most of the major research libraries in the country and quite a few of the privately-owned ones, too, in which she spent long hours reading both wizarding and Muggle accounts of the paranormal. Most of what she learned was rubbish; the information that wasn't, she dutifully noted down and collated at home at the end of each day.

The wizarding definition of a ghost, she discovered, was frustratingly imprecise: 'the imprint of a departed soul.' To her, this suggested that a ghost was something like a wizard's portrait, imbued with his personality and knowledge, but pearly-white and mobile rather than stationary. A ghost could interact with people, talking and moving about at will; a ghost could be affected by magic (how well she remembered the basilisk and Nearly-Headless Nick!). A ghost, however, like a portrait, was not the actual person it was an imprint, a facsimile. The soul was elsewhere; what remained behind was more like an interactive recording.

Hermione did not think this sort of ghost was what she had on her hands: if the Snape who kept appearing in her house could speak to her directly, he probably would have done so by now; he was not translucent white, but instead could have passed as a human being, so natural did he look; he was not intimidated by her wand or her spells. She began to revise her terminology: he was not a ghost, at least not in the traditional sense, so in her notes she started to refer to him as a 'manifestation' instead.

From wizarding works on ghosts, she moved on to Muggle accounts and immediately hit upon some very interesting information. For one thing, there was an almost endless list of famous ghosts, from the 'real' to the fictional, and they were said to appear for any number of fascinating reasons. The most usual explanation for the appearance of a ghost was quite similar to what wizarding literature had said: the person's image usually manifested in a place familiar to, or important to, that person in life. The legend that the ghost of Queen Anne Boleyn haunted the Tower of London was familiar to Hermione, although in all of her visits to the Tower, she had never once had the impression that it might be haunted. In fact, it seemed to her to be a bustling, rather cheerful place, for all its dire history.

In other cases, a ghost might appear to request some kind of favour from the living. Pliny the Younger, that great writer of letters, had in one of his missives described a ghost seen by his friend, the philosopher Athenodorus, in a house in Athens. Although the ghost had been unable to communicate, Athenodorus had followed the apparition into the garden and noted the spot where it had dematerialised. Upon digging there the next day, he found the corpse of an old man and was able to give it proper burial, thereby putting the ghost to rest. And in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, of course, the ghost of the old king appears to Hamlet and declares himself unable to find peace until his murder is avenged.

But the sort of apparition that really caught her eye, and which she noted down carefully, was what the books referred to as an 'oracular' spirit. Making sure her pen was plentifully supplied with ink, she set to writing:

Example A: King Saul and the Witch of Endor

I Samuel 28

King Saul, having expelled all of the mediums and fortune-tellers from Israel, is overcome by terror when he witnesses the army of the Philistines approaching his land. Although he prays for guidance from the Lord and attempts to divine an answer through the Urim and Thummim, he receives no message. In despair, he disguises himself and goes to see the Witch of Endor. After he reassures her that she will not be punished for being a medium, she summons at his request the spirit of the prophet Samuel. Angered that his peace has been disturbed, Samuel tells Saul that he received no message from the Lord because he has not obeyed the Lord's commands. He tells Saul that he will be defeated by the Philistines the next day and will die, along with his sons, at their hands.

Example B: Brutus at the Battle of Philippi

Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, 'Brutus'

Marcus Junius Brutus, one of the assassins of the dictator Gaius Julius Caesar in 44 B. C., had been a reluctant party to the conspiracy because of his familial and political connections to Caesar and is rumoured to feel considerable guilt about the manner in which he and his fellows terminated Caesar's 'tyranny.' His doubts and guilt stalk him even as he and Lucius Cassius Longinus, the mastermind of the conspiracy, prepare for battle against Caesar's heir, Octavianus. Having progressed with his army as far as Asia Province, he is reading in his tent one night when an apparition enters. Upon being questioned, it promises Brutus, 'You shall see me again at Philippi.' As it happens, Brutus's army meets that of Octavianus just outside of the ancient city of Philippi in Thrace. After an initial, indecisive battle, Brutus retires for the night and sees the phantom, which warns him of impending doom once again. On the next day, when the tide of battle turns against Brutus and victory seems impossible, he kills himself rather than be captured and humiliated by Octavianus.

(Note: this story also appears in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, in which the ghost is that of Caesar himself.)

Example C: Jacob Marley and Ebenezer Scrooge

Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Fictional. Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly and greedy businessman, is visited on Christmas Eve by the ghost of his business partner, Jacob Marley, who had died seven years before. Marley is doomed to suffer the burden of chains and weights for all eternity as punishment for his avarice and other sins; he warns Scrooge that unless he changes his ways, his own punishment will be even worse. Marley warns Scrooge that he will have one opportunity to change and describes to him the advent of the three spirits of Christmas, who will assist him to take advantage of this opportunity.

Now, Hermione thought, these were not 'ghosts' of the Nearly-Headless Nick sort. They possessed knowledge beyond what they could have known in life and appeared to individuals to warn them of some incipient disaster. Most of the time, those people had an opportunity to avert the disaster, but only in the case of Scrooge unfortunately a fictional personage had this actually been done. Unlike her apparition of Snape, the 'ghosts' in her examples could communicate verbally, although this seemed to happen only under certain circumstances: when Samuel appeared to Saul, he had been summoned by a medium; the spirits that appeared to Brutus and Scrooge had come late at night when those men were exhausted and nearing sleep...

She sat up straighter suddenly and banged her knee on the underside of the table. *When they were exhausted and nearing sleep...* She had first seen Snape in the window that afternoon, true, but it was after a morning's worth of backbreaking labour in her garden. But when she had seen him in her room that night, she had been half-asleep still, and when she had found him standing in her sitting room, she had been drunk. And he had been able to speak to her in her dreams... What was it he had said? 'You must not continue down this path.' What path did he mean?

Something she had written about King Saul caught her eye the next day as she was reviewing her notes. Before going to see the Witch of Endor, he had tried to divine what he should do by using the Urim and Thummim. Suspicious though she was about Divination, this did not sound like crystal-gazing or Tarot-reading to Hermione, so she decided to look up what, exactly, were the Urim and Thummim.

What she discovered amazed her. The first reference she came across was again in the first book of Samuel, in which Saul used them to determine who amongst his company had sinned that day. He split the company into two groups and cast the lots, saying, 'If the group containing myself and my son is at fault, respond with Urim; if the group containing the rest of my men is at fault, respond with Thummim.' Urim was the response, and Saul discovered that it was his son who had sinned. This information was not particularly useful to Hermione; it seemed to her no different from flipping a coin. She did not hit pay dirt until she consulted much to her personal chagrin some wizarding books on Divination.

There, in a volume called *Necromancy, Divination, and Free Will*, she found the following passage:

One of the least distasteful methods of communicating with the souls of the dead is by using the Urim and Thummim. Historical record suggests that this was the method favoured by magicians during the time of the ancient Hebrews, and accounts of it survive even in Muggle lore. The procedure is very simple and requires no incantations or even magic of any kind. Two objects of the same shape and size must be obtained; they must be distinguishable from one another only by sight. The easiest way to do this is by choosing objects with different colors; in the ancient world, a white stone and a black stone were used most commonly. The two objects must then be placed into an opaque bag and shaken thoroughly. The querent should speak his or her question aloud and indicate clearly which object will signify an affirmative response and which a negative response. Having done this, the querent should then remove one of the objects from the bag or box. Its colour will indicate the appropriate answer.

As a method of necromancy, the Urim and Thummim are heavily criticised, primarily for two reasons. The first, and most obvious, is that it is not considered 'true' (i.e. magical) Divination and is therefore subject more to the laws of probability than anything else. Only two responses are possible, each one equally mathematically probable, thus giving the method a more than passing resemblance to a game of chance. Indeed, the fact that this is a method much favoured by Muggle spiritualists to dupe the bereaved lends weight to this critique. The other objection, often offered by those with experience in the more scientific aspects of Divination, is that the mechanism whereby the souls of the dead influence the outcome of the exercise is unknown. Do they affect the position of the objects within the bag? Or do they somehow direct the hand of the querent to the appropriate object? Extensive experimentation has thus far been inconclusive.

Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that wizards and witches can overcome these limitations in certain ways; many magical querents maintain that when these additional strictures are employed, using the Urim and Thummim is one of the most useful and reliable ways to obtain simple information. Some reports claim that, when the querent is seeking information from the soul of a named individual, choosing as his objects items that once belonged to that individual ensures that the spirit is attentive and responds accurately. Others have concluded that Summoning the soul of a named individual into the objects themselves is an even more certain way to achieve accuracy, though this is usually frowned upon as Dark magic. Still others claim that the phrasing of the questions is the most important aspect of the process: the simpler the question, the less accurate the answer will be. The art, therefore, is to create complex, precise questions that can be satisfied by simple responses. Probably for this reason, the Urim and Thummim is the method of Divination most often employed by the legal profession.

She had to skip back to the introduction to discover that this was not the sort of Divination that was taught at Hogwarts. There, Divination had seemed to consist of looking into some vague, pre-determined future and making nonsense pronouncements about it; necromancy, she learned, was a way of questioning the dead about *anything* unknown, past, present, or future. The dead were believed to possess special knowledge, even about matters which had been unknown to them in life.

Hermione could believe in this sort of Divination quite easily; it coincided perfectly with what she was learning through her research into the soul. If there was such a thing as a collective soul, then it was entirely possible that any one part of it any soul which *had* belonged once to a living individual might have access to the knowledge possessed by the entity as a whole. This would explain why the souls of the dead were so useful in Divination; it did not, however, explain, as the book had said, the mechanism by which the information was communicated.

Undeterred, Hermione returned to Spinner's End that night determined to perform her first *evewilling* attempt at Divination. After dinner and a few glasses of wine to open her mind, she thought to herself she settled herself comfortably on the sofa in the basement by the light of a few candles and the warm glow of the furnace. She knew she was limited by the fact that she didn't have anything of Snape's to use quills, she suspected, wouldn't mix up well inside a bag but she had obtained one red marble and one green marble and hoped that her choice of colours might have some useful effect.

She took a few deep breaths and began, 'I wish to communicate with Severus Snape, the late owner of this house. If your answer is yes, respond with green; if your answer is no, respond with red. Severus Snape, are you here?'

She waited for a few seconds, feeling silly, then reached into the bag and pulled out a marble. Her breath caught.

It was green.

She stared at the tiny sphere of glass in amazement, then dropped it back into the leather sack she was holding and shook vigorously. 'Professor Snape,' she asked, 'can you speak to me in the way a living person might speak to another living person?'

She reached into the bag again. This time the marble she extracted was red.

'Okay...' she murmured. 'Professor Snape, have you tried to communicate with me through my dreams?'

Green.

'Professor Snape, do I need to continue addressing you by name?'

Red.

'Do you like my choice of colours?'

Green.

'When you appear to me, are you trying to warn me about something?'

Green.

'Can you tell me in a dream what that is?'

Red.

Hermione exhaled a frustrated sigh. 'Can you tell me some other way?'

Green.

Of course, this was the limitation of using the Urim and Thummim she could not now ask him what that other way was. 'Is this Dark magic, what I'm doing?'

Red.

'Am I speaking to your soul right now?'

Green.

'Could I Summon a soul into these marbles, if I wanted to?'

Red.

'Is a copy of the *Ars Magica* in this house right now?'

Red.

'Is your journal in this house right now?'

Red.

She had been keeping a tally of how many times she drew green and how many times she drew red; so far she had drawn green six times and red seven times exactly what she would have expected according to probability. She heaved another deep sigh, and one of the candles guttered out.

'Does your journal contain any notes on the material in the *Ars Magica*?' she asked.

Green. Now the tally was seven and seven.

'Would those notes be useful to me in my research for Teach?'

Green. Eight and seven.

Another candle guttered out. Hermione glanced at it in alarm. 'Is what I am doing right now, with the marbles, dangerous?'

Red.

'Are you making the candles go out?' She was shivering now with apprehension.

Green.

The final candle flickered; by the light of its wavering flame, Hermione caught sight of a shadow forming in front of her by the armchair. The light was suddenly snuffed out, making her gasp; the dark figure of a man standing before her was illuminated only by the muted glow of the furnace in the corner. The figure moved; fingers, unmistakable in their calloused gentleness, stroked her cheek tenderly.

Hermione screamed.

Dead On Time

Chapter 10 of 17

Hermione tests a theory.

Dead On Time

Stamping on the ceiling, hammering on the walls

Gotta get out

She scrambled along the sofa, crab-like, terrified, her eyes squeezed tightly shut. When she reached the opposite end and could move no further, she opened her eyes to a narrow slit and peeked across the room. What she saw made her freeze in place: the candles were lit; the furnace hummed comfortingly; Snape, young and austere, was sitting calmly in the armchair across from her. Two mugs of tea steamed gently on the coffee table.

'You're dreaming,' Snape said softly.

'Am I?'

'You passed out.' He leaned forward and picked up one of the mugs. For a moment, he cradled it in both hands, seeming to enjoy the warmth. Then he said, 'I didn't mean to frighten you. I apologise.'

She stared. He looked exactly as she had seen him in her bedroom and in her sitting room: the thick, shoulder-length hair; the plain, black clothing; the pale, angular face. Only the expression was different more open, somehow, and friendlier. His dark eyes were not so forbidding now.

'Please,' he said, gesturing at the table. 'Have some tea.'

Slowly, without taking her eyes from his face, she reached for the second mug and brought it to her lips. She tasted nothing; her slumbering mind seemed unable to approximate the flavour of tea. 'What is going on here?' she asked, suspicious and more than a little angry.

'It would be pointless to attempt an explanation. Most people do not remember the complexities of their dreams. Only the atmosphere lingers.' He waved one graceful hand expansively. 'I've tried to create a pleasant atmosphere, but I can only work with what is already in your mind.'

'I remember my dreams,' she insisted stubbornly.

'No, you do not,' responded Snape. He sipped his tea thoughtfully, then added, 'But you remember more than most people.'

'What happens if I wake up?' she asked.

He shrugged. 'Nothing. You wake up.'

'You're not keeping me unconscious?'

Snape laughed. The sound was so familiar to her, yet she was sure that she had never once witnessed him smiling, let alone laughing, when he had been alive. 'I cannot alter reality,' he said finally. 'At least, not under the present circumstances. This you know, even if you don't know that you know. Think about it, Hermione. How is it that you can see me or hear me or feel my touch?'

His emphasis on the words 'see,' 'hear,' and 'touch' did not escape her. 'You can affect my sense perceptions.'

'What governs sense perception?' he asked.

'The body.'

'And what interprets those perceptions?'

'The mind.'

'And,' he prompted, 'what links body and mind? What governs how the mind interprets those perceptions?'

She knew the answer, just as she suddenly knew how he was manipulating her senses and her sleeping mind. It horrified her. 'The soul. You're messing with my soul!' She leapt from the sofa and backed into the corner of the room next to the record player. 'Stop it! Stop it!' The panic she felt was overwhelming.

An expression of impatience crossed his face, and for a brief moment he looked exactly like the old Snape, the living Snape. 'I could point out,' he snapped, 'that, at present, you're contemplating doing something much worse.' He rose to his feet and began to walk toward her.

She shrank further into the corner, pressing her back against the wall, and asked cautiously, 'What do you mean?'

'You know what I mean,' he said. Pausing in his approach, he turned to the bookcase that held his collection of records. He ran his long fingers idly along the spines. 'You know what you are looking for and why.'

'You started it!' she accused, indignation propelling her a step forward. 'You made me see you.'

'And you know the reason for that, as well.' He was watching her impassively now.

She stalked directly up to him, fists clenched, eyes flashing. "'Let me distract you,'" she quoted angrily. 'I told you that I remember my dreams. So, is that it? You're trying to stop my research by keeping my mind occupied with you?' She smiled unpleasantly. 'You're not as compelling as you think, Professor Snape.'

'Oh, really,' he said flatly. 'You do, however, seem to enjoy my distractions. Perhaps your memory isn't as good as you believe.' He grasped her upper arms and pulled her resisting body flush against his. His lips next to her ear, he whispered, 'How many times have you come apart in my hands?'

She gasped in surprise, a sharp inhalation of air that pressed her breasts to his chest. 'That was you?' Wide, brown eyes gazed unseeingly into black ones. 'But... only three times...'

The black eyes crinkled faintly at the corners; she realised he was smiling again. 'Far more than three times,' he countered softly. 'You just don't remember. More's the pity.'

'I will remember this,' she vowed.

'I hope so,' he said. Then his lips were on hers, and a conflagration of desire exploded across every inch of her body. His kiss was as humiliating as it was familiar and arousing; she realised that his anonymous appearances in her dreams had conditioned her to enjoy his attentions. Even though she now knew it had been Snape all along, she was nevertheless powerless to resist her body's joyful response.

He kissed her ears and her neck; because this was a dream, she was not concerned when their clothes seemed to disappear, and the rough concrete of the floor, which would have been so uncomfortable in reality, bothered her not at all when he guided her down to it to lie on her back. For the first time, she was able to appreciate the sight of his body; she loved his broad shoulders and narrow hips, the wiry muscles of his arms and legs. Never mind that he had not looked this way in life; she would never know him in life again, so this inaccuracy did not bother her, either.

He kissed her breasts and her belly; because this was a dream, she did not mind the slight pain his love bites caused or the roughness of his palms against her smooth skin. And she did not care, when he parted her thighs and began to lick her sensitive folds, that he was dead. These feelings were a construct of her soul: this was not death, it was life!

She came powerfully, crying out her completion unreservedly, and was still gasping when he stretched out his body on top of hers and kissed her tenderly.

'Please,' she whispered. 'Finish it.'

Snape sighed into her hair. 'I can't make you feel things you don't know how to feel.'

Never, until this moment, had she regretted her state of virginity; never, until this moment, had she come close to having an opportunity to do anything about it. 'Next time,' she thought, 'I'll have that fixed.'

'No!' Snape said urgently, answering her unspoken thought. 'No.' He kissed her again heatedly, impassioned, trying to drive the nascent plan from her mind. Outwardly, she surrendered to him again, silently determined to remember this thing, too; and she was pleased to discover that, because this was a dream, her responses to his touch were in no way diminished a second time around, or a third.

When Hermione awoke, every muscle in her body ached and screamed in protest when she tried to move. A minute or two passed before she realised why: she was curled into one corner of the sofa, her head resting on the arm, and her body had cramped up while she slept. There was a pain behind her eyes, too, which felt suspiciously like a

red-wine headache. Her mouth tasted awful.

Gingerly, massaging her neck and back, she sat up and stretched her legs out in front of her. She remembered exactly where she was; her headache made her grateful for the pitch-black of the windowless basement. When she finally felt able to stand, she groped her way to the stairs and ascended them to the kitchen. The cold, grey light of early morning filtered through the windows.

Groaning, she filled the kettle and spooned some instant coffee into a mug. Her first swallow of boiling, black caffeine revived her somewhat, and she was able to sit relatively painlessly in one of the kitchen chairs and consume a piece of toast. Her brain felt incredibly sluggish, but she forced herself to think while she chewed her breakfast mechanically. Something had happened during the night, something she had to remember...

I need to remember. She remembered the Urim and Thummim; she could recall quite clearly the succession of questions and answers. And then Snape had appeared, frightening her out of her wits, and she had had a dream...

What had she dreamt? The tasteless tea, she remembered that; the debilitating pleasure she had experienced in Snape's arms was as clear to her as if it had really happened. There had been other things, too, things she had commanded herself not to forget! But she could not force her thoughts away from Snape now that they had drifted in his direction. *Snape, naked. Snape, doing that to me.* A look of contentment came into her face, and she wondered idly if she had the marks of any new love bites this time.

The sudden rush of recollection hit her like a freight train, making her gasp aloud, the memories tumbling over one another in quick succession *I cannot alter reality at, least not under the present circumstances... You're messing with my soul!... I can't make you feel things you don't know how to feel.*

'Oh, my God,' she whispered.

Then she was on her feet, snatching quill and parchment from her bag hanging on the back of the kitchen door. She scribbled:

Edward,

You must come back at once I have had a bit of a breakthrough. Spinner's End, 7 pm. I'll make dinner.

Hermione

P.S. I don't know what you saw in my hallway, but I assure you, I have no boyfriend.

Apparating to Grimmauld Place thankfully empty of Harry and Ron, who were still on their training course she tied the scrap of parchment to Pigwidgeon and shoved the tiny owl briskly through a window. Just as quickly, she was home again.

Breakfast forgotten, she stood in the kitchen and unashamedly stripped off all of her clothes to inspect her skin. She regarded triumphantly the love-bites that dotted her body: there, just above her breast, and another on her hip, and another on the inside of her thigh. She was right her theory was right! Snape *could* affect things in the physical world, but perhaps without realising how, or even that he was doing it. She knew, of course, that the marks on her body could be psychosomatic, but she doubted this was the case.

Being Hermione, however, she could not let her theory go untested; this was the reason for her hastily scratched letter to Teach and for the rash excitement, the hectic heedlessness, she currently felt. She would test her theory this evening and perhaps kill another bird with the same stone: there were certain things she was determined to 'know how to feel' before too many more nights had gone by.

By the time seven o'clock rolled around, Hermione was on her fourth glass of wine. She had just tipped a load of linguine into the saucepan of water boiling on the hob when she heard the telltale *crack* that heralded Teach's arrival. She set her wineglass carefully on the countertop and pushed her hair behind her shoulders. Strange, how she didn't feel at all nervous, but rather recklessly confident. She would have liked to blame it on the wine, but she knew it was a product of the anticipatory excitement she had felt all day. New discoveries were beckoning from the edges of her awareness, and she was determined not to let the opportunity to reach them slip away.

'Miss Granger? Are you here?' Teach was calling from the sitting room. 'I'm sorry I had to Apparate straight in, but I wasn't sure if it was wise to try it on a Muggle street...' His voice trailed off when she entered the room.

Hermione secretly enjoyed his expression of astonishment; she knew what he was seeing, having perfected it in the mirror earlier, and his reaction delighted her. Her hair, wild and tousled; her smoky eyes; her perfectly smooth skin, given a golden sheen by the candlelight in the dining room; her body, artfully revealed in the tiniest red dress she could find; her bare feet and painted toenails. She had hoped it would make him think of sex; it didn't look as if she were going to be disappointed.

'Wine?' she asked politely.

Teach nodded silently. She Summoned the bottle from the kitchen and poured the dark red liquid into one of the wine goblets on the table. She was at leisure to look at him as she did so; he wore yet another dark suit, this time without a tie, and the top two buttons of his shirt were open, revealing the barest hint of hard, bronzed chest beneath the hollow where his collarbones met. His light brown hair was windblown and just slightly too long where it brushed against his high cheekbones on either side of his face. Hermione had no trouble imagining herself carrying her plan through: he was gorgeous. Not in the same way as the youthful Snape, who was lean and angular, but with a robust hardness that she appreciated almost as much.

When she handed him his wine, she allowed her fingers to graze against his; then she stood back again and waited for him to drink. He glanced briefly at the glass in his hand, as if he had no idea what it was, and returned his gaze to her, seemingly unable to stop staring. Finally, he tore his eyes away from her body and put the wineglass on the table. 'Miss Granger,' he said and stopped uncertainly.

'Hermione, please,' she breathed, swaying a step closer and lifting her chin to look up into his face.

Her subtle movement appeared to be all the encouragement he needed: in an instant, she found herself crushed between his body and the table, returning his deep, heated kisses with fervent enthusiasm. His hands tangled in her hair and angled her head so that he could plunder her mouth more fully, then his fingers swept over her shoulders to slide the straps of her dress down her upper arms. She was breathless, her eyes closed, imagining Snape, then Teach, then Snape again, and powerfully aroused. She had felt this way in her dreams, yes, but now there was a living, physical body pressed against her, bending her backward over the table so that nothing seemed more natural than for her to lift one of her legs and twine it around his waist, and the sensations coursing through her frame were even more devastating and wonderful than usual.

One of Teach's hands was tracing her sternum now; the other grasped her thigh, lifted her knee higher on his hip, and slid beneath the hem of her dress. When his fingertips came in contact with her knickers, he groaned, and she answered him by plunging her tongue deeper into his mouth, unconsciously imitating the fantasy she was envisioning. She felt oddly free and light-headed; a sense of infinite possibility and capability overtook her, making her wonder if her current elation was at all similar to an overdose of Felix Felicis.

Teach hooked a finger around the waistband of her knickers at her hip. With another groan, he pulled his lips away from hers and fastened them onto her neck, just beneath her ear. 'Tell me,' he panted between breaths and kisses, 'about your breakthrough.'

Her head fell back, granting him access to the rest of her neck and chest. 'Souls,' she answered, bringing her hands up to push his jacket away from his shoulders, 'can affect the physical world.'

He bit the top of her shoulder gently, then flicked his tongue across her skin. 'How?'

'I don't know,' she breathed and turned her attention to the buttons of his shirt. 'It happens when the people around them...' she broke off to moan as he dragged her knickers down to the tops of her thighs '...are emotionally charged.' She was not at her most articulate, but then the fact that she could maintain a coherent thought while he was stroking her bare hip was accomplishment enough.

Teach kissed her lips again, driving his tongue between them, and pulled her forward. Off-balance, she lowered her leg. Her knickers fell to her knees, and she opened her legs slightly, allowing the garment to drop to the floor. Teach noticed; a second later, she was back on the table, her dress pulled up, both legs wrapped around his waist, while she tore his shirt from his body and scraped her fingernails over his chest. He ground his pelvis against the soft skin where her bare thighs met; the evidence of his arousal was hard against her flesh and shockingly hot, even through the fabric of his trousers.

He was bent over her now, kissing her still as she lay directly on the rough wood of the dining room table; she was ready for him, she knew, and she was just beginning to wonder when he was going to get on with it when a sound from the kitchen distracted her. Teach froze. 'What was that?' he whispered.

Hermione smiled. 'I think the pasta might have boiled over.'

He drew back, straightening her dress for her. 'We should check. Wouldn't want to catch your kitchen on fire, too.' He grinned.

She slid from the table, leaving her knickers discarded on the floor, and walked into the kitchen. The pasta had indeed boiled over; the sound she had heard was the hissing of the bubbling water as it fell onto the flame of the gas burner. Some of the water had splashed onto the floor, too; with a sigh, she lowered the flame on the burner and stepped away from the cooker to find a towel.

The instant she moved from in front of the hob, the pot of boiling pasta hove violently upward and flew across the room like a shot, straight at Teach, who had been standing near the back door. Incredibly, he managed to leap out of the way just in time; the saucepan crashed into the door, showering that side of the room with sprays of linguine. Before Hermione had a chance to react where was her wand? she thought desperately the cupboard doors burst open, a chain reaction exploding first along one wall and then the other. Plates and mugs, knives and forks flew into the air and crashed against the ceiling and walls. Another pot rocketed off the cooker, clattering into the kitchen table and spilling its contents. Bolognese sauce streamed across the floor like a river of blood.

Horrified, separated from Teach by the rain of cutlery and dishes, Hermione watched helplessly as he snatched his wand from his pocket and began to blast a path through the whirling utensils. Seconds later, although it seemed like hours, he reached her and grasped her arm painfully, pulling her behind him as he edged toward the door to the dining room. She preceded him gratefully into the next room, gasping and near tears, only to find that they had escaped almost literally from the frying pan into the fire.

Books soared from their shelves as if thrown by an invisible hand, pelting Hermione and Teach mercilessly as they dashed into the sitting room. Hermione tore at the lock on the front door, trying to ignore the hail of paper and the sound of her favourite possessions ricocheting around the room. Panic numbed her fingers; she almost sobbed aloud when she finally managed to undo the locks and fling the door open. They ran into the street, Teach slamming the door closed behind them.

The narrow street was silent in the chill October air. They stood in the road, panting, Hermione leaning against Teach's firm chest, until they caught their breath. Then he pushed her away and stared at her, his eyes running over her body. 'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Yes,' she answered shakily.

'Good. *Then you can tell me what the hell that was!*' he shouted, enraged.

'I don't know,' she whispered, shrinking away from him.

'Oh, yes, you do,' he countered and reached out to hold her in place. For a moment, she thought he was going to start shaking her, but he simply gripped her shoulders and waited for her to respond.

Sighing, she admitted, 'It was my ghost. I have a ghost. In the house.'

His astonishment was obvious; taken aback, he seemed to grope for words before asking at last, 'Is it Severus Snape?'

Despite her fear and the hectic rush of adrenaline through her veins, a curious calm suddenly fell on Hermione. 'No,' she lied, looking him directly in the eye. 'It's always been there. The neighbours told me about it. It's just a ghost.'

He seemed satisfied with her answer; releasing her arms, he dragged his fingers through his hair wearily. 'Is that the man I saw upstairs last time I was here?'

She shrugged. 'I don't know. I've never seen anyone. It just moves things around sometimes.'

Teach shook his head in amazement. 'Doesn't it scare you?'

'Of course,' she responded casually. 'But there's not much I can do about it. Most of the time, we live together quite peacefully.' She smiled, hoping her dishonesty wasn't showing in her face.

'Are you going to go back in there?'

'I suppose I ought to, really. That mess will need clearing up.' She wrapped her arms around her chest, barefoot and shivering now in the cold.

'I'll help you,' he offered, turning back toward the door.

'I appreciate that,' she said sincerely, placing her hand on his arm, 'but I don't think you should go back in. It's used to me; it won't mind if I'm there alone.'

He favoured her with a doubtful glance and noticed that she was hugging herself. 'All right,' he sighed. 'But if anything else happens, you know you can come stay with me.'

She nodded, then looked pointedly at his bare chest. 'Thank you. I'll bring your clothes out.'

A few minutes later, when Teach had Apparated away with his shirt and jacket, Hermione returned to the kitchen and sat down, exhausted, at the table. Blankly, she surveyed the remains of her dishes. She was aware that she had stepped in the Bolognese and now had mince beef and tomato clinging to her feet, but she did not, at this precise moment, care.

'I know you're here, Snape,' she said conversationally. 'You know everything that goes on in this house, don't you?' Unconcerned, she swirled her big toe in a puddle of sauce. 'Do you enjoy spying on me? Watching me in the shower, perhaps? Are you a jealous ghost?'

Slowly, Hermione got to her feet and went to the door of the basement. Uninterested in the red footprints she was leaving behind her, she descended the wooden stairs and switched on the small lamp, taking up her place from the night before on the indented cushion of the sofa. The bag with the marbles was still on the rug where she had dropped it. She picked it up and settled back, shaking the bag idly. 'I'm not going to go through the process of asking for you by name,' she stated calmly. 'I think my intentions are clear enough.'

The only sound in the basement was that of the marbles, rattling around in the sack. Finally, she asked, 'Was that your little fit of temper upstairs?' She reached into the

bag and withdrew the green marble. 'Ah. I thought so.' She replaced the marble and shook the bag again.

'Oh, and tell me,' she added sarcastically, 'was that your version of a warning?'

Green again.

'Are you trying to warn me about Edward Teach?' she asked.

Green again.

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. Then, without warning, her arm drew back, and she threw the tiny green marble against the opposite wall with all of her might. It slammed into the drywall and bounced, rolling back toward her across the rug. When she picked it up again, she saw that it was cracked along one curve, a jagged slash that reminded her of the one in the Resurrection Stone.

She situated herself more comfortably on the sofa and rested her head against the cushions. She had passed beyond angry and was now drifting in the sweet calm on the other side of her fury. She was determined to discuss this incident with Snape face-to-face; he would learn that he could not manipulate her like that again. Warily, she closed her eyes and waited for sleep to come.

But Hermione did not dream that night.

Lily of the Valley

Chapter 11 of 17

The secret of Horcruxes is revealed.

Author's Note: Many apologies for the delay in updating! A new house and dodgy internet connection made life difficult for a few days... All gratitude is owed to my beta, Angel Mischa, who has helped me to work through this chapter, which is, perhaps, the most complicated part of the whole story.

Lily of the Valley

Have you an answer for me, please

The lily of the valley doesn't know

Over the next few weeks, Hermione was unable to stop analysing the incident with Snape and the kitchen utensils. She would be trying to concentrate on something else entirely reading, perhaps, or playing board games with Harry and Ron and find her thoughts returning inexorably to that disastrous evening. One of the reasons for her continued obsession was the difficulty she had pinpointing her exact feelings about the matter. Once her fury had worn away, she had at first been confused, then repentant, and finally ashamed of herself.

For one thing, in all of her rash excitement that morning, she had completely overlooked the fact that her theory that Snape's soul could, in emotionally charged situations, act on objects in the physical world required no actual testing. Had he not opened the basement for her? Had he not made the candles go out while she was questioning him with the Urim and Thummim? Never mind the love-bites; she had possessed ample evidence already that he was able to do such things. And, quite stupidly, she had allowed this information to slip her mind. How had she managed to do that? Somewhere, deep down, she had wanted to provoke a reaction from him; all the times she had accused Snape of manipulating her, she had really been manipulating him.

And what in the world had she been thinking to tart herself up like that and try to seduce Teach? Her behaviour had been so out of character that, reflecting on it, Hermione almost believed she was remembering the actions of another person entirely. She would have suspected she had been on drugs, had she not been completely aware that she had no such excuse. No: giddy with the knowledge that she was attractive to Snape possibly the coldest fish of a man in the entire universe she had set out to prove that she could attract anyone else she chose, too. The fact that she had succeeded gave her little comfort, for it was probably the reason why she had seen nothing of Snape, either in the house or in her dreams, since the incident. She felt as if she were being punished, and she could not help but feel that she deserved it.

As it turned out, this sense of shame did not last long, either. From the depths of self-reproach, her innate scepticism at last asserted itself. What, in fact, had really taken place? The Urim and Thummim: well, she had counted the answers, hadn't she? And they had been completely mathematically plausible. Her dreams could simply be, well, dreams fantasies constructed by her mind from bits and pieces of her current preoccupations. What evidence did she have to suggest that she was really communicating with Snape at all? There was definitely *something* inhabiting her house, moving things around, but it wasn't necessarily anything to do with Snape. Hermione was well read; she knew all about poltergeists. And the apparitions? Shadows, the illusory play of light on windows and in darkened rooms. Had she not already established that her 'ghost' had appeared when she was tired or intoxicated? Perhaps the images she had seen had been nothing more than the hallucinations of a drunken or exhausted brain.

After days of travelling on this train of thought, Hermione began to doubt that she had ever seen or heard or dreamt anything at all. She had wanted to see Professor Snape her curiosity about him had verged upon the obsessive and so her overwrought mind had obliged and provided her with a Snape to see. He could not manipulate her soul; he could not cause chaos in her kitchen; he could do nothing at all, in fact, because he did not exist. He was dead.

Adding to her feelings of guilt and foolishness, Hermione had received a letter from Kingsley Shacklebolt, enquiring as to the progress of her research on Horcruxes. She realised that it had been literally months since she had given any thought at all to Horcruxes, so caught up had she been in Teach's questions and their bearing on Severus Snape. Never, in all her life, had she behaved so irresponsibly, so selfishly! It was no good telling herself that because Teach held the purse strings, she had to accede to his wishes; she owed a duty to the Ministry as well, and she had ignored it for too long.

Resolved to let the matter of Snape drop, and imbued with a new sense of purpose, Hermione took herself on another round of libraries, armed with another set of research questions and determined to apply all of her considerable brainpower to the Ministry's needs. She ended up in Oxford again, with its legal deposit library, as it was the part of the country she knew best, apart from Hogwarts. Early each morning, she Apparated to a secluded corner of the University Parks and walked into the city centre. Late every evening, she returned to Spinner's End to eat dinner and to sleep the dreamless sleep of the mentally exhausted.

Sitting quietly at a desk in Duke Humfrey's Library, she reviewed her set of questions to be answered:

Item: How does a Horcrux work?

--How is the piece of soul housed within the object?

--If the soul consists partly of an individual's personality (cf. Plato), does the object in which the piece of soul is housed take on features of that personality?

Item: Destroying a Horcrux releases its piece of soul from the earth-plane.

--Does destroying a person's body release his/her soul from the earth-plane? Is this what we call 'Death'?

--Is 'Life' the presence of the soul (encased within a body or an object) on the earth-plane?

Item: How is a divisible soul possible?

--When Horcruxes are created, is the soul divided in half each time? (This would render Voldemort, at the time of his death, as possessing exactly 1/256th of a soul.)

--If the division is qualitative rather than quantitative, what are the qualities of soul and in what order are they removed when one creates a Horcrux?

Hermione had, in fact, no idea whatsoever how to go about finding the answers to her questions: the collection of magical manuscripts in the Bodleian Library was vast and uncatalogued, being of little interest to Muggle scholars, who considered the majority of information contained therein to be nonsense; she could hardly ask the librarians for assistance; readers were not allowed into the stacks or archives. The only place she could think to begin was among the works of wizards themselves. As she also did not know when Horcruxes had been 'invented,' she chose a likely starting point in history and called up the works of all the wizards she could think of.

Her chosen time period was the thirteenth century witness all of those texts called *De anima*! an era replete with magicians both confirmed and reputed. What she had not realised was the sheer volume of material her searches would produce: a veritable army of librarians piled her table with layer after layer of books and manuscripts. Ever methodical, and trying not to be daunted by the weeks of work those layers represented, Hermione sorted the material into piles according to author and then sorted the authors chronologically: Robert Grosseteste (nothing); Roger Bacon (nothing); Albertus Magnus (nothing); Aquinas (nothing, and anyway, she had already exhausted his writings months ago); Siger of Brabant (also nothing). Perhaps she had chosen too early but Nicole Oresme and William Ockham produced no new information, either.

November was nearly over before Hermione reached the end of her tether. She had scarcely noticed the passing of the season; winter was drawing in, Christmas was almost upon her, but all she cared about was that the library's opening hours would soon change for the Christmas holidays. That, and the fact that she had found nothing, *nothing* new on Horcruxes, to Kingsley Shacklebolt's continued disappointment. Her slog through the convoluted scholasticism of medieval wizards had come to naught; frustrated letters to Teach had resulted merely in words of sympathy and encouragement. Other than Teach himself, there was nobody she could reasonably ask for guidance. She read again the books she had stolen from Dumbledore's office before leaving Hogwarts at the end of her sixth year, knowing even so that they contained no theory, only instructions. Trawls at Harry's behest through the library at Grimmauld Place her last, desperate hope for any kind of lead at all had yielded a wealth of horrible stuff, Dark magic all, but nothing on Horcruxes.

It pained her to give up; Hermione was not a quitter. But, for the moment, there was nothing else she could do. She used up her rather dull days buying Christmas presents for her friends and catching up on revision for her N.E.W.T.s, which she had decided she would take in February with Harry and Ron. Spinner's End was a lonelier place without the sense of Snape she had grown accustomed to; she spent more and more time at Grimmauld Place.

It was during one evening there, while she was helping Harry cook supper in the basement kitchen, that a development finally occurred.

Ron came pounding, as was his wont, down the stairs and separated Hermione from Harry. 'There's a letter just come for you in the sitting room,' he told her under his breath. 'I think it's from Malfoy.'

Startled, Hermione looked circumspectly at Harry, noticed he was coping perfectly well with the food, and made her way up the stairs with an odd constriction in her chest. Had Malfoy found the *Ars Magica* amongst his books, after all?

When she slit open his note, however, she was conscious of a crushing disappointment admixed with a pang of anxiety:

Granger,

I had a good look for your book, but whatever Professor Snape did with it, he didn't leave it to me. Just thought I'd let you know. You haven't found it, have you? Make sure you return it to me when you do; it wasn't Snape's to keep.

A word to the wise, as well I'm told Edward Teach is your research patron. I don't know him, but I know of people who do, if you get my meaning. You watch where he sticks his nose; anything he does is going to be laid at your door.

D.M.

What in the world did this unobtrusive little warning mean? That the 'people' Malfoy referred to were Death Eaters, Hermione had no doubt; but the Death Eaters were all in Azkaban, surely! *Unless there are American Death Eaters...*? But no, the very idea of American Death Eaters was ludicrous. Why, then, was she supposed to care about Draco's warning? Was he trying to tell her that if Teach displeased them, the Death Eaters would carry out their punishment on her? *Does that pointy twit really expect this to frighten me?*

Ron poked his head round the door, drawing her out of her reverie. 'What does Malfoy want?' he asked suspiciously.

'Oh, just...' Hermione cast around for something plausible to say. 'He just has some information for me, that's all. I'll write back to him now.' She picked up a pen and began to scribble a message on the back of Malfoy's letter.

Thanks, Malfoy I'll be sure to tread very carefully.

Then, in a spark of inspiration, she added:

P.S. I don't consider your debt to me repaid, as you haven't furnished me with the book. However, if you wish to discharge what you owe, come to Spinner's End on Thursday night. Bring everything you can find about Horcruxes.

With a flourish, she signed her name and tied the note to Draco's owl, whom she tipped out of the window much more gently than she had Pigwidgeon on the day she had tried to seduce Teach. She gazed into the square for a moment, wondering whether Draco would manage to produce anything of use, before returning to the kitchen, trotting down the narrow staircase with a new, determined spring in her step.

Thursday night arrived much more quickly than Hermione had expected. Usually, when she was as unoccupied as she was currently, she felt that her time, being empty of urgent tasks, crept by at the rate of a snail. But earlier in the week, dreams had begun to plague her again, and they were nowhere near as pleasant as her interludes with Snape had been. There was a nightmarish quality to them, involving as they did memories of her night with Harry in Godric's Hollow, or the unimaginable pain she had suffered at the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange in Malfoy Manor. The incident at Godric's Hollow had happened at Christmastime; she decided it must be on her mind due to

the approaching holiday. She began to dread bedtime, and as a result, her days passed by rapidly.

Darkness fell early that day; it was the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, and Hermione found herself lighting lamps and turning on the furnace at half past three that afternoon. She tried to busy herself with wrapping presents and writing out Christmas cards, but after less than two hours of this, she was restless and unsatisfied. She switched on the fairy lights of her tiny Christmas tree and went into the kitchen, not very hungry but hoping to find something to do.

A packet of mince pies peeked at her from the breadbox; sighing, she took one out and ate it. Surprised by her pleased reaction to the food, she decided to have something to drink as well and tipped half a bottle of cheap mulled wine into the kettle to heat. The label on the bottle said 'Do Not Boil,' so she flicked the switch on the kettle just before the wine began to bubble and poured some of the steaming liquid into a goblet. *All alone on the winter solstice* she thought to herself. *I wonder what the hippies are getting up to at Stonehenge tonight.*

Muffled sounds from the front room drew her attention; pulling open the bookcase-door, Hermione stepped into the dining area and saw Draco standing by the armchairs in the sitting room, wrestling with a small, burlap bag. He looked up sharply when she entered and said, 'Oh. There you are. Give me a hand, won't you?'

She approached and waved her wand vaguely. 'You're supposed to shrink the stuff you put in the bag, not the bag itself,' she told him, amused.

Flicking his hair out of his face, Draco favoured her with a dirty look and extracted the last of a series of leather-bound books from the bag. He flopped onto the carpet next to the pile and leaned back on his hands; Hermione was surprised to see that he was wearing what looked like the same rumpled suit in which she had last seen him.

'Tea? Coffee?' she offered.

His eyes narrowed at the goblet in her hand, and he said, 'Whatever you're having'll do me.'

Shrugging, Hermione fetched him a glass of the warm wine and joined him on the sitting-room floor. 'Now,' she said, businesslike, 'tell me what you've brought.'

'Not so fast, Granger,' he countered, blocking her hand as she reached for the topmost book on the pile. *You tell me* what you want these for. This is some serious stuff, and I'll need to be sure it's being used responsibly.' He gave her a wry grin.

She almost scoffed at the idea of Draco ensuring her good behaviour until she noticed the expression on his face and realised he was being ironic. Instead, she told him, 'I'm researching Horcruxes for the Ministry. Everything is perfectly above-board, I assure you. I have documentation from the Minister for Magic himself.'

Draco seemed to ponder this as he sipped his wine. 'Are you certain it's safe for the Ministry to know this stuff?' he asked at last. 'They've not shown themselves to be the best guardians of public safety, as it were.'

Something about this remark struck Hermione as odd; a vision of Teach waxing voluble about Floo regulation leapt, for no reason she could identify, to the forefront of her mind. This memory, in turn, sparked another, something to do with a dream... But she could see that Draco was waiting for a response, and her inability to connect her thoughts made her impatient.

'Enough of this, Malfoy,' she snapped. 'You can't keep interrogating me every time we meet. Get on with it.'

A single pale eyebrow rose a fraction, but Draco made no objection. He opened the first book and said, 'Right. This one'...his fingers trailed over the dusty pages...'explains the spells used to make a Horcrux.'

'But I know those already!' Hermione burst out, irritated.

Draco's eyes drifted up from the book to meet hers. 'Don't you listen? It doesn't just tell you the spells it explains them. Look.' He passed the book into her hands.

A minimum of three spells were needed to make a Horcrux, Hermione remembered: one to separate the torn piece of soul from the body; one to prepare the chosen object for housing the soul; one to direct the piece of soul into the object. There was usually a fourth spell involved, too: the *Avada Kedavra*, cast to commit the murder that would tear the soul in the first place. It wasn't necessary, however; a knife, or a gun, or bare hands would do just as good a job as the Killing Curse.

Hermione had even seen the spells before; they were familiar to her as she perused the table of contents of the book in her lap:

I. To Isolate: 'Proficiscitor a corpore' and the Mechanics of Division... 4

II. To Prepare: 'Fi domum animae' and the Question of Containment... 61

III. To Direct: 'Intra in vas ac perficite opus' and the Nature of Command... 118

Her head jerked up to stare at Draco in amazement. 'What is this book? Why haven't I been able to find it?' She flipped back to the title page, where she read:

John Pecham's De Anima Arcana, trans. L. S. Malfoy

'Probably because that's the only edition ever printed,' Draco answered her with a slight smile.

'Good God,' Hermione whispered. 'If your father knew all of this, why didn't he recognise...?'

Draco shrugged. 'I'm not sure he much cared. He only did it because...' He gulped nervously. *Someone* asked him to.'

'But but,' she stuttered, 'this is exactly what I need! This is the *only* thing I need! I might as well hand this book over to Kingsley right now it makes my research obsolete. Who is this Pecham, anyway?' she asked suddenly. 'Maybe I could interview him.'

Draco pried the book gently from her fingers. 'Ah. Well, there you have a problem. He's dead. In fact, he's *been* dead for about, oh, seven hundred years. And I'm not letting you lend out my father's book especially not to the Minister, not while my father's still in prison. He could get, if it were possible, into even more trouble.'

'Oh, to hell with your father!' Hermione exclaimed and snatched the book back. To her surprise, Draco refused to let go; her powerful tug pulled him along in its wake, and he toppled into her lap, knocking her over backwards. Like a panther, he crawled up her body, yanking the book from her grasp, and pinned her in place with his arms and legs.

'Do not be flippant,' he said softly, eyes fierce, 'about my father. Neither of us may like him much, but he's the only father I've got.'

Hermione felt instantly ashamed; how would she feel if no one cared whether her own father lived or died? She thought of him and her mother, far away in Australia, without her to look after them and unable to look after her and, unaccountably, Hermione began to cry, tiny, lonely sobs of remorse and self-pity.

Draco, his pale face inches above hers, his shaggy blond hair hanging almost into her eyes, looked bewildered. 'Granger?' he whispered.

'I'm sorry,' she said, trying to calm herself. 'It's just... my parents...' A fresh wave of tears overtook her.

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Granger,' Draco sighed. He released her arms and moved his hands up to either side of her head. With the pads of his thumbs, he wiped the tear-tracks from her cheeks. 'I didn't mean to set you off. Close your eyes, now.'

Hermione obeyed and sighed softly when she felt his fingers on her eyelids, drying them of the droplets that hung in her lashes. At the sound of her exhalation, however, Draco seemed to freeze; she felt his body tense along its entire length, and for a moment, she experienced a sharp pinprick of fear.

Then he was kissing her, and the fear disappeared, to be replaced with a longing so intense that she kissed him back immediately, opening her lips and attacking him with such passion that he grunted in surprise. The weight of his body on top of hers was divine; arching against him, she let her hands creep beneath his jacket and slide along the smooth muscles of his back. His own hands had left her face—he was running them feverishly up and down her sides and over the curve of her hips, every now and then digging his fingers ever so slightly into her flesh.

Hermione managed to free one of her legs from his iron stance and wrap it round his hip; immediately, he grasped her behind the knee and began stroking the back of her thigh. He ground his hips against hers, slotting himself neatly into the space she had created by lifting her leg, and she gasped into his mouth, delirious at the feel of his hardness through her jeans.

Everything seemed to take on the hazy quality of a dream: clothing scattered across the floor, skin fired against skin. Hermione imagined the heat burning away her loneliness, Draco's loneliness. Both of them had been, in a sense, orphaned by the war; their actions were a sweet celebration of the joys of human company. She felt no pain, only the remarkable sensation of being pushed higher and higher; Draco's wordless moaning into her ear spurred her onward until her head fell back and her eyes fluttered closed. The taut strings in her body snapped convulsively, and she came violently, a feeling so familiar that she screamed aloud into the warm, heavy air of the sitting room.

Suddenly, the weight on her body was gone. She saw a flash of wounded grey eyes before Draco snatched up his clothing and spat at her. Then he disappeared, and Hermione found herself alone again, panting and sweating on her sitting-room carpet.

For long minutes, she lay where she was, ashamed and confused. What on earth had possessed her to call out Snape's name? Had she grown to associate the feeling of pleasure with him so much that she was thinking of him, even subconsciously, while she was with someone else? The idea was horrifying, and yet... was that a frisson of excitement she felt at the thought that, next time she dreamed of Snape (if a next time ever came), she would no longer be a virgin? There was a certain sickness to that as well, she realised: what sort of person would ruin *propersex* for the sake of what was, after all, only a dream? Of course, Draco would have misinterpreted her exclamation; he was bound to think that she had had some kind of improper relationship with their Potions professor.

Sighing, Hermione sat up and began to put her clothes on. She didn't even know whether Draco had achieved any kind of satisfaction! She was a terrible lover, she thought, shoving aside a book to pull on her jeans...

He had left the books. *He had left the books.* Galvanised into action—Draco could return for them at any moment!—Hermione grabbed her wand and picked up the book she wanted, pausing only to button up her trousers before Apparating hastily away to a place she knew Draco could never go searching for her.

The Atrium was silent and almost deserted, its fireplaces cold and dark, as Hermione walked through it on the way to her small office. The guard on duty at the desk looked drowsy as he waved her past without a word. It had been many weeks since she'd bothered to show up at her office, and when she had done so, it was usually in the morning. She'd never come to the Ministry at this time of evening; though it was not particularly late, everyone besides the guard had long since gone home.

Her office smelled of dust; she shivered a little in its chill as she situated herself behind the desk and placed the book down in front of her. It was not a long work—perhaps two hundred pages—she could easily finish reading before midnight. She stirred a pot of ink with her quill and opened the book, prepared to take notes. Within minutes, the quill was forgotten, soaking up ink forlornly along its spine.

... When the act of murder is committed, it is convenient to describe the soul as now 'divided,' but this is merely an approximation of the true effects of the act. While the soul is a unified object, and thus indivisible, it can be said to consist of constituent parts which, together with one another and with the body, complete the human being. These constituent parts may be said to be qualities of human behaviour, for which we have convenient labels such as kindness, cleverness, and so forth in an almost infinite list. A person may not possess every such quality, but because of the nature of the soul, he does possess the potential for every quality... The act of murder, then, does not 'split' the soul, but isolates a particular quality or qualities: those that, in fact, had they been employed by the murderer, would have prevented the murder from taking place. Most often, these qualities are courage, pity, mercy, sympathy, remorse; it is not unheard-of, however, for logic or reason to be isolated as well, in circumstances in which the murderer might think, 'This act is not to my net benefit', or 'This does not serve my long-term interest', but pursues his course nevertheless... It is important to remember that the murderer does not actively employ these qualities of himself in any case, or perhaps does not yet possess them fully-formed; when these qualities, or the potential for them, are isolated inside of him, he is unlikely to notice; as long as these isolated parts of his soul remain within his body, there is still a chance for their re-integration. To create a Horcrux, therefore, is to identify the isolated qualities, remove them from the body, and place them within another receptacle. Once a murderer has done so, he loses all future capacity to employ those qualities of himself; he has made himself an incomplete being...

... The soul can survive without the body, and the body can survive without the soul, but only when one operates in conjunction with the other can the human being be said to be complete: that is, to possess 'essentia' rather than simply 'existentia'—living rather than surviving, being rather than existing. This is why the Horcrux must involve a container for the piece of soul, to approximate the function of the living body in which that piece of soul was once housed. Any object is sufficient for this purpose; the Horcrux need not be made with a box, or bowl, or conventional container. It would be possible, if one were so inclined, to make a Horcrux using a single grain of sand... Once the chosen object is treated with the Soulhouse Solution, it is ready to serve as a surrogate body for a piece of soul. The Soulhouse Solution, however, is a necessary but not sufficient condition; the will of the wizard must be imposed on the object as well. The object, which now possesses something approaching sentience, must be instructed as to its function: to hold the piece of soul, to protect it, to serve its wishes; the object must be imbued with a strong sense of self-preservation (although the strength of this quality will only be as great in the object as it is in the creator of the Horcrux himself); the object must be made to understand that it serves as a worthy substitute for the creator's body...

... Most of magic relies upon the principle of 'demand' or 'command' and operates by the imposition of the wizard's will upon his reality. It combines the philosophies of both universalism and nominalism, in that it identifies and produces the form of the wizard's desire by his acknowledgment of its name. The apparent conundrum enters when one realises that the wizard is acknowledging the name of the form, rather than the name of the effect or thing itself; this is why, when a Muggle points to an empty space and says, 'Water!' nothing occurs, for he has acknowledged the name of the effect (the water) rather than the name of the form (that universal idea of the liquid element, for which wizards use the term 'Agamenti')... A wizard's intrinsic magic, therefore, consists either of (a) demanding an item that is not present by acknowledging the name of its form, or (b) commanding an item that is already present using terms able to manipulate that object's form. A Horcrux is, clearly, created by command, for it is effected entirely by manipulating the form of the objects (soul and container) involved. In one sense, a Horcrux is a marvellously simple thing to create, for souls are extraordinarily susceptible to mandate, and the Soulhouse Solution makes the container susceptible in this same way. In another sense, however, it is very difficult: the self-discipline required to command one's own soul to behave in a way contrary to its very nature is immense. Far easier, indeed, to create a Horcrux for someone else, or to have another person assist one in making one's own! For the paradox that must be overcome is that, often, what prevents a person from committing murder is courage, not fear; and if the person manages to achieve murder in spite of this, he has isolated his courage, which is the very quality he needs in order to command his own soul to become a Horcrux! For this reason, Horcruxes are fortunately very rare indeed; there are few people in the world whose evil acts even courage would not prevent...

Hermione read the book twice in its entirety; it was long past midnight before she sat back in her chair and closed her eyes, hands behind her head, the book to one side atop her desk. Many things made sense now: how it was possible for Voldemort to create multiple Horcruxes, the reason why he did not find the idea of damaging his soul abhorrent. Voldemort would have found the Horcruxes useful for more than simply aiding in his bid for immortality—he would have positively enjoyed slicing out of himself the potential for such qualities as mercy, pity, and remorse, all of which he would have considered weaknesses. At what point, then, had he sliced away his capacity for love? Was it when he had murdered his family, whom filial love and duty, or at the very least, gratitude, should have protected?

The idea that Horcruxes relied upon the magic of command fascinated Hermione, too. The questions of demand and command were not something she had ever given much thought, but now that they had been brought to her attention, she delved into them with the tenacity of a terrier. That it was difficult to command one's own soul against its nature, she had no doubt, but if the command were *not* unnatural, how then would one's soul respond? Alternately, would the soul respond to someone else's commands? She thought back to the dream she had had of Snape, and wondered: had he manipulated her senses by issuing commands to her soul?

And if he can command my soul, she thought suddenly, does that mean that I can command his?

The Lantern

Chapter 12 of 17

Hermione receives an unexpected Christmas gift from Mark.

The Lantern

My face turns a deathly pale

You're talking to me through the veil

Hermione spent Christmas Eve with Harry and Ron at Grimmauld Place and woke the next morning to the delicious smell of a fry-up. A flute of Buck's Fizz stood on her bedside table; she drank it in bed, feeling luxuriously decadent, before padding downstairs to join the boys in opening presents. Their delight at the holiday was palpable and infected her with a long-missed sense of joy. Kreacher darted around them solicitously as they ate breakfast and sent them off to the Burrow with three enormous casseroles to contribute to Mrs Weasley's Christmas dinner.

When she finally returned to Spinner's End in the early evening, Hermione was stuffed full of food, slightly tipsy, and unimaginably tired. The day had had its share of ups and downs: for the Weasleys, it was their first Christmas without Fred; for Harry, it was his first Christmas with Teddy Lupin, his orphaned godson; for Hermione, it was the first anniversary of the most horrible experience of her life. She had managed to keep her mind firmly in the present for most of the afternoon, but now that she was alone, she kept envisioning the darkened, smelly bedroom of Bathilda Bagshot and the sinuous slither of the giant snake.

A knock on the front door drew her out of her reverie. She opened it to reveal Mark standing, bundled up warmly, on the front walk.

'Happy Christmas, Hermione,' he said, scooting inside to escape the cold. His nose was bright red, and he warmed it with his fingers for a moment before shrugging off his coat and dropping into an armchair. 'Brought you a present,' he said, unzipping the big pocket of his rucksack and pulling out a small parcel wrapped in red paper.

She grinned. 'I've got one for you, too,' she said, tugging a box from beneath her tiny Christmas tree and handing it to him.

Mark tore open the package gleefully and exclaimed, 'This is fantastic!' It was a chemistry set. Hermione had deliberately chosen one of the more adult-oriented sets; she knew Mark was mature enough to handle the more dangerous chemicals and she knew that if he wanted to experiment in her basement, she could ward the lab surreptitiously against accidents.

'Thank you, Hermione,' he said sincerely. 'Now go on, open yours!'

She carefully removed the red paper on the parcel and opened the small box to reveal a bracelet made of elaborately intertwined links in the shape of infinity symbols. She lifted the chain carefully, examining it, and saw with surprise that it was made of stainless steel. 'This is beautiful. Where did you get it?' she asked curiously.

His face turned faintly pink. 'I made it,' he answered. 'I got a spool of steel wire from the ironmonger's and used my father's soldering gun to close the links. Do you really like it?'

'Oh, yes!' she exclaimed, wanting to hug him but aware that he wasn't a demonstrative child. 'It's wonderful.' She slipped the bracelet over her wrist and held out her arm, admiring the play of the steel over her skin. 'Where did you learn to do this?'

'There was a guy in the Shambles once,' he explained, shrugging as if his accomplishment were modest. 'He was making reproduction chain mail. I watched him for ages. Your bracelet was a lot harder, though,' he added suddenly, a touch of pride in his voice. 'The chain mail was just little rings.'

'It's perfect, Mark,' she said with a smile. 'Better even than silver because the steel won't tarnish.'

He grinned with pleasure, then leaned over his rucksack again. 'I have something else for you, too,' he said, 'but it's not a present or anything. It's just something I thought you might want to look at.' He extracted a leather-book and passed it to her.

'What is it?' she asked, turning it over in her hands. There was no title or author's name embossed on its cover; in fact, the book was one of the plainest she'd ever seen.

Mark cleared his throat suddenly, and she looked up to meet his eyes. He said carefully, 'I'm not certain because I've never opened it, but I think it's Professor Snape's journal.'

Colour rushed hectically into Hermione's cheeks; for a moment, she felt uncomfortably hot and short of breath. 'What makes you think so?' she asked in a half-whisper.

Mark seemed to sense her sudden anxiety and excitement; he cleared his throat again nervously and explained in a small voice, 'He gave it to me last summer. He said I could do whatever I wanted with it he said I could use it as my own journal if I wanted but I wasn't to hand it over to anybody who might ask for it.'

'You shouldn't give it to me, then,' she said, returning it to him regretfully.

He pushed the book back toward her and shrugged again. 'So?'

'There could be things in it...' Hermione paused. Mark couldn't possibly know what Snape had been involved in, and if she hinted at the dangerous nature of what might be contained in the journal, she might only alarm and upset him. She amended her sentence hastily: 'There could be things in it that a student shouldn't know about her teacher.'

Mark's gaze was level as he said, 'I doubt that will bother Professor Snape where he is now.'

It was such a sensible thing to say that Hermione smiled and hugged the journal to her chest. 'You're right, of course.' Reluctantly, she stood and placed the journal on one of the bookshelves. 'Can I interest you in some cranberry squash and Christmas pudding?' she asked Mark.

He bounded up from the chair and gave her a cheeky grin. 'Is the pope a Catholic?'

The hour was quite late when Mark finally went home, having insisted on breaking in his new chemistry set. Wisely unwilling to walk before he could crawl, he had mixed some baking soda and vinegar in a beaker and pronounced himself bored with the endeavour. The next time he came over, he promised her, they would do something more exciting.

Now, after scrupulously cleaning the worktops in Snape's Potions lab his lessons were wearing off more slowly than she would have believed. Hermione crawled wearily into bed with a mug of tea and Snape's journal. For the first time in many weeks, she could almost sense his presence in the room, but she firmly pushed this imaginative fancy into the back of her mind as she opened the thick, leather-bound book.

The creamy parchment pages were blank at first. She watched as, not entirely unexpectedly, ink coalesced itself into a brief sentence on the flyleaf.

State your name.

With a wry smile, she said quietly, 'Hermione Granger.'

The ink dissolved back into the page. She waited patiently; less than a minute later, ink began to fill the page again, this time in the narrow, spiky script she knew so well. Words flowed down the parchment like a waterfall. She flipped further into the book and saw the same phenomenon occurring on every page. After perhaps thirty seconds, the lines of writing reached the bottom of the pages, and she turned back to the beginning and settled in to read.

10 August 1993.

I never pay much attention to the news, and it is therefore slow to reach me, but Dumbledore's memory must be failing indeed for him to forget to mention this to me: Black has escaped. In their panic, the Ministry assume he will be going after Potter, who is staying in Diagon Alley under the discreet but watchful eyes of an entire pack of Aurors. This assumption makes very little sense to me, unless Black is truly deranged, and that I find hard to credit.

In fact, the entire Black affair is hard to credit from start to finish. The man is a worm and always was, and I, naturally, have never had any trouble believing him to be rash, thoughtless, casually cruel, even deliberately cruel. Nor do I think his conscience would be troubled by murdering thirteen innocent people in public. What I cannot believe is this fantasy that he betrayed Potter and Lily to the Dark Lord. Black, for all his ancestry, was a Gryffindor to his marrow; Gryffindors like Black don't possess the subtlety necessary for successful betrayal. He also cannot have been the Secret-Keeper even if Potter were that stupid, Lily would have known better than to select someone so obvious and so unreliable. She must have known better.

Hermione paused and leaned back against her pillows, gazing blindly at the circle of lamplight on the ceiling of her bedroom. Memories of her third year flooded back to her. Shaking her head to clear it, she read on.

21 August 1993.

The Defence professor this year is to be Remus Lupin. Dumbledore has obviously taken leave of his senses. A werewolf! The parents would riot if they found out but, of course, I am forbidden to 'make a peep' about it. How I would love to send a little communiqué to Lucius Malfoy! But no... I shall keep my information in reserve. A more propitious opportunity for disclosure may present itself. In the meantime, I have been conscripted into making the Wolfsbane Potion. Normally, I would resent having to perform unpaid labour, but I do find a great deal of satisfaction in the difficulty of preparing the Wolfsbane and also in having such a sword to hang over Lupin's head.

In a way, however, I do feel sorry for him because Dumbledore is using him (surprise!). As he put it to me, 'Either the man is innocent of all collusion with Sirius Black and will help us to protect Potter, or he is guilty of it and will unwittingly lead us straight to Black. Lupin will be extremely useful either way; let us be thankful for the convenience of the situation. You, Severus, must act suspicious of Lupin at all times it will keep him on his toes.' Such pretence will not, I admit, be difficult for me to maintain.

As Hermione read further, it became clear to her that Snape had not written in his journal every day, and when he had, it was usually in order to whinge. Some events he had recorded she recognised, but most of what he wrote about was entirely unfamiliar to her. He had carried on a great deal of correspondence, largely centred around research in Potions and the Dark Arts, and many of his entries consisted solely of rants about fellow academics ('total sods'), the quality of their research ('worse than shite'), complaints about his colleagues at Hogwarts ('complete tits'), and half-angry abuse of Albus Dumbledore ('past-it coffin-dodger').

She made it as far as the summer of 1996 before passing out from exhaustion shortly before dawn.

The next morning Boxing Day, so there was nothing to do and no place open in the city she immersed herself once again in Snape's journal at the kitchen table over a breakfast of buttered crumpets and sausage.

He had obviously had much more to rant about beginning in her sixth year; Dumbledore came in for a lot of heavy abuse, mostly regarding what Snape considered the headmaster's deficiencies of intellect. There was also a great deal of frankly angsty speculation about Draco Malfoy. Hermione remembered Harry's obsession with Malfoy during that school year and thought that, if anything, Snape's had been even more intense but then, she supposed, Snape had had a lot to lose if Malfoy messed up.

His frustration with Malfoy after catching him at the Slug Club's Christmas party seemed to leap off the page; Hermione began to feel sorry for Snape and Malfoy simultaneously. Snape had been doing his best in an impossible situation. Malfoy, meanwhile, had been trying to complete a task he loathed the very idea of without revealing to Snape whom he clearly distrusted how distasteful he found it.

But before she realised it, she had reached the last few pages of the journal. A sense of impending disaster overtook her. Sliding her empty plate away, she set the journal on the placemat in front of her and focussed all of her concentration on Snape's words.

27 February 1997.

That miserable, conniving, scheming, unempathetic bastard. That cruel, single-minded, son of a bitch. I refer to Dumbledore, of course, who has just told me that Potter will have to destroy himself in order to destroy the Dark Lord. Words cannot describe what this feels like to me, so I will not even try. Lily, my betrayal of you is complete.

2 March 1997.

There is nothing like a bit of melodrama to focus the reasoning mind. Hogwarts being a place infested largely with teenagers, melodrama is never in short supply, and yesterday Potter and the Weasley boy provided a healthy dose of it. Malfoy is being inexcusably careless; I must have a word with him.

I have given a great deal of thought to Dumbledore's revelation about Potter, and I have come to the conclusion that he believes me deaf, dumb, and blind. Also stupid. 'A fragment of Voldemort's soul was blasted apart and stuck itself to Potter,' indeed. Potter is a Horcrux. And there are clearly others, apart from him fragments of soul don't get 'blasted' unless the soul in question is already dangerously unstable.

What to do, then. The bit of foreign soul inside Potter must indeed be destroyed in order for the Dark Lord to be vulnerable, but does it have to mean destroying Potter, too?

9 March 1997.

Horcruxes are, truly, a fascinating bit of magic. Fascinating. Already, I am bombarded by ideas about how to destroy Potter-as-Horcrux while preserving Potter himself. The magic is not overly complex, I don't think, but arranging circumstances will prove fiendishly difficult.

13 March 1997.

I grow convinced that the solution no pun intended is in the Soulhouse Solution. First of all, thank God and all his saints that I have not ever been asked to prepare that potion. Even I, one of the least squeamish people I know, cannot imagine anything more disgusting. The Dark Lord must be relieved it is a solution and not a draught; even immortality would be an inadequate reward for having to drink such stuff. I can understand, of course, why the active ingredients are necessary; the receptacle for the soul must be made to approximate a human being, so naturally the potion needs the essential ingredients, so to speak, that make up a human.

Enough contemplation of that; it's making my stomach churn. The rest of the potion is a combination of herbs and oils that encourage relaxation and receptivity in human beings; without the active ingredients, however, the potion is fit for nothing better than seasoning a baked chicken. The obvious objective of the Soulhouse Solution is to make the object component of the Horcrux susceptible to command it should be possible to modify the solution, therefore, to make the soul susceptible to command while it is still inside the body. Clearly, however, this cannot work as a solution, so I must figure out some way to create a draught.

3 April 1997.

Finally, a bit of a breakthrough. I remembered that useless old book of Malfoy's, the one with all of the Native American trance potions. About as magical as smoking a spliff, but nevertheless food for thought. And I have thought of something.

11 April 1997.

The package I ordered has arrived at last. I'm spending the weekend at Spinner's End to test it out. One of the best things about the acacia is that it becomes more potent as it grows stale; I can store it in a coffee jar and spare myself the worry about its expiry date.

12 April 1997.

A 0.125mol/L solution of the extract and rosewater appears to have the desired effect, but I begin to suspect that another ingredient is necessary to activate the potion. Unfortunately, I will not be able to test that theory for another twelve hours or so; at the moment, I am too busy tasting the Schumann I put on the record player earlier...

At last. I have put in a drop of tincture of wormwood. The draught has turned a delightful shade of gold I hope it tastes as much like Courvoisier as it looks. Cheers.

13 April 1997.

Success. The draught will certainly remove the Dark Lord's soul-fragment from Potter's body. The only question remaining is: what will happen to it thereafter? I'm not sure we can expect it to emulate Potter's soul. It seems to me, though this is mere conjecture, that once it is outside of Potter's body, one should be able to make a proper Horcrux with it and then destroy that Horcrux. The disembodied soul would be easy enough to command. Unfortunately, such a plan would mean preparing some object with the Soulhouse Solution, which I'm not certain is possible. Even if I could nerve myself to collect the ingredients, where on earth would I find a willing female?

28 July 1997.

All my effort has been entirely futile. Were it possible to give up, to quit, I would do so now. Potter will never take the draught. His life is forfeit; mine will be, too, when he dies, if I manage to live that long. I have only one task left, and that cannot be done until I am confirmed in the position of headmaster. Today will be the end of this journal, I think; my days are numbered, but I can't bear to count them off myself.

Hermione closed the journal and leaned her chair back, balancing it on its back legs. She did not react immediately to what she had read; for once, she allowed the information to marinate in her brain, trickling through her thoughts, meeting up and joining with other information, until she could almost see the web of brightly coloured awareness glowing behind her eyes.

Then she stood up calmly, tucked the journal beneath one arm, and descended the stairs into Snape's Potions lab. She placed the book onto the worktop as she passed it, heading for the cupboard of Potions ingredients, and carefully pulled on a pair of dragon-hide gloves. Deliberately, unhurriedly, she opened the doors to the cupboard and began to sort properly through the bottles and jars she had only ever glanced at previously. Snape's labelling system was meticulous; she couldn't help but grin as she read each one and rested it carefully on the end of the worktop. *Eye of newt and toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog...*

The potion Snape had created, she reasoned, was the most important part of what she had read, and she had assumed that she would find some here, since he had obviously prepared enough to give to Harry but, by his own admission, had never had the opportunity to give it to him. Therefore, the potion must still be here somewhere. Of course, she had assumed the same thing about the *Ars Magica*, and about the journal, and neither had been in the basement (she still had no idea where the *Ars Magica* might be), so she was reasonably prepared for disappointment.

When she had emptied the cupboard almost entirely and still found nothing out of the ordinary, Hermione actually began to smile, and then eventually to grin. Snape had done it again! Led her to the answer she wanted, built up her expectations, and let her down in the end by being a secretive, sneaky bastard who hid his important possessions instead of keeping them where they belonged. The book was still missing; he had given the journal to Mark; perhaps he had left the amended draught with his milkman or the elderly neighbour who kept his spare keys!

But then she pulled down the last jar on the top shelf. Unlike the others, it wasn't a carefully-labelled and wax-sealed dedicated Potions storage jar; it was a Nescafe Gold container, yellow lid and all, with a handful of withered, ferny-looking leaves inside. *I can store it in a coffee jar...* This must be the 'acacia' Snape had mentioned in his journal, the ingredient he had used to make the potion she was unable to find! What else had he said about it? She racked her brain and remembered: the staler the plant was, the more potent its extract would be. Thrilled, she darted to the desk nearly dropping the Nescafe jar in her excitement and, ripping off her gloves, groped around in one of the drawers for quill and parchment.

She might not have found the draught itself, but she had found the essential ingredient for the potion: now, all she had to do was recreate it never mind for the moment that she had no idea what it was actually supposed to do. From what he had written in his journal, he had tested the draught on himself, so it couldn't be fatal (although she didn't quite understand his reference to 'tasting Schumann'). Whatever the potion was, it had something to do with influencing the soul, and as a result, Hermione didn't even make the pretence of trying to control her curiosity. She was going to have a go at making that potion, regardless of the difficulties involved. She had no doubt that if Snape could invent the draught from nothing in a weekend, she could replicate his work in the same amount of time if not less.

'Hermione...'

She rolled onto her back in bed and looked to her right. Tendrils of dark hair fell across the pale green of her pillow. Her eyes followed them to their source and came to rest on a pair of solemn black eyes.

'Professor Snape?' she asked, hardly daring to hope. 'Am I dreaming this on my own, or are you helping me?'

'I'm here, Hermione,' he responded, his deep voice frothing over her grateful ears like ocean waves. He lifted himself onto one elbow as she turned her body to face him, her left hand reaching up tentatively to touch his cheek. He mirrored her actions, brushing her curls out of her face and allowing his fingers to drift along her eyebrow and down to her jawline.

Snape's expression was guarded, carefully neutral, but Hermione could not resist the desire of her eyes to focus on his lips. Unconsciously, she licked her own lips, remembering the feel of his kisses and wanting, suddenly, to initiate one herself. He seemed to know exactly what she was thinking as her gaze flicked up to gauge his expression again, but he didn't give any sign of encouragement or refusal.

Her desire to know the answers to her questions, however, outweighed even her sudden ardency, so instead of kissing him, she said, 'You stayed away for a long time.'

'You asked me not to manipulate you,' he answered reasonably.

'Yes,' she agreed, 'but I asked you that before you wrecked my kitchen and living room.'

Snape blinked the only reaction she was likely to get in response to her remark and said nothing.

She eyed him cautiously for a moment, then shifted onto her back again and put her hands beneath her head.

He was on her in an instant. He pushed her elbows to straighten her arms and grasped her wrists in one hand, stretching her arms behind her head and pinning her hands to the pillows. At the same time, he shifted his hips onto hers and pressed the weight of his chest on top of her, seizing her mouth with his own and thrusting his tongue between her lips. Surprised and delighted, Hermione returned the kiss with equal fervour.

At her joyous response, Snape released her hands and yanked her camisole up to her chest. Obliging, she lifted her shoulders and let him tear the garment over her head, sighing in satisfaction when his hands came to rest on her breasts. She opened her mouth and kissed him even more hungrily when he began to pinch her nipples slowly and firmly.

'Hermione,' Snape gasped against her lips. 'Touch me.'

Feverishly, she complied, dragging the bed sheet from between their bodies to discover that he was warmly, gloriously naked in bed with her. Pinned in place as she was by his kisses, she couldn't see much of his body, but she remembered clearly the ripple of muscle across his back and the leanness of his strong thighs. She remembered his cock, too, thick and immensely hard, and she closed her hand around it now, loving the way he moaned and arched his hips in response.

Emboldened by his reaction, she murmured, 'I'm not much in the mood for foreplay.'

Snape grew still briefly, as if digesting the idea. Appearing to come to a decision, he abandoned her breasts and grasped her thighs instead, pushing them swiftly apart. Her knees he guided upward, and he situated his body neatly between them. Two of his fingers stroked their way along her thigh to her centre where he eased them inside of her and twisted them gently.

'Please,' said Hermione quietly.

Snape smiled at her between kisses, an expression she would never grow tired of seeing on his face, and commented, 'Yes, you're very ready, aren't you?' She wondered if he was going to make her beg, but she needn't have worried; as soon as the words left his mouth, he positioned his cock against her entrance and began to slide into her.

The delightful feeling of being stretched and filled overtook her. She moaned uncontrollably as his shallow thrusts carried him deeper within her body until at last he was sheathed fully, his hips pressed flush against hers.

'Are you all right?' he asked breathlessly.

Hardly able to believe this was Snape when had he ever shown such concern? she rocked her hips upward and said, 'Yes, please, go on!'

At her vehement insistence, his face broke into a smirk, and he began to move inside of her, pushing in and pulling out slowly at first, then accelerating into a steady, driving rhythm that left Hermione gasping for breath as she worked to match it. The strands of pleasure tightened throughout her body, and she tried to speed the rhythm even further, only to find that Snape resisted her attempts firmly.

'No, Miss Granger,' he growled softly into her ear. 'Faster is not always better.'

Frustrated, she growled back at him, determined that if she couldn't move faster, she could at least push harder. Almost gritting her teeth, she slammed her body against him, driving him deeper than his own thrusts had been carrying him. To her surprise, a small exclamation escaped his lips, and his hands captured her wrists again and lifted them over her head.

'You want it harder?' he hissed. Without waiting for an answer, he drove into her, nailing her to the mattress with the force of his thrusts but never increasing his pace.

'Yes!' She locked her ankles behind his back as her body tensed and tightened. She threw back her head involuntarily and heard herself chanting, 'Yes, yes, yes, yes!' to the beat of his movements. Incredibly, she felt his cock growing even harder as it pistoned in and out of her, and this seemed to set off a series of small charges that crackled and pulsed up her legs until they reached the point where her body joined with Snape's.

And then Hermione exploded, every muscle in her body bursting into powerful vibration. Dimly, she heard Snape cry out, but she was incapable of thought, locked into an uncontrollable physical convulsion that seemed to pump a sensation of fierce, burning joy through her veins.

She returned gradually to awareness as the vibrations settled back to mild pulses through her body. Realising that, at some point, she had closed her eyes, she opened them again. Her vision filled with the image of Snape's youthful, smooth face, she blurted suddenly, 'I love you.'

Shock flashed through his eyes for a brief instant before he smothered his reaction with a wicked grin. 'In your current state, that is permitted.'

She returned his smile weakly and let her iron grip on his body relax. He heaved a deep breath and slid carefully off her, taking care not to lean his weight on her shaky legs. Then he gathered her into his embrace and wrapped her in the warmth of his body.

Hermione could sense the dream beginning to fade, the emptiness of her sleeping brain taking over, and she tried valiantly to hold on, saying, 'Please, Professor Snape, tell me what is wrong with Teach, tell me what I'm not supposed to do.'

'You already know, Hermione...'

Have A Cigar

Chapter 13 of 17

Hermione and Edward Teach attempt to recreate Snape's potion.

Have A Cigar

It's a hell of a start

It could be made into a monster

'Are you ready?' asked Hermione. She was sitting on a stool across from Edward Teach at the worktable in the basement of Spinner's End. It was New Year's Eve.

In response, he loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his starched white shirt. 'Ready.'

They regarded the table in front of them. There was a large piece of parchment, listing Snape's remarks about the potion he had created. Hermione had copied very carefully from his journal in order to make sure that she missed nothing of what he had written. There were also several smaller pieces of parchment, arranged in a queue, with the names of ingredients written on the front side and the effects of those ingredients on the back. There was a tattered, blackened book, open to a page whose heading read in ornate lettering, 'The Soulhouse Solution.' And there was another book, newer, slightly battered, with a colourful cover and a piece of lined A4 sticking out of the middle of its pages.

Hermione picked up the small pieces of parchment and began to lay them out on the table in a new arrangement, one by one, explaining to Teach as she worked:

'These are the, er, inactive ingredients of the Soulhouse Solution, according to this book.'

Edward shuddered a bit in distaste but paid careful attention.

'First,' Hermione said, putting down a scrap, 'the sage oil. This acts as a stimulant, like nicotine.' She placed the next scrap directly to the right of the first one. 'Then the camomile flowers, calming and soporific. The conjunction of these two ingredients will do... what?'

'In the right proportions,' Edward answered, 'they will produce a physical state of calm but attentive equilibrium.'

'Right,' Hermione nodded. She placed another scrap on the table. 'Rosemary oil. This improves memory and focuses concentration.' She shuffled the pieces of parchment in her hand and selected a fourth one, putting it on the table so that the four pieces together formed a square. 'Stinging nettle. It blocks pain receptors and induces mild euphoria.'

Edward said, 'Together, they create a state of mind that parallels the equilibrium in the body.'

Hermione laid down a fifth scrap of parchment in the centre of the previous four. 'Ginger.'

'Aids in the absorption of the potion into the bloodstream.' Edward leaned back on his stool, balancing himself with his palms flat on the worktable. 'Altogether, that would make a baked chicken taste divine.'

Hermione cocked one eyebrow and fluttered the remaining three scraps of parchment in her hand. 'I don't understand what effect those things are supposed to have on an object. How do they prepare the object to receive a piece of soul?'

'I'm fairly certain,' Edward responded, brow furrowing slightly, 'that this stuff kicks *in after* the, er, active ingredients have humanised the object. Once the object has taken on human properties, the sage and rosemary and so on affect it in the same way they would affect a human body. They make it attentive, calm, and receptive.' He glanced toward the cabinet that held Snape's Potions paraphernalia and commented, 'We'll need all of them, and probably in the same proportions used in the Soulhouse Solution.'

'Probably,' Hermione agreed. She selected two of the scraps she still held and hesitated for a moment before laying them on the table, slightly to the right of the arrangement of the other five. 'Now the modifications Professor Snape made. First, the acacia extract dissolved in rosewater. In a "0.125mol/L" solution.'

Edward stared at the parchments for a moment, considering, and reached over to the colourful book and opened it at the page marked by the lined paper. 'That should work out to one part extract to eight parts rosewater per litre of solution.'

Now it was Hermione's turn to stare. 'Okay. First of all, how do we make the extract? Second, how do we know how much extract equals a mole? Third, how do we make sure we're measuring the proportions by amount of solution, rather than amount of solvent? Fourth, once we've made the solution, how do we know how much to put in the potion?'

Smiling, Edward said, 'Well, as to the second question, we can look that up.' He stood, walked to the bookcase, and searched carefully for a moment before pulling a thick reference work off the shelf. He paused for a moment, gazing at the title, and turned back to select another, smaller, book. Then he returned to the table and opened the smaller one, murmuring, 'Acacia...' under his breath. A minute later, he looked up at Hermione and said, 'It looks like the pharmacological substance in the acacia that we need is mescaline. Look that up in the other book, would you please?'

Hermione drew the thick book to her and opened it. The pages contained an inventory of chemicals listed alphabetically; in the M section, she found mescaline and read aloud, 'C11H17NO3. 211.26 grams per mole. Melting point 183-186 degrees Celsius.'

'We'll have to assume that that mass of our extract won't contain the right amount of mescaline,' Edward said thoughtfully, 'but I'm willing to bet that Snape used that number anyway. The equipment here doesn't really allow for the kind of chemical precision he would have needed to measure a mole of pure mescaline.'

Hermione consulted Mark's science textbook for that was what the colourful book was and said, 'A 0.125mol/L solution means that for one mole of extract, there should be

eight litres of liquid. So if we want to use one litre of liquid, we should be using an eighth of a mole of acacia extract.'

'Right,' Edward agreed. 'Easy enough.' He did some rough calculations on a scrap of parchment. 'We put 26.41 grams of extract into a litre-beaker and then fill it up with rosewater.'

'Oh!' Hermione exclaimed. 'Of course.' She frowned. 'But then how much of that do we put into stuff from the Soulhouse Solution?'

Edward shrugged and twisted his mouth into a rueful smile. 'We'll just have to do a drop-by-drop titration until we get it right.'

'How will we know when we've gotten it right?' Hermione asked, worried.

He seemed to recognise her worry and share it. 'We'll have to drink it.'

'What exactly is mescaline?' Hermione wanted to know.

'As far as I know, it's a psychedelic hallucinogen.'

Knowing how dangerous such a plan was, especially with such a substance, Hermione nevertheless set her shoulders in determination. As long as the potion wasn't fatal and Snape himself had drunk it, so it was safe at least in that regard she could deal with its adverse effects. 'Right then,' she said firmly and put the eighth and final piece of parchment onto the table. 'Tincture of wormwood.'

'Snape says it activates the potion,' Edward offered. 'It makes sense, intuitively.'

'Yes, I suppose it does,' she agreed. Then she frowned again and looked up at Edward thoughtfully. 'The question is, what exactly does this potion do? We've got enough information to make an assumption, but...' She raised her eyebrows.

Edward gazed off into space for a while, tapping his index finger against the table. 'Snape was going to use this potion to remove Voldemort's bit of soul from Harry Potter's body,' he said eventually. 'So, we must assume that the potion removes the soul from the body.'

'That's what I don't quite understand,' Hermione responded, frustration creeping into her tone. 'He says it worked, but wouldn't it have removed Harry's soul from his body as well?'

He rested his chin in his hand and gave this observation some thought. Eventually, he said, 'It must do that. But once the soul is out of the body, it can be commanded, right?'

Hermione nodded.

'And we know he planned to command the piece of Voldemort's soul into a different object to make another Horcrux. So maybe he planned to command Potter's soul back into Potter's body.' He waited expectantly for her response.

Command Harry's soul back into Harry's body... Hermione chewed the inside of her cheek, thinking. But she was not thinking about whether this was the purpose of Snape's potion at Edward's words, her thoughts had struck off in a different direction entirely. 'Forget Horcruxes for a minute,' she said slowly, almost unaware of the fact that she was speaking out loud. 'If it's possible to command a soul that is outside of a body, then *this* is how the wizards of the New World were communicating with their ancestors.'

Edward narrowed his eyes at her. 'What do you mean?' he asked cautiously. 'What are you thinking?'

Dreamily, she went on, 'We could command the soul of someone who's dead.'

'How?' Edward demanded, his attitude suddenly, painfully intense.

'We use this potion to remove a living person's soul from their body,' she whispered, 'and then we command the soul of the dead person into that body.'

'But how would we get it back out again?'

'The same way,' she said. 'Give the body the potion again and switch the souls.'

'What happens to the living person's soul while it's outside of their body?' Edward asked.

Hermione seemed to come out of her trance. Blinking, she said, 'I don't know. My God,' she said suddenly, her eyes widening as something that should have been obvious occurred to her. 'How did Snape get his *own* soul back into his body after he took this potion?'

'Perhaps there was somebody else present to command it for him,' Edward suggested.

'Oh, I doubt that,' Hermione answered, smiling. 'You didn't know Professor Snape, but I did and he would never have shared this with another person.'

Edward pointed out reasonably, 'Then why did he write it down in his journal?'

To which point Hermione was forced to admit she had no answer.

They divided up the tasks involved in recreating Snape's potion. Hermione took the sage oil, camomile flowers, rosemary oil, nettles, and ginger to one end of the table and set herself to chopping, grinding, and diluting. At the other end of the table, Edward, his hands carefully sheathed in dragon-hide gloves, ground the dried acacia leaves with mortar and pestle, pulverising them into a fine powder. He lit a flame under a small cauldron and warmed the powder in it, regularly adding drops of alcohol from a tiny pipette until he was certain that the excess water had been steamed out of the acacia powder. He poured out the mixture over a glass dish, straining it through a thin piece of linen to separate the alcohol from the grains of acacia, and placed the linen to one side to allow the powder to dry. He repeated the process several times, using up all of the acacia leaves from the coffee jar, then excused himself for a few minutes. The work had been so fiddly and careful, Hermione knew, that Edward needed a break to stretch and let the intensity of his concentration wear off.

While he was gone, she mixed the wormwood into ethanol to make a tincture and measured out a litre and a half of rosewater. Then she put the sage, camomile, rosemary, nettle, and ginger together in a medium-sized cauldron and began to warm it with a very low flame. There was nothing left to do until the acacia extract was dry, so she followed Edward upstairs and collapsed onto the floor of the sitting room, feeling slightly tired and drained. Edward had taken up position in one of her parents' old armchairs; resting his feet on the low coffee table, he allowed his head to fall back against the wing of the chair and very quickly fell into a shallow sleep.

Unable to sleep herself, Hermione lay on the shag carpet and stared at the ceiling, her mind curiously empty. She drifted into a steady state of relaxation almost like a meditative trance and was therefore somewhat startled when Edward woke a few hours later and nudged her with his toe.

'You ready to start again?' he asked through a yawn.

'Yeah,' she answered hoarsely, picking herself up from the floor and making her way to the stairs that led to the basement.

At the worktable once again, they both pulled on their gloves and examined the acacia extract, which sat in little piles on several squares of linen at one end of the table. Edward poked gently at one of the piles with his fingertip and said briefly, 'It's dry.'

Picking up the squares of linen carefully, they deposited the fine powder onto Hermione's scales. When each side of the scale balanced at last, Edward collected the powder carefully into a one-litre beaker. Hermione lifted the container of rosewater and began to pour. When the level of the liquid reached the white line on the side of the glass, Edward picked up a stirring rod and began to swirl it gently through the solution.

Meanwhile, Hermione stirred the oils and herbs in the cauldron and deliberately added a single drop of the tincture of wormwood. Most potions, she remembered from Professor Snape's lessons, had to be constructed in a particular order, but she hoped that wasn't the case with this one. Snape had added the wormwood last, but she and Edward couldn't do that without wasting acacia extract. And without knowing how much of it might be required, they couldn't afford to waste any at all.

'Do you think it's all mixed in evenly yet?' Hermione asked Edward, pointing at the beaker of rosewater solution.

'Should be,' he answered shortly. Bringing it over to the cauldron, he gave her a very serious look. 'What colour are we aiming for here?'

'Courvoisier,' Hermione answered, lips turning up in a small smile.

'Ah.' He sucked some solution into a pipette and held it over the cauldron. 'Keep track. First drop.'

An elliptical droplet formed at the end of the pipette and hung there for what felt like an eternity before dropping off and splashing with a *tinylop* in the cauldron. Nothing happened.

Edward drew his sleeve across his forehead and positioned the pipette again. 'Second drop.'

The next drop fell without as much drama, but still the potion remained unchanged. Hermione made a second tick mark on the parchment to her right.

The suspense was clearly getting to Edward, who wiped his forehead again and gritted his teeth. Hermione felt strangely calm and empty when he said, 'Third drop.'

The glittering droplet fell, and the potion blossomed into a beautiful, clear gold.

Edward exhaled sharply and emptied the pipette back into the beaker of solution. 'Would you say that's the colour of Courvoisier?'

'I don't know,' responded Hermione. Her calm had dissolved instantly when the potion had alchemised. Giddily, she added, 'I think it looks closer to Remy Martin.'

When the potion was cool and decanted into its vial, Hermione stood motionlessly for a long while, regarding it, awed by the nature of what they were about to do. She couldn't seem to wrap her mind around the possibility that the potion worked, that it did what they had assumed, that any of it was real. She *knew* that souls existed, she *knew* that they could be manipulated, but somehow it seemed to her like a dream, like a cosmic joke. One of them would take the potion and do nothing more than get extremely high from the mescaline it contained. Presumably, that was what had happened to Snape when he tested the potion before he had discovered the need for the wormwood. Slowly, she removed her dragon-hide gloves and laid them on the table, then turned and walked into the other half of the room to sit down on the indented cushion of the sofa. Edward took off his own gloves and followed, settling himself into the armchair across from her. He seemed slightly agitated. He fidgeted for a few minutes, crossing one leg, then the other, and chewed on his lip.

'What is it?' he asked finally. 'What's the matter?'

Hermione hesitated before saying, 'I think there's an ethical dimension to all of this that we haven't really considered.'

'And that is...?'

'We've agreed to test this potion on one of us,' she said, 'and that's fine. We're in a position to give consent to that. But whomever we choose to bring into this. The dead person's soul isn't in a position to give consent. What if the experiment damages them somehow? What if putting their soul into a living body is somehow the equivalent of killing a living person?'

Edward pulled his wand out of his pocket and twirled it nervously in his fingers. 'It can't really be like that, though,' he argued mildly. 'A dead person knows what it was like to be alive. It won't come as any surprise to them to be alive again, even if it's only temporary. A living person doesn't know what it's like to be dead; that's why it would be worse to kill than to do what we propose to do. The situations aren't equivalent.'

Hermione nodded carefully. 'That may be true. But it doesn't address the issue of consent. It would be wrong. It would be like rape. It can't be right to deprive someone of their personal agency, even if they're dead, even if it's for a good reason.'

Shaking his head in exasperation, Edward said, 'So, you're saying we shouldn't do this at all? We've rediscovered this, we know what it does, Snape did it. But we're not supposed to duplicate his experiment?'

'We don't know what it does!' Hermione exclaimed, leaning forward intently. 'We think we do, but what if we're wrong? And Snape only did it to himself. He didn't put some poor person's soul into his own body.'

'Hermione,' Edward said earnestly, 'think of the knowledge we could gain if we did this! Not just for us, but for the whole magical world. What is one person's discomfort, compared to the greater good?'

She reared back suddenly, horrified. 'No!' she cried, thinking of Dumbledore, and Harry, and Snape. 'The "greater good" is never a good reason to demand somebody's unwilling sacrifice!'

Startled by the strength of her negative reaction, Edward slid out of his chair to kneel in front of her, taking her hand in his, holding her gaze with his own. 'Hermione, it wouldn't be a sacrifice!' He gripped her fingers almost painfully. 'What is ten, fifteen minutes of their eternity? It's nothing! A drop in the ocean. A single grain of sand. Time, for the dead, is infinite. And it could be an enlightening experience for them, too!'

'No,' she protested, weakened by the intensity of her revulsion. 'We can't know that. And since we can't know it, we can't do it.'

He dropped her hand as if it burned him and stood up. He ran his fingers through his hair, obviously trying to control the level of his frustration. Pacing, he began to twirl his wand again while Hermione watched him warily. Every now and then, he would glance at her, his expression betraying his irritation.

'Edward, I'm sorry...' she started, but he interrupted her with a slash of his hand.

Then his stormy expression cleared abruptly, and he stared at her in surprise. 'Hermione, what if we could get consent? Or rather,' he amended quickly, 'what if we chose somebody we knew would agree?'

'Like who?' she demanded.

'Professor Snape.'

Her eyes grew wide as her face suddenly flooded with heat. 'Professor Snape?' she repeated in a whisper. In all of her fascination with the potion and the theory behind Horcruxes, she had forgotten that this was exactly what she had wanted to do from the moment Edward had first told her about methods for communicating with the dead. *Talk to Professor Snape!* And she knew with fervent certainty that Snape must want this too hadn't he been trying to communicate with her for months? Hadn't he said in her dream that there were ways to communicate that were far better than the dreams themselves, better than using the Urim and Thummim? He must want to speak to her as badly as she wanted to speak to him! In fact, he wanted to issue some sort of warning there was something he believed wholeheartedly she must not do. How could she ever find out what that was if she didn't use this opportunity to speak to him, *really* speak to him?

Slowly, she tilted her head to look up at Edward. 'It would have to be you,' she insisted softly. 'You would have to take the potion.'

He shoved his wand into his pocket and squared his shoulders. 'I've been willing to do that all along,' he assured her. 'You'll have to restrain me, though.'

'Why?' she asked, surprised.

'I don't want Snape doing anything with my body.' The idea actually seemed to nauseate him; his face grew pale, and he swallowed convulsively.

'All right,' Hermione agreed. Privately, she couldn't think of anything Snape might be inclined to do with Edward's body that Edward wouldn't do himself and immediately blushed at the thought. Shaking her head to clear it, she said again, 'All right.'

Edward sat back down in the armchair and made himself comfortable, wriggling back into the cushions. 'Good. I'm ready.'

'What, right this second?' Hermione blurted, startled. 'Don't you want to, you know, prepare yourself mentally?'

He shrugged. 'Isn't the potion supposed to do that for me?'

'I suppose so,' she offered weakly. She pulled out her wand and pointed it at him, her hand trembling.

When she had stood like that for a long moment without moving, Edward rolled his eyes at her and said, 'Well? Get on with it, Hermione!'

She nodded once, firmly, and cried, *Incarcerous!*

Magical ropes snaked out of her wand and bound Edward firmly to the chair. He tested them carefully, straining against them, and looked satisfied. 'Excellent,' he said encouragingly.

Unable to contemplate what she was doing, and unwilling to examine it, she steeled herself to go over to the worktable and pick up the vial of potion. Still keeping her mind blank, she returned to Edward and put her hand on his chin, tilting it gently upward. 'Open up,' she commanded.

He met her eyes and winked, grinning. Echoing Snape, he said, 'Cheers!'

Hermione blinked once and poured the potion into his mouth.

Strange Brew

Chapter 14 of 17

Edward takes the potion.

Strange Brew

She's a witch of trouble in electric blue

In her own mad mind, she's in love with you

Edward swallowed dutifully, leant his head against the wing of the armchair, and gazed up at the ceiling expectantly.

'Do you feel anything yet?' Hermione asked, taking a step backward, whether from caution or fear, she wasn't certain.

He smiled a little. 'Not a thing.'

Relieved and slightly disappointed, Hermione sighed and perched on the end of the sofa. She watched as Edward continued to look around, tapping his foot and chewing on the inside of his lip with the same air that she had seen on people sitting round in waiting rooms. She resisted the urge to fidget herself, not wanting to make him any more anxious than he already must be. His courage was admirable, she considered, unless it was foolhardiness, in which case he eclipsed even Sirius Black in that regard. The full stupidity of drinking a potion whose effects were unknown and whose recipe had been approximated from vague references in a personal journal struck her head-on as she sat, tense and wary, waiting for something to happen. How would Edward behave under the effects of the mescaline? Not even knowing fully how it had affected Snape, she couldn't even begin to guess. And what would his body be like without his soul inside it? The Dementors' Kiss removed the soul from the living body, but she had never seen anyone who had suffered that particular punishment, and now the Dementors were gone. *Any second now*, she thought; *I'm so wound up, I could scream.*

But when the potion did take effect, she almost didn't notice, so subtle was Edward's reaction: he twitched slightly in his bindings, and his eyes widened, fastening on her face with great fascination. 'Wow...' he breathed.

'What?' she asked in alarm, rising to her feet. 'What is it?'

He laughed quietly and turned his head to take in the rest of the room. 'Everything is very colourful,' he remarked. 'Calm down, I'm okay.'

'What do you mean, everything is colourful?' she repeated cautiously.

'The sounds,' he answered vaguely. 'Your voice, too it's all green and red, like Christmas.' Then he laughed again, a sound so flushed with delight that she knew at once he was feeling the effects of the mescaline in the potion.

'Would you say the potion has kicked in?' she enquired impatiently, turning away from him to fetch from the shelf the book she had stolen from Draco Malfoy.

'Most definitely,' he responded cheerfully. 'What do we do now?'

'Well,' she said, hesitating slightly, 'I'm going to request your soul to leave your body. Is that all right?'

'Cool,' said Edward and twitched again in his bindings. At her direction, he grew still and closed his eyes calmly.

Hermione paused *Am I really going to do this?* but, remembering Edward's earlier determination, set her shoulders and swished her wand confidently.

'Proficiscitor a corpore.'

Instantly, Edward's head dropped to his chest, his hands falling limp against the arms of the chair.

'Edward?' She leaned over him, amazed, and poked him on the shoulder. Receiving no reaction, she cupped his chin in her hand, lifted his head, and inspected his eyes curiously, pushing the lids out of the way. She moved her finger in front of them like a doctor, wondering if they would follow the motion, but again, Edward did nothing. '*Lumos*,' she whispered and held the tip of her wand near his face. His pupils continued to stare blankly without contracting.

Hermione stepped away again after lowering his head gently back to his chest. Her command certainly appeared to have worked, but the real test would come when she tried the next incantation. Using the spells Voldemort must have used to create his Horcruxes unnerved her more than a little. Even though she knew she was doing nothing evil after all, she had not killed anybody, nor damaged anyone's soul the very fact of employing the same magic made her skin shiver a bit in apprehension.

This next step was the line she didn't particularly want to cross; to call to Snape and order his soul to inhabit Edward's body wasn't something she could contemplate without unease. The longer she stood there, her wand dangling from her right hand, regarding Edward's motionless form, the less inclined she felt to do it, and for several minutes, she considered simply ordering Edward's own soul back to its rightful place. Then she remembered his impatience a few moments earlier and his obvious wish to go through with the experiment, and she heaved a great sigh and turned back to the book.

'Severus Snape!' Hermione intoned, hoping that calling his name in his own house was enough to capture his attention. '*Severus Snape intra in vas ac perficite opus!*

She didn't know what she expected to happen; there was no spark or boom or clap of thunder, however much she might feel, at this moment, like a mad scientist. Instead, there was continued silence. Edward's form remained as still as it had been for the past five or so minutes. When another minute passed, and then another, and still nothing happened, Hermione dropped onto the cushions of the sofa, half-laughing, half-sobbing. *Thank God, it didn't work.* She put her head between her knees, breathing deeply in her relief and saw, out of the corner of her eye, Edward's foot begin to tap again on the floor.

Hermione raised her head slowly and pushed her hair out of her face. Edward had sat up straight and was staring at her with a look of frank amazement on his face. Hermione's mouth dropped open slightly in shock.

'Trust you, Miss Granger, to find a use for my potion that I hadn't anticipated,' he said dryly. 'Although it was patent good sense, I agree,' he went on, jerking his arms and legs slightly in the magical restraints, 'you may release me now.'

She came slowly to her feet, speechless, and approached the chair.

'Oh, do close your mouth, Miss Granger.' The voice was sharp, tinged with amusement and contempt, and British.

'Prof-Professor Snape?' Hermione whispered in horror, leaning in closer to look into Edward's face. 'Is that you?'

The brown eyes gazing into her own narrowed into an irritated glare. 'You had better hope it is. Unbind me, if you please.'

'I can't untie you,' she whispered apologetically. 'I promised Edward.'

'How solicitous of you,' he drawled sarcastically. 'Pity you didn't give as much thought to stuffing me into a body that is, to put it mildly, out of its head on drugs.'

'Oh!' Hermione sank onto the cushions of the couch and rubbed her temples. 'I didn't even think of that... But I don't see how I could have avoided it...'

Snape-as-Edward sighed in exasperation and glanced around the room, clearly trying to gather his patience. 'Miss Granger, it is only by the barest thread of self-control that I am speaking to you sensibly,' he said at last. 'So allow me to instruct you in the strongest terms, and do not misunderstand this: since you will not release me, you must destroy the potion and your notes, and burn my journal right now, before too much time passes.'

'And if I release you?' Hermione asked curiously, ignoring his instruction.

'I do it myself,' he answered simply.

'You know I can't let you do that!' she protested, aghast. 'What would happen to Edward? How would I ever get him back into his body again?'

Edward's brown eyes, so full of a look of Snape now, cut toward her. He was beginning to breathe rapidly, shallow inhalations that made the magical ropes bounce across his chest. 'You,' he said, his tone incredulous, 'did not test the potion on its own first? You... ejected him summarily from his body and stuck me in it...' He interrupted himself by laughing, dissolving into amusement that sounded, to Hermione, slightly hysterical. 'How long has it been?' he gasped between giggles.

Frozen into astonished immobility by the unexpected nature of Snape's behaviour, she stuttered, 'Wh-what? How long has what been?'

'Since you threw him out of his body!' Snape shouted. 'How long, damn it!'

'I don't know!' she said, confused and highly disconcerted by the strange mixture of Snape and Edward, rational and bizarre. 'Ten minutes, perhaps?'

He exhaled weakly. 'Then we have a little longer. Untie me, please, and we will destroy everything together. Edward will be fine, I assure you.' His lips twisted into a derisive smile that contained nothing of Edward but a great deal of Snape. For the first time, Hermione began to believe that she had truly accomplished her aim.

Hermione shook her head. 'I promised...'

'Hermione,' Snape said softly. 'You must trust me.' He shifted in the chair uncomfortably and fixed his eyes on hers.

The intensity of his gaze made her thoughts turn instantly to the last time she had dreamt of him. How strange it was, to see and hear Snape translated through the medium of Edward's body! And yet the effect was not distasteful; her memory of the dream metamorphosed into a stunning fantasy, and she felt her body growing warm. *Oh God, I am sick, sick, sick*, she thought miserably, even as her hand, independently of her brain, reached into her pocket for her wand. 'It really is you, isn't it,' she whispered wonderingly, extending her other hand to caress his cheek.

'Yes, Hermione,' Snape murmured encouragingly.

His voice, she thought, was like steely silk connecting that description with another part of him, she blushed hotly! *I'm not going to do this, I'm not; don't do it!* But she pointed her wand at the silvery ropes around his body and said softly, '*Relashio*.'

The ropes slackened and dissolved. He flexed his arms and legs, grimacing as though they had fallen asleep while he sat there and were now tingling with pins and needles, stood unsteadily, and turned toward the laboratory.

'Wait a moment,' Hermione blurted and got to her feet, moving to block his path across the room. 'What are you doing?'

'Destroying the potion,' he said impatiently. 'There isn't much time. Stand aside.' His arm moved to ease her out of the way.

'No!' she exclaimed, dodging his arm and flinging herself against him, holding him in place. 'You can't! Edward...'

'Sod Edward!' he snarled, trying to twist out of her grasp. Hermione clung to him like a limpet, the fingers of one hand fastened around his belt loop, the other hand clutching his silk tie. With a growl of frustration, he buried both hands in her hair close to her scalp and pulled, drawing her head backward.

Hermione's eyes watered in pain; she arched her back awkwardly to ease the sudden tension in her neck. Her movement brought their hips into contact, and she gasped at the heat she felt radiating from the hardness in his trousers.

Snape-as-Edward gasped too; the frustration in his expression changed rapidly to desperation, and his gaze shifted between her face and the laboratory in anguished indecision. 'Hermione, please,' he groaned, but without waiting for an answer, he bent and fastened his lips to hers.

Giddy relief rushed through her body, sending jolts of desire straight to her brain. 'Oh, yes,' she moaned into his mouth, tangling her tongue with his, feeding off the fiery need in his motions and adding to it her own. She slid the knot from his tie in a single stroke and began to unfasten the buttons of his shirt with quick, certain movements.

Snape released his grip on her hair and slid his hands to her shoulders. He pulled her body tighter against him, emitting an agonised groan as he ground his cock roughly into her hip, and jerked her robe down her arms, gathering the cloth into a fist at her back. Pinning her in place, he tore his mouth from hers and looked at her pleadingly. 'You must destroy it all,' he said earnestly. 'I wish there were time to explain I should have done so immediately, but...' And then he kissed her again, seemingly unable to resist her.

Hermione returned the kiss gratefully and freed her arms from her robe, returning them to his chest where she grasped the edges of his shirt and pulled roughly, popping the remaining buttons from their anchors and practically tearing the cloth from his body. So wrapped up was she in running her hands all over the firm, bronzed chest in front of her that she didn't notice immediately when the quality of his kiss changed. When she did become aware that something was different, she disengaged her lips and said breathlessly, 'Professor Snape? Are you all right?'

He didn't answer. Concerned, she let go of him and stepped back only to cry out in shock when, released from her hold, he collapsed bonelessly to the floor.

'Professor Snape!' she cried, kneeling hurriedly next to him. He was moving sluggishly. Gasping in relief, she helped him turn onto his back and brushed his hair tenderly out of his face. 'Thank goodness,' she murmured. 'What happened?'

'Oh,' he whispered, opening his eyes. 'Oh, oh, oh...' he repeated, staring at her as if he had no idea what he was saying. Suddenly, recognition blossomed into his face. 'Hermione?' He struggled to sit up and shook his head roughly, like a dog clearing water out of its ears.

The voice was Edward's again, flat and American. She drew back, horrified, and scuttled away, catching her foot clumsily on the edge of the rug. 'Edward?'

He dropped back to the floor and laughed, his handsome face filled with joyful amazement. 'It worked! Oh, Hermione, it worked!' He ran his fingers through his hair and rolled onto his side to look at her, his mirth diminishing when he saw her expression. 'It worked, didn't it?' he repeated doubtfully.

'Yes, it worked. Oh, shit...' And she dropped her head between her knees again, fighting not to be sick, while Edward started to laugh again and did his best to soothe her from his prone position on the concrete floor.

Several hours passed before Edward was sober enough to discuss their experiment. His continued exclamations about various sounds, colours, and smells prompted Hermione to look up mescaline again in Snape's reference books where she discovered that it was known for inducing synaesthesia when ingested. She began to understand why Snape had seemed so unbalanced in Edward's body and to wonder what, exactly, it felt like to kiss someone when one's senses were all cross-wired. She could not imagine tasting sounds, or seeing them in colours as Edward seemed to, or smelling numbers. She certainly could not comprehend how Snape had mastered himself so well in such a state; Edward was unable to do even the simplest things and appeared entirely content to lie on the floor and talk to himself. At one point, he asked her to put on a record, which she reluctantly consented to do, and hummed along in perfect rapture while she paced back and forth and waited impatiently for him to come, literally, to his proper senses.

Eventually, Edward stopped humming and cocked his head to one side. The faint sound of a clock chiming could be heard from the kitchen. He levered himself to his feet and extended his hand to Hermione. 'Come on, you,' he said pleasantly. 'We have to ring in the new year.'

The cold outside seemed to freeze the very moisture on Hermione's eyeballs; wind, frigid with the air of the North Sea and damp from travelling over the sluggish branch of the Ouse that wound its oily way through the scrubland, sliced easily through her wool coat. The walk to the pub felt interminable to her, and she found herself highly irritated with Edward, who seemed not to feel the winter air and observed the squalid neighbourhood in which Spinner's End was situated as though it were the most fascinating sight in the world. In contrast, the inside of the pub had almost the same atmosphere as a sauna: hot, sticky, damp and smoky. Hermione and Edward threaded their way through the throng of revellers to the bar where Edward shouted their orders for beer over the din of the New Year's celebration. Some minutes later, pints in hand, they shoved a path to the back of the pub and went into the cloistered beer garden, there to hover alone pathetically around one of the patio heaters.

Through one of the pub's windows, Hermione could see, as she sipped her pint pensively, an old television set, its small screen showing the scene in Trafalgar Square.

'Would you rather go there?' Edward's voice, very close to her ear, interrupted her thoughts.

'No,' she said. 'No, I'm fine. Thanks.' She lapsed back into silence.

All evening, as she had waited for Edward to recover from the potion, she had been conscious of a strange feeling taking hold inside of her, a mixture of anger, regret, and resentment that closed her off and emptied her of all enthusiasm. In between swallows of beer, she tried to analyse it: with whom was she angry? What actions did she regret? What was the cause of her resentment, and toward whom was it directed? These questions were difficult to answer; she was more aware of the fact that, in some way, the experiment had not turned out as she had hoped, though she was unsure of what she might have been wishing for. Certainly she had wanted to speak to Snape, and she had done so why, then, was she suffering these crushing sensations of negativity and disappointment?

'Penny for your thoughts,' whispered Edward.

Hermione rounded on him. 'Tell me,' she demanded. 'Tell me what happened to you. Where did you go? How did you get back into your body?'

He regarded her evenly over the rim of his pint glass. 'Well,' he began thoughtfully, 'nothing much happened for a minute or two, as you know. Then my eyes started to go all funny for a second, I thought something was wrong with my vision, but it turned out that I was just seeing things that had never been visible to me before. The whole world looked as though it were underwater, but everything made these amazing, iridescent ripples in the water. You were fiddling with your wand, and every time you moved, these waves extended out from your body. Then, when you started to talk, the sounds made the ripples too, in crazy colours I could see from one colour that it was you speaking, and from another, your mood, and from another, what you were saying. Concentrating, though, was very hard I almost couldn't respond to your questions, I was so busy watching the world ripple. It was beautiful.'

Hermione snorted and downed an enormous swallow of beer. 'Then what?'

'Then you said you were going to command my soul out of my body, and that sounded great to me it made me think I would be able to go and swim through all the ripples.'

'And did you?'

'Not exactly.' Edward upended his glass and slurped the last remaining drops of lager. 'Another round?' he asked.

A little later, refreshed with two more pints and huddled once more around the patio heater, Hermione listened as Edward continued:

'When you spoke the incantation, I wasn't sure what was going to happen to me: would I black out? Would I feel my soul being ripped from my body? But nothing like that occurred. Instead, there was this fantastic sensation of release. I think I imagined it in keeping with the aquatic theme; it was as though I had been chained to the bottom of the ocean, and your spell set me free. I was streaming toward the surface of the water with the most incredible buoyancy. And when I reached the surface, if you don't mind my staying with the metaphor, this transformation seemed to take place: I wasn't *in* the water any longer, I *was* the water, and I knew everything that was in it and everything that had ever been in it and everything that was going to be in it, and of course, everything knew me. That must be how it feels to be God.'

Midnight was approaching; the din in the pub was practically unbearable. Several people spilled into the beer garden to smoke; Hermione smelt the acrid, seductive odour of marijuana. 'I don't understand,' she said to Edward. 'You knew all the... fish... and and anemones...?'

Laughing, he elaborated, 'No, Hermione, it's a metaphor! I knew *everything*. And I could feel things, too, and see things, but not in the normal way. Which makes sense, I suppose,' he went on, 'because I didn't have access to my skin or my eyes. But I knew and understood when you poked me and shone your wand into my face. I comprehended everything you said, even though I didn't hear it with my ears.'

'Are you suggesting you became *omniscient*?' Hermione asked incredulously.

'It did sort of feel that way,' Edward admitted. 'But there was a lot to know, and no more cognitive space than usual; I think I would have needed an eternity just to explore what I suddenly knew.' He paused to take a drink, then said: 'Actually, I was completely aware of what you and Snape were doing, so you don't have to describe it to me.'

Hermione flushed; she had known she was going to have to explain why Edward had returned to a half-naked body that was lying on the floor, rather than one tied securely in the armchair. Somehow, she was more embarrassed now that she wouldn't have to say anything at all. Trembling a bit in shame, she turned her face away from him to gaze blindly through the window at Trafalgar Square.

'I know you tried to keep your promise,' said Edward in a low voice. 'I saw why you didn't.'

Heartened slightly by these words, Hermione felt able to meet his eyes and apologise. The words refused to come out, however, when she saw the expression on his face; rather than forgiving, his eyes looked oddly calculating. She cleared her throat uncomfortably and said lamely instead, 'Ah. Good.'

'Anyway,' he continued, breaking eye contact, 'things went on for a bit, as you know. And right when you two started to get... er, busy... I felt this gigantic tug. Much more quickly than I had left my body, I was back inside it again, but I couldn't control it right away; it was too loud and too heavy. It was a bit like being Petrified or encased in stone, or so I imagine. I guess that's why I fell down. Obviously, however, my body was still high as a kite all the ripples and colours were still there and were very intense. And there was something else, too, something really weird: for a little while maybe an hour I could still sort of feel Snape in there, too.'

'You could?' Hermione blurted before she could stop herself. Dimly, she noticed the smokers make their way back inside and wondered absently what they had made of her and Edward's conversation.

The cold, knowing look Edward turned on her made her insides shiver. 'I could. There was all this I don't know how to describe it emotional residue. He was angry with you furious, in fact, because you ignored his orders. And he wanted you. He wanted you so badly that I could still feel the burn of it. Do you know what else, Hermione?' Edward asked, although it seemed from his tone that this was a rhetorical question.

'What else?' she whispered.

'He was surprised,' Edward answered, watching her carefully. 'He had not expected to want you as badly as he did. He had only started making love to you to distract you. It worked too well; you were too distracted to destroy the potion like he'd ordered. And he discovered that, suddenly, *you* were distracting *him*. He wanted your body more than he wanted that potion destroyed.'

Frozen to the spot, Hermione stared at him in dismay.

'I suppose I should thank you,' Edward added casually. 'If you weren't such a slut, he might have got his way, and then where would I have been? Not in my body, that's for sure. I wonder how you would have made the change permanent but you're a bright witch, I'm sure you'd have figured something out. I imagine Snape would have enjoyed it my body's a hell of a lot nicer than his was, if the pictures are anything to go by.'

Pain erupted in Hermione's chest; it took all of her strength to remain calm in the face of this combination of insult and injury. 'You're being unreasonable,' she objected. 'Besides, you went back into your body automatically,' she pointed out, proud that her voice barely shook.

'What a consolation,' he retorted sarcastically. 'I should be grateful the two of you didn't have enough time to figure out how to make the switch permanent. Otherwise, you could have been spending your nights fucking a living person instead of a dead one.' Hermione shrank back as his voice, so calm at first, blossomed into a shout, and his hands clenched into tight fists. 'How did it feel, Hermione?' he raged at her. 'Were you a cock-tease with him, too, or did you like getting off with his cold prick inside you, you sick bitch?'

Stomach wrenching, Hermione cried, 'Don't be disgusting! It wasn't like that!' She backed away from him, ambushed by the violence of his words, and put her hands out as if to ward off the abuse.

'Oh, I bet it wasn't!' Edward spat scathingly, his face contorted with anger. He loomed forward menacingly and pointed into the distance emphatically. 'That's him in your house, isn't it? Your "ghost." And you knew it all along. He's very protective of you, isn't he! What happened on the night he tried to beat me to death with your kitchenware? After you sent me away, did you go back inside, all tarted up and half-naked in your little red dress, and let *him* fuck you on your dining-room table?'

'No!' she cried, eyes burning with welling tears of frustration. 'I was angry with him! I didn't want him to hurt you. Edward, please,' she pleaded, 'you're not being fair! I swear I would never have let him use your body!'

'Are you *listening* to yourself?' he exclaimed, regarding her with awed revulsion. He seemed to sag, his anger draining away as suddenly as it had come, and his voice dropped to a whisper. 'You sick little bitch,' he repeated, staring as though he had never seen her before. Then he dropped his pint glass in the gravel and stumbled into the pub, clutching his stomach, his face white. Through the window, she saw him shove his way through the press of people to the front door, which he wrenched open. Then he was gone.

The agony in her chest was overwhelming; Hermione wished she could faint, or vomit anything to alleviate the anger she felt at Edward's insults and the shame she felt at knowing they were justified. Her disquiet earlier in the night became clear to her: she had been angry at being denied more time with Snape, resentful at Edward for coming back so soon, and she regretted not using the time she *had* been allowed more effectively. There was so much she had wanted to say to Snape, so much she had wanted to ask him! The ten minutes they'd had seemed like the barest instant. But though Edward might have been right about one thing she *did* love making love to Snape; she had always welcomed his advances and had been miserable those months when he had deserted her he was wrong in thinking she would have allowed Snape to steal Edward's body. The idea was ludicrous; she didn't even know how such a thing could be done. The thought had never crossed her mind, and the manifest injustice of his accusation was the most wounding thing of all.

And so Hermione stood in the biting cold of the beer garden and surrendered to a few tears of disgrace and resentment and indignation while, inside the pub, the clock chimed midnight, and the night air was filled with cheers and screams of celebration, the relief that the old year was ended and the hope of better times yet to come. Her pint of beer forgotten, Hermione sniffled and wiped the half-frozen tears from her eyes and cheeks with her gloved fingers. 1998, she decided, had been the worst year of her life. She was glad it was over.

Keep Yourself Alive

Chapter 15 of 17

Hermione tells Draco about the experiment.

Keep Yourself Alive

But I tell you, just be satisfied

And stay right where you are

The chilly damp of northern England in early January wormed its way between the buttons of Hermione's wool coat and penetrated through her skin into her joints, which ached with cold and fatigue. The brisk pace of her walk along the river did nothing to warm her. Ahead and to her left, the ruinous bulk of St Mary's Abbey cast long shadows over the lush grass of the park. To her right, down a shallow flight of slimy concrete stairs, was the Ouse, its name an appropriate description for the sluggish way it moved between its half-frozen banks. The leaden sky made the calm water perfectly reflective; looking down, Hermione saw the mirror image of herself, another haggard young girl walking along a river in an alternate, upside-down world. And there, on a bench thirty yards distant, sat Draco Malfoy, waiting for her. Appraising him as she approached, she noted he was looking none too well. Ragged jeans covered his legs beneath his black overcoat; a slight breeze from the water ruffled his long, unwashed hair, and his face was more gaunt than she had ever seen it, all nose and cheekbones and no flesh.

'You look like the most incredible shit,' she commented rudely, taking her seat on the bench next to him.

'Yeah, well, you're not exactly fresh and blooming,' he drawled in response. 'Where's my father's book?'

'In good time,' she said. 'There's something I want to tell you about first.' And, while the sun shifted further toward the horizon in the winter sky, she narrated to him the story of how she had used his father's book and Snape's journal on New Year's Eve.

Draco made no response until she had finished speaking; then, without turning his head, he slanted his eyes toward her face and said, 'So what?'

'What do you mean, so what? Are you winding me up?' she snapped. 'Did you listen to what I just told you?'

'Yeah, I listened.' He crossed his legs and turned to face her. 'What sort of reaction were you expecting? A moral judgment? Sympathy? Remember to whom you're speaking, Granger.'

Hermione sighed, deflated. To give Draco his due, he was cool cool to the point of frigid. 'Fair enough,' she conceded. 'You don't care about my sense of self-worth. But doesn't the experiment itself interest you at all?'

'Sure,' he agreed. 'Not enormously so, however, as it seems unfortunately impossible to duplicate. I take it Teach is unlikely to let you use him as a guinea pig a second time?'

Hermione nodded morosely. 'I can't blame him. I mean, would you?'

The question was meant to be rhetorical, but Draco tilted his head to one side and considered it seriously for a long moment. 'If I were Teach, no, I wouldn't,' he said finally.

A spark of tension blossomed in Hermione's chest, a strange and unfamiliar sensation after the despondency she'd felt for the last week. There was something quite open-ended, something implicit but unspoken, in Draco's remark, and her intuition leapt to it like a hound on the scent of a fox. 'I see,' she said carefully, holding her breath.

'But then,' he carried on pensively, 'I'm not Teach, am I?' He gazed across the river to where the great, girded dome of the train station rose above the stone wall of the city and the bare branches of the trees.

'What are you saying?' Hermione asked slowly. 'You...'

'Oh, go on, Granger you know what I'm saying,' Draco interrupted, piercing her with his intelligent, grey eyes. 'You want to try it again. I'm curious. I also have nothing better to do. So I'll be your guinea pig.'

'You're mad,' she whispered, amazed.

'No, I just know you better than Teach does,' he pointed out sensibly, his voice flat. 'He was afraid you would stick Snape into his body forever. I know you wouldn't. In other words, I trust you. That's the difference, but it's a big one.' He got to his feet and drew his coat closely around his body. 'It's getting dark. Shall we?'

Hermione grasped his outstretched hand and stood. 'It's not as if I know how to do that anyway. Would you rather walk or Apparate?'

He looked at her curiously for a moment, then shook his head. 'Let's walk,' he said, setting off toward the bridge, the red-and-white painted roses of its railings the only colour in the bleak landscape. 'I like the cold.'

Spinner's End was a haven of warmth and cosiness when they arrived, though Hermione felt a pang of loneliness as she unlatched the front door and ushered Malfoy inside. She had seen nothing of Snape since New Year's Eve, and she wondered whether she had managed to offend him again with her experiments. She had seen and heard nothing of Teach since the same night, despite half-expecting to find him destroying her lab when she returned from the pub shortly after midnight. The deafening silence from both men had made the intervening week drip by like treacle, a slow Chinese torture enhanced by the knowledge that, at some point, she would have to confess to Kingsley Shacklebolt why the funding for her project had dried up. It was too much to hope for that Teach would continue to be generous in the face of what he obviously considered a monumental insult to his existential integrity.

She hung up their coats while Draco wandered into the kitchen; before long, she heard the sound of the kettle going, though what he carried to the sitting room was not tea but the last of her Christmas mulled wine. She gulped the spicy concoction gratefully *a bit of Dutch courage for what lies ahead* she thought in mild amusement and studied Draco again. He seemed perfectly comfortable with her silence, so she felt free to indulge. Given what she knew of him, which admittedly was not much, she concluded that he was both lonely and depressed. Lonely, because he kept agreeing to her company; depressed, because the standards of personal grooming she had come to expect from him from their time at Hogwarts had clearly slipped. The war could hardly have had a worse effect on him: parents in Azkaban, family name dragged through the mud, friends dead, illusions shattered. For a brief moment, she felt a pang of sympathy and pity. Then she remembered the way he had always treated her, simply due to the circumstances of her birth, and the way he had watched while his aunt tortured her in his drawing room. He might have been horrified, yes, but the episode was the logical conclusion of the philosophy he had espoused.

His eyes met hers painfully, as if he knew exactly what she was thinking, and she blushed. 'Draco...' she began.

'It's all right,' he interrupted. 'Show me this lab, will you?'

Red-faced, still clutching her wine, Hermione led him into the basement. She had cleaned up the lab and stored the potion carefully, but the signs of her experimentation lingered: the science books stacked on the desk, the cauldrons and distillation equipment spread out on the worktops. Draco pushed for a more detailed explanation of what she and Teach had done, so she talked him through the process carefully, showing him the relevant passages from Snape's journal and his father's translation.

'And then this Teach offered to take it? Just like that?' he asked, a frown darkening his face.

'Well...' Hermione felt slightly stupid. 'We thought that, since Snape had tested it on himself, it would be safe...' She trailed off.

'You idiots.' Draco shook his head, almost in admiration. 'Did it never occur to you that what he wrote in the journal could have been a plant?'

'He didn't intend for anyone to see it,' she said weakly.

'You are, if I may say, really fucking lucky,' he replied with a sigh.

'That's as may be,' she said. 'Fair enough we were lucky. It's done now; we know it's safe.'

'Teach didn't think it was so safe afterward,' Draco pointed out, settling himself in the red armchair. 'He thought you might, given your obvious preference for Professor Snape's ghost, eject him from his body permanently.'

Hermione blushed again. 'Yes, but that was rather paranoid of him. I told you, I don't even know how to do that.'

'Don't you?' He arched one pale eyebrow.

'What do you mean?' she snapped from her place on the sofa. 'You had a similar reaction when I said that earlier, by the river. What do you know that I don't?'

'I don't know anything you don't,' he said reasonably. 'I've just seen a connection you haven't seen, that's all. You used some of the Horcrux spells to displace Teach's soul with Snape's, according to your account. Right?'

'Right,' she answered slowly. Then the obvious connection hit her with full force. 'I could have used the same spells to house Edward's soul in some object!' Mind racing, she suddenly recalled the passage from *Necromancy, Divination, and Free Will. Others have concluded that Summoning the soul of a named individual into the objects themselves is an even more certain way to achieve accuracy, though this is usually frowned upon as Dark magic.* But she had asked Snape if that were possible, and he had said no... Then she remembered her exact question:

'Could I Summon a soul into these marbles, if I wanted to?'

Red.

And of course his answer had been no, because at the time, she hadn't known how to do it that was before she had acquired Draco's book on Horcruxes.

'Finally seen it, have you?' Draco's voice cut into her thoughts. 'I practically pointed it out to you when we were looking at Snape's journal a moment ago.'

'What?' she asked distractedly.

Wordlessly, he Summoned the journal from the other side of the room, flipped to the back, and passed it to her, saying, 'Thirteenth of April.'

Confused, she glanced down at the passage and gasped.

Success. The draught will certainly remove the Dark Lord's soul-fragment from Potter's body. The only question remaining is: what will happen to it thereafter? I'm not sure we can expect it to emulate Potter's soul. It seems to me, though this is mere conjecture, that once it is outside of Potter's body, one should be able to make a proper Horcrux with it and then destroy that Horcrux. The disembodied soul would be easy enough to command. Unfortunately, such a plan would mean preparing some object with the Soulhouse Solution, which I'm not certain is possible. Even if I could nerve myself to collect the ingredients, where on earth would I find a willing female?'

'It's possible to do that with an entire soul not just a fragment?' she whispered, horrified.

Draco shrugged. 'Don't see why not.'

'Why did you point this out to me?' she exclaimed suddenly, throwing the journal to one side. 'I would rather not have known!'

'Oh, really?' he asked sarcastically, his tone mocking. 'The great Hermione Granger, deliberately passing up knowledge! I never thought I'd see the day.' He leaned forward intently. 'You can't ask not to know. Willful blindness is the worst kind of ignorance. I suppose you don't want to know about the Soulhouse Solution, now, either.'

'I know about it,' she protested haughtily, stung by his remarks.

'Do you? Do you know what the active ingredients are?'

She wanted to slap the smugness off his face. 'No. And it doesn't matter. Remember your father's book?'

'What of it?'

She Summoned it to her, found the correct page, and handed it to him triumphantly. 'Read.'

The Soulhouse Solution, however, is a necessary but not sufficient condition; the will of the wizard must be imposed on the object as well. The object, which now possesses something approaching sentience, must be instructed as to its function: to hold the piece of soul, to protect it, to serve its wishes; the object must be imbued with a strong sense of self-preservation (although the strength of this quality will only be as great in the object as it is in the creator of the Horcrux himself); the object must be made to understand that it serves as a worthy substitute for the creator's body...

'You see?' she asked. 'It's not enough. The wizard has to impose his will on the object, too. How, do you suppose, could I have got Edward to do that without his noticing?'

Draco shrugged and tossed the book aside. 'Point taken.' He curled up in the armchair again, nursing his wine, and grew quiet and thoughtful.

Hermione reached for Snape's journal again and browsed through it, wondering what else of significance she had missed, but nothing leapt out at her. She suddenly felt much less enthusiastic about using the potion again and wondered if she would be able to convince Draco that it was a waste of time. She didn't even really want to speak to Snape, knowing the abuse she was likely to come in for. He would be angry that she hadn't destroyed the research, and he would be even more livid at her giving Draco the potion, despite having his consent. The ethical question she had brought up to Edward on New Year's Eve loomed even more heavily in her mind, and without Edward there to persuade her otherwise, she knew it was wrong to manipulate Snape's soul without his permission.

But hadn't Edward told her that Snape liked it? That he'd wanted her even more than he'd wanted the potion destroyed?

She shook her head as though trying to remove the thought.

'What's up?' Draco asked quietly. 'You look upset.'

Hermione shrugged. 'I don't want you to take the potion anymore,' she conceded.

He nodded. 'I understand.' For a minute or so, Draco simply looked at her; then he levered himself out of the armchair and asked, 'Do you want more wine?'

'Yes, please,' she answered wearily. She continued to stare at the chair after he had gone upstairs, and when he returned, she realised she'd be stuck in a reverie about nothing.

'Drink up,' he advised.

Obediently, she swallowed half of the contents of the glass, not much caring that it burnt her mouth and throat on the way down, and lay back against the indented cushions of the sofa with a heavy sigh. Draco wandered over to inspect the record player in the corner; it wasn't long before he turned his attention to the records themselves on the bookshelf and selected one, sliding the black vinyl from its sleeve and placing it on the turntable.

Eyes closed, Hermione didn't immediately register the quiet sound of the music filling the room. The sensation of gentle swaying overtook her; she knew she wasn't moving, and the disconnect was so odd that she opened her eyes and sat up abruptly.

The poorly-lit basement seemed to shimmer in rainbow colours that danced and waved to the music: a stream of red here, a curtain of purple there, and a backdrop of deep green that pulsed gently around the walls. 'What the hell?' she exclaimed. The sound of her voice came out in colours too, throbbing oranges and reds that weaved across the room and merged with the colours of the music. 'What did you put in my drink?'

'Your potion,' Draco answered simply in tones of dark blue-purple.

'Why?'

'I thought we should see what it was like together.'

She was too fascinated by what she was seeing to be angry at this violation of trust; in fact, it seemed like the right thing to do, to let the drug work its way through her system, to be vulnerable in the way she had made Edward Teach vulnerable. Her brain felt naked. 'You put it in your wine, too?' she asked at last and wondered why it had taken her so long to form the question.

'Yes.'

The colours were swirling round her now, bathing her in caresses. She hated to blink; she was afraid she would miss some lovely new pattern. So she continued staring, ignoring the discomfort in her drying eyes. When she finally did close them briefly, she sensed someone else in the room; when she looked round, she saw that Snape was there, sitting next to her on the sofa, and this seemed perfectly natural, too.

'Severus,' she whispered, reaching over to touch his shoulder. He seemed solid enough, so she sat up, with difficulty, and crawled into his lap. 'Did Draco...?'

'No,' Snape answered, his deep voice a surprisingly vibrant shade of crimson. 'This is your brain... on drugs.'

She laughed and kissed him, rejoicing at the warmth of his lips on hers. The physical contact seemed to create new patterns in the air; she felt them zinging over her skin and gasped with pleasure.

'Do you like that?' he asked quietly against her mouth.

'Oh, yes, very much,' she answered breathlessly.

His hands moved to roam over her body, finding a path underneath her jumper to stroke over the sensitive skin of her back, then snaking around to glide over her belly and up to her breasts. The colours in her head became brighter and more urgent; impatiently, she tore her jumper over her head and unclasped her bra, tossing it carelessly to one side. Snape's fingers closed around her nipples and pinched firmly, sending her into spirals of reds and greens and yellows. He pushed her back into the cushions, capturing her tiny gasps and moans with his mouth, and freed one hand to unfasten her jeans and pull them down over her legs.

Caught up in the riot of images emanating from his fingers on her breast, she hardly noticed what he was doing until he wrapped one arm around her shoulders and repositioned the other between her thighs. He dipped his middle finger shallowly inside her body, gathering her moisture, and began to rub gently up and down her cleft. The heat inside her body took on a pattern of its own, and she arched her hips toward him, begging wordlessly. He seemed content to keep up his stroking, his breath growing harsher as the volume and quantity of her cries increased. It was, very possibly, one of the most wonderful things she had ever felt: Snape's body warming hers, his arm holding her in close, and his finger, lubricated by her slickness, circling her ever-higher into ecstasy.

When she finally came, it was as though the aurora had exploded behind her eyelids; long moments of intense pleasure passed before she gasped and shuddered back to reality.

Only to find that she was alone on the sofa, and completely naked. A choked sound from the armchair sent a wave of blue-purple across her field of vision. She raised herself up on her elbow and twisted round. Draco, sitting in the armchair, appeared to have forgotten all about his wine; his grey eyes were as wide and astonished as she had ever seen them. She blushed, realising hazily that she had just treated him to the show of a lifetime.

'Fuck me,' he murmured, sounding dazed. 'What the fuck was that?'

The magnificent properties of the potion allowed her to see, in vivid colour, the alarming amount of fascination in his tone; reflexively, she snatched up her wand and pointed it at him.

He flinched abruptly in his chair, but she was too quick for him: *Proficiscitor a corpore!* she cried and watched with satisfaction as his entire body went limp.

Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown

Chapter 16 of 17

Draco makes a decision.

Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown

I tried so hard to rearrange your mind

But after a while I realised you were disarranging mine

With a soft, static popping, the record on the turntable wound to its end. The sound of Draco's gentle breathing, immediately prominent, sent prisms of pale colour rippling across the room. Hermione got unsteadily to her feet and padded toward the armchair in which he sat. The magical ropes that had bound Edward's body to the chair had kept him upright; Draco, unbound, was a study in relaxation, his body slouched comfortably amongst the cushions, one hand resting on the red upholstery of the arm, the other drooping gracefully over the side. His long legs extended in front of him, the left leg bent slightly at the knee, emphasising the drape of the ragged jeans over his thin frame.

Hermione stood at the side of the chair and studied his face, wondering at the pure, youthful lines of his jaw and cheekbone and the delicate, purple shadows under dark-blond eyelashes. A strand of pale hair had fallen across his forehead when she cast the spell; she tucked it behind his ear now and marvelled that his face could look so innocent and child-like in repose. But then, she supposed, it was because he had no worries now; not because there was nothing to worry about, but because whatever did the worrying was now absent. Was this how victims of the Dementors' Kiss looked? From the picture in Snape's classroom, she had always imagined them to be staring, shuffling horrors, but that had been a fallacy, she realised. Kiss victims wouldn't stare, or even open their eyes, because there was nothing to stare at and no facility to interpret the images they might see; they wouldn't shuffle, because movement implied a destination, or at the very least a purpose, and that which gave them purpose was destroyed, consumed by the hunger of the Dementors. Only the involuntary functions, like Draco's rhythmic respiration, would remain.

What was Draco's soul doing now? Edward had said that his soul, amongst the collective, had access to all knowledge; did Draco know that she wanted to call Snape's soul into his body? Could he read her mind? She didn't think so; her soul was still her own, an individual. Or could he read Snape's intentions, as Edward had done?

Suddenly, the sight of Draco's soulless body was horrible to her; shivering, Hermione returned to the sofa and lay down, entirely devoid of the desire to interact with Snape again. She pillowed her head on her arm and allowed her eyes to drift closed. *I'll just rest here*, she thought, *until Draco's soul comes back on its own*.

When she awoke unexpectedly some hours later, she saw at once that Draco hadn't moved. Flooded with the preliminary sensations of panic, she leapt from the sofa and shook him hard, disarranging her earlier careful placement of his hair.

'What is it?' he muttered groggily, to her eternal relief. He shifted uncomfortably.

'Are you all right?' she asked, pushing his head back to look into his face.

'Yeah, I'm fine. Get off,' he snapped irritably and shoved her hands away. 'Just stiff from sleeping in this chair. What time is it?'

'Late,' she admitted. 'Did you... Did the spell work?'

Draco stood and stretched; the joints of his shoulders and spine popped audibly. 'It worked,' he said. 'We'll talk about it in the morning. Can I sleep in your spare room?'

'Of course,' Hermione agreed, slightly disappointed that he would rather go to bed than discuss the experiment in which he had been so interested. 'Unless,' she added shyly, 'you'd rather sleep in mine.' She looked up at him from under her lashes uncertainly.

He put his arm around her shoulders and smiled tiredly. 'Fine, but just for sleep, you understand.'

The wooden stairs creaked as they ascended to the kitchen; Hermione put the lights out and led the way to her bedroom where Draco stripped without ceremony to his pants and climbed wearily under the duvet. After a moment's deliberation, she did the same. When she slid under the bedclothes next to him and felt the bony points of his body against her skin, a strange protective instinct overcame her. Curling up against his back, she wrapped her arms around him and held him against her chest. He sighed and relaxed into her embrace. Content and relieved, minutes later Hermione fell asleep.

Hermione awoke late the next morning to the smell of frying sausages. Blearily, she flung her arm across the bed, realised it was empty, and sat up. Draco's jeans were absent from the pile of clothing on the floor near the foot of the bed. After rubbing the sleep from her eyes and smoothing down her hair, she slid from beneath the bedclothes and scrounged amongst her own apparel for a t-shirt.

The bookcase-doors were propped open; when she stepped into the kitchen, she saw Draco standing at the hob, shirtless, spatula in hand. Hermione's mouth went slightly dry at the sight, and she leaned casually against the wall to watch him. When he at last raised his head from cooking and noticed her standing there, he offered a beatific but wholly impersonal smile and said, 'There's coffee in the pot if you want some.' It couldn't have been more clear that he wasn't impressed by her own partial nudity, so she shrugged and poured herself a cup of the steaming liquid, settling into a chair at the small table. She was content to observe his competent preparation of their breakfast in silence; he, too, seemed perfectly comfortable in the absence of conversation.

A few minutes later, he brought a collection of sausages, bacon, eggs, and toast to the table, and they began to eat. Hermione, unaware of how hungry she had been, tore into the breakfast ravenously, a fact which seemed to amuse Draco, primly buttering his own toast and spearing bits of scrambled egg delicately on the end of his fork. The morning light that fell over the table from the windows directly behind them was harsh and clinical; under its effects, Hermione felt rather silly about the previous night's drama and determined that, from now on, she would approach matters more rationally.

This naive resolution was tested almost immediately: swallowing the last of the food from his plate, Draco opened his mouth and said, without a shred of warning or explanation, 'I'd like to try that potion of yours again, please.'

Proud that she hadn't reacted by choking or spitting out her sausage, Hermione set down her fork calmly and affected an attentive pose. 'Now? Or shall I finish my breakfast first?' she asked tartly.

A strung-out silence followed, during which Draco appeared to be marshalling his thoughts. Finally, he replied, 'I have a theory I'd like to test. You see,' he went on thoughtfully, 'I remember you said that Teach's soul went back into his body after, what, fifteen minutes?'

Hermione nodded.

'And that must have been what happened when Snape tested the potion on himself,' he reasoned. 'I'm sure it's what happened to me last night. But I think that mechanism

can be controlled.'

'What do you mean?'

Draco fiddled with his fork absently, his eyes staring off into the distance of his mind. 'The magic of command can achieve all sorts of things - the creation of Horcruxes, for example, and Apparition, which we accomplish partially by employing determination. I think,' he said, suddenly focussing his eyes on her face, 'that I could keep my soul out of my body for longer, given sufficient determination and strength of command.'

'For how long, exactly?' asked Hermione, breakfast forgotten.

Shrugging, Draco answered, 'I won't know until I try. But if my theory is right - well, possibly indefinitely.'

'Why would you want to do such a thing?' she queried, tilting her head to one side and regarding him with suspicion.

In lieu of response, he dug his hand into the pocket of his jeans and extracted a pouch of tobacco. Hermione waited in silence while he rolled a cigarette with deft fingers; when he lit it and took a deep drag, she reached over to crack open the kitchen window. Frigid air seeped into the room, dissipating the homey smell of their fry-up.

'Teach told you what it was like to be part of that world,' said Draco dreamily, resting his chin on his hand. 'You're comfortable... There's nothing you can't know. It's what I always hoped death would be like, all those times I worried about dying. You've cracked the secret of the afterlife, Hermione, and it's glorious.'

'It's an escape,' she countered flatly. 'You're miserable, and you want out. But you have a responsibility...'

'Don't talk to me about responsibility!' he interrupted angrily, leaping to his feet so violently that his chair nearly overturned. 'All my life, I've been fulfilling responsibilities - burdens put on me by my parents, my friends, my heritage. Well, I've satisfied them. I've done what I was told I was supposed to do. And I'm finished with it all. I'm going to do something for myself now.' He glared at her.

'You idiot,' she said wearily and shook her head. 'You didn't even let me finish what I was saying.'

Draco paused by the back door, and she swivelled in her chair to face him. 'Finish, then,' he said tightly.

'I was going to say - you have a responsibility to live. We all do. We owe it, not to other people, but to ourselves to make the best possible use of the time we're given.'

He laughed, pressing his forehead against the cold pane of glass in the door. 'I'm surprised that you, of all people, should hand me that shit. My life is my own, and I'll do with it whatever I choose to do, regardless of whether it achieves anything good for anybody else.'

'Yes, and so?' she snapped, finally growing irritated with him. She stood and drained her mug of coffee before slamming it back onto the table. 'You're going to kill yourself, is that it? You don't have the courage to slit your wrists with a bit of dignity,' she continued scathingly, 'so you're going to use Snape's invention - which was intended to save someone's *life* - to relieve yourself of your own? And you think you're going to attempt this *my* house? What the hell did you plan for me to do with your body?'

Throughout her tirade, Draco had listened impassively, but at her last, sarcastic question, an expression of astonishment crossed his features. 'I thought you would put Snape into it,' he said simply. 'That's what you want, isn't it? Snape?'

Hermione's mouth opened, but such was the extent of her rage that no sound emerged. She was fed up with other people's articulating her own desires to her as if she didn't understand them, as if the articulator wielded some sort of moral superiority. Edward Teach had made her feel disgusting for being attracted to the soul of a dead man whilst *at one and the same time* urging her to put that dead man's soul into a body and suggesting that the change could be made permanent; now Draco was bludgeoning and seducing her with the same instrument, using her selfishness as an excuse for and facilitator of his own.

At last, her anger found a voice: 'You're right! You're absolutely right. Let's do it now, shall we?' She thrust her wand in the direction of the basement door *Accio Snape's potion!* Then she flicked her wand at Draco. 'Sit, damn you.'

Amazed, he wandered back to his chair and perched on the edge as the little bottle of potion flew from the basement and into Hermione's outstretched hand. 'Now, wait a minute, Granger...' he began.

'No waiting!' she sang, advancing on him determinedly. 'You want this, don't you? It's your choice, isn't it?' Leaning directly into his face, she hissed, 'And I want it too. So open up, Malfoy. There's no danger to you. You can come back whenever you want.'

For a moment, he looked as if he might hit her, or at the very least shove her away. Then his face went carefully blank, and he set his wand upon the table next to the remains of their breakfast. Leaning back in the chair, he arranged himself into a pose of balanced relaxation and opened his mouth, eyeing her in defiant expectation.

Acknowledging his attitude with a small, salutary grin, Hermione wrenched the stopper from the bottle and allowed three drops of the potion to fall onto Draco's tongue. He swallowed dutifully; she waited patiently by his side until his eyes took on the dreamy quality that demonstrated the potion had taken effect, then she cast his soul from his body with a silent swipe of her wand.

Ignoring the now-limp form in the chair, she gathered up the breakfast dishes and put them in the sink. She filled it with hot water and washed, mindlessly and without magic, every plate and fork and frying pan; she dried each one with considerable care before replacing it in its drawer or cupboard. Approximately ten minutes had passed; Draco's body remained as motionless as ever.

Wholly seized now by the need to eat up time in mundane tasks, Hermione trudged upstairs and ran a bath, taking a very long time to pull off her shirt and comb the snags out of her hair. When the tub was near to overflowing, she shut off the taps and sank into the water with a heavy sigh. Around her, the house was silent. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a flicker of movement and almost screamed; tension propelled her upright, and water sloshed over the side of the tub - but it was only a spider crawling serenely up the opposite wall. Breathing raggedly, she slid back under the water and turned her head back and forth, swishing her thick hair to get it thoroughly wet. A luxurious shampoo and rinse later, she decided she had dawdled long enough and quickly washed and dried the rest of her.

Unwilling to wait any longer - the time for mundane tasks had passed - she returned to the kitchen in her towel and surveyed the scene. Draco had not moved; when she poked him viciously in the ribs, she received no reaction. Mindful of Snape's complaint about putting him in someone who was riddled with drugs, she bustled about for a few more minutes, making a pot of tea, before summoning his soul into Draco's body. Then she sat opposite him at the table, blowing gently across the top of the mug to cool her brew, while she waited for him to appear.

When he finally opened his eyes - alight with awareness and malice - she spoke immediately. 'Are you going to harass me again?'

'Yes,' he answered bluntly. 'Why have you not destroyed everything as I told you to?'

'You're not the boss of me,' Hermione answered petulantly.

'I don't think you understand the gravity of the situation,' he stated, although she noticed he couldn't help glancing curiously down at Draco's form.

'Well, I've been thinking about all of your rather nebulous warnings,' she commented casually. 'And you're right. I don't see the gravity of the situation, as you call it, at all. Where's the danger? Even if I could summon up, I don't know, *Voldemort* - events are dictated as much by circumstance and prevailing trends as by individuals, if not more so. You could put Grindelwald's soul into someone's body, and there's no probability, much less guarantee, that he'd immediately embark on some sort of pureblood holocaust.' She settled back into her chair in satisfaction.

'Leave that aside for the moment, Hermione, as that's not the danger I'm concerned with,' said Snape seriously, now leaning forward intently. 'Once this gets out - and it will, make no mistake about that, as you've let Teach run riot with it for a week now without informing or warning anybody - in the hands of the wrong people, namely the Ministry, it could become a tool of the sort of tyranny you and I both sacrificed a large part of our lives to eliminate.'

'How?' she countered. 'You slip this potion into someone's pumpkin juice, you put someone else's soul into their body - and then what? A quarter of an hour later, everything reverts back to normal. We already know how difficult it is to force a soul to act against its own nature. And even when you consider what Draco realised - that it's possible to effect a permanent switch if you make a Horcrux - that can't be done without a person's consent.' She sipped her tea thoughtfully for a minute, then added, 'Besides, the Ministry have already had the power to do much worse. Using the Dementors, they could destroy a person's soul altogether. I hardly think your potion will enable a worse sort of tyranny than *that*.'

Snape continued to glare at her through Draco's narrowed grey eyes. 'And when the Ministry have consent? When they have volunteers to undergo this process in the name of security or power - what then?'

'But that doesn't make any sense,' Hermione argued calmly. 'Let's say I'm some sort of slavish volunteer, and that, from some perverse notion of the greater good, I allow the Ministry to replace my soul with someone else's: Dumbledore's, for example, the most powerful wizard in a century. Once he's in my body, he's in charge, and he's not necessarily going to go along with whatever plan the Ministry might have had. You're concerned about tyranny, and thus about free will; but nobody can replace another person's soul without consent, and even then, the new inhabitant of the body has *his* own will, so it hardly matters, does it?'

'What about your original objection?' he asked quietly.

'What?' She stared at him, confused.

'Don't you remember?'

'I...' But then she did remember, and hard on the heels of the memory came a crippling sense of shame. She had told Edward that the one ethical problem they couldn't circumvent was the difficulty of getting consent from the dead person. He had overridden her by suggesting Snape, but as she herself had pointed out a moment ago, that had been an alternative created by circumstance. Although it was technically possible to ask for consent, as her experience with the Urim and Thummim proved, would the Ministry bother with such niceties? Given their previous record, she doubted it, and Kingsley Shacklebolt's enlightened direction of that institution couldn't be counted on forever. History was filled with examples of governments that had acted with the best of intentions to solve an immediate problem, only for the people to realise when a new group gained power that the chosen solution had created a dangerous precedent. 'I suppose they could always take the potion again...' she offered weakly.

Snape rolled his eyes and sighed heavily, finally deigning to drink his tea. 'Do you understand now why I wanted you to destroy it all?' he asked.

'I always understood,' she said stubbornly. 'I just didn't agree.'

'Don't be absurd,' he snapped. 'Your agreement, or lack thereof, was never an issue; you never considered heeding my warnings.'

'I did!' protested Hermione.

'Liar,' he said softly. Then he sighed again and allowed his head to drop into his hands. 'This is my fault. In trying to distract you, I inadvertently created a reason for you to pursue the very thing I wanted you to avoid.' With a laugh that had nothing in it of humour, he got shakily to his feet and began pacing the kitchen. 'How long has Draco been gone?'

'Er... about ninety minutes,' she said, checking the clock on the oven.

'Do you think he'll be able to maintain this... this state of affairs?'

She shrugged. 'He seemed pretty intent on it.' Gathering her towel closer around her body as if to ward off his words, she asked in a small voice, 'Do you want the potion again, so that you can leave? It's there on the table.'

Snape stopped in his pacing and stared at her, his gaze roaming from her face down her body and back up again. He seemed to be considering her question, but then his expression took on the same air of determination she had seen from Draco, and he said, 'No. I don't want the potion again.'

'Are you certain?' She was shivering now, although not from cold.

To her surprise, Snape knelt at her feet and hooked his fingers around the backs of her bare knees. 'I'm certain. I will stay for as long as Draco allows it...' His hands drifted slowly down her calves and up again. 'As long as you allow it.'

Laughing nervously, she said, 'Well, it's your house.'

'Mmm,' he nodded. He was watching her eyes now as he gently took her hands and uncurled them from their position clutching the hem of the towel around her chest. She inhaled suddenly, seeing his intention, and the small intake of breath dislodged the towel from its place. With her hands in his, she was unable to pull it up again - but she quickly forgot her modesty as his lips captured her own, and he lifted her easily onto the kitchen table.

Hermione closed her eyes, caught up in the sensation of his kiss, even through the odd dissonance of Snape's attitude and mannerisms inside Draco's form. Physically, this wasn't Snape at all - but the mind and the magic underneath it all were entirely Snape, and if she ignored what he looked like, she could sense the familiarity of the man from her dreams. He pulled the towel away from her body entirely, and she arched into his hands, wanting to feel them everywhere, and he obliged. He caressed her breasts, pinching the nipples gently, and his lips nipped along her jawline to deposit kisses behind her earlobe, down the column of her neck, and across the flesh of her shoulder. Soon, she was inching her hips to the edge of the table, wanting greater contact with his body, and briefly she was reminded of the similar situation she had been in with Edward Teach.

All thoughts of Teach fled from her mind, however, as Snape's fingers stroked the soft skin of her thighs and slid with breathtaking deliberation inside her body. She gasped, and he groaned; spurred on by her reaction, he drove his twisting fingers deeper until he was panting as helplessly as she was. She couldn't seem to open her legs wide enough; she wanted to take in as much of him as possible. Finally, with frantic movements, he unfastened his trousers and shoved them down his legs, and then he was gloriously naked.

Unable to help herself, Hermione rose up on one elbow to admire his body. The broad chest, the narrow wrists, the perfect, pale skin... and his cock, hard and eager. She had of course encountered that part of Draco before, but now this was Snape wielding it - Snape who stepped forward and directed its tip to her entrance, Snape who braced his hands against the table while she lifted her knees, Snape who insinuated his hips forward so that he sank into her with agonising, luxurious slowness, Snape who moaned directly into her ear when he was finally sheathed as deeply as possible within her body.

'Oh, God,' he whispered raggedly; 'I've longed for this for months.'

'So have I,' she gasped, moving against him urgently.

Hands gripping her waist, he began to move, setting a driving pace that left her clinging to the edges of the table and filling the kitchen with incoherent cries of pleasure. There was no keeping to the pace this time, however; as impatient as she, he rapidly gave himself over to short, deep thrusts that seemed to fill her entire body. His moans joined her own, at first quiet and infrequent, then growing louder and more desperate as she felt him hardening inside her. Heat swept through her frame, and she threw back her head, screaming her completion as her body thrummed in violent satisfaction; Snape's voice and body followed her, and he jerked spasmodically, grinding against her until their continued ripples of pleasure at last smoothed into exhausted relaxation.

The discomfort of the table beneath her shoulder blades eventually roused Hermione. Snape eased gently from between her legs and collapsed into a chair while she tried to balance on rubbery legs and tie her towel back around her body. A slight awkwardness descended.

'Well,' Hermione said unevenly, picking up the mugs from the table, 'fancy another cup of tea?'

Voodoo Chile

Chapter 17 of 17

Snape finally gets his way.

Voodoo Chile

If I don't meet you no more in this world

Then I'll meet you in the next one and don't be late

Despite the warnings provided in the 'Tale of the Three Brothers' about the Resurrection Stone, Hermione could find no trace of melancholy in Snape over the days that followed, nor any indication that he would prefer to be with the ranks of his fellow dead. At first, she wasn't sure what he would want to do. Having suddenly found himself alive again, would he wish to go off and assume Draco Malfoy's life? Or branch out on his own? These questions occupied her even as she worried, in paranoid fashion, that at any moment she'd turn round and find Draco in his own body again. Notwithstanding Draco's determination to remain part of the collective soul, she wondered whether it was really so easy to maintain absence from one's body. If she thought of it in terms of physical activity, was it not possible that, at some point, his determination-muscle would get tired, and his need to rest it would propel his soul back? Was the metaphysical link between soul and body one that could remain stretched indefinitely, or would Draco's soul snap back along the link like a loosed rubber band?

But as one day passed, then two, then three, she gave this worry less and less of her attention, because she was too absorbed in getting to know Snape. He, too, seemed to be discovering himself, and each new facet fascinated her as it was revealed.

For one thing, Snape seemed perfectly content not to discuss what they had done - as if, having said his piece, he left Hermione's struggles of conscience up to her and thought no more about it. His decision, once made, stood firm, and he was disinclined to doubt it. Instead, they talked about whatever happened to come into his mind: food, perhaps, or the weather, or the plants he thought she ought to cultivate in the back garden. For the first few days, his behaviour imitated the erratic patterns of his conversation: he flitted about without routine, doing whatever he fancied at any given moment. He took long walks into the city centre and along the river; he spent hours examining the carving and statuary in the Minster; once, he wandered for an entire afternoon in the open-air market at Newgate and returned home blue with cold. He took one of Hermione's rucksacks and Apparated to Malfoy Manor; ten minutes later he was back, carrying Draco's clothes and all of his own books, which he had found, still packed in boxes, in the foyer. Hermione spluttered at this in outrage - Draco had sworn he'd searched high and low through the collection for the *Ars Magica* - until she noticed Snape regarding her in bemused astonishment.

'What?' she asked defensively.

'He knew it wasn't there.'

'How?' she demanded.

'Because he was with me when I burned it,' Snape answered simply and turned back to continue unpacking, not at all concerned by her affronted glare.

Within a week, the bookcases at Spinner's End were groaning once again with their renewed burden; the shelves sagged under their double-load of tomes. The books that wouldn't fit on the shelves Hermione and Snape stacked in piles on the floor in out-of-the-way corners of the sitting room. With Snape's precious literary collection thus safely restored, and Draco's clothes hung neatly in the second wardrobe of the master bedroom, Hermione began to allow herself to believe that Snape wasn't going to leave anytime in the near future.

Indeed, Snape seemed keen to explore not only his environs, but also himself. Hermione supposed that he had never really led a normal life or had the opportunity to satisfy himself without obligation, and she watched with amusement as he indulged his whims, and the seeds of a daily routine began to take shape. First, he rang up the local newsagent and demanded that four newspapers be sent to him - two tabloids and two broadsheets - as well as subscribing to the *Daily Prophet*. These he read at the kitchen table each morning while he hoovered up toast and coffee. The newspaper habit proved irresistible; before long, Hermione was joining him in the mornings, offering and listening to occasional, random remarks about the perfidy of public figures.

Then, to her utter surprise, Snape began to read her books - methodically, shelf after shelf, smirking at the marginal notes in her textbooks or losing himself entirely in the plot of a science-fiction novel. He took up writing as well, reclaiming his journal from her and continuing its record of his thoughts. Hermione reigned in her curiosity; her desire to read the journal when he was absent was almost irresistible - she had grown accustomed to being able to plunder every available aspect of his life - but she knew such an invasion of his privacy would be unforgivable. Nevertheless, it was difficult for her to see the journal lying about, for Snape never bothered to conceal it or ward it against prying. Knowing that he trusted her and relied on her integrity, she was determined not to let him down, even though she was aware he would likely never know if she took an illicit peek or two.

On the Sunday following Draco's departure, two things occurred that set Hermione's nerves jangling. The first was the arrival of a letter from Kingsley Shacklebolt during breakfast. Hermione fed the eagle owl a bit of bacon and slit the seal on the letter with shaking fingers while Snape watched curiously from across the table. 'Oh, dear,' she murmured, and passed the parchment to Snape.

The letter read:

Hermione, I've just had a most bizarre communication from Edward Teach. I think you'd better come in here today and explain it yourself. I'll be available to see you at 3pm. Kingsley.

Snape considered it for a moment, then he set it aside. 'This is good news.'

'Is it?'

'Of course. He doesn't understand whatever Teach has told him. He wants your version of events. Use the opportunity.'

'I'm not sure I follow.'

He sighed impatiently. 'Give it your own spin. Twist the facts to put yourself in a good light.'

'I'm sure you're not suggesting I should lie to the Minister,' Hermione said forbiddingly.

'If necessary, you should certainly lie.' Snape shrugged. 'Politicians get where they are by being economical with the truth. He'll be expecting it.'

'All the more reason not to do it!' Hermione snapped. 'He'd know it instantly. I'm a bad liar.'

'Bollocks. Let me put it this way: Edward Teach is dangerous, and whatever he wants to do should be stopped. Twist the facts to put him in a bad light, if you can't bring yourself to make your own actions look noble.'

Snape buried Draco's nose in the nearest newspaper while Hermione, jittery with nerves, did the washing up. She had trouble concentrating on anything as she went about her day; instead, she practised in her head how her conversation with Kingsley might go. Although she was reasonably certain she hadn't done anything illegal, that was essentially only because there was no law yet to prohibit what she'd done to Teach. The one consolation, she thought at 2.55pm as she put on her coat, was that Teach knew nothing about her repeating the experiment on Draco.

'Good luck,' Snape murmured snidely as she Apparated out of their front room.

Kingsley was waiting for her in the atrium of the Ministry when she popped out of thin air. His expression was so serious that her stomach shrivelled.

'Minister,' she greeted him nervously.

'Hermione,' he replied gravely. Putting his hand gently under her elbow, he guided her toward the doors of the lift. 'I thought we might walk and talk. It's not every day we get afternoon sun in winter.'

They stood in silence as the lift rose and opened into the telephone box on the street above. Kingsley guided her through the narrow streets until they emerged into the sparkling, frozen green of a nearby park. It was some minutes before the Kingsley said at last, 'Hermione, I trust you more than most people. I find it difficult to believe what Teach has told me of your research activities. Then again, it's been weeks since you sent me any updates. I know it's been the holidays, but according to Teach, that's when these dubious events took place. Please tell me your version.'

If she'd had any serious intention of brazening it out, Kingsley's opening statement would have squashed her resolve. Instead, Hermione took a deep breath and told the truth. Even the parts about Draco. She didn't need to be a mind-reader to know that Kingsley was utterly appalled.

When she'd finished her tale, she seriously believed he would Obliviate her. After a few moments, however, his confrontational posture melted away, and he relaxed his grip on the wand in his pocket. 'I don't need to tell you,' he said with meticulous calm, 'the kind of trouble this could cause. I'm not even sure "trouble" is sufficient to describe what might happen if *anyone*, good intentions or ill, got their hands onto this kind of magic. To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever done such a thing before. This is a dangerous innovation, what you've done.'

'Yes, Minister,' she said quietly, knowing what would come next.

'Frankly, I expected better judgment from you,' he said. 'Your studies at Hogwarts were meant to teach you responsibility...' His father-lecture carried on. Half-listening, Hermione gazed across the park. The sun had dropped behind the level of the buildings and trees, and ice had begun to crinkle at the edges of the duck pond. The first of the evening commuters had begun to hurry along the pavements; some of them cut through the park, their tired faces distracted with thoughts of home. She turned her attention back to Kingsley.

'...to say, I'm putting a stop to this line of research. I doubt Teach would continue to fund it anyway. And although I'll spare you the indignity of memory modification, you'll gather up every last piece of evidence of this and bring it to me tomorrow.'

'Yes, Minister,' she agreed dully.

'A good evening to you, then,' he said, somewhat more gently. 'I'll see you tomorrow, Hermione.'

She nodded. He walked away briskly, back in the direction of the Ministry. Heavy-hearted, she had no particular desire to rush home and rehash the conversation with Snape, so she left the park and found a shady archway where she Apparated. It was full dark when she climbed up the embankment from beneath the Donnington Bridge and trudged up the Abingdon Road into Oxford city centre. Hilary Term had just begun at the university, and the streets and pubs were filled with students. The familiarity of it all brightened her mood, so she loitered there throughout the evening until her stomach began to growl. When she left for York, a beautiful speckling of snow had begun to fall.

'Where is my fucking journal?'

Snape's rage, filling the room like a thundercloud, blasted her out of her tranquil mood the instant her feet landed in Spinner's End. Unfortunately, the awesomely cold fury with which he had intimidated two generations of Hogwarts students didn't have the same effect on her as it had when she was in school; Draco's pointed face was more suited to petulance. Unconsciously aping her mother, she asked, 'Where did you see it last?'

'Where did I see it last?' he echoed incredulously. 'On the bloody table, where it always is! What did you do with it while I was out?'

'I've only just got back.' She hung her coat up and strode to the dining room table. Since he had taken up residence, the tabletop had been obscured by piles of books and papers. Rifling through these now, she saw that journal was, indeed, not there. 'Perhaps you left it in the kitchen. Or the basement.'

'I know where I left it,' he hissed, but she was already pulling the bookcase forward and walking into the kitchen. He had been at the shops; plastic bags of fresh winter vegetables sat on the worktop. A parsnip had spilled from one of them onto the floor, as if he'd dropped the bags in a hurry. A quick glance showed her the journal wasn't there, either, so she headed down the basement stairs. He didn't follow - sulking, she supposed.

The lamp by the sofa was on when she emerged into the chilly room. He hadn't turned the furnace on for the evening yet, and she crossed her arms over her chest. Already, she was wondering whether he'd taken the book up to the bedroom when she turned around to inspect the lab. There, she had the surprise of her life, or at least that part of her life since the war: everything was gone.

Everything.

Books, papers, ingredients - the research she'd done, the bottle of potion, Mark's textbook, had all disappeared. The ingredients cupboard hung open, empty.

Before she knew quite what she was doing, she was pounding back up the stairs, heedless of the wood creaking beneath her. 'Snape!' she cried when she reached the kitchen. 'My stuff is gone! My God, we've been burgled!'

He was standing by the window. 'Hermione...'

'We've got to get the Aurors!' she exclaimed. 'I'll go to Grimmauld Place and bring Harry back with me - what?' she interrupted herself. He'd made a dismissive gesture and

faced the window. 'What is it?'

'No one has stolen your work,' he said roughly.

'What?' She moved to stand next to him and, out of habit, looked out of the window, too. Just beyond, in the darkness of the back garden, she could see an indistinct black shadow in the grass. 'What is that?'

Pulling her wand from her pocket, she stepped stealthily toward the back door, eased it open silently, and slipped through into the cold. The shadow didn't move as she approached. There was a strange smell in the air, almost like incense...

And then she realised what the shadow was: the burnt, blackened remains of her research. No heat emanated from it; he must have thrown everything on the fire the moment she'd left for her meeting with Kingsley. A few flakes of snow had settled in the withered grass around the pile of ash and misshapen glass. Numb, Hermione went back into the kitchen. She was shaking and speechless.

Snape had begun chopping the vegetables for their meal and didn't look at her when she dropped her wand onto the worktop next to him. 'You did that,' she said.

'Yes.'

'I promised Kingsley I would turn all of it over to the Ministry, first thing tomorrow.'

'That's too bad for the Ministry.'

Well, he had told her to burn it, hadn't he? And she'd refused, so he'd taken the first opportunity to do it himself, and to no great effect, either. She remembered it all, and she had no doubt that Teach did, too. Lucius Malfoy, if he ever got out of prison, would be furious: two of his rare books had now been sacrificed to the flames.

Coming back to herself, she watched Snape continue shopping for a minute before asking him: 'If your journal wasn't in that bonfire, then where could it be?'

He put down the knife and regarded her with large, grey Draco-eyes. 'That's what I'm worried about.'