Consequentially Yours

by Nyruserra

Summary

It’s a rescue, really. At least, that’s what Fred and George Weasley manage to convince him of. After all, Hermione is sure to be a target for revenge seeking Purebloods – what could any right-minded Wizard do but step in to help?

But with the shadow of Voldemort still hanging over a frightened community, Oliver is about to find out that the consequences of doing the right thing can get very out of hand!

An Oliver Wood/Hermione Granger Romance

Notes

Many people may have seen this story over on that other FF site, who-shall-not-be-named :D If so, welcome back! Otherwise, thank you for wandering in here. Pull up a seat, check your wand and the door, and enjoy :D

I began writing this way back in 2005. This is the first story I ever wrote and posted, and it took me many years to finish it, through which many amazing readers stayed with me with tons of encouragement. During this, I sometimes wrote other stories branching into other
fandoms, but I was never able to fully leave Harry Potter, or this story, alone.

Do you ever forget your first fandom?

I didn't think so ;)

I adore this story. I've come a long way as a writer since this, and the writing is definitely better after I found my stride, but if the goal was to write something that I, at least, enjoyed reading than I succeeded in spades, for I still read it even now. That may say something about me, but hopefully it is something nice *lol*

I decided to post this story here, despite it being older, because I want a complete record of my stories on this site, as opposed to them staying scattered, in some cases not even completed, over several sites. I'm thrilled that new people are finding this, and enjoying it, despite it being a bit 'rough', at least at the beginning. I have thought of re-writing it a few times, but honestly, I can't bring myself to change anything about it, so it will likely always retain it's warts, but also hopefully, something lovely that might be lost if I try to polish it now, so many years later.

Other than this note, all the chapter notes that appear in this story are as they originally were posted - this is for me, as I said, to try to have a record I can look back on - a personal writing diary, if you will :)

Thank you so much for wandering in here, and choosing this story to befriend, and while away a bit of time with <3 I hope you enjoy your time here, and like this as much as I do.
Banner by the amazingly talented Bellatrix, from the now defunct InkPen fansite.

Consequentially Yours:

A Gentleman’s Duty

Prologue

This couldn’t be happening – Fiercely blinking back the tears that caused the words on the parchment in front of her to blur, Hermione stared dully at the pronouncement of doom before her. Her future decided - just like that.

It was now late Monday afternoon and the offending document had been sitting heavily in the bottom of her book bag all day, mocking her. She hadn’t dared to open it until she had a chance to do it alone, and that had meant waiting until all her classes were over, then sneaking away from Harry and Ron on the pretext of going to the library for a non-existent Arithmancy essay. Instead, she had climbed up the stairs in the North Tower, right below the trapdoor leading to Trelawney’s ‘classroom’. No one in their right mind ever came up here, thinking the Divinations teacher was a right old bat. Even the few students who seemed to believe for some unfathomable reason that she held the secret to some great mystery (:cough: Pavarti and Lavender) never seemed to come up here after dinner, confining their visits to lunchtimes and weekends. Besides, no one had Divination classes on Monday afternoons. Holding it in her hands now that she was here, all alone, she still couldn’t find the courage to break the seal. Feeling the tears finally break free of her eyelids, the thought of what people would say if they could see the ‘Great’ Hermione Granger now caused a bitter smile to twist her lips. Oh, where was all her Gryffindor courage now?

The Ministry owl had brought the missive to her during the morning meal in the Great Hall,
arriving amidst all the flurry of the usual morning post. Hermione hoped fervently that the official nature of her owl was missed amongst the hundreds arriving and departing the Hall. She really wasn’t up to dealing with the horrified, morbid curiosity that would follow when it became general knowledge that Mudblood, brainy, brilliant-but-scary, Potter’s–ally-in-the–final-war Granger had a Contract.

The Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic’s office was one of the few that still had a working occupant in it at this time of the evening on a Friday night. Long past when everyone else had packed up and gone home for the evening, there where still candles burning brightly in this office – and usually long before anyone else had gotten in each morning, too. One thing that had not changed about Percy Weasley since his days of working with cauldron bottoms years before, was his dedication and work ethic. (Or as the less charitable often said, “The boring obsessive prat, doesn’t know when to go home!”)

Percy was well aware of this general opinion. It often amused him to occasionally do something small and out of character to shake up this perception just a little bit – almost a form of gentle reverse teasing for his colleagues. He also knew that these types of comments were said with some measure of respect – he had worked very hard after the death of the former Minister, Cornelius Fudge, to keep the Ministry effective during the chaos of the last eighteen months. Unfortunately, it also meant that he had no life. Oh well, at least he didn’t have to worry about his superiors suddenly turning up barking anymore. The office of the Minister for Magic was still standing vacant and maybe one of these days, when the wizarding world had somehow managed to pick itself up again, they would appoint a new one. But until then, Percy filled in as best he could (he continued to stubbornly refuse his colleagues’ attempts at appointing him Minister).

A throat clearing brought Percy out of his tired musing, and reminded him that he had, in fact, been waiting for someone.

“Wood! Glad you made it in tonight. I was a little worried when you owled to say you were going to be out an extra week - How did things go in Wales, then?” Percy winced as Oliver had dropped heavily into one of the chairs close to the fire and turned weary and heavily shadowed eyes on him.

“It was a ruddy nightmare down there – there’s all manner of beasties loose down in the bracken and moors that will take the Magical creatures unit the better part of six months to clean up. They’re causin’ all kinds of havoc among the Muggles. We managed to contain the problem somewhat, but it’s still not going to be pretty.” He shot Percy a sour look. “Nary a sight of Him or any of his followers. Five weeks out in the mountains, chasing rumors! I would’na say no to a drop of something though – it’s miserable out there.”

Moving to a battered sideboard against the window that looked out over the street several stories below, Percy held up a bottle, got a nod from his guest, and poured them both a glass of the deep burgundy liquid. Depositing his tall, lanky frame in a chair opposite Oliver’s and handing him the other glass, Percy enquired without any trace of malice “You found nothing; or was there nothing to find?”

“Nothing but sheep, once ye get up into the mountains. I hate sheep, by the way – they never passed that way, I’m sure of it. Tension is still really high amongst the magical community, though. People’s nerves are just stretched too thin with waiting for word that it’s really over. It won’t take much of a spark to set something off.”

“I hope you’re wrong about that.”
Oliver shifted yet again in an attempt to stay awake. He was finding that the large chair was obscenely comfortable and given that he hadn’t slept in over twenty hours, he was finding it very hard to resist its siren call. The mellow flavor of the wine was only accentuating his weariness, making him feel warm for the first time in days. Shaking himself slightly, he threw out the question that had been gnawing away at the back of his mind all evening. “What’s this I’ve been hearing about the Ministry being concerned over blood purity, Perce? That has a bit of a smack of His thinking to it, doesn’t it?”

“Actually, the opposite. The intermarriages amongst the ‘pureblood’ families have created something of a crisis for their continued existence.” At Oliver’s slightly raised eyebrow, he continued, “Squib births are on the rise – up by almost sixty-eight percent in the last thirty years. We’re now facing a statistic of something like one in every three children being squib-born – and that’s just the start of it! There are more and more problems with, ah … conceiveing children, both with witches and wizards proving … incapable. And then, there are all kinds of disturbing blood-sicknesses that are cropping up. The bloodlines are just too damn close!”

“Oh? There have been rumors for years, but I never realized that the problem was that wide spread, or even much of a concern. I mean - who cares if the Malfoys of the world can’t have kiddies, or spawn, or whatever it is they do. Sounds to me like a good start on a solution to some of our more pressing problems.”

“That particular brand of pureblood has created one hell of a mess for themselves all right, but it’s a problem for all of us, as it’s not just the righteous few who are in trouble. They’re definitely much worse off than the rest of us, though. This is affecting everyone – we need to add new blood desperately! I mean, look at You-Know-Who—”

“What about him?” Oliver looked startled at this apparent non-sequiter.

“He was Muggle-born. Well … half, anyway. He was one of the most powerful wizards of all time. And who did it take to beat him? Harry Potter is also half Muggle, on the Evans side, you know; and of course, Hermione Granger is completely Muggle-born – two thirds of his downfall, and both also amongst the most powerful mages of our time. I wouldn’t be surprised if you went poking about in the Dumbledore family tree, you wouldn’t find a healthy dose of half-blood.” Percy paused to gather his thoughts, wearily. “And another thing – those blood-sicknesses that are turning up, a couple of them in particular are highly virulent. If we don’t nip this in the bud, we’ll have a pandemic on our hands, the likes of which you couldn’t even imagine, my friend.”

“So what’s yer plan, then? You going start telling them ‘No, I’m sorry, you can’t marry yer sister, Goyle - no matter how nicely she cooks!’?”

Percy snorted, barely managing not to spray his wine in the process. “Actually, you’re not too far off the mark, Oliver.”

This got him a fully raised eyebrow for his trouble, and gave him the feeling that for the first time this evening, Oliver was giving more weight to his words than to his pressing need for sleep. He made a peculiar sort of rolling motion with his head, to indicate that he had better continue — Now.

“I’ve instituted a Marriage Law. It’s already been announced while you were gone.”

“WHAT!”

“…”
It took a while to calm the raging Scottish man enough for him to listen at least, and stop choking on his wine. Eventually, even he had to concede, though, that the Undersecretary did have a point. It was a very major problem – and given the abundance of prejudiced gits still at large, people were not going to behave themselves just because the Ministry asked nicely. It was the next part of Percy’s plan that Oliver was having the greatest trouble with, though.

“Really Oliver, I’m sure you see how important this is – I need you publicly on board with this. You were extremely popular on the Puddlemere team when you played with them, and your support would help smooth the path.”

“How in the hell is my support going to smooth the way? And what right-minded wizard is going to go along with this one? I mean, it’s almost slavery, Perce. The only ones who will participate will be the McNaultys and Blacks of this world. Can you imagine Bill, or Lee Jordan, or one of those blokes issuing one of these contract thingies to some poor girl?”

“First of all - yes, I realize that there will be some unpleasantness with the Malfoys and Crabbs, and a few other families. I have tried to put in as many protections in place as I could, but this is the only way. As for the others … well, it will just take time. I still expect them to fall in love as they usually would, they will just have a narrower field to choose from. It’s not like I’ve placed a time limit on anyone. Not until a Contract has been filed, anyways.”

“After that, the poor thing has a month to find herself what happiness she can, before she becomes legally bound, huh? And I still don’t see where I fit into this.”

Percy sighed at his companion’s naivety. “Well, I want you to … sort of show the way on this one - you’re really very popular, you know.” At Oliver’s blank look, Percy decided to ‘go for broke’ and spell it out for him, “I need you to file a Contract, Oliver. Soon.”

For the second time that evening, Percy was faced with the job of calming an irate highlander. After he had recovered from his spluttering, of course.
Chapter Summary

See Prologue

Consequentially Yours:

A Gentleman's Duty

Chapter One - Something Wicked This Way Came

Hurrying through the empty streets, Oliver swore as he misjudged the depth of a puddle and splashed ankle-deep in cold water. He was late as it was, and desperate to get out of the driving rain which had sprung up out of nowhere and turned the early afternoon sky to the steel grey of late evening in a matter of moments.

After discussing things with Percy as coherently as he could, given his state of mind by that point of the conversation, he returned to his little-used flat and remained horizontal for the next fifteen hours. He then spent a luxurious forty-five minutes under a very hot shower trying to pretend the evening before had been an unusually vicious dream, before heading back to the Ministry on Sunday morning to drop off some forgotten paperwork. Once he got there, he found that he had, in fact, not hallucinated the entire thing in his sleep deprived state.

It had taken him longer than he’d wanted there, due to a lousy Junior Department Head who had the rather unfortunate habit of taking physical hold of her victims to prevent escape while she waxed on about unimportant details no one else cared about. Oliver felt by this time that he had definitely seen more of that place (and that girl) in the last two days than he ever wanted to see again. With one more glance at the time, and another muffled curse at the grabby junior official who had made him late, he picked up his pace again.

Oliver tried not to look too closely at the buildings looming around him as he hurried through the deserted streets. Diagon Alley had been one of the places most affected by the final stages of the war against Voldemort and his followers. The destruction in places was fairly severe, and whole sections of the settlement had been abandoned.

Oliver always found it far more depressing to be here than other sites which sustained much greater damage. He supposed it was because this hit so close to home. He had a lot of fond memories of this place. That first nervous trip for school supplies after getting his Hogwarts letter. Buying his first ever broomstick; an old second-hand Silver Arrow that he had saved up for, for over two years. Taking 15 year old Katie Bell, the first girl he ever fancied, for ice cream at Florean Fortescue’s. Somehow, he found, seeing Diagon Alley broken and wasted like this always caused a raw ache in his heart.

Today, he had promised to meet with a couple of old friends at their shop. They had been the first to return and rebuild, almost defiantly, in the face of all the rumors and superstitious terrors that still kept most the Wizarding Community away from places like these, where major actions had taken place. Fred and George had scoffed at their fears, firmly reminding everyone that living in constant fear of You-Know-Who’s return was no kind of life at all. Oliver knew, with a funny kind
of pain in his chest, that it would be a long time still before laughing hoards of school children again infested the place at the end of each August, even with the re-opening Hogwarts last term.

Shaking the drops of water out of his curly brown hair as he entered the warm and inviting interior of Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes, Oliver got no further than three steps into the shop when he was assaulted by a cacophony of noise and confusion that rattled the floorboards beneath his feet and sent vibrations through the soles of his boots and up his legs. He should have expected that, he supposed, when entering the twins’ shop — he was almost surprised that chunks of plaster didn’t begin raining down on his head, just to add to the almost cliché moment.

In the silence left in the wake of the explosion, the sound of Fred’s (or possibly George’s — he couldn’t tell with his ears still ringing) muffled, sheepish voice came floating out of the back room.

“Bit too much Draconis saliva, there; sorry, that was me, this time.”

The wobbly feeling in his legs had started to pass, as he began picking his way carefully through the fallen merchandise, heading towards the back of the shop and into the twins’ lab.

“Fred? George?” Oliver enquired, safely surveying the room from the doorway, as he watched something pink and gooey dripping off the ceiling in front of him.

“Wood! Mate, how’re you doing?” came an enthusiastic greeting from the other side of the spacious room. The voice had a tinny, echoing quality to it, and as he scanned the room, he had to quickly swallow a chuckle. The voice was emanating from inside a large metal drum, with just a pair of legs protruding from the opening like some kind of drooping stalks for a very weird plant. A cupboard door opened along the bottom of one of the reinforced cabinets that lined the back of the room, and the other twin quickly unfolded himself from an impossible-looking position for anyone who still had all of their bones in their body, and dusted himself off grandly.

“Aye, an’ after I put so much effort inta fixing the place, you two ha’ better not damage so much as one square inch of it!” Oliver growled, and fixed both of the miscreants with a mock-glare as he took in the destruction. Actually, it was more cosmetic than substantial. The Weasley clan (and Oliver, who was practically an honorary Weasley, having gone to school with all seven children during his time at Hogwarts) had helped the twins to rebuild after the shop’s destruction during the first wave of attacks. Taking this opportunity, they had put a variety of heavy warding charms in place, knowing exactly how the room was to be used (or abused). It had taken the eight of them three exhausting days to do it, though. Nice to know it had worked, really.

“Your fault, Mate. If you had been on time —“

“—We wouldn’t have had time to kill —“

“—And wouldn’t have been tempted to test our latest idea!” Fred/George grinned at him, unrepentant.

“Do I need a drink before I hear this idea of yours?”

The twins’ grins turned positively wicked. “Oh, definitely, Oliver. Maybe two!”

“…”

“So, how go things at the Ministry these days, Wood?”

Oliver snorted into his Firewiskey, derisively.
“I don’t work for the Ministry, Fred. I just do some occasional jobs for Percy.” Which was true, but he was doing more and more ‘odd’ jobs for Percy since the end of the war, instead of less. Oliver sighed —his heart was still with his favorite game, and hopefully, once this mess was cleared up and people could breathe freely again, Quidditch would resume, and he could return to the sport he loved. Percy could shove his special assignments somewhere very uncomfortable. Seeing the skeptical looks on his companions’ faces at his job distinction, he relented.

“It’s bad. Nobody’s really in charge right now — No one really knows where to go next. We lost a lot of people in the Ministry attacks last July, in key departments, too. We’re relying on a lot of Junior Department Heads, with just a few experienced people like Percy trying to run multiple, unrelated departments. I mean, one guy is trying to run the Department of Standards and Testing, The Accidental Magical Reversal Units, The Department of Magical Sanitation, and the foreign offices dealing with Czechoslovakia and Muldovia. I mean, the guy doesn’t even know how to cast a decent Translation charm! Last week, he told the Czech Minister’s wife that he was pleased to make the acquaintance of her two lumpy breasts! That took awhile to sort out, I hear. It’s all a right bloody mess.” The burr underlying his voice was getting stronger as his voice trailed off.

“Too true, mate. Everyone’s paranoid. It’s worse than it was when people knew that they could get attacked at any moment — what with the Death Eaters on the lose, and You-Know-Who popping up everywhere. People had plenty of courage then, defying the evil git to try and take their freedom — but now, when they don’t know if he’s dead or alive —“

“— It’s like they lost their nerve. When they knew what they were up against, they could fight it. But now — well they just don’t know if he’s gone for good this time. And people don’t know if they’re going to lose everything again. I don’t think people can deal with the thought of putting all this effort into rebuilding, to have it come crashing down on them again. Where we had lions before, there are now rabbits, scared of their own shadows. I think that’s the saddest part of all. Now that we have some measure of safety, people are so afraid to lose it, that they forget to live.” George finished wistfully, while staring out of the window and into the rain soaked streets. “It’s like we never won at all. Not really.”

Shaking himself, as if he could rid himself of the depressing thoughts like a dog shaking off rain, George pulled a grin out of his pocket, and turned to Oliver with a gleam in his green eyes.

“We haven’t told you of our latest idea yet, Wood…”

Oliver could already feel the headache coming on. This premonition of future suffering was confirmed when he saw an identical expression on Fred’s face. Yes, this was definitely going to be a Headache Potion moment.

“…”

The fire had died down considerably in the dark room. They had finally abandoned the pub to return home to the twins’ flat above their shop a couple of hours ago. They had been sitting comfortably sprawled on overstuffed furniture in front of a fire while continuing to catch up on recent happenings, and, as was the nature of guys anywhere in such circumstances, getting slowly and gently inebriated.

The conversation had wandered from the politics of the pub, to the barmaid that served them (by the end of the second hour all three were convinced she could have been a model, if she had only wanted to).

They had then moved on to occupational hazards of the average house elf employed in a magical testing facility (“Ah, Gred, but it depends on just what they’re testing, now doesn’t it? I mean — I
mean, if they were working for Percy in his cauldron bottom days, then they were definitely in danger of dying of over exertion when they finally beat him to death with one of the cauldrons, now wouldn’t they?”).

They were now discussing the finer points of the Weasley family tree.

“I don’t think, George, tha’ you can claim tha’ Charlie’s a Squib just because you think he’s a twit. I mean, if tha’ twere the case, don’ you think they would have exposed Snape by now?”

“Now, there’s a question — Can you be a Potions Master, if you can’t cast any spells? I mean, the ingredients themselves are magical, right? So technically, Snape could be a Squib, and no one would know. I think I could get to like the idea of Snape as a Squib…” Fred’s voice slurred very slightly at the last, betraying just how much he had drunk that night.

All three of them sniggered over this delightful thought. Fred’s slightly glazed eyes widened at a sudden thought, as he turned to Oliver.

“Speaking of Squibs, Oliver, I heard the Ministry came out last week, publicly, with it’s concern over the rising rates of Squib-births and blood diseases cropping up in Pureblood families —“

“— Read in the Prophet, that they had issued some kind of bill, or law or something to intermarry Muggle-borns with Pureblooded lines —“ George sounded a lot more alert then he had when discussing Charlie’s questionable grey matter.

“And what makes ye think I know anything about it?” Oliver shifted uncomfortably under their combined scrutiny.

“Because, this level of stupidity had to have come from Percy — besides, whether he wants to admit it or not, he is practically the Minister for Magic, and the only one who could have passed something like this. So spill.”

So, Oliver began to fill them in on Percy’s ‘genius’. Halfway through the explanation, they were all for marching over to his office, and stuffing him in a toilet, while they thought of something more permanent to do. Talking fast, Oliver managed to dissuade them long enough to make them listen to the logic behind the plan. Eventually, even George had to admit that they would have to abandon their fun and allow Percy to remain unharmed for another day.

“So, Pureblood’s will hav’to…have to state their intentions through a formal contract, right? Issued to the Muggle-born witch of their choice, an’ the Ministry, of course – oh, an’ her family, eventually. She’ll then have a month to accept, or fin’ another offer.” Oliver was going over a couple of the finer points that the twins had missed during their mad drunken plotting earlier in the discussion. “I’m forgetting something … oh, yeah, an’ I’m supposed to do my bit. Perce says I’ve gotta contract a witch, too.”

Both twins took gave him a shocked stare, before falling out of their chairs, to lay on the floor, gasping and desperately trying to fill their lungs as they laughed and laughed.

“...”

“Come on, Oliver, it’s perfect — ” Fred was coaxing persuasively

“— Yeah, someone like her is sure to be picked up by one of the shite families straight away —”

“— Think of it as a rescue! I mean, how would you feel to see someone like her with, say, Marcus Flint, or Ernie Macmillan —”
“— Ernie? I thought his family was alright?” George broke in, confused.

“— How okay can they be when they produced something like him? I mean have you ever spoken to the guy? He has the personality of a stink-weed. And he has no neck!”

George and Oliver gave him an incredulous look at this show of logic. Oblivious, Fred sailed on with his argument.

“Really, I mean, she’s a great catch for you’re average evil lord supporter. She’s gorgeous — ”

“Gorgeous? She’s pleasant enough, I suppose. At least she was when I saw her last, but tha’ was when she was fourteen. She can’t have changed that mu — ”

“She’s brilliant, and she’s powerful.” Fred carried on, ignoring Oliver’s interruptions. “She’ll probably produce cute little genius children if she’s picked up by anyone half way intelligent — ”

Oliver turned red at this statement. He definitely wasn’t ready to probe into that aspect of married life just yet. Still, they did have a point. She would be the type of witch to get picked up by someone truly horrible — and since he had to do this anyway, and soon, he might as well rescue the poor girl, right?

Watching the owl take off, he watched as its flight pattern wobbled and listed slightly more than the weather warranted. George had insisted they give it a drink to send it off (“It’s cold out there, Ollie. Just a drop to keep ‘im warm, eh?”), and Oliver wondered vaguely if maybe Gillywater would disagree with the poor creature.

The owl was currently winging (Well, actually, an aerial equivalent to staggering) towards the Ministry Office with the Contract forms that he had filled in with the twins’ help. Staring out into the snow, he reflected that this was indeed a rescue, despite the fact that the lady fair (well, pleasant enough, anyway) hadn’t actually been placed in any sort of ‘danger’ yet. That part was academic, it was just a matter of time before one of those evil sodding gits decided to go after her, right?

If Oliver had consumed even slightly less alcohol that evening, maybe he would have seen just how bad an idea this probably was. The fact that it came out of Fred’s mouth would surely have been a tip-off, anyway.

— … —

None of the boys managed to drag themselves upright until well into the afternoon on Monday, and Oliver enjoyed the day of leisure in his friends’ company, despite the nagging feeling of forgetting something important.

It was sometime during dinner at the pub that evening when the niggling feeling that had been bothering him all day finally resolved itself. With sudden, cold clarity, the rescue plan of the night before hit his sodden brain in an illuminating premonition of pain and consequences. Fred and George stared, alarmed as their friend suddenly jerked straight, as if he’d had ice water poured down his spine, and watched as all the colour in his face drained away.

“Oh bloody hell …”

And in the North Tower, Hermione continued to stare at the unopened parchment with dread.

Obviously, this is a take on the WIKTT Marriage Law challenge. I know it's an older one, but it
just looked like too much fun to leave it in someone else's toy box. I promise I will put everything away when I'm finished - even Oliver.
Chapter 2: The Importance of Being Oliver

Consequentially Yours:
A Gentleman's Duty

Chapter Two - The Importance of Being Oliver

There was an irritated hoot from the messenger owl sitting on the corner of his desk as a landslide of paperwork was set off when Percy attempted to relieve it of its burden. Once released, it took off with a disdainful backwards flip of its wings, and soared out the open window as quickly as it could. Percy snorted softly in rueful amusement at the creature’s antics — there were probably only a handful of people arrogant enough to own such a bird, and none of them were ones he wanted to hear from at the moment. Hermes hooted sharply from his perch by the sideboard, apparently in complete agreement with his master about their rude visitor. Percy tossed the parchment aside unopened — Goyle, he noted the name as he did so.

The heavy horn-rimed frames of his glasses had started to slide down his nose as Percy removed them, and leaned back in his chair with a soft noise of appreciation that may have been a sigh in another person. Blinking somewhat myopically without the ever-present glasses, he contemplated the mountainous paperwork before him, and thought longingly of just setting fire to the whole business. The only thing the Ministry seemed capable of right now was generating large amounts of paperwork. Percy sometimes thought the best thing that could have happened was if the whole building had been destroyed during the last attack, down to the last filing cabinet. Then it would be an easy matter of instituting new protocols and procedures to rebuild the organization from the ground up. Over half of the building had survived though, along with all those filing cabinets, and now they were desperately trying to maintain standard procedures with only half the necessary personnel, because people couldn’t bring themselves to abandon what always worked before. Change was coming slowly to his colleagues, and the Undersecretary often got exasperated by their inability to see the larger picture — such as the pointless need to fill out reports for departments that no longer existed due to lack of personnel.

Placing the lenses once more on the bridge of his nose, he ignored the waiting piles of paperwork, and instead began carefully skimming through the various reports that came to him directly from various witches and wizards in all parts of the country:

More Muggle baiting, this time involving a ward of charmed bedpans — almost the twins’ brand of humour, that was....
The International Confederation of Wizards was moving in on Austria for the increasingly restricting laws being levied against Muggle-born witches and wizards — Percy still thought it was pretty disgusting that they hadn’t said a thing about his new law; he really hoped he wouldn’t have to resort to stronger measures to get their attention….

A rather peculiar case of a drunken post owl — poor thing was in Belgium now, recovering.

A missing load of wand wood — he would have to remember to speak to Mundungus about that one….

Strange lights appearing in Andale… Percy’s glasses began sliding down his nose once more, unnoticed, as he stared at the report in front of him in interest.

“Ah, Minister, so good of you to see me on such short notice - especially with things as… busy as they are for you at the moment.”

“Mr. Malfoy.” Percy didn’t even bother to look up from his work, but instead continued to ignore his unwanted guest.

The last few years had not been kind to the senior Malfoy. Time spent in Azkaban, coupled with the demands of belonging to the Dark Lord had taken their toll on him. His once handsome face was lined, and his charismatic smile was now lost to a harder, sterner expression. Despite these changes, he still projected the aura of a powerful man, one to be dealt with cautiously and preferably from a distance. The fact that he had been able to avoid being sent back to Azkaban once the war was over continued to gall Percy. He saw it as an affront to the Ministry itself that they had been forced to let so many scum go free, lacking the resources to hold them all. Still, Percy was a realist, and one of the many things he had learned from recent experiences was that it was ‘better the devil you know’. Removing the current ‘elitists’ wouldn’t end the problem, only drive it back underground to send up unexpected ‘shoots’ elsewhere. Following this vein of thought, Percy had allowed them to remain public with their views and opinions, without censure. *All the better to watch you, my dear Malfoy.*

“What, no modest protests today, Sir? Could it be, perhaps, that you are finally accepting your trappings of power?”
“What is the point in reminding you, yet again, that currently there is no Minister for Magic, and I most certainly am not up for the job?” Percy was now making notes on the parchment in front of him, and addressing his visitor with a kind of condescending boredom that spoke of a conversation held many times before.

“I merely thought I would stop in for our little weekly chat. It is so hard to find your level of conversation amongst evil henchmen.” His eyes glittered mockingly from between narrowed lids. Moving into the room, and avoiding the seat set opposite the large desk so obviously intended for his use, Lucius instead chose one to the far left, in a small conversation area by the fire, forcing Percy to either abandon his chair at his desk, or to have to continually twist uncomfortably during conversation. Lucius enjoyed the many petty games they played at every meeting, and had found that the Undersecretary was a surprisingly good player. *No doubt the result of surviving all the infighting found in being raised as part of a large litter.* The thought caused a small shudder, as he settled back for what would prove to be an… instructive meeting.

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The owlery sat atop one of the southern-most towers of the school. Large, open-air windows lined the entire circumference of the cavernous room, allowing the cool evening breeze to enter unhindered. Owls of every shape and colour could be found roosting here, and the air was full of soft noises: gentle hooting, the rustling of wings, and the scrape of talons on stone; Hermione found the mixture of sounds to be unexpectedly soothing. From up here, the scars of Voldemort’s attack were invisible, leaving the grounds unblemished. She would miss this place, which in so many ways represented for her, everything they had fought to protect — including one of the best libraries in the country.

She had finally been forced to abandon the sanctuary of the North Tower when the silence had been shattered by the arrival of Pansy Parkinson and her evening’s entertainment, a sixth year Ravenclaw with pale skin and strikingly dark hair and eyes. Mercifully, the couple were unaware of her presence, being completely preoccupied with one another. Hermione had been able to slip out unnoticed; avoiding what would have been a nasty confrontation in her current mood. The sounds of soft gasps and breathless whimpers followed her down the tightly spiraling stairs, making her flush in disgust and embarrassment at the pug-faced girl’s blatant appetites.

Ginny found her here, sitting against the stone wall, staring unseeingly out at the darkening night sky, lost in thought.

“What are you doing up here, Hermione? Ron being his usual self, is he?” Ginny loved her brothers very much, but she had no illusions as to their characters. Ron, though a loyal friend and great guy, still tended to be a clueless prat around Hermione on occasion. Fortunately, for everyone in Gryffindor tower, this was happening less and less frequently, proving that even hopeless cases could grow up. It was getting almost unusual to see the two of them screaming at each other in the
common room these days.

Hermione didn’t react to her presence, so Ginny moved to join her on the floor, wincing a little at the coolness of the air-chilled stone. Hermione was holding something tightly in her lap, her knuckles almost white. Leaning over, Ginny saw that it was a thick parchment scroll, and quickly scanned it for the telltale purple seal. She suddenly had a very bad feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“Hermione,” she said, hoarsely, “is that…?”

Hermione nodded mutely, finally turning to face her friend in the fading light let in through the large windows surrounding them. Ginny could see the tear tracks still drying on her cheeks, her eyes puffy from prolonged crying. She just looked so lost and bewildered, and so… unHermione–like, that her heart went out to the older girl.

“Oh, Merlin… who?”

In answer, Hermione just turned the scroll slightly, to show the unbroken seal in deep plum wax, bearing the Ministry crest.

“You open it, Ginny. I can’t…” Ginny had to strain to hear her voice, even in the relative quiet of the owlery. She held out her hand, not daring to say anything to her friend right now. She wasn’t sure she could keep the tears out of her voice.

Her hands shook slightly as she took the scroll. Breaking the wax seal gently, Ginny hesitated. She didn’t want to actually see the name edged in the glowing outline that indicated the Ministry authenticity charms were in place — it would make this too real, too final. Screwing up her courage tightly, she forced herself to continue unrolling it, and began skimming the parchment for a name. The one she found, however, left her speechless.

“Is it that horrible?” Hermione looked more and more frightened as the moments passed and her friend didn’t say anything, just sat there gazing at the document dumbly.

“Oh, Hermione, you’re not going to believe this…” Turning it around, so that the victim could read the scribbled, barely legible signature, she waited, watching as Hermione’s face went white, and then very red….
“Absolutely out of the question!”

In the street outside the Sleeping Dragon, a local wizard pub specializing in the type of homey food favoured by drinking men everywhere, the quiet evening air was punctuated by the soft sounds of someone just coming to fully understand the misery awaiting them.

“Oh, Shite!”

A pause — “She’s gonna go mental!”

Then — “This is not funny, you two!”

Oliver had finally stopped showing off his dubious education to the passersby outside the Sleeping Dragon, and now only occasionally gave voice to muffled curses as they walked down the street towards the flat the twins kept above their shop. Fred and George, though very concerned for their friend, still found his predicament supremely funny. Oliver was making his way down the street somewhat woodenly, as he tried to come to terms with what he had done.

Muffling a chuckle, George tried to reassure his friend. “Come on, it’s not that bad Oliver — I mean, at least you’ve fulfilled your duty to the Ministry.” He shrugged. “Now the decision’s out of your hands. Cheer up, it could have been much worse.”

“How?” the Scottish man asked, suspicious.

“We-ell, it could have been someone truly unfortunate, like Lavender Brown, or someone like that. I mean, at least your girl doesn’t simper.”

Oliver stared at him, wondering how the thought of not having a nice, placid girl was supposed to comfort him at the moment. “She’s going to go spare!” He spoke forcibly, hoping to impress the seriousness of the situation on his friend, whom he suspected might not be thinking of the same
Fred sniggered. Oliver turned and glowered at him darkly.

“And just what in the bloody hell do ye propose I do? She’s going to go mental - with good reason!”

“Don’t worry Oliver —“

“— We’ll help you get through this.” Fred soothed.

Oliver looked at each of their grinning faces in turn. “I’m doomed,” he moaned, burying his head in his hands.

This declaration was rewarded with a fresh burst of laughter from Fred.

“I’m going to have to go see her. Maybe we can sort this mess out calmly…”

“You’re right, of course - things are only going to get worse if you don’t give her a chance to yell at you in person.” Fred unlocked the door to their shop, and crossed the room to hop up on the counter. “Girls are like that. The longer you leave her to stew on it, the more time she’ll have to come up with inventive ways of getting even.”

“Besides, she’s a lovely girl. I’m sure she will appreciate your good intentions,” George thought about this for a moment, before adding, “I don’t know that I would admit to her that it was Fred’s idea, though.” He paused for more thought. “And you might want to leave out the part about being drunk. That may not go over well.”

“George?” Oliver said, after blinking at this advice. “Stop trying to help me.”

“..-“

“Oh Ginny, what am I going to do?” Hermione had gotten past the worst of her blind rage; she was
now into numb horror. The two of them were currently holed up in Hermione’s dormitory. They had drawn the heavy velvet curtains around her four-poster bed, and cast a charm to keep their conversation private while they plotted in the dim cocoon they had made for themselves.

“Actually, I’m kind of relieved.” Ginny glanced over to her companion, slumped in a pile of fluffy pillows at the head of the bed, and carefully gauged her reaction, before continuing. “I mean, the worst is over, now we can concentrate on saving the day. There’s no way you’re marrying someone so totally unsuitable - but at least it’s not Zabini, or even Snape! He’s a Pureblood too, you know — Could you imagine being Mrs. Snape? You’d never get the grease stains out of your clothes.” Catching and eating the Bertie Botts bean that was flung furiously at her head for this comment, Ginny made an exaggerated face.

“That’s really disgusting, you know. I rate much higher than spinach!” Swallowing dramatically, “gagghhh,” she pronounced with a theatrical shudder. When Hermione finally gave into her antics and allowed a tiny smile to twitch across her lips, she became serious again.

“Honestly though, I’ve been on pins and needles these last two weeks, nervous for you every time your post came in. Now that the worst has happened, we can all get our heads together, and find a way out of this mess. Unless, you want us to leave you to it?” Ginny tried to sound serious, hoping to lighten the mood with her teasing.

“And just how are we going to fix this one, Ginny? I don’t exactly see a line up of knights in shining armor just waiting around with nothing better to do.”

“Well, you still have a month to find another offer. Is there anyone you’d like as a substitute?” Ginny’s tone was speculative, as she gave her a teasing look.

Hermione threw the pillow that she had been lounging against, halfheartedly at her friend. “Not like that, no, Ginevra Weasley,” she said primly, flushing slightly at the other girl’s leering expression.

“You could ask Harry, or Ron, you know. I’m sure they would do it for you.”

“Actually, no, I can’t ask Harry – he’s only a half-blood.”

Seeing Ginny’s started look, Hermione sighed. “Oh, honestly, doesn’t anybody read the Minister’s Report when it comes out? Though Half-bloods can marry either a Muggle-born, or Pureblood
under the new law, they cannot themselves file a contract; nor can they be contracted by anyone. Oh, and female Purebloods are entitled to file contracts, but only if they are issued by the patriarch of their family. Male Purebloods can do it on their own after they reach the age of Authority.”

“Why not ask Ron, then? He’ll never let you go through with this, once he finds out, anyways.”

“I know he won’t, Ginny. I wish I didn’t have to tell him at all, but even Ron’s not thick enough to miss the fact that I’ve gotten married. We don’t have to tell him who however, until the month is up.”

“Hermione! What are you thinking? You can’t be seriously planning on going through with this! Ron would be a better choice than that.”

“I know Ginny, but how could I live with myself after asking that of him? He would lose his freedom too—possibly for the rest of his life, if this law isn’t repealed, and it’s not likely to be with all the new blood-sicknesses cropping up almost daily. Ron deserves to fall in love someday, and be happy.” She shook her head slightly, “besides,” she said determinedly, “I don’t think the situation is beyond my ability to handle.”

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Unfortunately for Oliver, he was sent out on assignment again the very next morning, preventing him from going down to Hogwarts and calmly talking things over with Hermione as he had planned. He had a sinking feeling that leaving her to stew about this wasn’t going to be conducive to his future wedded bliss, or even his continuing ability to walk upright with the normal number of limbs. Hermione, he remembered, was very handy with charms and hexes, and might find it very amusing to be married to a frog.

Groaning when he realized there was a good possibility she might do just that, he dragged himself out of bed, and quickly got himself to the Undersecretary’s office, cursing Percy inventively the whole way.

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Harry and Ron had been stunned to say the least, when Hermione and Ginny had told them about her predicament Tuesday morning over breakfast. Harry had known she would get one sooner or later, and given who she was, probably sooner. Hermione had been the only one of their group to
be vulnerable. Like Ginny, though, he was actually a bit relieved that the worst was over — now if only she would tell them who, they could start working on fixing everything for her.

Ron, on the other hand, was furious. Harry didn’t think it had actually occurred to him before then that his best friend was Muggle-born, and would therefore be subject to the new law. It seemed to catch him completely off guard, and for some reason, he and Hermione had gotten into a fight about the whole thing — as if it had been her fault that he hadn’t known about it.

“You okay, ‘Mione?” Harry asked somewhat tentatively. He couldn’t quite get over the fact that she was just sitting there reading from The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 7, as if nothing had happened. It really was a Hermione-like thing to do, he supposed.

“I’m fine, Harry.” Her voice was really beginning to sound exasperated now, like someone who had been asked a question, and all it’s variations, one too many times. She didn’t even bother looking up from behind her book anymore, from which she was working from on an essay due by the end of next week. Harry couldn’t believe she was still calm enough to be worrying about schoolwork that far in advance.

For a while, the only sound to be heard was the scratching of quills on parchment and the occasional soft ‘plink’ of a pen being dipped in ink a little too enthusiastically, as all three of them went back to their respective homework. The tension was still there, though — Ron had yet to say anything since hearing Hermione’s news, and Harry felt like he was treading on eggshells whenever he was with the two. When Ron’s head suddenly shot up from the parchment he was working on, all Harry could think was ‘Here we go’. He noticed, with a sinking feeling in his gut, that the red-haired boy had only written about three inches in the last two hours. He began surreptitiously scanning the room for possible cover.

“How can you be so calm about this?”

“Honestly, Ronald. It’s the law — it’s not like I can do anything to stop it. I fail to see how panicking is going to solve the situation.”

“Yeah? Well most people would actually be upset about something like this!”

“Are you listening to yourself? It’s the law, Ronald — go yell at your brother, if you feel this is someone’s fault — besides, I consider myself somewhat capable of handling my own problems.”
It probably would help if Hermione would take her head out from behind the book, Harry thought. Half of what was egging Ron on was the feeling that she thought he was being too stupid to bother with.

“Oh, yeah, I bet whoever he is, is just wonderful now, isn’t he? I bet you’re just ecstatic.”

“Oh really, what is your problem? It’s not like I asked for this.” Okay, there she went and put the book down — man was she going to be angry later when she realized that she had dented the cover just now. Harry watched as both of his friends had risen to their feet. Hermione, with her hands planted firmly on her hips, looked very reminiscent of her bossier, know-it-all younger years. Ron looked sullen, and his ears were well past ‘pink’, and onto ‘lobster red’.

“Yeah, well it’s not like you’re looking for a solution, now is it?”

Stuffing his books into his bag, Ron stormed out of the tower, leaving the entire common room to stare in his wake.

What was she going to do? It had been three days since she had received the contract, and still she had no inkling as to what she was going to do about it. Since the scene in the common room a couple days ago, Ron had continued to be an absolute pig-headed git, and by now, she was getting ready to pull out her hair — or someone else’s, anyways. Contrary to Ron’s belief, she had spent a good deal of the last three days in the library, researching the new law and all of its clauses — and there were a lot of clauses. She had sent to the Ministry for copies of all of the regulations and wizarding laws that could possibly be applicable in this situation. The new bill proved to have no loopholes — Hermione would have admired the simplicity and cleanness of the wording that left absolutely no wiggling room whatsoever, if it hadn't been used against her personally. In almost three days of research, she hadn’t turned up a single thing, except to verify that she was, in fact, getting married.

There must be a way to deal with this that didn’t involve killing the offender… or Ron. Then again, roasting was fun, perhaps she could ask Dobby to set up a spit for her. No, no, that was no good; it would make a mess of the lawn. He would look good as a cockroach, and whenever he annoyed her she could step on him — Hey, and the beautiful part of it was that cockroaches survive anything, so she could step on him again, and again… but, even as a cockroach, she’d probably still be forced to marry him, and that was definitely out….

How could this happen to her? Well, actually, she supposed, she had kind of expected this to
happen to her. She had known that she would get one of these infernal Ministry sanctioned decrees of doom sooner or later. The only question in her mind had been: would it be one of the Slytherin boys bent on enjoying her humiliation, or would it be someone looking for the trophy of having ‘the’ Hermione Granger? This eventuality, however far surpassed even her worst envisionments of her fate. ‘Think, Hermione, there has to be a loophole that doesn’t involve asking someone to bail you out…’

“Hermione?” Harry broke into her manic musings softly. Everyone had started treading very carefully around her in the last few days — even teachers. She still wouldn’t tell them who it was, but her complete lack of enthusiasm really wasn’t surprising. Whoever it was, Harry wasn’t sure he would like to be in his shoes right now, as Hermione’s temper seemed to be deteriorating at an accelerating rate. Still, if it was really bad, he was sure she would tell her best mates, and let them help her find a solution.

‘…but is Wendle’s Spot Remover slippery enough to get him up the chimney? And how do I get him to eat it? Or do I need to get Dobby to …’

“Hermione, you’re brooding again.”

“I am not!” Her voice was unnaturally high. “I was just thinking about the chart I need to finish for Arithmancy. It requires some very complicated calculations —”

“You’ve been staring at the fire for the last fifteen minutes with a very evil look on your face.”

“So? I was thinking about this chart. Honestly, Harry, not everything is about that git’s terrible lack of intelligence!”

“You were cackling, ‘Mione. You scared off all the younger years — they thought you were going to let fly again, like you did this morning on poor Gregory.”

“He shouldn’t have startled me then! What is with these all these titchy little first years, anyway? Don’t they have homework or something?”

“He just sat down. That’s all.” Looking over at a small table in the corner, Harry noticed Gregory sitting with some other first years, nervously trying to avoid Hermione. He jumped occasionally at small noises. At least they had been able to remove the turnips that had sprouted out of his nose. “He’s probably going to need therapy in the future, you know.” Harry was fighting hard to keep the
amusement out of his voice. Laughing at Hermione right now was about as safe as walking into Snape’s classroom and announcing that you thought it was about time he took a bath — and why didn’t he ask Peeves to wash his back for him?

Glancing over at the first years’ table, Hermione had to stifle a giggle as Gregory twitched yet again when someone turned a page too loudly. She felt some of the tension ease out of her frame. “All right, maybe I was a little harsh with young Mr. Fannahagh. I’ll try not to abuse anymore younger-years.”

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Ron had apologized stiffly to Hermione the following morning, and judging by the dark circles under his eyes when he met her outside the Great Hall before breakfast, Harry privately thought that he had spent the night thinking on it. Things between them were still somewhat cool — they addressed each other with careful politeness, showing that neither one had forgotten it yet. Poor guy. When Hermione was through with her fiancée, what ever was left was going to be in very deep trouble with Ron.

Harry wondered if he could get tickets.

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“Where’s Hermione? She’s going to miss lunch completely if she doesn’t come soon.”

“Dunno, Ginny. She wasn’t in Transfiguration today.” Harry looked questioningly at Ron, who, as usual, had more food in his mouth than he could handle.

“Fee wusun’ in karms e ver.”

“Ron — that’s disgusting!”

“What?”

Harry shook his head. He was used to their sibling bickering by now. “Do you want to maybe try
that again, Ron?”

Ron left off his squabble to shrug. “I just said that Hermione wasn’t in Charms this morning, either.”

“She must be ill — she never misses class. Think we should bring something up for her?”

“Yeah, that’d be good. Why don’t you?” Ron was eying the food still left on his plate. Harry hid a snigger behind his hand.

“Come on, Harry, I’ll go with you.” Ginny gave Ron one last exasperated look, and grabbed Harry by the elbow.

“It’s okay, I think I can manage, Ginny —“

“And how exactly were you planning on getting into the girls dormitory, Mr. Potter?”

“Oh, right.”

“..”

Friday — five days after he had filed that blasted Contract, and Oliver was finally on his way to Hogwarts to face his fiancée’s wrath. He’d put a little more thought into this one, though. This time, he had at least sent an owl to her, asking where and when it would be convenient to ‘discuss a few things’. Her reply had been civil, but cool which, he supposed, was encouraging. He had witnessed enough of her disagreements with Potter and Weasley to realize it could have been a lot worse — it could have been a Howler. She was definitely feisty, he had to admit ruefully — at least, he would never have to worry about her bottling things up on him — she had no qualms about coming right out and telling you exactly what she thought of you. He was actually a little amused by her forcefulness. He kept getting this mental image of a little mouse, puffing up indignantly to scold a fox for even thinking of making her its dinner. He would probably never be bored again, with her around.

They were meeting by the lake after the midday meal. He wasn’t sure if they were meeting there to have some measure of privacy from prying eyes in the castle, or because she wanted to feed him to the giant squid. Neither thought was entirely reassuring, for vastly different reasons that Oliver
didn’t want to examine too closely just yet.

Nervousness was starting to take hold, and Oliver found that he was having a hard time remembering not to fidget as he waited for the coach from Hogsmeade to take him up to the castle. What would she look like now? It had been almost six years since their last brief encounter at the World Cup game. He had an impression of wild curls and tawny-brown eyes, but that was about all he could honestly recall of the girl. She had always sort of been around — seemed to spend all of her time getting those two boys out of trouble. He snorted at this thought — Potter and Weasley had needed all the help they could get in that respect. She had seemed nice enough, a little high-strung when it came to schoolwork, but Oliver could definitely appreciate dedication to something you found important. There were certainly enough people who would be willing to call him much worse than high-strung when it came to Quidditch. A bit prissy about the rules too, and this was amusing really, given the antics her two friends seemed to drag her into.

Still, this sort of hazy reminiscing did little to assure him. She had been a major participant in the final battles, along with her two mates. She was widely acknowledged to be clever and very handy with a hex or jinx…. This kind of thinking was quickly eroding Oliver’s confidence. He hurried to remind himself that he had done this with her best interests at heart — she would be grateful, once he explained everything to her.

In the back of Oliver’s head, a small voice snorted derisively at this pronouncement.

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The lake gleamed brightly in the late February sun. There was still a chill in the air, but the snow was gone at least. Hogwarts was quite a bit further north than London — where, only yesterday, he had been enjoying the unseasonably warm temperatures and the mild rain that was so common in this country to be almost unnoticed by the inhabitants.

Standing by the lake, he saw a lone figure with wild, wind-tousled curls. Early, of course — he should have guessed. At least he was on time — no sense just handing her ammunition. Staring at her agitated form from what he hoped was a safe distance (and from behind a tree, just in case it wasn’t), he found that, unfortunately, it was also too far to determine much more than the basics. She was shorter than his six-foot frame, probably up to his chest, or so. She had brown hair, and tiny hands, which she was waving around in the air wildly, as she paced to and fro; the rest was concealed by distance and billowing black robes. He knew she probably wouldn’t be on break for long, and that thought gave him the courage to cross the lawn. Hopefully, she wouldn’t have time to get too worked up.

He should have known better, really. She’d already had five days to work up to this meeting.

The nerve of him! The absolute gall! What the hell had he been thinking, filing that contract? Oh, lord, there were only three weeks left to find a way out — How the hell does one get out of something like this… and with someone like him, no less! What was she supposed to do? The man had the intelligence of a bag of rocks, how was she -

She was pacing again. And waving her arms around like a lunatic. She just couldn’t seem to help herself. How could he do this to her when he wasn’t even here? Here she was, waiting by the lake for an innocent meeting, only four days into her life sentence, and she was ranting and raving like an escapee from St. Mungo’s. She’d never felt this unable to control herself — ever. It seemed to be a special talent only he possessed. Annoying Hermione, and turning her into a crazy person. Just wonderful.

Arrghh! She was pacing again! That’s it; I’m going to kill him on the wedding night. There will be no body, I’m going to eat his heart, and feed the rest to Fluffy. Actually, Ginny had helped her practice some of the nastier curses just in case they couldn’t come up with another plan, so if it came to that, Fluffy might not even be necessary.

And to top it all off, now she had this meeting to worry about. To say that she had been stunned in getting an owl from Oliver Wood, of all people, was a gross understatement. She just couldn’t figure out what he thought they had to say to one another, but it was only polite to acquiesce to his
request to a meeting, even if it was a bit strange. She was pacing again. How was he able to make her so absolutely mental when he wasn't even here? Hermione didn't feel herself an expert in these sorts of things, but she felt fairly certain this probably didn't foreshadow a future of marital happiness

Men just suck, now don’t they, she thought, bitterly.

“Um, Hermione?” This soft enquiry cut though her mental rant instantly. Somewhere in her hazy memory, that accented voice matched up to one heard at the Quidditch Cup years before, so as she whirled around to face the source of some of her recent confusion, it was with a wary expression tightening the skin around her large eyes.

“Hello Oliver,” she offered, guardedly.

‘At least she didn’t answer with her wand, instead.’ Oliver was actually a bit taken aback by her willingness to converse before hexing him into oblivion. He was so taken aback that he just stared at her blankly for a moment as he tried to regroup.

“If you don’t mind, Mr. Wood, can we get on with this? I’ve been under a fair bit of strain as of late, and I don’t have the patience at the moment for pleasantries.”

Ouch. Yep, definitely not happy. It was Oliver just a few moments ago, too. Now what? At his hesitation, Hermione lost what remained of her patience.

“Oh, honestly! Do get on with it, Wood. I have no idea why you would request to see me ‘somewhere where we can talk privately’, but you can just hurry up and spit it out!” She had begun to pace again, with movements that were jerky, and uncoordinated.

Looking closer, Oliver noticed the bags under her eyes, and the drawn looking quality of her skin. ‘She hasn’t been sleeping’ he realized suddenly, ‘and I’ll bet she’s missed a fair few meals in the last few days too.’ He felt like a heel.

“I came down to apologize, Hermione.” This stopped her just as she was taking a breath to scold him again, confusion plainly written on her expressive features.

“What do you mean?” she tried to say, but all that came out was an odd whooshing, like someone
stepping on a frog, as all the air left her lungs at once. She promptly began to cough. *Great, just great, Hermione. Impressive display, that was.*

After awkwardly patting her on the back until she resumed breathing, Oliver seemed to lose himself in thought. He stuck his hands in the pockets of his navy robe, and scuffed the ground with his foot a few times like a schoolboy who knew he deserved to get what was coming to him, but hoped because this was his favorite teacher, if he looked miserable and remorseful, he would be too cute to be punished. For the life of her, Hermione couldn’t figure out what was going on.

“Um, Oliver? Why are you apologizing to me?” The bafflement on Hermione’s face had softened the hard lines of her strong features. *She’s probably got a pretty smile,’ Oliver thought unexpectedly. She should do that more often; when she scowls like that her chin gets all pointy looking…. Shaking his head to bring himself back to task, he stopped kicking the sandy ground at the lake’s edge, and came to stand by her again.*

“I came to apologize because it’s my fault you’re in this situation. I really didn’t mean —“ He got no further, before he was interrupted.

“What do you mean, this is your fault?” The steely quality of her voice should possibly have been a warning that this was all about to go south, quickly, but he ploughed on, oblivious.

“Well, I mean, if I hadn’t have filed that Contract…”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Oliver. There is no way that you could have accomplished something like this. There are all sorts of spells set up to prevent mistakes—“

Even though he was a little bit indignant that she didn’t think him capable of performing the task himself, he still found himself answering truthfully. “Well, the twins helped me with the trickier bits, and you know how good they…”

She heard the splash before she even realized what she had done. Standing there, listening to him explain away the torment she’d endured for the last week as some - some silly schoolboy prank, perpetrated by the twins of all people, well, she finally felt something snap. You could almost hear it happen. It was rather unfortunate for Oliver that he failed to realize that in someone like Hermione, this was definitely the time to start looking for cover.

The icy cold water of the lake came as an incredible shock to Oliver. He had had just enough time
to register her scowl, before his unprepared body found itself loosing a battle with gravity that landed him on his arse.

Spluttering, Oliver was sure he set a record getting out of the water, which was, he was positive, only a very short step away from being glacial melt-off. When his brain caught up to what his ears were hearing, however, he was even more confused.

“You — you! What ...ruined my ... would you think I... You?” Her jumbled raving was coming out sounding like very furious and indignant hiccoughs, until finally, she seemed to settle on just “Why? Why him?”

“Well, I thought I would try and help, I mean —“ Him? Oliver’s brain finally caught up, derailing his desperate explanation mid stride.

“Him?” he queried, carefully.

“Yes, him! Why the hell would you do this to me! I don’t want to know how you forged it, but you and your partners-in-crime had better find a way to fix this, or I swear —“

Oliver thought back furiously to his hazy memories of the mad hour spent completing the paper work for the contract. Nope, he’d definitely signed it — and besides, there were all kinds of spells in place to prevent any mistakes, even if it had been illegible, so there was no way he could have bollixed it up — so that meant... Bloody hell.

“Hermione,” he grabbed her by the shoulders, forcing her to look at him as he said urgently, “Who?”

“You prat! You set me up like this without even knowing who? I —“ She broke off, feeling Oliver’s grip tighten warningly on her shoulders.

“Who, Hermione?”

He just knew, absolutely knew, mind, that he wasn’t going to like the answer. And she confirmed this when she opened her mouth to say —
“Gregory Goyle.”

“Bloody hell.”

“...”

“So, what happens now?” They were both sitting under a tree at this point, staring out at the squid, as it made lazy patterns on the lake’s surface.

“Well, that depends on what happened to your owl. When the Ministry receives it, your challenge will be acknowledged, and the Goyle family will be informed. So will you, I assume —“

“Challenge?” Oliver struggled up from his semi-lounging position on his elbows to stare more fully at Hermione.

“Don’t tell me — you’ve never read the Minister’s Report either?”

“The what?”

“Never mind. Because the Goyle family has already filed for me, and I never signed their Contract, your claim is considered a challenge. Once the Ministry has processed it, they will inform the Goyles, who will then have 48 hours to choose how they want the claim decided.” The careful neutrality of her tone worried Oliver a little. At his gesture, she continued. “Once they inform the Ministry of their choice, the Ministry will inform you, along with the details of the ‘contest’.”

“What kind of ‘contest’?”

“The challenged party has a choice to defend their claim before the Wizengamot, almost like the trial Harry had when he defended himself from charges of under-aged magic, or... “

“Or?”

“A wizard duel.”
“She sleeping?” Harry asked, as Ginny came back down to the common room, tray still in her hands.

“No,” she said, slowly. “She’s not there.”

Harry blinked at this, unsure what to think. “Not there? Do you think she’s with Madame Pomfrey? Maybe we should go check.”

Ginny chewed her lower lip in indecision. “It’s almost time for your next class — don’t you have Defense Against the Dark Arts with her this afternoon? Why don’t we see if she shows up before we get too worked up. I mean, she may just need some time alone right now.”

“I wish she would tell us who it is! I mean, if he’s someone horrible, I’m sure she would ask for our help, but I’d still feel a lot better knowing for sure that it’s not Snape or someone like that. I know you know, Ginny. Can’t you give us a hint?” Harry’s frustration at not being able to help his friend was making his normally quiet voice rough. He moved across the circular room to sit heavily in a chair by the table at the back of the room. It was Hermione’s favorite place to study, half hidden, as it was, in the shadow of the stair leading to the dorms. His chin resting in his hand, with his elbow on his knee he looked up and tried to plead silently with his best mate’s sister to tell him. It wasn’t working. Frustrated again, he dropped his gaze and noticed a stray parchment on the floor under the table. Letting Ginny’s words wash over him, he leaned down to retrieve it.

“… really, and it’s her decision when she wants to tell the two of you. I mean, is there anyone in the world that you and Ron are going to think is good enough for her? She’s just …”

Dear Hermione,

I’m sure this is confusing to you…

…appreciate a chance to talk about things…

Harry’s eyes widened in shock, realizing, as he skimmed the letter, that it was probably from
Hermione’s mysterious suitor. Feeling only a little guilty in reading her personal correspondence, he quickly scanned down to the bottom, and read the signature. And then read it again.

“Oliver Wood,” he breathed. Ginny stopped mid sentence, and just looked at him, confused.

“Come on, I’ve got to find Ron.” Harry left the common room at a run.

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“So, why exactly did you Contract me, anyways?” Hermione was playing idly with a blade of early grass, trying to hide the flush she was sure was spreading across her face. She wasn’t quite sure what to make of the fact that apparently ‘the’ Oliver Wood had not only remembered a bossy know-it-all four years his junior whom he hadn’t seen in almost six years, but that it had been her he’d thought of when faced with the dilemma of having to ‘lead the way’ with the new law. It was making her more than a little uncomfortable, and she was sure her question came out more then a little accusing.

“Uh, well…” Oliver looked around for inspiration. How was he supposed to answer that? Unfortunately, all he saw was the squid, who proved to be less then inspirational. “Ah, well, the truth is, I wasn’t really thinking too clearly at the time…”

“Oh?”

He didn’t miss the sudden coldness of her tone. Think Wood, this is your future as a frog talking to you. You had better come up with something, quick.

“Well, I’d just found out about this law a few hours before, an’ …

“You were drunk, weren’t you?”

There was no way she could have missed Oliver’s guilty wince at her accusation. She went from her reclining position to standing so fast; it almost looked like she had Apparated, instead of bothering to go through the extra steps of getting up. With a sharp kick to his shins, she left him clutching his leg in surprise and stormed back up to the castle.
“Well, apparently tha’ wasn’t such a good idea.” Oliver was leaning against a tree, staring out at the lake, and contemplating how much better that should have gone.

“You got that right.” At the sound, Oliver straightened. The voice had sounded unexpectedly hostile.

Turning, Oliver only just had time to register red hair and a lean body before he had his head snapped with enough force to rock him back on his heels a bit. It appeared that the cavalry had arrived, and its name was Ronald Weasley.

_Yep, this day just kept getting better and better._
“You absolute prat — you complete bastard! What the hell were you thinking?” Ron had at least stopped trying to hit him. Oliver really didn’t want to get into more trouble with Hermione for beating up her friend.

“Whoa, slow done just a little bit, huh? I already explained to Hermione the reasons—”

“I saw you explaining them to her, and it didn’t look like she was impressed, either!”

Oliver couldn’t help but wonder what the hell was happening. It seemed to him that Goyle would be a far more worthy target for this kind of abuse than he — and wait just a minute here; how do these two scamps know about his Contract on Hermione, when even Hermione hadn’t know until an hour ago? Ron’s reddening face quickly brought him back to the present. Time to try and figure out the complicated relationship between these three later — for now he would just play along — it was Hermione’s choice after all what she told her friends, he supposed. He probably wouldn’t want to admit to having Goyle as a suitor either. Wait a tick — that didn’t sound right, even in the privacy of his own head.

“Our wee mouse has a fiery temper. She’ll calm down, and understand the logic behind this.” Oliver suppressed a wince, as he thought, I hope.

Harry gave Oliver an odd look at his choice of endearment, but kept quiet and in the background of the confrontation.

“So there is some logic involved here, somewhere? This I’ve got to hear!” Ron snarled. It hadn’t seemed to occur to him yet that Oliver was easily twice his size. Ron may have become even taller in recent years, but he was still slim and narrow for all that he had grown. Despite his training with the Order, and a few years of Quidditch for Gryffindor, muscle mass just seemed to be refused by his lean frame. Right now, he was vibrating in rage so great; he looked like an autumn-red leaf in a heavy gale.

So Oliver related (again) his own situation, and how he had honestly been trying to help Hermione by filing for her. He spoke of the necessity behind the law, and the likelihood of Hermione being Contracted by some Death Eater or something. He left out absolutely all reference to Goyle, challenges, or drunken owls. They didn’t seem to know anything about Hermione’s other contract, and Oliver wasn’t fool enough to tell them, if she hadn’t.

Ron obviously wasn’t very impressed with this reasoning, and Oliver began to have a sneaking suspicion of the complications to come.
“Did it ever occur to you that she had friends here that would have stepped in if she needed to be rescued from something like that?” Ron was seething now, absolutely livid at Oliver’s actions.

“Why, would you have? Offered a Contract of your own then? ‘Cause, the last time I checked, you still hadn’t managed to have an emotional discussion with her without ending up screaming at each other loud enough to wake the whole of Gryffindor tower!” Oliver watched Ron’s face carefully as he made these accusations. He really hoped Ron would be shocked, surprised, or disgusted, maybe – anything, as long as his growing suspicions were wrong….

They weren’t. Ron blushed hotly at the accusation, and dropped his eyes. Oh, shite. That was going to complicate things. He’d never seriously thought of the two of them together. Well, it might be a way out of his current dilemma – if Hermione wanted it, that was. He wasn’t entirely sure why, but his stomach clenched uncomfortably at the thought.

Wrenching his thoughts around, Oliver tried to deal with the issue before him. “Are you serious about this?” He tried to keep his voice even and soft, giving nothing of his inner discomfort away. Wait a minute, where was all this coming from – he didn’t have any intentions toward Hermione… did he?

“I don’t know! I don’t know if we could make it work!” Ron exclaimed furiously. “I’d’ve liked to try, though.” He was frustrated now, and looked like he wanted to go back to hitting Oliver.

“Have you ever asked her?” Oliver asked quietly.

“I haven’t said anything. She’s too dense about stuff like that –when it comes to me, anyway – to notice.”

Oliver thought that it was a bit much coming from Mister Oblivious himself, but he let it go for the sake of continuing good relations.

“There’s still three weeks left, you know. You could offer her a choice. Rescue her from me, if you like.”

Ron avoided his gaze.

“You don’t know if you want to.” It wasn’t a question. Oliver was beginning to get really irritated. “So you don’t know if you want her yourself, but you don’t want anyone else to have her either. Friendly of you, that is.”

Ron bristled at this assessment and Oliver tensed, not sure if Ron was going to decide to start swinging again. The tall, lanky boy glared at him for a long moment, and then his shoulders slumped in defeat. He wasn’t ready to file a Contract for Hermione, and he knew it. With one last baleful look at Oliver, he strode off in the direction of the Forbidden Forrest, already deep in thought.

“You handled that fairly well.” Oliver nearly jumped. He had forgotten Harry was still there.

“Thanks,” he replied; and then, after a moment, “You knew?”

“He’s my best mate, Oliver.” Harry sounded almost amused that Oliver thought he could miss such a thing.

“And you didn’t say anything? You could have saved us all some grief, you know.”

“Ron is too hard-headed. If I had tried to tell him that he hadn’t a hope of being happy with ‘Mione,
he would have gone out of his way to try and prove me wrong. He’s a great guy, but he has a lot of pride. He loves the idea of the two of them, but it’s only because he’s afraid of losing her at the end of the year. School will be finished, Voldemort’s gone — we won’t be together anymore. Not like we are now, anyway.”

Oliver looked startled for a moment at this insight. “Quite philosophical, aren’t you, young Mister Potter?”

Harry grinned, suddenly amused. “I had to think very fast, when your Contract came in. If I had thought it was what Ron really wanted, I would have spiked your wheel pretty damn quick, you know.”

Oliver laughed at this. “So, are you going to hit me too? Or shall we just get straight on to dueling?”

“Oh, I think I’ll let you lick your wounds for a while yet, before I go after you. More sporting that way, don’t you think?”

When he saw the other man’s gaze follow Ron’s slumping progress out to the edge of the woods, Harry added, “Don’t worry about him, he’ll work it out for himself soon. Probably be his usual charming self by morning.”

Oliver nodded, then turned to go, intent on finding a healing charm for his face, but was halted by Harry’s voice, behind him.

“Oh, and Oliver? All the usual threats about hurting her apply, of course.”

While having his face tended to in the Hospital Wing after his confrontation with Ron, Oliver had realized that leaving things as they stood now with Hermione was not the healthiest idea he’d ever had.

“Letting her cool down a wee bit first would’na hurt, though,” he mused quietly to himself. Madam Pomfrey didn’t bat an eye at this strange comment. She had made it her policy long ago not to enquire after details of anyone’s visit to her domain. Almost all of her patients got here through some sort of rule breaking, so there really wasn’t any need to tax their creativity by asking them to come up with some kind of cover story.

Once released, Oliver had made his way to the library. He really had no clue what class she might be in, and didn’t think he had any hope of getting into her common room to wait for her, unless he ran into Harry again, so it was the best he could come up with. Sulking around in the Herbology section, he had kept up his vigil for over two hours before he was rewarded with the sight of Hermione wandering in over-burdened by a bulging rucksack over one shoulder, and three sizable tomes clutched tightly to her chest with both arms. She looked, to Oliver’s eyes, to be absolutely exhausted. *Ah, seventh year slouch,* he thought, taking in her drooping frame. Silently, he slipped behind her, and gently relieved her of her bag.

“Harry, you can be so sweet sometimes. I can’t bel—,” she cut off abruptly, as she finished turning around, and saw her rescuer. She went extremely red, and began drawing herself up, no doubt to start scolding him again.

“We’re in the library!” Oliver hastened to remind her, hoping the consequences of being banned from her beloved sanctuary would help to keep this encounter more congenial then the last one.
Abruptly swallowing whatever she had been about to say, she cast a guilty glance around, as if expecting the librarian, to come swooping down on her.

Taking in Oliver’s determined expression, and the resolute way he seemed to be holding her bag hostage, Hermione gave in to the need to have a civil conversation. Wordlessly, she began walking towards one of the least used corners of the labyrinthine room not bothering to check that the burly man followed.

Dropping bonelessly into one of the fraying chairs to which she had led them, she deposited the heavy books she had been carrying on a low lying table, twisted around to bring both feet under her, and began to stretch her neck and shoulders. Oliver watched her deliberate nonchalance, and had to smile softly; she definitely wasn’t about to make this easy for him. Dropping her bag onto one of the other chairs, he moved around her to rub her shoulders.

Twisting under his grasp, she turned to give him a hard look. “That’s not necessary, thank you,” her voice was flat, and very unfriendly.

“Don’t be daft — I’ve been in seventh year too, you know. You probably haven’t slept enough in at least a month, and with carrying that lot of books around all the time, it’s a wonder you’re still walking.” Very gently, he continued his ministrations, knowing from experience that it is extremely difficult to stay mad when getting a thorough massage, and willing to use it to his advantage. When she made to protest again, he interrupted her to forestall another fight. “We didn’t behave too well by the lake this afternoon, did we? How much do you want to bet that we showed our maturity off for a bunch of younger years at some point during all that? Must’ve looked like right children out there.” His lilting accent came out tinged heavily with rueful amusement as he continued to dance his fingers lightly along her shoulders.

Silence greeted this remark, and Oliver hoped he hadn’t stuck his foot in it again, when she bust out in waves of soft laughter that caught him completely off-guard.

“No, I guess we didn’t show off our maturity, did we?” Oliver smiled at this break-through in inter-personal relations, though he was sure that things were still far from easy between them. He tried to think of something that might further serve to ease the tension. “Those two scamps call you ‘Mione’, don’t they?” He could practically feel her eyes narrow in confusion at where he was heading with this, and he gave a small crooked smile. “A few of the old timers still speak Gaelic back home; been hearing it all my life. There’s a word, ‘mione’ in Gaelic — the pronunciation isn’t quite the same, sort of a bit rounder, but it’s close, and it’s spelt the same. Do you know what it means?”

She had relaxed again at his explanation, and gave a very small shake of her head at his question, but he could almost feel her curiosity at this unknown fact, bright and shinny and pristine in its newness.

He reached across her to hold his palm flat for her to see. When she didn’t react, he gently took one of her hands that had been resting limply in her lap, and lay in over his own, also palm up. The difference startled even him, who had already noted the disparity in their sizes. It looked so small and delicate to his own; the palm’s smoothness making the calluses on his broom-roughened fingers and palm stand out in sharp contrast. All of a sudden he was hit with a startling desire to protect something that could be so delicate and yet so strong. “It means ‘small’ or ‘little’.” His voice was soft, still looking at the sight of her hand laying in his. Had he been looking at her, he may have noticed her smile at this interpretation of her name.

Realizing that he was still holding her hand in his, Oliver dropped it, and quickly cast about for something to say in an attempt to hide the flush he could feel crawling up his neck.
“Quidditch? You’re trying to re-start the Quidditch leagues?”

Once he had dropped her hand and stopped blushing, Oliver found that they managed to hold an only moderately awkward conversation for the rest of Hermione’s free period, which Oliver had taken as a bit of a triumph, given the level of interaction they had had up to this point in their lives. Apparently, when asked what he had been spending his time for the last year, he gave the wrong answer. His response seemed to have escalated the previously only mildly awkward atmosphere, into something more resembling nuclear disarmament talks.

“Well, yeah. I’ve been scouting around for the last few months,” Oliver went on, eyeing her carefully, “and I think I could get a team in the air in time for next season, if I could get the Ministry to re-instate. There’s a really fast kid playing house leagues over at…” he trailed off and furrowed his brow at Hermione’s horrified look. “What?”

“Don’t you think that, well…that there are more important things to be done first, before we bother with some sil—some game?” It was obvious, even to Oliver, that she was doing her best to choose her words with care.

*What was she on about now?* He thought. “Like what?”

“I mean honestly, don’t you think that there are more important uses for your time than badgering Percy about some stup—about a game? No one knows if Voldemort is really dead, everyone’s living on pins and needles in fear of his return. The Ministry is in shambles, and we have all kinds of new illnesses cropping up daily, thanks to the Pureblooded mating habits—and you’re biggest worry is whether or not you can find a seeker capable of performing one of those Wonky Faint thingies—”

“Wronski Feint,” Oliver corrected, in a strained voice.

“Whatever. I think Percy is perfectly right to deny your petition.” Hermione crossed her arms over her chest in frustration at his obvious confusion.

“An’ I suppose you have the perfect thing in mind for me to do with my talents, do you?”

“Well, you could be devoting your time to something worthwhile, like S.P.E.W.! Helping creatures less fortunate, who are abused by the system so badly, that they don’t even have the will to fight!” Her brown eyes were sparkling, and bright spots of colour were rising on her cheeks. Some of her curls had come loose of her bun in her agitation, and were laying about her head like a frizzy halo, as if she contained so much energy and passion that even her hair was alive with it. *The effect is actually rather ridiculous,* Oliver thought, with a fond smile, losing track of the argument for a moment.

“You do realize that House Elves are happy as they are, don’t you? If you want to talk about wasting time, I think we could start there—,” he was cut off mid-retort by the most unbelievable language. She really should have been a Beater, with language like that, he reflected. *Must be all those years hanging ‘round Weasley.*

It was undeniably a place meant for masculine company, the very fiber of the worn and comfortable atmosphere exuding something that spoke of a man’s office, Oliver reflected, letting his eyes travel its familiar confines; visiting briefly with the ancient fireplace dominating the one
long windowless wall, the battered dark-wood desk with matching worn chair sitting in front of the huge windows overlooking the street below, and then with the scuffed sideboard, sitting almost throne-like on the wall opposite the stone hearth. More then half the space had been devoted to a conversation pit facing the fireplace, full of squishy, overstuffed chairs and one short chesterfield. The room really was a man’s room; all dark woods and functional furniture, completely comfortable without losing one bit of its utilitarian usefulness.

Oliver was getting sick of seeing it. He was watching the people moving on the street below, leaning forehead to forearm as it rested against the window frame, lost in the sea of movement. Shifting slightly, he watched through the reflection in the glass as Percy entered; a flock of memos following him into the room— one even getting stuck in his hair in its pushy insistence at being read first.

“Therapeutic, isn’t it?” Percy asked, coming up behind him to stare at the shoppers moving in groups along the once bustling street. “Just watching them all and wondering what they’re thinking, feeling right now? Why does that boy seem to lack the courage to approach that girl? Why does he look at her so longingly? It’s easy to get lost in just watching people, and never notice the time go by.”

The brunette man had no reply, merely waited for his friend to snap out of his reverie. Shaking his head, and loosening the trapped memo in the process, he focused on more important matters. “So, you got my message? I thought you might get here sooner.”

“I was down at the school, speaking to my future bride,” Oliver glared at Percy’s reflection, as thought he could blame everything that had happened on him— it might not be entirely fair, but he fully intended to try. The spectral image in the glass made Percy’s normally fair complexion wan and sickly, and his deep auburn hair washed out to a dull orange. The ghostly image seemed to be smirking at him.

Moving further into the room, the Undersecretary passed Oliver to drop down into his scuffed chair behind his desk with something that sounded suspiciously like a chuckle. Oliver glared harder, knowing he was being childish, and for the moment, not caring one bit. “Actually, I was meaning to ask you how that went. May I extend my congratulations?” Percy’s face took on an expression of beatific innocence. “For some reason, I should have known the drunken owl had to be yours. Only you could land yourself in this much trouble overnight.”

Oliver continued to glare at him, trying to resist the urge to stick out his tongue. Sighing in defeat, Oliver finally left his vantage point to face his friend and sometimes-boss. Settling on the edge of the desk, all traces of his former irritation were gone from his voice, “So, what have you got?”

At this simple, but serious query, Percy’s face lost the bland countenance with which he had been teasing the other man. Straightening in his chair, he stared at Oliver pointedly, waiting for him to move off of the file he had sat on, before handing the manila folder over. “I’m afraid I have to send you out again. Today actually; before lunch if at all possible.”

“What’s happened, then?” The calm radiating from the large Scottish man when under pressure was one of the best indicators of his competence, his unpretentious nature causing many to underestimate his abilities.

“Problems in Norway, actually,” Percy paused, seeming to gather his thoughts as he swiveled his chair to stare out the window behind him. “We really can’t afford to have problems happening in a country that’s so close to us, and not know what’s happening. Oliver— we’re just too vulnerable right now. Lovisa Berg —“
“The Norwegian Minister’s wife?”

“Yes,” Percy tried not to scrub his face with his hands in weariness. He wasn’t sure he could remember the last time he had been able to sleep properly without waking up with his reports imprinted on his cheek. He accepted the tea gratefully when Oliver offered him a chipped mug. *Oliver’s transfiguration work always was a bit spotty,* he reflected, as he inhaled the slightly bitter aroma blissfully, before continuing, “Lovisa passed me a quiet word at the IWC talks last night. Michael is very worried, but I wasn’t able to get a moment alone with him all evening.” Percy spared a small smile when he saw Oliver’s sour look at the apparent maneuverings of ‘backroom politics’. “You’re too honest, my friend. The world’s problems cannot always be solved in a straight-forward manner. Austria is getting more militant everyday— I’m surprised the Muggle community there hasn’t heard more from them. The Netherlands are unwilling to rock the boat at the moment, and France has its own problems to worry about. Until we know for sure that Voldemort is really dead, our list of allies is very, very thin— and no one dares to be our friend openly.” The distance given him by the other European heads last evening still rankled. The second Dark War had been a very near thing for them, and countries that had been too friendly with the Order, and other resistance groups had earned punitive atrocities from the Evil Lord and his followers. The gruesome displays that he had given were now paying unexpected dividends by isolating Britain during it’s recovery; no one was willing to risk even more violent retributions should Voldemort rise for a third time.

“Specifics?”

“Not much. There have been a number of unexplained incidents lately. Things that appear fairly minor, really, but you know Michael — he claims that an entire town was reporting ‘mysterious’ lights last month. I mean, really, the lack of common sense being displayed here is astounding! You would think that the Northern Lights are a familiar enough occurrence for them that they wouldn’t panic when it appears, even if it might look unusual from time to time, due to some perfectly normal, natural phenomenon. Not everything can be blamed on Voldemort’s shadow. Now he claims he has an ‘unusual’ rampaging dragon on his hands.”

Oliver raised an eyebrow at exasperation in Percy’s voice. “An’ what exactly does an ‘unusual’ ravaging dragon *do?*”

A smile twisted its way onto the tired man’s face. “You know, I’m not sure.” They looked at each other for a moment, before sniggering in amusement.

Removing his thick spectacles to try and clean the lenses on the sleeve of his robes, Percy continued, “I want you to take a small team out there to find the silly thing. If there is something funny going on right on our doorstep, this is a very good cover for you to go and have a quiet look.”

A nervous knock on the door stemmed further exposition by the Undersecretary on the character defects arising in the Norwegian culture, at least those found in small towns that should know the Northern Lights from an *Avada Kedavra.* A blond head poked itself through the door as Percy, in his chair, swiveled back to face it.

“Mr. Undersecretary, sir,” the small woman asked tentatively.

“Yes, Miss Macier?”

“There’s a Mister Lucius Malfoy here to see you sir—” An expression of harassment showed briefly on her carefully controlled face.
The tall blonde man used his trademark ebony cane to delicately move the young woman out of the doorway, interrupting her introduction. “No need to announce me, I’m sure Mister Weasley has a few minutes for a concerned citizen.” The unctuous tones that preceded him into the room flowed like an oil-slick on water—beautiful but deadly. Pausing as he entered to sweep the room with his cold grey eyes, he spotted the other occupant. “Ah, Mister Wood. How unexpected.”

“Malfoy.” Oliver’s tone was bland, as he inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment. He watched with satisfaction as the other man’s eyes narrowed briefly in annoyance.

“Please, don’t let me keep you. Shall I wait outside for you to finish your business Mr. Undersecretary?”

Percy’s voice had become fussy and exasperated. “No, no need,” he turned to face Oliver again, narrowing his eyes in irritation. “I think we were finished here, Wood. I know how you feel about the Quidditch leagues, but I’m afraid that I simply cannot justify the use of our limited resources at this time for something so frivolous. You know that: my answer is the same every time you come here. Why don’t you try Norway? I hear that they’re looking for talented people right now.” Percy watched the interloper carefully from the corner of his eyes, as he causally sent Oliver on assignment right under his overly sharp nose, for any sign of a reaction. He then reached around his desk, and offered a parchment to Oliver. The bulky Scottish man was standing to leave, looking appropriately disappointed. “Here, take this with you when you go. I’m sure it will explain my position perfectly.”

A pair of dark grey eyes glittered as they followed the burly man out the door, unnoticed by Percy, who had to deal with the sudden arrival of a tiny screech owl zooming through his window, and hooting excitedly at a job well done. It was carrying a bright red envelope clutched tightly in his talons.

There was already smoke curling faintly from the edges.

(—)

(Dear) Hermione,

Am I allowed to be so friendly with you yet? Or is it still grounds for immediate injury? You have a hell of a kick, do you know that? Nice to know you can look after yourself — not that I ever really had a doubt, mind you. I just didn’t expect such a personal demonstration.

I’m rambling.

This is incredibly hard— How do you write a letter to someone who is going to be your wife, but you don’t know them very well yet? I think I now understand how people might feel in places with arranged marriages. I wanted to share a story with you that I thought might help a bit. When my oldest brother got engaged, my Grannie sat all of us down to share some advise.

“You’ll never find someone perfect for you,” she said. “You have to make things perfect with the person you find. They’ll always find a way of getting on your last nerve on a bad day, and that’s all there is to it— you’ve got to accept the things they do that drive you squirrelly, and decide early on if they are things you can live with.” I guess when she married Granddad, she made a list of ten things he did that made her crazy, and decided that those things she would just accept. She wouldn’t nag, and wouldn’t fuss about those ten things— but anything not on the list, and boy, watch out!

I dunno, it worked for them; they were the happiest couple I know. I think the list is supposed to be
stuff like, ‘I won’t go mental when they leave their socks on the floor’ sort of thing, but I really
don’t know if you leave your socks on the floor yet, but I thought the same might work with more
generalized resolutions for now — I can always add the thing about the socks later, if it turns out I
need to. (Kidding!) So here’s the first of my ideas: 1) I will try to be supportive of Hermione’s
campaign for House Elves, even if I do think that there are rather better …

well, you get the idea.

Let me know how your N.E.W.T. studies are coming along— I’m sure you’ve got all your classes fit
into a study schedule by now, you’re just that organized. I always seemed to be trying to work my
studies around Quidditch strategy meetings with McGonagall– don’t let her fool you, she’s a
bigger Quidditch nutter then I am. Oh, and If Goyle starts harassing you, let me know right away,
Alright? I’m sure, when this is all done, we can talk Fred and George into donating something
special, just for Greg.

Yours,

Oliver

P.S. Do you know a good Warming charm? I’m up North at the moment, and it’s still ruddy cold at
night, for all that March is just around the bend. I’m checking out the Norwegian club at the
moment, on Percy’s recommendation– there’s some really great talent out here that’s worth
keeping an eye on…

Oliver looked it over carefully, decided that he was a terrible correspondent … and then sent it off
anyway. Hell, it wasn’t like it was going to get any better, no matter how much he fooled with it.

He had been thinking of her with surprising frequency, since arriving in Norway. The distraction
this job had offered from his immediate problems, however, allowed him to do some very serious
thinking. Up until this point, everything he had done had been reactionary, even the initial
‘proposal’ had been– at the prompting of much alcohol– in reaction to Percy’s directive to find a
wife. He hadn’t put much thought into what he was going to do about the whole situation, all his
efforts had been funneled into staying alive once Hermione found out. Now he found himself lying
awake at night, turning the whole mess over in his mind, and had come to some startling
conclusions: he wanted to make this work.

Why? He hardly knew her— though his contact with her in the last ten days had most assuredly been
explosive and intense. His lips slide into a smirk at this thought. Just not in the way that you
normally wanted with someone you were going to marry– and there was the really hard part to
swallow. He was going to marry her, in less than two months, unless she got another offer that she
liked better, in whatever time was remaining after he fought the challenge with Goyle. After how
well things went at the school, if she got an offer from one of those blokes you were trying to save
her from right now, Wood, she just might jump at it. Once again, the thought of Hermione taking
another Contract caused an uncomfortably tight feeling to settle in his stomach. And that was the
crux of it: he wanted this to work, with Hermione. She burned with this inner passion that lit up her
whole being, like she was ready to fight the whole world, and Oliver found himself drawn in,
despite himself. She exasperated him, and her lack of Quidditch savvy astounded him, considering
she was practically inseparable for almost nine years from two of the biggest fans he knew, but he
admired her nonetheless. She was fiercely loyal, and determined. He would value having her as a
friend, if they could ever find some middle ground. He thought with time, maybe they could.

It had been a bit strange to realize that Hermione, Potter’s bookish Lieutenant was in all actuality a
woman now. Somehow, just in holding her hand like that, he had suddenly seen her free of the haze
of his memory of a buck-toothed teenager, caught immortal in his mind in her knobby-kneed and
gracelessly awkward phase. He snorted at the thought, and pushed his speculations out of his mind
for the day. It was time to work; time enough later to ponder when he was trying to sleep in his tent	onight.

They had been tracking the Horntail for two days, and a truly inhospitable place the damned thing
had picked too. They were just east of a place called Mo I Rana, and so far, it had been miserable.
The weather had been unseasonably wet, with sleet and rain almost every afternoon. After sending
the owl off on the long journey to Hogwarts, he turned to check if the fire was ready to start
breakfast. It was his turn to cook this morning, so that meant he had to get up early to bank the fire,
and bring in water. They tried to use as little magic as possible when out in the field like this– one
of the biggest reasons in this case, was that the dragon they were after was nursing, and they
tended to be very sensitive to magic when they were doing that. The last thing they wanted to do
was bring an enraged mother down on their camp over sausages and eggs!

He had Charlie Weasley with him, thankfully. -he had insisted on it, actually. The last dragon
‘expert’ Percy had sent along to help had goofed and Oliver had gotten a nasty bite out of his thigh.
Thankfully it had healed well, but he’d refused to go out again without someone he trusted to know
their business along. Basil Chambers, a very handy man in transfiguring things, and Anita Tormez,
a skilled medi-witch, filled out the rest of the team. Their job was not to subdue the creature (they
would need a lot more wizards for that), but to locate it, and set off some ‘scent bombs’ comprised
of ingredients that gave off particularly noxious and odiferous fumes. Because dragons had such
sensitive olfactory capabilities, this would force the beast into successively smaller and smaller
areas and away from Muggle and wizard settlements alike. Apparently, they could smell this stuff
up to two weeks after it had been put down. The team would then place apparition markers out, so
the retrieval team could just come in, instead of having to slog in the hard way. Hopefully, Oliver
would be able to get back to London soon, and plan how to smooth things over with Hermione.
Somehow, he couldn’t help to think that scent bombs wouldn’t work as well on his wee mouse.
But it was a fun thought.

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“So, is it true? Are you really going to be the future Mrs. Wood? I mean, at least your taste has
improved somewhat, he’s a small step up from the Weasel here– and definitely better then Goyle.
Still, it would be nice if you could at least try to aim a little higher than an ape on a broom.”
Malfoy’s quiet tone still managed to drip with derision.

Refusing to look up from where she was grinding up glittering beetle eyes, Hermione answered,
“well, I guess that leaves you out then, doesn’t it?”

“Miss Granger, I will thank you to pay attention when you are in this classroom, no matter how
interesting you find Mr. Malfoy.” Professor Snape smirked maliciously at her, a half smile twisting
his thin mouth.

Hermione shot one more disgusted look at Draco, before guiltily turning to her potion once more.
Upon entering the lesson, Malfoy had foregone his usual seat amongst his Slytherin cronies to take
one behind Hermione where she sat between Harry and Ron.

Malfoy waited for the Slytherin professor to move on before continuing. “I always told you that
Mudbloods were meant to be property– apparently the Ministry agrees. I’m sure you don’t mind
the thought of Wood owning you, though, do you? He was rather popular with the girls while he
was here, and it’s not like you would have had a hope with someone like him otherwise. A real
dream come true for you, isn’t it?”
“Shut it, Malfoy,” Ron snarled, as Harry and Hermione hastened to restrain him.

Unfortunately, the movement attracted Snape’s attention once again. “Five points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley, and I will thank you to leave your sordid love affairs for outside my classroom.”

They all quickly bent their heads to concentrate on the difficult brew that had been assigned to them, while Snape continued to float around the tables like a large brooding bat. Ron was muttering murderously under his breath, and even Harry was clenching and unclenching his fists in his rage.

“I wouldn’t get too attached to the idea of being Mrs. Wood, if I were you, Granger. I’m sure the Goyles will be kind enough to send what’s left of him back to you, though. Maybe you can seal it in one of those pendants, and wear him round your neck.”

“If you have done everything correctly, your potion should be a deep blue before you add the Billywig stings. I want you all to know, if anyone finds themselves unable to perform this potion to an acceptable standard, they will find themselves sitting detention with me for however long it takes them to improve their performance.” Snape’s expression soured as he watched on of the Slytherin’s potions began to smoke unpleasantly. “I expect my seventh years to achieve the highest standard on their N.E.W.T.’s, which I may remind you, are only a few months away.”

Hermione continued shredding her Shrake to equal length while surreptitiously monitoring Ron and Harry’s method. If any of them had thought that Snape’s dislike of the ‘Golden Trio’ or Gryffindors in general would lessen after fighting together in the war, they were severely disappointed.

The task before her was made more difficult by her shaking hands, and her watery vision. Ignore him. Ignore him. She kept the chant up like a mantra, trying not to focus on what he was saying. Unfortunately, Malfoy had no intention of cooperating, it seemed.

“Nice display you two put on by the lake, I hear, Granger. Heard you hexed the poor bastard from fifty paces. Though why he’d want to have you is beyond me…”

Ron’s whole face was slowly turning the colour of an eggplant with the effort it was costing him to control his temper. “I’m warning you, Ferret, one more word, just one more, and I’m—” But Snape had made his way over to their corner of the room once more, cutting off whatever dire fate Ron had been about to threaten.

Hermione was still surprised that Malfoy had come back to Hogwarts after the war. Actually, she was surprised by many of the Slytherins, – both in their lack of involvement, and their apparent willingness to just pick up where they left off when it was over. Only a small handful of the students from the serpent house actually sided with the Dark Lord during the fighting. Marcus Flint had been one, so had Adrian Pucey; but the majority of them, including Malfoy, Zabini, and the idiot twins, Crabbe and Goyle, had stayed neutral, despite the fact they had Death Eaters for parents. The really weird part was that they didn’t seem upset that Voldemort had lost, or even seem to acknowledge that anything unusual had taken place.

And they had all shown up to help rebuild the school last summer, joining in the student effort without comment or disparaging remark. It had been a sort of release, working the long and back-breaking hours needed to rebuild the grounds and outer walls of the castle. The exhaustion that came with it was a welcome antidote to the uneasy, nightmare filled sleep suffered by many of them. And slowly, the almost cliché adage had held true; keeping busy had allowed the mind to heal. Not completely, but enough.
Hermione had known that she was going to be okay, that the awful numbness that had inhibited her emotions since she had been forced to actually kill someone during battle nine months earlier was going to go away, when she was finally able to cry. Not for the faceless Death Eater she had killed, but for the comrades lost along the way. All alone, sitting in her make-shift cot in the newly restored Gryffindor tower, she had found herself desperately clutching a crumpled book she had found in the boys tower when she had gone up to check for damage. It’s torn binding and tattered pages did nothing to take away from the cheerful blue of its cover. Hermione had sat, rocking back and forth on her cot, sobbing so hard she thought she would shake apart at any moment, crying for a boy who had been her first friend on a train filled with strangers, whose quiet determination, despite what he had lost so early in life, had inspired his friends and kept her going with his clumsy thoughtfulness. A boy who would never lose his toad again. Sitting alone in the darkening tower, Hermione had mourned, clutching the rather foxed copy of Magical Mediterranean Water-Plants and Their Properties to her chest.

Hermione sometimes wondered exactly who Draco Malfoy mourned when he was all alone.

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“You’ve been quiet these last few days, Oliver.” Charlie was giving him a sly look over the rim of his soup cup as they sat around a blazing fire that night. They had been getting steadily higher up into the mountains these last few days, and camp tonight was made in the lee of some stunted cedars that had somehow managed to exist where no tree had the right to grow. The resulting gap made between the solid rock rising on their left, and the stand of four emaciated trees growing out of it at unnatural angles, provided some much-needed cover from the unobstructed wind. A thick layer of needles carpeted the rock floor, promising a much softer sleeping surface to stretch out on than the previous night. Anita and Basil had already turned in for the night and Oliver was actually looking forward to seeing if the needle covered ground was as soft as it looked– but Charlie’s voice called him back from such pleasant speculations. “It wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain brunette witch, now would it?”

How did he-? “The twins?” Oliver couldn’t help but look heavenward in silent reproach when Charlie nodded solemnly, his eyes dancing with amusement.

“I got an owl from George the day before we left; so tell me, was it young Miss Granger who was occupying your thoughts today?” Charlie’s wind-tanned face glowed copper in the firelight as he leered wickedly at his long-time friend, and one-time teammate. Oliver was practically squirming in mock-discomfort, his face screwed up exaggeratedly as though pained by the nosiness of Weasleys everywhere.

“You’re an awfully nosy bastard, you know tha’, don’t you?”

Charlie shrugged in acceptance of this character defect, a half-smile pulling at his lips. “Every man needs a hobby.” He watched Oliver get lost in thought again as he waited for him to begin talking. When he showed no signs of satisfying his curiosity though, Charlie cleared his throat noisily. “So-oo, care to share?”

Oliver busied himself with the fire for a few moments, trying to gather his thoughts. He had been thinking of little else for the past three days, but maybe a fresh perspective would help. Racking the embers out a bit to add another tough-as-iron log these stunted trees seemed to produce, Oliver settled back on the springy needles and stretched out. Leaning back on his elbows, he looked into the clear sky above them as he tried to find a place to start.

“I dunno, Charlie– I guess it’s just finally starting to sink in. Of all the people I would have imagined my future to be spent with, Hermione Granger wasn’t one of them.”
“She’s definitely nothing like anyone I would have pictured you with.”

Oliver bristled slightly at this observation, “Why? Because she’s smart?”

“No, because she’s not a sheep, you bloody highlander!” Charlie gave him a rough shove.

“Actually, I was referring to Hermione’s disinterest in the noble game of Marsh-Landers everywhere— I mean, you’re going to have to learn whole new topics of conversation that don’t include Quidditch— unless you were planning on skipping the conversation, and going straight to the bedroom?” Charlie leered at him openly.

Oliver rolled his eyes, “I’m not even going to respond to that, you tosser.”

Charlie shrugged it off as irrelevant, before asking, “How did Hermione take the news?”

Oliver grimaced at the memory before launching himself into an explanation of his current predicament with the brown-haired witch.

“Goyle? You’ve got to be joking.” Charlie was eyeing him suspiciously. Oliver gave a slight shake of his head in negation. “If I were you, I would talk to Hermione at your first opportunity. Find out exactly what the rules are to this ‘contest’. Greg Goyle is one thing — I don’t think he’s even sure what end of the wand to hold and which end to stick up his nose, and his Da is no better, but usually senior family is allowed to stand in for a case like this.”

“So? I thought we just decided the Goyles don’t have enough menace to worry a Puffskein.”

“Oliver, are the Weasleys and the Woods related?” Charlie spoke as if walking a child through his lessons.

“Well, yeah, probably, somewhere along the line. Most Purebloods are. Wh—” Oliver’s eyes widened with sudden understanding, “That could have been a nasty surprise.”

Charlie raised his eyebrows, as if surprised he had to spell it out. “So, if I were you, I’d want to check to see if the rules limit how closely related you have to be to stand-in, or you could find yourself facing Malfoy, or someone like that. Hermione probably knows.”

Oliver was silent for a long time after that, just staring at the hypnotic flames of their campfire with unseeing eyes. After watching him in silence while he finished his mug of coffee, and filled it up one last time for the night, Charlie was prepared to leave him to his inner musings, when Oliver suddenly seemed to come back to himself. Transferring his gaze from the fire to his hands, which were clasped loosely around his drawn knees, he seemed to be struggling to find the right words. Charlie sipped his coffee, waiting for him to find his way.

“We have nothing in common Charlie. I mean, how is this ever going to work? She’s been forced into this every step of the way—”

“That’s not entirely true — she does have the choice of whether or not to pass up your Contract in favor of the Goyle Contract——” Charlie’s voice was sly.

“Charlie, you know damn well tha’ Gregory Goyle is no kind of choice at all— I’m sure she would rather marry a two headed troll then tha’ wanker. I’d just like to know for sure that she views me as being slightly better than the deformed troll. I mean, she thought I was bein’ a trifle thick when I told her I wanted to lobby the Ministry into giving priority to restarting the Quidditch leagues— said I could surely find better uses for my time than ‘pandering to a boy’s hormone-driven hobby sport’! I jus’ don’t think we understand each other at all… and you don’t want to know the things she said when I pointed out that there were perhaps better uses for her time than fighting for the rights of
creatures who were happy as they were. I definitely don’t think she would like for her mother to hear that kind of language come out of her mouth. I have this horrible vision of our future together, and it would seem to involve separate bedrooms– and probably earplugs.”

“Hermione will come around– but you’re going to have to make an effort. Try and make her feel like this is something you chose, not something you were forced into too. After all, Hermione is still a girl.”

“An’ just how do you suggest I go about that?” I know she’s a girl, you plonker.

“I know this is a shot in the dark, but have you tried actually asking her? Making her feel like she has a say in the matter?”

Maybe Ron was’na the only one with these sorts of issues, Oliver reflected, sheepishly. “But she doesn’t really have much of a say in the matter, does she?”

“No, but sometimes illusion is worth more than substance – That was your first lesson on dealing with women, and you can slip payment under my pillow tonight.”

“…”

They spent four more days in the mountains, tracking the beast. Charlie had told him that it was odd for one of them to get loose from the reservations like this. Dragons were born opportunists of the most basic kind; they recognized the fact that things were much easier on the reserve than out on their own slumming it. On the reserve, they had food in plenty, females to rut with in relatively close proximity (well, close for a dragon. They still weren’t the world’s most sociable creatures), and the occasional handler to bite when feeling peevish. Sure, sometimes one would escape its handlers, usually as the result of territorial fights among the males, but they would never go too far, more wandering about aimlessly, rampaging small villages rather than attempt an all-out run for freedom.

This one, however, had escaped somewhere down near Arendale, and was now something like 600 kilometers north of there, approaching the invisible cartographers’ boundary for the Artic Circle. As a child, Oliver had always imagined that there really was this dashed line outlining different territories, just floating out in space– just like on the maps he had lining the walls of his room (along with flight paths, and training locations for the various Quidditch teams he followed, which seemed to be all of them, for one reason or another). He had been rather disappointed when his older sister, Adrian Margaret, had told him otherwise when he had eagerly asked her about it after she had gone on her first long-distance flight when he had been seven.

What they would have done if it had been a male, and not tied to the ground by flightless youngsters, Oliver had no idea, though he was sure Charlie would have cheerfully accepted the challenge for his beloved dragons. Man was daft, really. It was mid-afternoon on the fourth day when they finally managed to corner her in a dead-ended ravine thingie (he never really bothered to pay attention to the proper naming of landscape – he figured it would still be a dead-ended ravine thingie, whether he knew to call it a blind canyon or not.) Charlie set scent bombs along the far ridge, as Oliver worked to seal off the near side and the opening through which she’d entered. They finished just as the early dusk of this northern place began to set. And still not even yet time for tea, Oliver thought ruefully, when he glanced at this northern place began to set.

The canyon she had chosen was somewhat protected by the rising mountain, allowing the stunted trees that they had seen thus far to thrive and flourish into the tall and healthy plants he was used to seeing. The grey light that was all that was left of their daylight for today was misleading, causing his surroundings to look like a strange alien landscape. Shadows appeared that distorted the shapes
of the trees, making them loom unpleasantly, and except for the sound of the wind whipping through the rocks and branches, everything was quiet and still

Wait a moment, Oliver frowned. As he listened, sounds began to resolve themselves out of the wind, like trying to tune a stubborn radio to bring music out of the white noise of the background static, he listened to the wind again, but that this time he heard something else entirely.

There it was again. A, a … what was that noise? It didn’t sound particularly threatening, just, well … odd. He hesitated for a moment, then drew his wand (thirteen and three quarter inches, Alder wood, firm, with a Unicorn tail hair core), before quietly picking his way further into the brush. Charlie should be finishing up his side of the crevasse by now, though he’d probably stopped to ogle the beast below, so he should be the only one on this side of the canyon, and he’d left Anita and Basil back at camp, to light their way back in once darkness finished falling. Probably a fox, or something, enjoying a moupe dinner, and I can go back feeling a wee bit silly for bein’ so jumpy. Still, he had a few moments before Charlie returned, and he felt better being sure he wasn’t going to be sharing his campsite tonight with uninvited guests. It was getting easier to pick the sound out of the wind, now that he knew it was there. It sounded a bit like scree sliding down the rock face— a dry scrapping, slithering noise, but softer, and interspersed with sharper sounds of … whuffing? Pushing his way through a last few sharp conifer branches, Oliver stopped to allow his eyes to adjust to the sudden brightness of being out from under the trees. He could hardly believe the scene that met his eyes.

He was on the edge of the tree line here, the broken ground forming a broad natural rain-wash before rising again in a scree slope that was quickly lost in the darkness. The moonlight picked out random pieces of quartz and mica, making the ground appear to be littered with a king’s ransom in diamonds, all twinkling and glowing like fireflies. And there, moving up the rain-wash was the source of his odd noises. Smallish black-furred bodies were scrabbling over the loose rock, their sharp talons scraping the stony ground as they struggled to find traction. Occasionally one would snuffle and whuff in apparent excitement.

At first glance, Oliver thought he saw about ten separate creatures, though it was hard to tell, when they were all huddled close together like this. They appeared to be struggling to drag something slowly and painstakingly with them. I’ve ne’er seen Nifflers do tha’ before, he thought as he just stood and stared at the sight before him in stunned amazement. He was reluctant to use his wand to chase them off— the nursing Horntail was still too close for comfort, and he really didn’t’ want to rile her up and encourage her to test the boundaries they had set for her— but he was curious as to what they were dragging. Though the beasts were known to be sociable, and occasionally worked together with some rudimentary co-operation, whatever they had found must be pretty big to attract a group like this apparently had.

Nifflers weren’t generally dangerous, but with ten of them out there to defend their prize, Oliver wasn’t ready to just wander over for a look. Casting around, his eyes lit upon some decent sized chunks of the broken ground that littered the rain-wash close at hand. Selecting a small pile of ammunition for his purpose, Oliver examined the scree slope, aiming for a point that wouldn’t send a bunch of shale down on the beasts’ heads if he were successful. The impact of his rock on the opposite slope was loud in the relative stillness of the gully. Ten heads immediately dropped whatever they had a hold of, and looked around, long snouts scenting the air; pointed ears swiveled back towards the source of the noise. The next one landed much more satisfactorily, knocking a small landslide of the scree loose about six feet ahead of the lead animal. That did it; they broke and ran at the threat. He waited a moment for them to get clear before he moved to examine their catch.

“Oh, fuck.”
“Oh, fuck.”

This is really not good. The moon was well and truly up by now, and if he didn't hurry back Charlie was going to come looking for him – and as much as Oliver liked and trusted him, this was something he wanted to keep quiet until he had had a chance to think. Besides, he definitely didn’t want Basil or Anita involved here.

Well, looks like Michael wasn’t overreacting after all, does it Perce? Oliver thought ruefully Being involved in most of Percy’s more clandestine operations, he was perfectly aware that this needed to have a rather large lid nailed down on it, at least until they had a chance to prove without a doubt, that Voldemort had absolutely nothing to do with it. People were panicky enough as it was, without adding to their worries. Secrecy was still something that sat uneasily on Oliver’s shoulders, even after serving under Percy in conjunction with the Order for most of the war.

There, lying on the ground, sprawled where the scattering Nifflers had left it, was a body; a very dead body. Oliver was very sure of this, because live ones usually had more blood on the inside.

Grimacing in distaste, he bent to examine it closely. What the hell were the Nifflers doing with it? The skin looked pale and grey in the moonlight, with a moist, waxen quality to it that made Oliver want to wretch. Thankfully for Oliver’s nerves, the body didn’t appear to be too far gone; (he could be someone’s father) it showed few signs of decay, bloating or damage from being left out in the elements. The man appeared to be on this side of forty, with dark hair faintly frosted with grey above his ears, and a long jawed face with only a few lines to mark it. The skin looked leathery, like it belonged to someone who spent a lot of their life outdoors in harsh weather, though Oliver was’t sure if this was a result of how the body spent its time before it came to lie here; or just the effects of the elements afterward.

The chill moonlight made the whole scene that much more macabre, bleaching the colours, and causing the blood that had congealed along the man’s visible wounds to glitter and sparkle obscenely. The strange light made it look more like quicksilver then life-giving fluid. Wait jus’ a minute… Oliver frowned in disgust, but reached over to run his finger over the wound that spread with spidery veins just under the skin all along the right temple, and across his cheek. Pulling the digit back, he rubbed the thick fluid between finger and thumb. He was by no means an expert on this sort of stuff, but he had seen a fair few bodies during the fighting last year, and blood was normally, well, sticky. It definitely shouldn’t feel like cold phlegm in one’s hand. (Is someone still waiting for him to come home?) And now that he examined it, it was sort of … glistening. Like metal.

He released the clasps on the front of the heavy burgundy robes, and tried to ignore the gnaw marks made by the Nifflers’ sharp teeth as they had dragged the heavy, shiny, weight towards their hoard. (Did he volunteer on Sundays to help the old lady down the street with her shopping?) Somehow Oliver just couldn’t seem to keep the inappropriate thoughts from intruding – preventing
him from focusing closely on the reality in front of him. *(Will his wife be waiting all alone, staring out the window each night, wondering what had happened?)* He had always really liked Nifflers; they reminded him of badgers a bit, and always looked at you with a sweetly intelligent expression that made them endearing. The Scottish man was uncertain if he could ever look at them the same way after tonight.

Its chest – thinking of it as a problem to be solved instead of a once living, laughing human being made it much easier – had three circular marks about eight inches in diameter right above the sternum. The puckered flesh *(I wonder if he played Quidditch?)* was a mess; a mass of angry raw meat with blackened edges that glistened and shone with massive networks of silvery veins, like an infection working its way towards the heart. *Well, now I know what brought the Nifflers.* The arms, he found were a mass of silver and scarlet, with ridges of blackened, open tissue interspersed along the tender flesh of the underside of the forearms. Scraping a small amount of the … blood into a couple of vials was an extremely unpleasant task, but Oliver was grateful Percy insisted all teams go out with a full field kit, including sample vials, no matter the mission.

Tired and edgy, he risked a small bit of transfiguration at this point. He wanted to get out before Charlie came looking for him. Getting unsteadily to his feet, he began examining the slope on the far side of the gully. It didn’t take him long to find a crease between two outcroppings of rock that he thought he could seal. It even had a couple of gorse bushes nearby that he was able to weave roughly together into a crude screen. Grabbing the cadaver under the arms, he dragged it as quickly as he could to his chosen sight. After hauling him upright and forcing him into the cramped space he had found and settling his screen in front, Oliver muttered a quick prayer to Merlin, or anyone else who may be listening, that the dragon wouldn’t feel this little spell of his as he began to transfigure the framework into something solid. Ceramic was a lot easier then stone, or glass, and at least it was easy to miss against the rest of the rocks from a distance. Once he had sealed his discovery in, he put a small picture of three spheres rising from straight rods of unequal lengths at about eye level on the new wall. Satisfied that it was now safe from further animal damage and would be there for the Retrieval Unit Percy would send, he scrambled to get back to camp, and away from the nightmarish scene as quickly as the darkness allowed.

"We’re in for some nasty weather. Lucky for us, really," Charlie observed as he touched down by the fire Basil had set to guide him in the rapidly falling darkness. It appeared Charlie had stopped to ogle her after all, so he hadn’t noticed Oliver’s absence. Thankfully the man was obsessed, and could be counted on to amuse himself. Anita was still out, setting markers on the lee side of their camp for the retrieval unit tomorrow.

"Lucky? From where I’m sitting, we still have to babysit the beastie until the removal unit arrives, and if we’re heading in that weather, I imagine tha’ they’ll find it more convenient to wait somewhere dry ’till it passes, so I think we’ll be the lads gettin’ wet tonight.” Oliver’s response was distracted at best, as his mind still picked at the mystery laying about 400 yards up the tree line.

The shorter man gave him an amused look for his trouble. “It’s the bad weather that drove her to try and find shelter in this crevasse to begin with. Lucky for us, yes? Besides, we should be past the season for snow by now, even here. I can stand a little rain, I suppose.”

“Yeah, right up until it’s your turn to cook in the morning, and then I’ll hear the grumbling the whole way back to London.” Oliver pushed his hair out of his eyes as he bent to add more fuel to their scant fire. They would still avoid magic as much as possible for tonight – no need to stir her up any more than necessary. If Charlie was right about her seeking shelter, then with any luck, she
was already curled up in some cave down there, and hadn’t even realized her predicament yet; or, hopefully, paid any attention to his little spell earlier. With a great effort, Oliver dragged his thoughts back from his hidden discovery, to focus on his plans for Hermione. After nearly a week of pondering Charlie’s advice, he finally knew what to do.

“..”

_The flowers really hadn’t been necessary_, Hermione thought bewildered. The display in the dorm room she shared with the other seventh year girls was definitely considerate. She only wished that he hadn’t chosen navy blue and gold; somehow, she found, it took away from the excitement of it to realize that he had sent you flowers in his team colours. Oh well, at least he didn’t favour the Chudley Cannons. After nine years with Ron, the bookish girl found she could no longer bear the colour orange.

It felt like time was slipping through her fingers. N.E.W.T.s were fast approaching, and Hermione spent every evening and weekend ensconced in the library until Madame Pince finally kicked her out every night (“Really Miss Granger, I appreciate enthusiasm, but you're going to wear out the words if you keep _reading_ them like that!”) The only breaks to this routine were the few occasions that there was a Gryffindor Quidditch game; she had to cheer her three friends on, after all, but she still brought her books with her to study during the boring bits (the very thought that she found that there _were_ boring bits caused Ron to begin muttering mulishly). The main advantage of her study schedule (which she kept track of via colour-coded notes; she really didn’t see why Harry and Ron wouldn’t let her do the same for them), was that she was far too tired and preoccupied to worry too much about her Contract situation. Every time thoughts of her predicament came to haunt her, she would make sure to bury herself in her Arithmancy or Charms notes until she could no longer remember the questions. The truth was, she was absolutely terrified, but now she found that her main worry was what would happen if Oliver lost the challenge.

Having his Contract to look forward to in place of Goyle’s reassured her far more than she wanted to admit. It was now more than two weeks into her grace period. Two weeks, and other than one rather strange letter, she hadn’t heard from ‘His Royal Quidditchness’ at all, she mused irritably. Until this morning, that was, when she had woken up in a miniature jungle of dark blue and gold blooms that sent her easily swayed roommates into a rather foolish swoon of delight. Huffing slightly at the silliness of it all, Hermione had pushed her way clear to clean up in the Prefects bathroom on the fifth floor just down the hall from the statue of Boris the Bewildered. The bathtub in there was the best in the whole school, and she fancied a nice long soak to try and stop the rather annoying fluttering in her stomach. Must be something she ate last night.

Feeling much more like herself once she joined her friends at the Gryffindor table for breakfast an hour later, Hermione had already put things like fragrant masses of roses and violets out of her mind in favour of trying to remember the list of implements involved in blood magic, an obscure, and somewhat arcane branch of potionmaking first practiced in ancient Arabia. Professor Snape had mentioned it as a side note in classes last week, mentioning how terribly precise it was, and what kind of horrible things could go wrong if the caster made the slightest error. The sallow faced professor had been as unpleasant as usual about it. “Which rules out the possibility of any of you brainless dunderheads performing it, but you must be aware of the theory at least, as it is slightly possible that at least some of you will be questioned on it by your N.E.W.T. examiner, so I think the more intelligent of you will choose to study it.”

“Oi! Hermione, that ruddy bird’s going to go spare in a moment if you don’t take your message!” Ron’s mouth was mercifully breakfast-free when he imparted this bit of advice, as Hermione was sitting across from him today, and didn’t fancy a porridge shower. Looking up, she found a lovely tan and white barn owl standing in the middle of her copy of the Daily Prophet that she hadn’t
quite gotten to yet (though it appeared Harry and Ron had, in her distraction. They were looking up
the team standings in other parts of the world, as they couldn’t very well follow their beloved
Cannons at the moment. Apparently a team called the Moose Jawed Asteroids or something like
that, was a heavy favourite for the World Cup next year, and occasioned some very fiery
discussions in the common room. The bird’s chosen perch explained Ron’s indignant exclamation,
anyways). Taking the note curiously, she offered the beautiful bird her crusts as she unrolled the
note. In the middle of the roll, was another navy rose. *Where is he getting roses that colour?* she
thought distractedly as she cursed the return of the stomach troubles that had plagued her earlier.
Maybe she was allergic to flowers. That was a likely explanation. She most definitely was *not*
being foolish about a boy.

There was also a blindfold.

She put that away hurriedly, before Ron could see, and cause a scene. He took every possible
opportunity to rag on Oliver since he and Harry had found out about the whole thing. (She still
hadn’t forgiven Harry for snooping in her personal correspondence, but had let it go in favour of
the bigger things she had to worry about.) They had gone positively spare when Hermione had
reluctantly told them that his was actually the second Contract that she had received, and that the
first one was from Gregory Goyle. They had been absolutely furious with her, and hadn’t spoken to
her for a whole day, before relenting to hear her reasoning. (“Because, Ronald - I knew that you
would feel obligated to try and help. It’s not fair that you should have to file a Contract for me. It’s
your whole life you would be giving up, and I couldn’t let you do that for me. You’ll be able to fall
in love, and be with someone you really want to be with, and as it stands, it won’t be so bad for me.
Oliver’s a nutter, but he’s not nearly as horrible as Goyle!”)

**Dear Hermione,**

**Surprise!**

You do like flowers, don’t you? I hope they’re okay - I asked Harry if he knew, but he said
you never mentioned that kind of stuff, probably because you have two guys for best friends.

I would like a chance to speak with you, if you’re agreeable, tonight. Meet me outside the
Gryffindor common room before dinner, say about 5:30ish?

Oh, I got back from Norway just three days ago, and guess what was waiting for me?

There was a parchment waiting on my stoop. Unfortunately, it was being carried
by the most obnoxious bird I’ve ever dealt with. Bugger nipped me three times as I tried to
get him loose. It’s not like it was my fault that he had to wait for nearly a week to
deliver his letter, now is it?

The Goyle family has chosen a Wizards Duel (big surprise there), to take place
at Hogwarts (I insisted on that bit – there’s now way in hel- that won’t erase, will it? Well,
there’s absolutely no chance I’m going to let them pick some dodgy place surrounded by their
kind of people) ten days from today. At least this way I’ll have Dumbledore there to
ensure I’ve got an even break – Harry has agreed to try and help me brush-up on my dueling technique. There’s all sorts of fiddly rules involved, and I don’t know the half of them. I’m not too sure Harry does either, but at least he can help me practice a bit.

I hope to see you tonight, at 5:30pm by the Fat Lady.

Oh, and bring the blindfold.

Yours in Circumstance,

Oliver Wood

Now, what in the world had he been doing in Norway that took almost ten days? Hermione’s studying of Blood Magic was distracted at best throughout the remainder of her morning meal.

It was with great trepidation that Hermione found herself being led by Oliver through the school halls, blindfolded, that evening. Lessons had been an unusual torture for her that day; alternately whizzing by as if sped by the hands of a time-turner, or dragging on, as if Professor Binns had suddenly possessed all of her teachers. He had met her outside the portrait hole at precisely 5:30, dressed in a nice set of navy robes that looked very sharp against his black turtleneck. Hermione was suddenly glad that she had left her school robes on, as she really didn’t have any clue as to what to expect, and this way, didn’t have to worry about it. He had asked her to wear the blindfold, and had been gently leading her by the elbow lower, and lower into the castle, until he lead her through a set of doors that must have led outside, as she could suddenly feel the damp air on her upturned face.

It is very nervous business being led around like that, especially if you don’t know the person doing the leading all that well. The trip seemed to take an age to Hermione, though afterwards, she knew it had been under ten minuets. Oliver kept up a litany of gentle encouragements the whole way that she found incredibly thoughtful, as it did provide a distraction from the feeling that you were going to step in a pothole or something equally distasteful at any second, and fall. He absolutely refused to answer any of her questions as to where he was leading her, saying only that it was ‘somewhere she should recognize’. Well that didn’t answer much. After seven years at the school spent in the company of Harry, Ron and the Marauder’s Map, Hermione didn’t think there was much she wouldn’t recognize here any more.

Oh, that last door had taken them back inside. The wind stopped, and the sound quality was different, the way it gets when there are walls fairly close by. Hermione was amazed at all of the things she could pick out, now that she could no longer see. Maybe there was something to that theory after all, the one about other senses being stronger?

She could feel Oliver’s calloused hands brushing her hair back as he prepared to remove her blindfold. The soft touch felt nice against the sensitive skin behind her ear, and caused a small shiver that was only partially due to the chill night air.

As the blindfold was removed, Hermione blinked a few times at the sudden flash of light. Oliver moved to place his hand in front of her eyes, shielding them, but still allowing some of the light to penetrate.

“You ready now?” Hermione didn’t think she had ever heard his boisterous voice like this. Soft and somehow shy. She nodded. To say that she was stunned by the sight that finally met her eyes
would probably be an understatement.

It was the boys’ loo.

Well, more correctly, the Gryffindor boys change room. But still, a bathroom, when you got right down to it – just a bathroom with additional benches and lockers. And currently, a table set for two, surrounded by floating candles.

Charming.

Why in the world would he bring her here? As for something she’d recognize … really, here? The only time she had ever been in here had been —

Oh.

Oliver had obviously put a lot of thought into this. He had tried to come up with something personal for the two of them. This just happened to be the one and only place that they had ever spent any sort of meaningful time together. It was sweet, if you looked at it the right way. She thought she understood. The last (and only) time she had been here was to tell him off for his lack of sensitivity; it had been right after the disastrous Gryffindor–Hufflepuff game in her third year. Harry had scared the life out of her as he fell off his broom while he was flying fifty feet up in the air, landing with a sickening thud that she felt more than heard from her seat in the Gryffindor stands. Harry had been horrified; it was the first game he had ever lost, and he had felt miserable with guilt as he lay in the hospital wing, recovering.

When she overheard Fred say that ‘Wood was still in the showers, trying to drown himself,’ she couldn’t believe someone could be so … infuriating as to take a game so seriously. When she had returned to the common room sometime later, and hadn’t seen Oliver she had asked Fred about him, only to be informed that they thought he was still attempting to sprout gills. For some reason, the revelation that he was out there, making his team feel even worse with his attempt to keep his disappointment from them, when she had had the scare of her life had infuriated her – before she quite knew what it was that she was doing, she had marched the length of the castle grounds, and begun banging on the change room doors, demanding, shrilly, that he let her in. When that had failed to achieve the desired results, she had pulled out her wand, made short work of the locking spells (and left a smoking hole where the knob had been), and proceeded to ball him out while the poor man had been standing there in only a towel. (A fact she had not recognized in her agitation.) He had been blushing horribly, caught trying to hold up his towel while attempting to defend himself against a bushy haired fourteen year old girl he only really knew as the ‘bookworm friend’ of his prized seeker.

“You can’t plan for everything, Wood. And staying in here to drown your disappointment so you don’t make any of your team feel like you blame them for the loss, is only making things worse for them. They go out there and try so hard for you, you stupid prat. Somehow, with your terrible lack of sensitivity, and horribly skewed sense of the appropriate, you’ve made them all see things your way; and if you don’t get to the Hospital Wing this instant to tell Harry that it’s not his fault, I will personally research a suitable hex to give you boils on your arse every time you even think of setting it down on a broom. Now march, Captain!”

The encounter still brought a smile to her face, even now. She felt Oliver relax next to her at the gesture. He obviously wasn’t sure how she’d take his surprise.

He glanced at her slyly, from the corner of his eyes. “You know - tha’ towel seemed like very little protection that day.”
A much more adult Hermione couldn’t resist the urge to smirk at him.

Dinner was nice. Not exactly comfortable, but nice. When Hermione expressed some concern at having someone walk in on them, Oliver smiled his slightly crooked smile at her, and told her that he had enlisted Harry to ensure that none of the team bothered them. Much to her surprise, Hermione found that they managed to have a conversation throughout the meal, without Quidditch being mentioned once. She would have thought the strain of it might kill Oliver, but she found he had surprising depth, and was able to converse on a variety of subjects – but anytime they got close to discussing anything really connected to current Wizarding affairs, he seemed to change the subject, or suddenly revert to inane small talk, which Hermione found horribly frustrating. She was now convinced that he was deliberately playing ‘dumb jock’, and she couldn’t for the life of her figure out why. Maybe he was merely trying to avoid anything that might result in another explosive disagreement. Despite everything, she found it difficult to enjoy the evening.

Her resentment at her situation kept bubbling up, pushing at her control like steam in a kettle. The whole evening just felt like a mockery to her; it wasn’t like either of them had a choice in this. This wasn’t a first awkward date, or a romantic lover’s meeting, but some kind of consolation prize, mocking her in her trapped predicament. She defiantly refused to acknowledge the rather traitorous thought that she might possibly be so upset because he was attractive, and had actually been rather quick-witted and smart, and the only reason he was here, was because he had to be.

Once the meal had wound down, Hermione made sure to thank Oliver for the thoughtful surprise; he really had tried hard, for her sake. Getting up to return to Gryffindor Tower before she missed curfew, she was restrained by a gentle hand on her wrist. She looked over, to see Oliver gazing at her intently, as if trying to figure out what position she would do better at.

“Hermione,” he began. The tone in his voice sent another shiver down her spine. Maybe she was coming down with a stomach flu after all. He looked at her, as if for inspiration on how to continue. She cocked her head at him, as if to say ‘Well?’

He let out a deep breath, and seemed to collect himself. “I know this has got to be incredibly hard for you. At least I had some say in who I Contracted. You’re a wonderful girl, with strong opinions, and the brains to defend them. An’ honestly, I’m not surprised at all that you were Contracted so quickly.” He paused for a moment, staring intently at her; in a way that made her wonder if she had food on her nose. She tried to covertly brush it with her hand, disguising the motion as a yawn. Where was he going with this?

Releasing her wrist, Oliver reached across the small table to take her hands very gently in his. He seemed to be concentrating intently on using just the right words to express what he was thinking. “I’d like the chance to become friends, Hermione. We have a whole lifetime ahead of us to get to know one another, and I swear I will provide for you, and protect you as you deserve, but I’d like to be able to be your friend. I wish I could say you had some choice in this whole matter, but I understand that there isn’t any real option here for you – I don’t think you could ever accept a life with someone like Goyle. I wanted you to have this – as a symbol of my commitment to make you as happy as I can – as happy as you deserve.” Sometime during his speech, Oliver had reached inside his robes, and had withdrawn something which he now lay in Hermione’s hand, which he still held loosely in his. Releasing her, so that she could examine his gift, Oliver watched her face intently for her reaction.

In her hand, Hermione held a flat silver broach, about three inches long. It was an irregular shape, and the edges of the antique metal were worn smooth with age, and handling. Someone loved this, once, she realized. Running one finger over design, she noticed that it featured two intertwined hearts that seemed to grow all but organically out of the surrounding pattern, almost as if the artist
had not meant to put them there at all.

“It’s called a Luckenbooth. It’s… well, it’s usually given as a betrothal gift by a groom to his bride. This was my Grannie’s, once. I wanted you to have it. Will you wear it for me?”

With a shaking hand, Hermione laid the beautiful piece on the small table in front of her. This couldn’t be happening – it just couldn’t. “You want me to wear a visible symbol of your claim on me? Just a tad barbaric, don’t you think?” She almost didn’t recognize the voice speaking now – it was cold, and brittle. She tried not to notice how Oliver’s face fell. She was not going along with this foolishness, really, what did he expect? “It’s bad enough I don’t have any say in this contract business, but you now want to brand me too, like I’m some sort of property?” Malfoy’s words of a few days earlier came back to haunt her, and she could feel the tears behind her eyes burning to escape - she suppressed them ruthlessly as she got up to leave. It would have been nice if this had been real – but Oliver had no right to lay a claim on her, beyond what the law gave him already.

Oliver really didn’t know what to say to this. Was that honestly what she thought of him? He had worked so hard, trying to come up with something meaningful, instead of some ‘canned’ romantic moment used in cheesy love stories by men intent on getting into some bird’s knickers. He’d been trying to create the illusion of choice for her, to try and make her feel less like a commodity to be traded, or fought over. Apparently, he’d failed miserably. Mentally taking a deep breath, he tried to push aside his hurt feelings, and rising anger at her lack of appreciation. Really, Hermione had had a lot to deal with in the last few weeks; if she wanted to keep things strictly impersonal, then so be it.

A small part of him couldn’t help but wish she felt otherwise, though.

“Hermione,” Oliver’s voice didn’t sound like he was angry at her, at least. She stopped, but didn’t turn around. She wasn’t sure she wanted to see his face at the moment. Guilt was trying to push its way to the forefront of her feelings, and she was struggling with the feeling that maybe she had over-reacted. “Hermione, keep the broach. I want you to have it.” She could feel him standing right behind her now. Two hands came down on her shoulders, and gave them a reassuring squeeze, before gently taking her hand, and placing the silver charm into her palm. “You never know, you may feel that you want to wear it yet.”

He watched her go, and for some reason he found himself feeling inappropriately hopeful. At least she didn’t chuck it at me.

- - -
“Duck!”

The warning was, unfortunately for the other occupant of the room, issued slightly too late to be helpful.

“Shite, I’m sorry, mate – I’m sure that they won’t be permanent. Madam Pomfrey should be able to remove them in a snap, and… well, I’m sure she’ll at least be able to reduce the swelling.”

The two men were currently holed up in a largely inaccessible room of the castle, located on the seventh floor, just opposite a rather fraying tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy. Oliver could tell it was Barnabus, as only he, out of the many notable wizards they had been forced to learn about in Professor Binns’ class, would be using a bent wand. The fact that the portrait was attempting to teach a bunch of trolls to dance was also a bit of a clue, really. They had been to this room so often in the last few days that at least one of them thought that he could walk there in his sleep. Currently, Oliver was trying to remember why in Merlin’s name he was going through with this.

“I think there was a definite improvement that time, Oliver – well, before, I …ah….” Gesturing helplessly at his prone companion, who now bore the unmistakable marks of someone who had been at the wrong end of a wand (either that, or victim of a random clown assault, wielding makeup and a lot of vegetables), Harry felt that maybe he should just quit now, while he might still be ahead.

To say that things had been going badly today would be a gross understatement. Oliver had hoped, as the defeater of Supreme Evil, Harry would find it a snap to help him prepare for this blasted duel. Hell, with the help of one of the best Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers the school had ever seen (a Professor Lupin, whom Oliver had had his seventh year, and thought the man was brilliant), and the (reluctant) help of The-Boy-Who-Lived-to-Make-Voldemort-Cry-Like-a-Baby’s best friend and partner in crime, Oliver thought he should have this one in the bag, so to speak.

Apparently, the Wizarding World’s green-eyed hero could bring down the most evil man to ever live, but couldn’t manage the mucky rules for a formal duel, and kept setting his wand off at ‘inappropriate’ moments. Like when they were bowing to each other before beginning, supposedly to show that they were all friends here, no harm no foul, though Oliver knew for a fact that he would never be friendly with Goyle, and there would most certainly be fouls if the Slytherin could at all manage it. Or yesterday, when they had stopped to assess whether a point scored on Harry’s nose was valid (and whether or not it was worth more than one struck on his ear). Then there was Tuesday evening, when they had… well, Oliver was trying hard not to remember that one.

The skills necessary for defeating Dark Lords often involved ‘curse first, bow never’, and both Harry and Ron seemed to find it a bit difficult to adjust to the very chivalrous, often just mystifying rules required in such a duel as Oliver would be facing in a few days time. (Oliver wasn’t entirely sure that in Ron’s case, everything was accidental, though.)

Lupin had succinctly summed up Oliver’s feelings on the matter quite early on, when he had declared duelling to be ‘...one of the most useless skills to ever grace the upper classes. Any enemy on the battlefield stupid enough to wait for you to find your wand again after dropping it, deserves
to be skewered with the sword you’ve got up your sleeve. The whole point in a fight like that is to make bloody well sure the other guy doesn’t get up again, not to show off how good your manners are.’

Secretly, Oliver had to agree. Unfortunately, a strategic knee to the bollocks would most definitely be frowned upon, so Oliver had to resign himself to trying to master the ridiculous sport as best he could. When it was all over, Oliver thought sourly, he might just see if he could find Goyle in a dark hallway to give him that knee - just for putting him through all this.

“Come on, lads, we still have a lot of ground to cover if Mister Wood is to give a credible showing.” Lupin’s tone was strained, and frustrated. Oliver had mastered a large variety of curses, hexes, jinxes and a few useful charms and counter-jinxes very quickly; after all, he had had Lupin, Harry and Ron drill him on them night and day for three solid days, using many of the same approaches Harry had used with the DA in his fifth year. He had felt very optimistic at the beginning, with Oliver showing so much aptitude, but once they had gotten down to the actual rules and formulas of duelling, his progress had stilled to the point Remus thought he had gone beyond ‘stalled’ and on to ‘backwards’. It certainly didn’t help him any that it was a real case of the blind leading the blind, as none of the three men attempting to help Oliver learn had ever really learned how to duel properly themselves, and Lupin’s passing familiarity with the art was the sum total of the expertise present in the room. Harry and Ron were working from a book they had dug out from the library, though the tired man was trying very hard to ignore how badly things were going, that they actually needed to try to learn from ‘Duelling for Squibs – How to Bluff Your Way Into Acceptance’. How was he going to be able to explain things to Hermione when her would-be fiancée got turned into a large purple smear on the flagstones, and she was facing the prospect once again of being Mrs. Goyle, he didn’t even want to think about. Of course, he had tried to convince Oliver to seek more qualified help, but when he explained that the only person at the castle who had the necessary expertise was, in fact, Professor Snape, he realised it was a futile suggestion.

Running his long fingers through his greying hair for the umpteenth time that night, Remus blew out a deep breath to try and recapture his patience. Duelling really is the stupidest sport to ever be invented, he thought sourly. It was flashy, and exciting to watch, but magical skill often played very little role in choosing a winner – it seemed more designed to compensate for the stupid and inept, to allow them equal footing with their peers. Unless one had a good grip on the rules to back you up, all the skill in the world wouldn’t help you. For some reason, Sirius had loved it.

“Okay, Oliver, have you got yourself sorted out? Yes? Good. Now, maybe we’ll use Mister Weasley this time.” Remus watched as Ron took Harry’s place opposite Oliver. Harry hastened to sit well out of the way, on one of the high-backed stools next to his professor. “Wands out, both of you – good, now bow, holding the wand in the correct hand, Ron – make sure you’re holding it at a precise angle, you can lose points for bad form, you know.” By this point, after hours of brutal practice, both boys were weaving slightly on their feet, showing none of the athletic gracefulness with which they had started the evening. Their thin teacher winced slightly when Oliver’s weaving became slightly more precarious, before he managed to regain his balance. “Now, stand… and turn sharply to the left – to the left! Your other left, Ron. And ten measured paces to take up your duelling positions. Good. Turn right this time, to face each other…that’s your left, Ron…yes, and you might want to turn fairly sharpish at this point, because you are both now ready to begin. Wands up, and start!”

They both managed to get off some fabulous attacks before becoming hopelessly entangled in the rules once again – though it was possible, Remus reflected, that Ron had hit Oliver with that Densaugeo spell completely by accident, not realizing that it was bad form to strike after the round was up. Possible, but not very likely.
His train of thought was derailed abruptly when he noticed the presence of Professor Snape.

“By all means, don’t stop them on my account, Lupin. You seem to have such a … talent for teaching them. They’ll be scraping Wood off the floor with a spoon by the time you’re through.”

Remus glared at Severus, though mostly for vocalizing the things he’d been thinking all evening, and decided it was time to give up for the night. “Okay, that’s it for tonight; it's after one, and I don't think we can get anything more useful done this evening. I suggest you all head down to the hospital wing to see Poppy, just to make sure there are no lingering spells, or side effects for any of you to worry about. We’ll meet again tomorrow night, straight after the evening meal.” At their collective groans, he reminded sternly, “There are only five days left before the duel, gentlemen, so we need to get busy.”

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He had run into Hermione a couple of times since their ill-fated dinner four nights ago, and each time had been horribly awkward and uncomfortable. Making his way wearily down the drafty stone corridors of Hogwarts castle, he tried tiredly to puzzle out his next course of action with the exasperating girl. The way things had ended after he presented her with the **Luckenbooth**, he had been quite content to just leave her to Goyle, and be done with it. Then they would have a quiet moment of … **connection**, and she'd offer him a shy smile that made him think about how nice unruly curls really were. It got him thinking that maybe she felt just a little bit guilty for the way things had turned out. It was enough to force him to practice unendingly with Potter and Weasley, just to find out. If Charlie ever found out, he’d never hear the end of it.

Oliver had stayed behind to speak with Professor Lupin (even though he'd graduated, he still didn't feel right calling him Remus) and he’d had to wait until Snape left, so Harry and Ron were probably already finished with Madam Pomfrey, and on their way back to their common room by now.

He had been slowing gradually as he became lost in thought, trying desperately to hold onto all of the forms and stances he had learned that night, while simultaneously trying to push Hermione from his mind. He had enough to concentrate on for tonight, he felt. Voices came drifting out to where he had paused outside the large oak doors with the small gold plaque announcing that, he had indeed found the hospital wing. Words were impossible to distinguish through the ancient wood door, but by the tone, Oliver thought that he was hearing several people, all trying to keep their voices down. He debated for a few minutes whether or not to simply bypass the hospital wing for tonight, and leave whoever they were to visit their friend in peace, but a particularly sharp twinge in his shoulder reminded him that he still had the remains of produce in several uncomfortable places, courtesy of Harry Potter.

Pushing the doors open only enough to slip into the darkened room, Oliver glanced around for the source of the voices. Off to his left, he could see a curtain partitioning off one of the beds halfway between himself and Madam Pomfrey's office. Soft candlelight glowed from within, and cast the shadowed silhouettes of several people against the rough curtain.

Moving quietly past the beds, Oliver made his way to the office, trying without complete success to tune out the discussion happening on his left.

"...he out there alone? I mean, I …"

"...going to be okay..."
"But what about the bleeding…"

Once inside the cozy confines of the Medi-witch's empty office, Oliver gingerly lowered his aching backside into one of the soft chairs in view of the door, and settled in to wait. It wasn't long before the combined warmth of the office, and the softness of the low-sitting chair lulled the large man into an exhausted sleep. With his legs sprawled out before him, Oliver remained unnoticed by the visitors behind the curtain for bed seventeen. Their soft voices murmured and buzzed soothingly at the edge of his consciousness as he drifted off, and began to snore, softly.

-..-

Snow was falling in a heavy blanket all around him. The landscape was grey, lit only by the night sky. A bloated moon hung low on the horizon, though somehow Oliver was sure it was getting close to dawn. Boots crunched on hard packed snow around him, the small sounds falling like gunshots on the crisp air. Though he didn't turn to look for his companions, he also knew, with a sinking feeling, what he would see if he did. He had already seen it once before; the prized possession of a pack of Nifflers.

"This has ta be good 'nough. You'd hav'ta be blooming out o'yer tonk t'come out'ere." The coarse voice was further roughened by strain. Oliver was somehow certain it wasn't the strain of helping to carry the heavy burden, but of fear.

What had they done?

"Shut yer gob. We'll lay it out by the banks. If the scavengers don' find it, the river'll take care of it come spring. Now pick up the pace - I don' plan on being out here longer jus' so's you can take in the sights."

He did look back at that point. He couldn't seem to stop himself when he felt his head turn of it's own volition, dragging his eyes along for the ride. He really didn't want to look. He felt the sight had been burned into his memory with an iron brand already.

It was even more obscene when it was fresh.

The moonlight glinted off the silver veins, making the body look as though it had been snatched back from some giant spider, mid-way through the cocooning process. Drops of the thick, visceral liquid were seeping freely from open, and very fresh wounds, to fall to the snow in a grotesque parody of Hansel and Gretel's trail of breadcrumbs. The allusion to the trail, ultimately leading to the unnamed horror of cooked children was not lost on him. Oliver numbly wondered if these two men would use them to find their way back through the dark forest tonight.

His companions, both dark haired men, with dark eyes peering out from beneath fur caps pulled low on their foreheads, continued on, completely oblivious to Oliver's horrified stare. Grunting occasionally with effort, they continued to half carry, half drag the corpse to the banks. Oliver noticed as they passed, that they held the body reluctantly, supporting it between them with hands held under each arm socket, but leaning as far away from the task as physically possible. They kept their eyes firmly averted, from their burden, and one another.

Oliver wondered if later, they would also avoid their own gaze in the mirror.

"Is it really supposed to be oozing green like that, d'ya think?"

Unlike the voices of the two men, this voice was muffled, almost like trying to listen to the wireless underwater. Glancing around, Oliver saw the two men continue towards the banks as the
trees began to flicker in his peripheral vision. The new voice seemed to be tugging him, pulling him back and keeping him from following.

"Dunno...."

No! This voice was much clearer, pulling him harder as the details of his dream began to melt into the mists of his subconscious.

"Honestly, you two..."

That did it. Oliver would recognize that tone anywhere, having heard a fair bit of it in the last few days. As he concentrated on forcing the blanket of sleep from his still-somnolent brain, the fuzzy, phantom voices began to resolve themselves into ones he could recognize. Keeping his eyes firmly closed, he focused on holding all the images from his dream in his mind, not thinking about them – not yet; just holding them until he was sure he had it all committed to memory. Occasionally, imprints like that could be left in the residue of a powerful spell – Oliver wasn’t sure that this one was any help to him, but something about the fear he sensed from the men in the scene put him on edge. The conversation outside the office continued at the edge of his awareness, teasing him into recognition.

“What I want to know is, how did a Graphorn get into the Forbidden Forest?” Weasley.

"There are still a lot of Death Eaters around, Ron, that never got rounded up with the rest." And Potter.

"So?"

"So, I would think Hogwarts would be one of the places they'd want to disrupt any chance they had. I mean, with all the losses we had during the war, this is one of the highest concentrations of powerful witches and wizards left in Britain!"

"Oh, yeah. I guess that'd do it."

"No, Ronald, it most certainly does not! Harry, you see Death Eaters in your breakfast cereal, sometimes, don’t you?” Oliver could almost feel Hermione rubbing her eyes tiredly at this point, as she tried to keep her voice down, and struggle for patience all at once.

"That only happened once, Hermione, and I was very, very drunk, you know.” Harry's dry tone acknowledged Hermione’s attempt at teasing, while still not backing down.

Opening his eyes, Oliver stumbled to his feet, moving quietly to investigate. Early morning sunlight streamed in through the ward's windows, warming the stone beneath his feet once he left the office. The privacy curtain was still drawn around bed seventeen, though he wasn’t noticed right away as he rounded it. Harry was leaning against a metal cabinet on the far side of the bed, fists shoved in his pockets as he stared out the window. Ron sat awkwardly on an overturned bucket, hands clasped and dangling between his knees as he carefully studied the floor. Hermione was the closest to him, though her back was turned as she watched the ward’s other occupant.

Lying there, swathed in bandages, was the school's groundskeeper, Hagrid.

"She's right, yeh know." Oliver flashed a tired smile as the three of them startled at his interruption. Harry gamely flashed him a tired, half-hearted twist of his mouth in greeting. Ron looked up to gave his customary glare that was his only greeting whenever he saw the Scotsman, and looked back down at his hands. Hermione turned, and Oliver could see that her soft eyes were cloudy with lack of sleep and worry. Wordlessly he reached out and squeezed her arm in comfort. The thankful,
gentle look she gave him caused him to scramble awkwardly to try and cover the moment, before he said something stupid.

"Well, right abou’ it not being very good proof o’ Death Eater activity, anyway. I have no idea about what you migh’ see in yer cereal bowl each morning, Potter." He took his eyes away from Hagrid to shoot Harry a speculative look, and raised his eyebrow at him, teasingly.

"Sod off." Harry snorted, good-naturedly, a real, if only half, smile twisting his features. The tension in his shoulders eased a little.

"What, exactly, would you know about it then?"

Oliver rolled his eyes, mentally. Right on cue, Mister Weasley. "The beastie probably wandered in on its own."

Harry cocked his head slightly. "Oh really? And just why would you say that, Oliver?"

Oliver rubbed his eyes blearily. "We-ell, Graphorns're largely a mountainous species, oft'n kept by trolls… you remember tha’ troll back in fifth year?

"Yes…"

Hermione was smirking triumphantly, having got there much faster than the boys. "It was a Mountain Troll, you see…"

"Sure it t’was. Hogwarts is surrounded by mountains, so it's the perfect place for them. Most of the surrounding area outside of Hogsmeade and the school grounds is all desolate an’ uninhabited." Oliver fought to suppress a yawn as he finished his explanation. Merlin, maybe I do hang around Charlie too much.

Ron shot him an irritated look; Harry just shrugged. "Alright, then. It's still important to be careful." Giving one last, concerned look at what was visible of Hagrid’s pale face beneath the bandages, he turned to Ron. "Coming? We've got Potions first thing this morning, and I know you haven't finished the essay on Gremlin saliva he set for today."

"How do you know that then?" The question was indignant, but Oliver watched as Ron scrambled off his bucket seat to join Harry.

"Because, Ron; I haven't finished mine yet."

"Oh. Right, then."

Hermione watched them go with a fond, if slightly exasperated look, and sighed before taking Ron's vacated 'seat'.

*I should go. Being alone with her at the moment is not a good idea - I'm in no condition to keep my feet out of my mouth, and I really don't fancy the taste of leather all that much. Despite this well thought-out advice, Oliver found himself settling against the wall opposite Hermione. Glutton for punishment, obviously.*

He still wasn’t sure how to handle her after their disastrous dinner. Part of him was still very defensive and reluctant to even try to get close with her again; but in the last few days, he had occasionally caught her looking at him when she thought he wasn’t watching. She would have a sort of speculative look in her eyes; almost like she was trying to decide what to do next. He felt he should at least wait, and see what she had in mind.
Watching dust motes dancing in the light let in through the small window, Oliver found himself stifling another yawn against the back of his hand. The silence was surprisingly comfortable, with only Hagrid’s deep breaths rumbling between them.

“So, lass, did’ee catch it, then?”

Startled out of her reverie, Hermione gave him an irritated look. “Pardon me?”

“Hagrid. Did he catch th’ Graphorn?”

Hermione’s tired eyes widened in shock, then narrowed sharply in anger. “Of all the insensitive … How could you be so - ”

“Hermione! Hermione – what’s the first thing Hagrid’s goin’ to want to know when he wakes up?” Hermione continued to glare at him from red-rimmed eyes. “If he thinks there’s even the slightest chance tha’ ruddy beast is still wanderin’ ‘round out there, there’s no way we’ll ever keep him here long enough t’mend.”

At his words, Hermione’s face flushed darkly. Resting her face in her hands, her voice was very muffled when she spoke. “I’m sorry, Oliver. I thought - ” She took a deep breath, and looked up. The flush had left her face, and she smiled at him wanly. “I should have thought of that myself. I know how he is, and, I….” Her inability to articulate her feelings left her scowling in frustration.

Oliver let his irritation go, pushing it out of his mind. “’S’all right, Mouse. I imagine you’ve been better.”

Hermione just looked at him, startled. “Mouse?”

Oliver could feel the heat crawling up his neck as he mumbled something and stared hard at the spot where his ankle rested over the opposite knee.

This time the silence that stretched between them was not comfortable. After studying her prone friend carefully, Hermione settled back on her bucket, perching on the edge stiffly. Oliver’s knee began to jiggle. Hermione kept fidgeting, nervously without looking up.

“The duel is scheduled for the end of this week, isn’t it?” She kept her gaze straight ahead as she spoke, her shoulders very stiff; Oliver thought it looked like a subtly defensive gesture, and was bothered that it would be. He didn’t like the idea of the slender witch feeling that he was someone she needed to protect herself from, even verbally.

Oliver replied carefully. “Five days from today.”

“Are you – are you confident?” The question was quiet. She was still speaking at Hagrid’s feet.

“I’ve been working with Ron, Harry and Professor Lupin for three days now.” Somehow, Oliver couldn’t bring himself to tell her just how badly things were going. The thought of what it meant for her if he failed was suddenly overwhelming.

She turned, finally, to give him a sad smile. “I appreciate that.”

“Will you be there?” The question was blurted out before he could stop it. He hadn’t meant to ask that - wasn’t sure he was ready to hear the answer, and very sure she wasn’t ready to hear the question. Everything was still so uncertain between them….

Hermione turned to look at him, unexpectedly regretful. “No one but your Seconds, and a panel of
three witnesses will be allowed to be present. Too great a risk of cheating.”

“Oh.” Oliver looked down at his hands. What had he expected, really? He should be relieved that the rules had prevented what was sure to be another awkward scene. Then why did he feel so disappointed? He was startled when he felt a small hand on his shoulder.

She waited until he looked up before speaking. “I really would have gone, you know.” They stared at one another, allowing the silence to stretch, letting the lack of words repair some of the damage already done. The sunlight picked out caramel highlights in Hermione’s unruly curls, matching the tawny gold of her eyes as she looked at him. And suddenly, the moment was gone. Hermione pulled back, lifted her bag and headed for the door. She paused when she reached the threshold, speaking without turning. “I never missed one of your Quidditch matches while you were here. Not even your practices. Not once. I know that may not mean anything anymore, but I thought you should know.”

And with that she was gone.

“Mister Wood.”

Surrounded as he was on all sides by large, dusty tomes, Oliver wasn’t able to see the speaker immediately. Not that he needed too; six years away would never be enough time to forget the steely tones of Professor Snape.

“Professor.” The afternoon light had begun to fade from the library, leaving the grey light that comes before actual twilight. They would be serving dinner soon, and Oliver knew he would have to hurry to make it to their practice on time. He pointedly began gathering his books together, hoping the brooding professor would leave him in peace.

Snape ignored his attempts. “You will join me after the evening meal tonight, Mister Wood. I will expect you in Dungeon Four within the hour.”

Oliver was incredulous. What the hell? “I’m afraid you’ll be waitin’ a fair while, Sir. I’m rather busy this evenin’.”

Black eyes glittered unpleasantly and there was a definite sneer in his voice when he spoke next. “Do you know what is likely to happen to Miss Granger if you fail? Let me assure you it will be most… unpleasant. I suggest, Mister Wood, that you consider this carefully. You are almost hopelessly ill prepared for your upcoming duel. After what I witnessed last night, I feel it’s safe to say that you would be hard-pressed to win against a flobberworm, let alone a skilled Dark Wizard, so I say again; I will expect you in Dungeon Four within the hour.”

Staring hard at the speechless man, he nodded once, seeming satisfied that Oliver would show, and left just as quietly as he had come.

The chill gloom of the dungeons made it easy to get turned around when looking for the little-used number four. Oliver felt that he’d been down here for ages already in the labyrinth of dark corridors and narrow passages when he finally saw the glow that indicated the Professor had gotten there before him.

The room had been cleared of desks and equipment, leaving a large, echoing chamber for them to practice in. Torches lining the walls didn’t so much illuminate the room, as highlight the gloom, driving the shadows to lurk just outside their wavering pools of yellow light. Oliver made a face at
the Potion Master’s sense of theatrics, while still suppressing an irritated shiver at the effectiveness of the gesture.

“You are almost five minutes late, Mister Wood.” The soft voice came whispering out of the deep shadows in the far corner of the room. Oliver had to stop himself from spinning around at the sound – he wasn’t going to play into Snape’s little game. Instead, he very deliberately turned his back on the professor to wait patiently in the centre of the room.

“Six, actually.” It was petty, but Snape always seemed to bring out the best in him.

“In future, you will be sure to report on time. I’m not in the habit of wasting my time – a habit I hope to break you of tonight.” The voice was right behind him now, and Oliver wasn’t surprised to find him standing only a few feet away when he turned.

Oliver looked at him closely. Wand out, body tense, the pale man was poised perfectly to strike in an instant, should he feel the need to. He remembered Lupin telling him that Snape was a duelling champion, and looking at him now, Oliver could believe it. Everything about his stance spoke of power, confidence and control. “Why are you doing this?”

The dark eyes stared at him in the blackness, glittering unpleasingly in the firelight. After a moment, he spoke, “Because Miss Granger may be an insufferable know-it-all, but someone of her intelligence and potential does not deserve to be chained to a gorilla, no matter how intolerable she may be.”

“Now, wand out, Mister Wood, and let’s see how badly Lupin managed to cock this up, shall we?” The sneer was back in his voice, and Oliver was sure that the chance to ‘correct’ one of Professor Lupin’s mistakes played a part in it, too.

An hour later, it had become obvious to Oliver that most of what he’d learned was useless.

“Forget what those dunderheads taught you. This is a challenge, an ancient contest, not sport. There are no points for this duel, no panel of judges to award penalties.” His tone was heavy with contempt for Oliver’s progress.

Oliver bristled at the implied criticism of the other professor’s abilities. “But those rules are supposed to be -“

“The rules he’s been trying to teach you are based on common sense application, but aren’t rules in anything but a formal competition. If your enemy drops his wand, by all means let him pick it up. It will give you a moment to gather your strength and look for an opportunity to finish him while he is distracted. A spell detonated closer to the eyes has the added bonus of blinding and unnerving your opponent than one detonated somewhere else. The rounds are supposed to test your control – powerful magic requires strong emotion. Can you just stop, when you need to? Take what little you’ve managed to learn, and think. Be ruthless – you’re opponent will be, count on it.”

He hated to admit it, but by the end of the night, Oliver had to acknowledge, if only to himself, that he’d learned far more in one evening with the unpleasant potions master, than in three days with his friends. And he’d been attacked by a lot less produce, too. Wearily, he decided to detour to the kitchens, in hopes of finding something warm before bed.

“Mrs. Hermione Wood?” Ginny glanced up from her parchment to see the reaction to this. “Hmm..., it’s going to take some getting used to, but I think it sounds good together – Much better
then Mrs. Hermione Finch-Fletchly, wife of the no-neck wonder, anyways, and Hermione Goyle isn’t even going to be discussed.” She looked back to her list.

“Hmmm… Mister and Missus Oliver Wood? I never understood why they do that – it seems so possessive, like you aren’t your own person anymore. You’re now this weird combined creature; Hermione, or possibly Olione. Sounds like something Hagrid would breed up for classes.”

“Ginn!” Hermione was blushing.

“How about Missus Hermione Granger-Wood, then?”

“I honestly don’t think that this is my most pressing concern right now, Ginny,” Hermione said, dryly.

She and Ginny had spent the entire afternoon holed up in Gryffindor Tower. Ginny had ambushed Hermione directly after class and insisted on getting her away from her boys for a while, claiming that some time spent with her would be a far better use of the evening. Hermione and Ginny had become very close friends over the last eight years. Hermione sometimes found she just needed to talk to another girl, someone who didn’t think body functions were a basis for wit, or find themselves gaping stupidly when she did something feminine. Ginny may be as Quidditch-obsessed as her brothers, but her fun-loving and irreverent nature was just what Hermione needed at times, as she herself tended to take everything far too seriously.

“So Hermione Wood it is then. Unless you’d prefer Hermione Weasley? I think Fred is still single….”

Seeing the look of horror on her friend’s face, Ginny let her voice trail off suggestively. Actually, Hermione had been very distracted for the last few days, ever since Oliver Wood showed up, and Ginny was going out of her way this evening to draw a rise out of her friend, in hopes it might get her talking about whatever was on her mind. Ginny was dying to know the details of their meeting, but so far, she’d had very little success.

Seeing Hermione settle down to brood again, Ginny smoothly diverted her to something she always found absorbing – schoolwork. “So, tell me about this research project you’re doing for Professor Snape, Hermione. The one having to do with differences with people's pants?”

Hermione tried not to laugh at Ginny’s complete ignorance of Muggle science. “Genes, Ginny. Not pants,” she corrected gently. Grateful for the change of subject her friend had provided her with, she tried to explain why genes had nothing to do with fashion to the increasingly bewildered Weasley girl. She loved taking N.E.W.T. level courses, as the students’ studies were largely self-guided. Private meetings were arranged monthly with the teachers of each course, to check-in, discuss any problems the student may have encountered during their research, and even offer career advice. There were still the regular classes to attend, and homework to complete of course. All in all, it was enough of a challenge to reduce most seventh-years to stress-crazed maniacs by Valentine’s Day – and even Hermione was beginning to crack a little under the pressure. She was taking more N.E.W.T.s than anyone else, of course.

“Oh, Ginn, it’s really very fascinating. Did you know that Muggle children who turn into witches and wizards actually have a gene that other Muggles don’t have?” Hermione’s eyes lit up with enthusiasm for her subject.

“Well, yea, I mean they’re not really Muggles, are they? They’re wizards, so they should have the same gene-thingies, right?” Ginny was really trying to keep up, but her head was beginning to hurt from Hermione’s determined explanations.
“Actually, interestingly enough, no. Purebloods don’t have it either - only Muggle born witches and wizards, and their children, presumably. It’s really quite incredible – Professor McGonagall is helping me with the research, and she’s arranged for me to work with Madame Pomfrey one day a week to perform some tests on blood samples she’s collected for me.”

“Tests for what?”

“Well, I want to see what the gene does. I mean, obviously Muggle-born wizards are different from Pureblood ones. I want to see how far the difference goes. It’s just so incredibly interesting! Really – “

Grinning at Hermione’s enthusiasm, Ginny cut in. “See, that’s better… Come on, the house elves probably still have some of that chocolate stuff they served for dessert in the hall tonight. Let’s go raid the kitchens for some, and hide out in your rooms until curfew, plotting a truly evil revenge on Mister Goyle, shall we?”

“-..-

Evening shadows stretched along the walls of the darkened room, playing with the wrought iron leading in the arched windows. Draco sprawled comfortably on an overstuffed armchair, watching the play of flames in the grate, lost in thought. This was one of the only rooms in the house were his mother’s influence was prominent, and he liked the contrast of her warmth with the cool sparseness of the décor. Everything in here was comfortable; the chairs, the rug, the lighting. No decorative knick-knacks marred the clean lines, or strange dark artefacts placed to intimidate visitors detracted from the simplicity of the space.

It was one of his favourite rooms in the manor. He supposed that said something about him, but he didn’t really care what it was. Sometimes he wondered what she would think of this room. And then he hated himself for thinking it.

It was Saturday, and he’d Apparated home rather than spend another weekend in the company of the moron twins. He’d return well after curfew, but he knew that Professor Snape never checked the Slytherin dormitories, feeling that their nocturnal activities were probably far more educational than some of their classes.

He could hear the house elf answering the door at the front of the house. So, his father was home. The staccato taps of his boots on the marble floors came closer, though Draco didn’t bother to straighten up before he entered, as he would have done once.

“Good evening, Father. Where were you tonight?” The senior Malfoy had gone out right after lunch, after being strangely quiet all morning – brooding, more then anything, he thought. Draco knew that things were proceeding for them, but that things could start happening rather quickly, and it would be disastrous to have anything happen before they were ready.

“I’ve been at the Ministry offices, using my time in a useful manner. You might try it sometime, just for variety. It seems that Mister Wood has filed a challenge to obtain... rights to Miss Granger.”

“I know; poor Greg.” Draco smirked with saccharine amusement. “He’s hopeless with a wand. Should be rather amusing to watch.”

“Really, Draco. Perhaps you should assist Mr. Goyle – help him to retain his bride.”

One of Draco’s elegant, pale eyebrows arched before he could stop the gesture. “Oh? Why would I
care if he has her or not? What that gorilla Wood will do to him will be nothing to what Herm-
Granger will do to the poor bastard if he actually manages to win her.”

“Draco, how is it that you actually manage to dress yourself each morning? Who is the current
Minister for Magic?”

“Percy Weasley?”

“Precisely.” Growling faintly when his son failed to follow, Lucius continued, “And whom did you
tell me was a good friend of Mister Weasley’s, and continues to spend a disgusting amount of time
trying to get that idiotic sport re-instated?”

“Oliver Wood?” Draco hazarded, while glaring at the condescending man for casting aspirations
on his favourite game.

“Very good. So, we know that, one: Miss Granger is unwholesomely clever and very respected,
quite a useful combination. Two, that Oliver Wood while not incontinently bright, is still smarter
than Mister Goyle. And three, Minister Weasley is both quite clever and altogether more devious
and forward-thinking than you are this evening.” At his son’s inquiring look, he continued, “Don’t
you think he might want to keep the girl close enough to keep an eye on her, without drawing too
much attention to the fact that he is? Wood is a perfect choice.”

“Giving her to the Goyles serves no purpose. You know what they’re likely to do with her, and
there’s no point. She’s an irritating little swot, but I don’t feel like getting myself involved in that
kind of filth.”

Crossing the room gracefully, Lucius sank gratefully into the welcoming cushions of the small
couch. Draco couldn’t remember the last time he looked so tired. “I didn’t say we would turn her
over to the Goyles. I’m sure we can find a way of sitting on the fence awhile, until we have a solid
position. Too much is happening, and I’m not sure… Just win the duel, Draco. We’ll decide what
to do with Miss Granger later.”

“Why don’t you do it then? You’re always telling me I need work on my duelling technique.”

“We can pass off your actions as a repressed emotional outburst of some kind. The sheer scandal of
it will keep others from looking too closely at what we’re doing. If I were to get involved, it would
invite a lot more speculation.”

Draco went back to gazing at the flames, lost in thought.

-..-

Of all the rotten luck…. Hermione couldn’t believe that she had to run into him while on a simple
chocolate run. Ginny had been surreptitiously watching the two of them ever since they had snuck
into the room and found him sitting at the scarred wooden table by the fire, staring into a mug of
hot cocoa.

The almost panicked look on his face when he’d looked up and realized it was her was almost
adorable, she thought. Especially the way even the tips of his ears blushed. Funny, how something
that in Ron was just ridiculous managed to look so temptingly boyish in the large man.

She was still a little embarrassed by her behaviour the last few days. For some reason, Oliver just
seemed to bring out the worst in her. Probably a good sign that they’d be rubbish together anyway.
Oliver was only trying to make the best of it, but somehow, she was having a hard time convincing
herself to do the same. It was just so… unfair. She was being sacrificed to ensure that a community
that was still heavily biased against her, and every other Muggle, would survive its own stupidity. But when her thoughts would turn to the Weasleys, who had surrounded her and Harry with family and love, especially during the hard losses of the war, she felt she could do this, if only to save that very special family.

Squaring her shoulders, Hermione tried a tentative smile, and didn’t protest when Ginny asked if they could join Oliver for a while.

She really wasn’t surprised when, ten minutes of strained conversation later, Ginny announced that she had to get back to finish her Arithmancy scroll before bed, and no, Hermione, don’t bother to come up, I’ll see you in the morning….

Oliver turned to look at her, then back down at his mug. “How’s Hagrid doin’, then?”

“He woke up this afternoon. Madame Pomfrey says he should be out of bed in a couple of days.” She didn’t’ bother trying to keep the relief out of her voice. Reaching across the somewhat sticky table, she touched Oliver’s hand shyly, making sure she had his eye before continuing. “The first thing he asked, you know, was about the Graphorn.”

Oliver looked down at where her hand and his were joined, then looked back up to smile. “Glad teh hear he’s okay.”

Hermione sat quietly for a few moments, listening to the soft bustling as the house elves finished up for the evening, preparing to start fresh in the morning. “Do you think we can really do this, Oliver?”

Startled, he tried to jerk his hand away, but she kept a firm grip on it. She continued to gaze at the flames, letting the soothing sounds of the kitchen relax her inhibitions, making her feel bold. “We haven’t gotten off to a good start, have we?”

Oliver contemplated his answer carefully. Allowing his shoulders to relax, he began idly tracing patterns on her hand, between the webbing of her thumb with his calloused digit. “When you were little, Hermione, were you different from other kids?”

The question was unexpected, but her current lassitude made it easy to answer without thinking too hard about anything. “I suppose. I was always smarter, I liked to read, where others liked to play at skipping. I liked libraries, while most liked the movies. Then, there were always strange things happening around me… a bully would take my book, only to find that he tripped and fell before he got two steps away. A girl would tease me, and find her bag strap snap, and all her homework would be blowing ‘round the yard, that sort of thing.”

“It must have been such a relief to finally know why those things happened to you.”

Hermione chuckled quietly. “You should have seen the look on my parents faces when they had an owl deliver a letter to them – and such a letter! They’ve always been so proud of me, but it must have been very scary to let me go, to send me away to a place they couldn’t follow. I sometimes wonder if I could have been that strong in their place.”

“You’re a very strong girl, Hermione.”

“Sometimes. I’m usually just as scared as everyone else, I just hide it better.”

“Sometimes… that’s enough.”

Hermione hadn’t turned during their strange conversation, staring intently as the hypnotic flames
danced in the grate, and Oliver traced gentle designs on her skin while continuing to ask his probing questions.

“Did you find it hard, leaving everything behind like that? To come to a strange castle in the middle of the night, surrounded by strange people?”

“At first. It was two months before I had Ron and Harry for friends, you know. I was just as different here as I had been at home, I guess.”

“Was it worth it? The uncertainty, the struggle to find your place in a completely new and unexpected situation - One you hadn’t really chosen for yourself?” Dimly, Hermione was aware that Oliver’s thumb had stopped moving against her skin as he watched her serious contemplation of his question; both the one he’d asked, and the one he hadn’t.

Her years at Hogwarts had been wonderful, despite its almost overwhelming strangeness at first. Even her rather dangerous adventures with Harry and Ron were remembered rather more fondly then was probably appropriate. Then, in the blink of an eye, everything had changed. Instances of bigotry and the hatred stood out against the backdrop of violence. The siren call of superiority drove the engines of war for eighteen long months; experiences Hermione would never have to try to forget, never have to relive in the dead of night had she remained a Muggle. But the war would have happened regardless of the involvement of one Hermione Jane Granger: Bill would still have been brutally scarred and afflicted, Seamus would still have lost his sight and Neville would still have died; but Hermione could hold close the fact that she was a part of the solution, and could savour that sweet moment of victory, when she realized that they would have the chance to rebuild. The amazing connection she had with Harry and Ron transcended friendship, strengthened by all they had endured together.

In the end, she had eight and a half years of exploring wonders most never even knew were possible, highlighted by amazing friendships and extraordinary people. Could she wish that she had never known any of this? Had it been worth it? With firm conviction, she knew there was only one answer. “Yes. It’s been painful at times, but no, I wouldn’t change it. Not now.”

Oliver’s hazel eyes regarded her steadily in the flickering light, and Hermione found herself fighting the urge to squirm under his scrutiny. The sudden shift in their relationship left her feeling insecure and uncomfortable and she had the irrational feeling that he was seeing far deeper into her attempted light answer then she would like him to. Pushing back against the weight of his gaze, of their sudden camaraderie, and the attempt at communicating something that she wasn’t sure she wanted to hear, and struggled to keep her eyes shuttered and unrevealing –

And then it was gone; his eyes were flat, distant mirrors once again as he gently tugged on her hand, helping her to stand. “Come on lass, I’ll see yeh to th’ tower. Ye’ve go’ classes in the mornin’.”

The experience left Hermione thoughtful. They had passed some sort of barrier tonight and gained a new depth to their relationship. She carefully didn’t acknowledge to herself how much she missed the warmth of his hand once he left her at the door to the tower.

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Torches guttered and swam in the breeze generated by their hasty passage, as Oliver followed Professor McGonagall deeper into the dark corridor far beneath the castle grounds. The dampness of the stone walls, and the unpleasant drip... drip... drip that sounded even louder than the hammering of his heart in the gloomy silence led him to believe that the passageway they were in was now under the lake.

This was it. At the far end of this passage would be a heavy oak door, one spelled in place by the Founders themselves to make absolutely certain that the chamber beyond was completely isolated once the door was sealed. There would be no cheating during the upcoming duel, no matter how clever Mr. Malfoy may be.

Word had come through only the night before that Draco Malfoy was stepping in for his distantly related cousin, Goyle. Somehow, no one had been surprised.

The last few days leading up to this had flown by with a speed that had him wondering if it was nervousness about the upcoming duel — or the nearness of his upcoming wedding if he won.

Oliver decided that maybe, it was a toss-up.

Twenty metres - the dark doorposts could be made out of the gloom now, ominous and unrevealing in the darkness. Everything would be decided on the other side of that obscured portal, and so powerful was its presence that Oliver had to push away the feeling that he couldn’t help but come out of this changed somehow; marked in some inescapable way, forever.

Ten metres. He was a fair wizard, he knew. He’d been active in the war, though never in the spotlight like Hermione and her friends, and he supposed that surviving meant he had a certain amount of skill in staying alive, but he was also very aware that he was no duellist. Good with a wand, yes. Fairly handy at thinking on his feet, definitely; but he was well aware that battlefield experiences wouldn’t do him much good in this ancient contest. One week’s preparation, no matter how good the instructor, just didn’t add up to a lifetime of privilege and practice.

Five metres – was this corridor actually getting longer? It seemed to take forever to traverse the relatively short distance of the corridor – the speed of his thoughts slowing everything else down to a crawl.

The door was made of black oak, its surface scoured smooth with age. McGonagall stepped to the side as they approached.

“You understand that no one is allowed into the Chamber with you? That the event will be monitored magically by three witnesses?” Oliver could hear her voice quaver as her expression
tightened under the guttering torch. Swallowing hard, he nodded.

Lips pressed so firmly, that they were nothing more then a thin slash above her chin, Professor McGonagall gestured jerkily for him to enter.

With a steady hand, Oliver reached out for the door.

"Hail Hogwarts inhabitants!"

"We have returned!"

The triumphant duel cry echoed through the tower, forcing Hermione from her bed far earlier then even she wanted to be awakened, especially as she had only just managed to get back to sleep. With the duel only one more day off, she was finding her sleep increasingly uneasy and broken. Irritably, she pulled the heavy down pillow over her head, stuffing her fists into her ears to try to minimize the discordant noise.

"Wha’s going on then?” came the rather sleepy rasp from the room’s other occupant. Lavender was never at her best first thing in the morning, hardly ever opening her eyes before she managed to make it down to the Great Hall for her morning tea.

Dimly, Hermione could hear sounds from the common room suggesting that the cries had succeeded in waking a number of the tower occupants, despite the hour. Faintly, she heard something breaking downstairs. Muttering under her breath, Hermione swung her legs blindly over the side of the bed, feeling for her slippers with her toes as she resisted to the last possible minute from lifting her head off the inviting pillow.

She groggily finished tying her fluffy terry robe as she came down the last few stairs, yawning hugely, despite her best efforts. Seated around the fireplace in the squishy chesterfield and various chairs and cushions were about half the towers inhabitants sprawled out in their collection of sleepwear, avidly watching two ginger heads bent over something on the hearthrug. Despite a sinking in her stomach — she just knew they were causing trouble already — Hermione smiled happily as she recognised the Weasley twins.

"You had better not be planning to feed that to any first years, you two, or I’ll be sure to take house points.” She had spoken from directly behind them, and she had to bite the inside of her cheek when they startled violently at her teasing words.

Recovering quickly, George’s (he had a freckle on his left earlobe that was sort of sun-burst shaped, while Fred didn’t) arm shot out and punched the shoulder of the unsuspecting third year sitting on the ottoman on his left with enough force to send him tumbling backwards. “I thought you were supposed to mention when our Hermione woke up — something about watching the stairs?” All this was in an undertone, as Fred turned to her with his most charming grin.

“Hermione! Just the person we wanted to see! Looking lovely as ever, I must say…” He wasn’t fooling her, and he knew it, but it was a game they both liked to play since they had come to a bit of an understanding during the months of working together for the Order. While he was speaking, he had angled his body to block her view of some kind of bubble-gum pink… something on the floor. She was fairly sure he thought she hadn’t seen it yet, though he was sure to know she thought they had something.

Using her best You’re Just a Bothersome Boy look, she tried to ease to the right to get a better look
at whatever it was behind him, but found that George had already managed to pocket it. Crossly
pushing her tangled hair from her eyes, she turned back to Fred. “What are you two doing here? I
thought you had re-opened the store?” She settled onto the ottoman George had vacated for her.
Seeing that the show was over, the crowd of sleepy Gryffindors began breaking up and drifting
their way back to their beds. Ron, Hermione noted affectionately, hadn’t moved. He mumbled
indistinctly and turned over before settling once again in the large chair. Harry gave his sleeping
friend an amused look, and apparently decided to leave him there, before moving to join them by
the hearth.

George glanced at him in welcome without breaking in his explanation to Hermione. “…for two
days. Oliver’s a mate, then; how could we not be here for him as he daringly wins his bride from
the clutches of the dastardly Dark Wizard who’s claimed her?”

“Nit.” Hermione flushed at the confusion of emotions his simple teasing had evoked. She ducked
her head to cover her embarrassment.

“You know it, luv.” George winked lewdly at her.

“I’m surprised you’re not with your shinning knight now, Hermione — being extra nice to him and
trying to boost his morale before the duel tomorrow.”

“Fred!”

Laughing, the twins seemed to feel they’d embarrassed her enough, and let it go. Harry joined the
conversation at this point, and talk turned to the upcoming Gobstones match.

Keeping track of the discussion with only half an ear, Hermione was soon lost in thought, dazed
and very sleepy as Crookshanks jumped into her lap and began to knead her tummy gently.

When she felt Fred nudge her later, she was rather surprised to see that they were alone in the
common room.

“Knut for your thoughts, Hermione?” Fred asked, looking up at her from a cushion on the floor, his
elbow resting on her bent knee, as he fluttered his ridiculously long eyelashes at her, teasingly.

Swatting him away, Hermione gave in and smiled at him. “Not even worth that much, this
morning, I’m afraid.”

“No wonder, you look like hell.”

“You know, Fred, I simply can’t understand why it is that you’re still single,” Hermione
responded, dryly.

Fred laughed. “You know, I’ve been puzzling about that myself. I think its George.”

“George?”

“He’s the trouble-maker, you know. I’m completely innocent.”

“Oh-huh. Does that mean you’re going to tell me about whatever it was you were showing off this
morning?”

“Now Hermione, I have absolutely no idea what you could be referring to. Besides, any
hypothetical object may have, in fact, been an engagement present for my favourite Gryffindor, and
as such, should be ignored until such time as it gets presented.”
“Now I am frightened. Should I warn Oliver, then?”

Fred threw a pillow at her. “Just for that, you are no longer my favourite Gryffindor.”

They were both silent for a moment. Hermione leaned her head back and closed her eyes, enjoying the companionable atmosphere. The twins were usually so busy being loud and raucous, that it was easy to overlook how genuinely perceptive they could be.

“Oliver admired you in school, you know.”

Startled, Hermione jerked her eyes open and turned to Fred with a puzzled frown. Fred, for his part, was lounging against the chesterfield, arm dangling loosely over his raised knee. He was facing away from her when he spoke, not turning to look at her as he continued.

“I’m not saying he fancied you or anything — you were only in third year after all, but he thought a lot of your intelligence.”

“Fredrick Weasley, you’re making that up.” Hermione smiled when he looked up at her, ready to argue. “I do appreciate it, though.”

Fred snorted. “Believe what you will, Hermione dear. Oliver’s going to win you know, and then you’re going to have to deal with the fact that you fancy him.”

Hermione spluttered. “I most certainly do not! I barely know him – we have nothing —”

“Yes, you do, Hermione. You wouldn’t be struggling so hard if you didn’t.”

“Fred, the idea’s preposterous.” Hermione was patient, as though explaining to a small child.

“And what’s wrong with it, then? Hermione Jane Granger, smartest witch of her age, could do something so insensible, so completely feminine as to actually find a handsome, genuinely nice bloke attractive? You’re right, the idea is simply ludicrous.” Frustration made Fred’s response sharper than it might have been.

“It’s not that simple Fred, and you know it.” Hermione’s voice caught, and she turned to glare at him, hurt.

“Yes, actually, it is Hermione. You just refuse to see it.” Softening his tone, he reached out and covered her hand with his. “Hermione Granger, you are a silly Puffskein sometimes, aren’t you?”

Hermione looked at him with glassy eyes. “I don’t like being forced, Fred. It’s not Oliver, it’s really not. I really don’t want to be Missus Hermione Goyle, believe me, and when you get down to it, it is rather nice of Oliver to try to help out, I just…” She trailed off, eyes straying to focus somewhere over Fred’s shoulder.

Just when he was about to open his mouth to get her attention, she turned back to him, with a watery smile. “I think we can become friends, though. We’re starting to, I think.”

He squeezed her hand sympathetically. “We can still arrange for Goyle then, if you’d feel better about hating your future husband for the rest of your life. Ginny tells me though, that you’ve almost come to look at your future as Missus Wood with actual good-will.”

“Maybe. I’d love to be there to see him kick Malfoy’s arse.”

They both laughed, and somehow, Hermione felt a bit better.
“Thanks Fred.”

“Anytime, Hermione,” he said, giving her a one-armed hug before she left to get ready for class.

Hermione’s classes that day turned out to be a little lighter than usual, and she wasn’t absolutely positive that it didn’t have something to do with well-meaning professors trying to let her focus on the duel tomorrow afternoon. She really wished they wouldn’t, though. She’d rather have the distraction of the extra loads of class work to keep busy — instead she’d be sitting in the library, or common room, and brooding all evening, and quite possibly well into the night. She was almost finished for the day, which she supposed was a bit of a blessing, as she hadn’t really been able to concentrate properly in any of her classes. It was Thursday, so she only had Care of Magical Creatures left, in the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest today, before she could seek the solitude of her dorm.

“Mudblood!” Draco’s overly cheery greeting floated across the lawn as Hermione made her way to their shared class. She hugged her books a little tighter to her chest, but ignored him as she passed where he was holding court with a group of upper-year Slytherins at the top of the short flight of stone stairs leading down to Hagrid’s hut. As she passed, she felt a hand reach out and clamp on her shoulder. Draco’s cultured voice spoke from just over her left shoulder. “What’s the hurry, Granger? I think Goyle might like to have his fiancée join him today.”

Hermione barely suppressed a shiver, and gave Malfoy a determined look. There was no way she would allow him to see her react, especially to let him know how uncomfortable his proximity was making her right now. Instead, she responded forcefully, “No thank you. I think Goyle should be more concerned with enjoying his last day of good health.”

“What’s the matter, Granger? Nervous that your pet gorilla won’t come out of this with his good looks intact?” Hermione had to struggle not to punch his stupid, smirking face, as she had in third year.

“I’d be more worried about yours, if I were you, Malfoy.” Shrugging out of his grip, Hermione hurried down the stairs.

“Be sure to wear something pretty tomorrow, Granger. I doubt it will help, but I think we could all use a good laugh,” Draco called after her. For some reason, Goyle’s laughter sounded particularly loud to her.

“That foul little, insignificant —” Hermione had been muttering to herself ever since she had burst into the clearing at a determined walk, resolutely looking anywhere but at the Slytherin students.

“Oy, Hermione! What’s got you so worked up? You look a right fright.” Ron’s bafflement just made Hermione swear harder as she stomped over to stand by Harry instead. Harry just looked over at Ron and shrugged.

“Al’right class, settl’ down now. Today, I’ve go’ a real treat in store for all o’yeh…”

The look of apprehension on the students faces could be excused, Hermione supposed. While she was glad to see Hagrid was recovering so well, Hermione couldn’t help a small traitorous thought that maybe class was a lot nicer when there was a substitute.

Not that she’d ever admit it aloud, of course.

“-..-”

Surprisingly, things seemed to have gotten better between himself and Hermione these last few
days.

She had even returned some of his greetings in the halls with an uncertain smile, though he had noticed dark bags under her eyes, and resolved to get her to put aside her studding on occasion and relax once this blasted contest was over.

Weasley was still furious with him, but seemed to have settled on a sort of sullen resentment, and had given up trying to be outright antagonistic. Oliver suspected Hermione may have had something to do with that, when one morning she’d come storming into the Great Hall, sitting resolutely at the opposite end of the table then she normally did (not that Oliver was paying attention to where she would normally sit, he told himself). Weasley had followed ten minutes later, looking like he’d been ravaged by a flock of birds. Since that morning, things had become noticeably more civil between the two men, for which Oliver was grateful.

Time with Professor Snape was unpleasant at best, but he was fast learning to make the most of his strengths, and even his weaknesses, and had to, grudgingly, admit a new respect for the greasy bat.

It still didn’t make up for years of foul treatment for any Gryffindor caught in his class, though.

Oliver could feel the sweat beading down his back before being absorbed by his robes. The sensation was extremely unpleasant in the damp chill of the dungeon. He’d been practicing with Professor Snape all evening, and now well into the small hours of the morning, and his eyes felt like they were full of hot sand. Patiently, he ignored the discomfort, and waited. The trick, Oliver had found, was to only allow his thoughts to pass lightly over any given plan or action, as Professor Snape was a highly skilled Legilimens. Fortunately, the concentration required to actually probe his thoughts while also focusing on what was going on around him limited this ability a great deal.

Snape was circling now, to his right, movements slow and flowing, wand held lightly in hand as he watched Oliver intently. Oliver took some pride in the fact that he was breathing heavily, sharp thin wheezes that echoed faintly in the tense silence.

The faint coppery taste of magic (Hermione once told him it was actually ozone generated as the spell passed through the air, whatever ozone was) could be tasted on every breath he took, reminding Oliver uncomfortably of the never-ending skirmishes during Voldemort’s campaign. Magic would hang so think sometimes, it was as if the air itself were bleeding.

“Arcesso Flamma!”

Oliver had only his instincts to bring up his wand in time to deflect the spell as he dodged to the left. He could feel the passage of the flames, singing his hair and clothing, and burning its way down his lungs as he struggled for breath in the supper-heated air left in its wake. He could feel the blisters rising painfully, high on his right shoulder. Coming up from a crouch, his hand shot out, instinctively aiming at a slightly darker patch in the gloom. “Ingenero Fumus!”

Think, billowing smoke began filling the room, beginning where he had guessed Snape to be. Silently he moved, staying just beyond the reach of the smoke, straining his ears for the tell-tale sounds that would give away his opponents position. His hand tightened fractionally on the smooth wood of his wand.

It didn’t take long.

Moving with agility that would have astonished him had he had the time to consider the time, and how weary he was, Oliver raised his wand, suddenly inspired. “Vomica Limax!” He was rewarded with the sounds of retching seconds later. Clearing the smoke with a flick of his wand, Oliver
advanced on his stricken teacher.

Several slugs were crawling about him, butting his knees playfully as he crouched, green and gagging as he heaved forth another slimy, wriggling gastropod.

Oliver made sure to make notes, to share with Ron, later; after all, he owed him for the inspiration.

Relaxing slightly, he moved closer, smirking slightly at Professor Snape’s predicament. “Here, Sir, let me—”

Pain exploded behind his eyeballs, bright and immediate, and Oliver found himself staring at the ceiling from the cool flagstone floor. Nausea fought briefly with his control, before giving up and settling to a dull churning. The back of his skull throbbed sickly as he tried to process the wildly spinning room, unable for the moment to understand the drastically changed situation.

“I am not in the habit of wasting my time, Mister Wood, and I expect you to put in the required effort to come out of your duel with Mister Malfoy in one piece.” The low tones of the Potions Master seemed to fill the dank dungeon from somewhere above him, adding to the throbbing of his head. “You had the perfect opportunity to strike, yet you lowered your wand instead. That kind of charitable thinking will cost Miss Granger dearly. Think on it.”

It was a long while after Snape had flowed from the room before Oliver left to seek his own bed.

Thursday was a dull grey morning, and Oliver had been sitting at the small table by the window, writing a letter to his sister in Fife, when the hearth had suddenly erupted in bright flames. Without looking up, he continued sharpening his quill before resuming his letter. Despite the sound of someone clearing their throat, at first a polite announcement of arrival, quickly changing to an exasperated reminder of its presence, Oliver pointedly ignored his visitor for the ten minutes it took him to finish his correspondence.

His sister, Adrianne Margaret, had read about the upcoming duel tomorrow and had made sure he knew about her pique at being overlooked in sharing such important news. He’d woken up this morning to a rather large and very red howler. It had already been smoking acridly when he opened his eyes, the owl carrying it trying to edge away from its own leg nervously, and had taken off in a cloud of feathers as soon as Oliver released it. As a result, he wasn’t feeling particularly charitable towards Percy at the moment, his fingers still bearing the marks of some rather frantic pecking.

Percy spoke from the fireplace. “Alright, Oliver. I’m sorry for alerting the Daily Prophet. I should have warned you; but I did tell you that you were doing this to lead the way on this – how else did you think I was going to let people know what was going on?”

“Surely, a former Hogwarts Head Boy could come up with something a little less tacky.” Oliver grimaced at the faintly greenish disembodied head in his fireplace. “You’ve go’ no idea the kind of mail the owls brought this morning. I’m personally sending you th’ nastier ones, you know. With much love, and a big stick.”

“I’ll consider that fair warning,” Percy said dryly. Shaking his head slightly, as if to clear it, he gave Oliver a long, searching look. Oliver gazed back, one eyebrow raised curiously, at the uncharacteristic silence.

“How do you feel about the upcoming challenge, then?”

Oliver shrugged. “Better. Malfoy’s a little twat, but still dangerous. You are going to owe me for
all the time I’ve had to endure with Snape, mind.”

“I’d like to send you out for a few days – no, let me explain –” Percy had to speak rapidly over Oliver’s objections. Quickly, the Assistant Minister sketched out the details for him, his face carefully blank, as a man trying to hold back great emotion. After hearing what he had to say, Oliver understood perfectly; he had to physically clench his teeth against the urge to hurt someone.

“The Muggle authorities think it’s a, what did they call it? A grain killer, whatever that means.”

“Muggles are rather odd.” Oliver said vaguely, as he rubbed the skin between the knuckles of one hand, where he’d broken it years before. The motion was absently rhythmic as he stared at the fraying rug thinking hard.

Oliver looked up, speaking quietly. “It’s out of the question, Perce. It’ll have to wait until after the duel.”

Oliver made a sour face at his friend. “Of course, if you really wanted me out there immediately, you could always just repeal this law of yours, and give the girl back her freedom.”

The lanterns set in the room gave everything a mellow glow that reflected off Percy’s ghostly glasses as he seemed to try to peer farther into the room than the confines of the hearth would allow.

“The duel is still two days off, isn’t it? Couldn’t you just Apparate out for a quick look? I could issue you a Time-turner, to give you a few extra days — ”

Oliver hunched his shoulders, dropping his gaze to stare at his hands again. “I’ve got Draco bloody Malfoy, not to mention the rest of the Serpent house here with me. How much do yeh want to bet at least a couple of them would pass on any information of interest to someone connected to what’s left of the Death Eaters, or one of these fringe groups tha’ have cropped up?”

Percy nodded reluctantly. “It’s your call of course – and you’re probably right. It’s just when it’s children —”

He didn’t need to finish; Oliver’s guts were still twisting at the thought of those Muggle children. His first instinct had been to fly out there immediately, as though somehow mere speed could make him strong enough to deal with what was going to be an awful situation.

The image of a soft brown mouse and curls thick as taffy inserted itself against the impulse before he could even seriously consider it. He would be useless if he exhausted himself by living a half-week of forty-hour days – and for what? He wouldn’t be able to do anything for those children at this point. He had a responsibility here, someone who needed him here, and he was startled to find how quickly and easily that job asserted itself as his first priority. The duel was more immediate, he reassured himself – Hermione was someone his actions could still save. The Muggle children would still be just as dead in a few days. In the back of his mind, he tried to ignore a small voice, telling him that, coat it however he will, he was acting on more selfish feelings.

 Aren’t you really staying because it’s Hermione that needs you?

Disquieted by his conversation with Percy, Oliver went in search of the twins, hoping for a distraction.

Fred and George were two of the most naturally talented beaters Hogwarts had ever seen – the two men seeming to think with one mind on the field, achieving amazing synchronicity that put mere teamwork to shame.
Oliver often found himself wishing they could have put the same effort into practices as they did into causing trouble, though.

“Really, Oliver, it’s going to be a blast.” George was reassuring him blithely. They were sitting comfortably with a couple of draughts down in the village, plans for their latest prank still in the air between them, and Fred casting an appreciative eye over Madame Rosmerta whenever she brought a new round.

“Really, Fred, she’s at least half again as old as you are.” George smirked, and lifted his eyebrow suggestively at the rather handsome pub keeper.

“Just a number, Georgie-boy – and the benefit of more experience.” Fred drained his jug quickly, raising it inquiringly as he caught the brunette witch’s eye where she stood behind the bar. “I’m sure she’d appreciate the benefits of a younger man’s stamina.” Fred grinned licentiously.

Oliver snorted into his pint. “Somehow, I do’na think she’d be as interested exploring the benefits of the age gap, Fred.”

Suppressing a laugh of his own, George turned back to Oliver. “Given his terrible judgment, are you really sure you want him as you’re Second tomorrow? I’m sure we could dig up someone else – say, Lockhart? I’m sure he’s even mastered joined up writing by now… Ow! Fred – Leave off!” George sat back, rubbing his shoulder.

“I think you may want to steer for safer waters, Georgie-boy” Fred glared playfully at his scowling twin.

“Goyle will never be expecting it.” Fred changed tracks smoothly, as Rosmerta served up the new round, deftly swiping up a few stray spills before setting the fresh pints before them. “Here, luv,” Fred smiled warmly, handing over a galleon and a few sickles. “And take something for yourself.”

“Fred Weasley, I’ll not be having any of your filthy lucre here.” The affectionate smile she gave them belied the sting of her words as she stared the unrepentant twin down, hand on her hip.

“Then be sure to add whatever you’re having,” he called after her as she turned to leave, swatting him lightly with an admonishment as she moved to serve someone else.

“Keep trying, Freddy. But I think it’s generally considered a bad idea to tip a girl you’re trying to pull – might give her the wrong idea.” Oliver smirked teasingly as Fred flushed.

“Oliver – that’s disgusting. I’m proud of you.” George laughed as the meaning of what Oliver was implying suddenly occurred to him. “Anyway, if Goyle’s not expecting it, with both of us back in the castle, then he’s an even bigger lump than I thought.”

Fred shrugged, indifferently, eyes gleaming at the thought of their proposed mischief. “So, it’s more sporting this way. Besides, what better way to show our excitement over our good friend’s engagement than a little planned chaos?”

“Fred —” Oliver’s voice was warning.

A blast of night-chilled air as the door was opened caused all three wizards to look up from their plotting. A familiar sharp-nosed blond strode in, talking animatedly with his companions.

"Oy! Who let him in?" Fred's loud protest was thankfully lost to the sudden burst of raucous laughter from the group as the casually pushed their way to a nearby table.
"Let off, Fred." Oliver warned, sharply. "There's enough in the air, what with the duel tomorrow, as it is; let's not go making things any muckier than they are already."

Fred gave him a sour look. "You used to be a lot more fun before you started hanging 'round Percy, you know."

With a few pints in him, Oliver knew that Fred could get very belligerent; surprisingly, George was the far more easy-going drunk. Keeping his tone easy, he replied, "Not really, I just don't wan' there to be any way tha' that little twerp can wriggle out of a good thrashing tomorrow."

Fred settled down again, a gleam in his eye at the thought of the proposed beating he'd get to witness. "It would be a shame to let Malfoy miss a much needed lesson in manners. Maybe we should include him in our plans for Goyle."

Oliver grunted, noncommittally, as he emptied the dregs of his glass. “I’m no’ so sure you —” He was cut off by a loud outburst from the Slytherin table.

“…And I said, you might try looking your best, not that it would inspire anything other then the desire to run in the other direction, but hey, it’d be good for a lark…” Oliver was vaguely aware of Draco Malfoy’s faintly nasal voice just a few tables away, bits of their conversation drifting in and out of focus as the general noise level in the pub lulled.

“I rather think Goyle would look good as produce. Maybe a cabbage.”

“Why a cabbage?” Oliver asked George, not really curious, but trying to ignore Pansy’s rather horsy laughter.

“Well, it’s sort of Slytherin colours, idn’it? Sort of sprouts out of the mould like fungus, and rather prone to being wormy…Not really much of a change, then, right?”

“…hair's a complete horror…” Pansy’s sneering voice grated Oliver’s nerves. With a face that looked like she’d been in a high-speed wall accident at birth, he wasn’t quite sure how she got off disparaging anyone else’s looks. Shaking his head slightly, he came back to the conversation.

“… not much time of course, but we’ll manage. Anything for a mate, right Gred?”

“What’er you two on abou’ now?” Oliver asked, irritably.

“Your bachelor party, of course. And you’re Blackening – wouldn’t miss that, now would we?”

“Wee?” Oliver choked on his ale, looking up at his two grinning friends, speechless. The wizarding community in Aberdeenshire was a rather traditional place, but he’d really hoped to avoid the village display.

Rather than try to deal with the disturbing idea of the Weasley twins planning any kind of social functions for him, not to mention how uncomfortably close this brought his thinking to things like wedding nights and beds in conjunction with soft, warm bodies and pretty brown eyes, Oliver decided now was the perfect time for a strategic retreat to the loo.

He had actually been rather surprised, and embarrassed at how natural the image of Hermione, smiling happily as she cradled a baby in the protective embrace of her arms had seemed; a baby with unruly brown curls and a rather crinkled smile…

*No more getting dunted with Fred and George, obviously.*
He was passing by the Slytherin table, trying to block out the unpleasant sound of Goyle’s lumbering laughter as Malfoy’s voice rose above the general mirth, voice full of cruel amusement.

“...I suppose she’s got decent legs though. I’m sure Greg can manage to overlook her other qualities; after all, they make gags for a reason, don’t they?”

Bits and pieces of the overheard conversation resolved themselves rather sickeningly for Oliver, and suddenly it was rather obvious who the topic of this rather disgusting conversation was. The rage was so sudden, so unexpected, he wasn’t aware of his intentions until he found himself already crossing the few steps between them.

His arm shot out before he had even paused to think, snapping Malfoy’s head back with a sharp crack as he hauled him bodily out of his chair, and had him shoved firmly into the wall behind him in a rush that forced the air from the other wizard with a sickening wheeze. Dimly, part of Oliver’s brain noted that he could feel the force of the impact shudder through the slender body under his hands.

Shock quickly gave way to outrage once Malfoy realised what was happening. Oliver could hear his cronies moving behind him as the three of them began fanning out from their seats, but he was focused entirely on the blond in front of him. “I’d na recommend letting me hear you saying such things again, Ferret.” The warning came out from between clenched teeth, as Oliver became aware that the strain on his arms was actually because he had unwittingly hauled him a few inches off the floor. Malfoy glared back, furious, but before he could retort Rosmerta’s voice cut across the excited exclamations of the other patrons surrounding them.

“I won’t be thanking you, Oliver Wood, if you go breaking anything in my pub.”

Everything in the pub went still, watching the tableau curiously. When he made no immediate move to back off, Rosmerta added rather pointedly, “That includes Mister Malfoy, Oliver.”

The blond wizard smirked at him, raising his eyebrows mockingly. Oliver continued to hold him to the wall, eyes narrowed warningly as he fought to suppress the desire to simply ignore the inappropriateness of it, and knock Draco’s head from his shoulders. Slowly, and very carefully, he forced his fingers to uncurl from the expensive silk lapel as he took a step back, still glaring, daring Malfoy to move. Though the self-styled Serpent Prince continued to smirk arrogantly, Oliver was satisfied that none of them attempted to move until he’d made his way back to his seat.

“Still think we’d better lay off?” Fred asked, face pale with suppressed anger and pushing across a fresh ale to the glowering Scotsman.

“Just so long as I don’t end up in any more trouble with Hermione.” Oliver glared across the pub at Goyle’s smirking face.

Oliver thought that perhaps his robes were still smouldering, but couldn’t really concentrate on that right now. Spells had been flying thick and fast for the last twenty minutes, with little or no break between the barrage of sizzling magic. Malfoy had caught him a lucky shot with an Incendio spell, igniting his sleeve while he was concentrating on a truly nasty Verrucae curse. It was exceedingly petty, but Oliver could be like that sometimes. Malfoy wouldn’t be sitting down for anything for at least a week, even with Madame Pomfrey’s help.

Kneeling tensely behind a quickly Transfigured barricade, Oliver paused to catch his breath, and absently Extinguished his robes. He strained is ears in the sound-dampening atmosphere of the
duelling chamber, but Malfoy seemed to be taking this opportunity for a bit of a breather as well. Quietly, he crept from the cover of the barricade to the deep shadows of the wall on his right. Sweat beaded down his forehead, chilling him despite his exertions. He was tired; his head ached and felt as if it were full of nettles, sharp little tendrils of pain shooting through his skull to distract him, and his arm was tender where his robe had caught fire. A hundred other scrapes and bruises added to his overall weariness.

He hoped Malfoy’s arse hurt for a month.

“Contortusaum!”

Yellow light came streaking out of the darkness, burning so brightly it blotted out anything else. The harsh cry and the crushing pain as he was picked up and slammed into the wall behind him were separated by no more then the blink of an eye, and he’d had no chance to escape. Oliver slid down the wall bonelessly, wind knocked from him and struggled to breathe despite the horrible dry sucking as he fought to find oxygen with empty lungs. Ruthlessly he forced his broken body to move, feeling bones grind together in his shin as he forced it to take weight enough to stagger and twist a few steps just ahead of the follow-up curse. Small chunks of mortar rained down on him as the spell hit the wall where he had been a second before, but it didn’t matter, he could feel Malfoy’s curse really beginning to take hold of him now, senses bleeding together like wet paint in the rain.

His veins felt like it was acid coursing through them, agonising and hot. He didn’t know where Malfoy was, but he had to be getting close. Oliver stumbled twice and went down to one knee, fighting furiously against the sensation that he was dissolving, his conscious thoughts running together into a murky puddle, he swung his head wildly, desperately seeking his opponent with senses that were failing. His eyes still showed him pictures, colourful and moving, but it was as if the brain could no longer process what it was being shown – the objects had lost all connotation and meaning to him; blind in a world without those connections. There was an overpowering roaring in his ears that may have been the sound of his own desperate screaming, or may have been the ragged whisper of his breath.

Bringing his wand up in what he knew was a futile gesture, Oliver struggled with lips that felt like sloppy mush to form the spell — any spell, as his world went dark around him.

He’d lost. The thought was very bitter as his confused senses vainly pushed against the blanketing veil that covered them, his last thought before losing consciousness was of Hermione in Goyle’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

Just a couple of notes for those who are curious:

'Contortusaum' is a conjugated (badly, I'm sure - I'm a horrible language student) form of the Latin verb for 'confuse'. It also means 'whirl, turn violently or contort; in throwing, or hurl powerfully'.

'Limax' is the Latin genus name for the slug family. I apologise for any mistakes in my
Latin - I'm not a language wizard, I'm afraid. :-p
Chapter 7: The Art of Making War

Consequentially Yours

Or

A Gentleman’s Duty

Chapter Seven ~ The Art Of Making War

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Hermione woke with a start. Moonlight filtered through the thin cloud cover, revealing the other occupants of the room to still be fast asleep.

It wasn’t the first time she’d had the dream. She hadn’t told anyone about them, not really wanting anyone to know how afraid she actually was. She knew Oliver would give it his best, but there was just so much risk…. Images of Oliver’s large, broken body sliding limply down the stone wall drove her from her bed. Slipping on her robe, Hermione made her way silently down the stone steps to the portrait guarding the tower entrance. Maybe all she needed was a mug of warm milk to put the image of Goyle’s triumphant smirk to rest for the evening.

"""

It was well past midnight. Silver moonlight filtered in through the cracked glazing, illuminating the sleeping occupant of the Downstairs East Corridor guest room.

At least, he should have been sleeping. Instead, Oliver Wood found himself awake, morosely watching the hypnotic patterns the rain made as it slid down the glass to the heavy oak casing below. Tomorrow would dawn grey and damp; a perfect day for an ancient duel with someone like Malfoy. Giving a frustrated sigh at his own inability to concentrate, he pulled his attention back to the multitude of parchment scrolls, tomes and notebooks scattered along the bedspread around him.

Dark Magic cults had been flourishing in the chaos of the post-war wizarding world. With very little left in the way of a functioning government until just recently, it had been the perfect climate for even the most mild mannered, slightly repressed British wizard to suddenly don a costume made of bed sheets, put a stuffed badger on their head, and take to memorising strange pass codes and ancient pledges while plotting mad schemes in dank basements.

Oliver had very little patience with the lot of them, and resented spending his time trying to track down loons in black hoods. But they had to respond to each and every disturbance. There was still the genuine threat of the remaining Death Eaters, and the possibility that their Dark Master was still at large, like a looming shadow over the hopeful new start the wizarding world was trying to make. George was right though; people were actually worse now that they had won.
Now, they had something to lose, he thought with resignation.

Oliver was good at tracking, which was one reason he had been asked by Percy to take on this mess. And he understood, he really did, the importance of keeping quiet about their suspicions to the community at large. Something in his soul cringed at the necessity though. Though thinking of Percy and his directives brought him right back to tomorrow’s duel and a certain tawny-eyed mouse with a sweet smile, and Oliver found that his ability to focus fell away like a house of cards once again. Sighing ruefully, he snagged a very battered notebook, tied closed with a piece of cord, from the pile and with a sweep of his arm, swept the rest off the bed and onto the floor.

Extinguishing the lantern on his way out the door, Oliver decided it was late; he was definitely not getting to sleep anytime soon — time to go in search of some cocoa.

He was rather surprised when he got there to find Hermione sitting at the battered table in the corner of the dim kitchen. She was staring down at her mug, swirling the contents slowly, and very obviously lost in thought.

Slipping into an only slightly wobbly chair quietly, it was several moments before she seemed to realize he was there. She’s actually rather cute when she blushes. Oliver quickly filed that thought away, as Things-Not-To-Be-Thought-About-Hermione-Especially-When-She’s-Right-Bloody-There, and firmly focused on the mug she held in her hands, instead.

“So, I have you teh compete with fer the cocoa supply now, do I?”

“Actually, it’s warm milk with nutmeg. My mother’s recipe. She would always make it for me when I had a bad dream, and couldn’t get back to sleep.” Her voice was sad, belying the smile she had given him.

“Yeh do look a wee bit knackered.” Oliver left it hanging, inviting a response, but Hermione said nothing, just continued to stare at her congealing milk as it skimmed and swirled in the bottom of her cup. Reaching over, he covered one of her hands with his, interrupting her mug’s progress. Startled, she looked up at him, a little belligerently.

“An’ have you been having bad dreams, Mouse?”

“I really wish you would tell me why you choose to call me that.”

Oliver felt himself flushing. “Yeah, we might get to that, one day,” he mumbled. “I think I was asking you if you’ve been sleeping okay.”

Ducking her head, it was Hermione’s turn to mumble.

“What was that?”

“I said it’s nothing. Just a few bad dreams.”

Oliver put down his notebook, to look at her closely in the uncertain light of the fireplace. The bags under her eyes looked even worse than he remembered. Even her hair seemed to sag, as if it were too much effort to do otherwise. This had obviously been happening for a few days, at least.

“Tell me about them?” he asked, gently, shifting his focus to the fire to give her some space.

“It’s nothing, really. Just me being stupid.”

"Somehow, I doubt that. About the duel, is it?"
Hermione nodded wearily. Seeing as she wasn’t forthcoming with any more details, Oliver released her hand and stood up. Looking down on her, he held out his hand and waited.

“What’s this, then?” she asked, confused.

In answer, Oliver gently tugged her to her feet. “A distraction,” he said, smiling, as placed her hand on his waist, held the other at an angle from her body, and began to lead her gently around the room in the intricate steps of a wizarding waltz.

“What are you doing, Oliver?” Hermione hoped he didn’t notice how breathless she sounded.

“Shhhhh. Can’ya no’ let go for a minute, luv?” Oliver’s voice was soft, and Hermione could feel the rise and fall of his breathing through the thin material of her dressing gown, and she was very aware of the warmth of his skin where he touched her.

Momentarily robbed of any retort, Hermione instead allowed herself to relax against his hold, slightly. He had begun to hum an ubiquitous tune quietly; a rumbling rough baritone that was surprisingly pleasant, and brought to mind lonely countryside and blooming fields heather, and Hermione realised how soft the fabric of his shirt was under her hand.

They moved comfortably around the room, a modified circuit as Oliver skilfully avoided the few work surfaces, and deftly wove them around scattered tables and chairs. Hermione leaned her head back and closed her eyes, inexplicably content. She was surrounded by Oliver’s presence, his burly frame and strong arms enveloping her, his voice humming just above her ear, his warm scent invading her nostrils. With her eyes closed and the gentle breeze of their passage moving her hair, the whole experience became surreal. The floor no longer existed beneath her feet and they were flying. For once, Hermione found the sensation extremely pleasant. The whole scene was slightly ridiculous; here they were, dancing around the dark kitchen, late at night, in their bedclothes.

“It was the duel.”

She hadn’t even realised she planned to speak until the words were out of her mouth. Something about being here, right now, just made it very easy to talk, and the way Oliver was holding her gave her the impression that nothing could hurt her.

Oliver didn’t stop humming, just softly squeezed her hand companionably, and she continued, not thinking, eyes still closed as they danced.

“I keep dreaming about it, over and over. I know I won’t even be there, but in my dreams, I can see it all happening, like I can see right inside your head, and, and…” she faltered, looking up at him uncertainly, suddenly not sure if it would be rude to tell him that, in her dreams, he always lost.

Oliver looked down, as if sensing her dilemma, and smiled crookedly at her. “Sound’s like I’ve done all my losing already then, doesn’t it?”

Hermione made a rueful face as they slowly drifted to a stop as Oliver stopped humming. “Sorry.”

Oliver shrugged, unconcerned, and spoke lightly. “You’re entitled to be scared, Mouse. You don’t have to put on a brave face all the time – but don’t think for a moment that I’ll lose you to that little ferret.” He was looking down on her, amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes.

*His eyes are actually hazel.*

She wasn’t even aware of thinking it; she was too busy telling herself that what she was about to do was a really, *really* bad idea. The impulse had become so strong, she found herself leaning her
weight forward to keep her balance as she raised up on her tiptoes, without any conscious command to do so. Her hand, which was still resting on his waist, took a tighter grip, bunching the soft fabric of his shirt between fingers that shook slightly. The other hand crept up his arm, tentatively, to finally settle high on his shoulder, fingers gently seeking to brush the soft skin of his neck. Dimly, she was aware that he made no move, to either encourage her or evade her.

This close, she could smell the scent of spice and a faint hint of aftershave, all mixed up with the myriad of other smells that were heady, warm and rather distractingly masculine.

I’m probably going to regret this later.

Closing her eyes at the last moment, she finished leaning in and placed a soft kiss on his lips. Not moving to deepen it, she held the contact for a long moment, savouring the warmth of his skin against hers, the sense of connection as he suddenly moved to hold her in place with one large hand on the small of her back, before releasing her.

“Good luck, Oliver,” Hermione said softly, watching his face for some hint as to what he was thinking. She couldn’t identify the emotion in his eyes, wasn’t even sure she knew what she was feeling. Suddenly feeling terribly drained, she gave him one last searching look, and left him standing there by their table as she headed back up to her bed.

The day of the duel dawned bright and cold. The rain the previous night had washed away the last of the spring frost still hanging round, but the ground was still too frozen to accept it, and the Quidditch pitch beneath Oliver’s broom when he’d been out early that morning had been flooded and mucky.

He’d spent the entire day quietly, focusing on being calm. He’d resolutely pushed all thoughts of the duel from his mind, along with the puzzles of Nifflers, gallivanting dragons, or strange lights in the sky. He’d hoped to catch Hermione in the Great Hall that morning, in hopes of joining her for some breakfast before her classes, but reluctantly decided against the idea. He’d been very careful since coming to the castle to give her lots of space. After last night, he was fairly sure she would want it.

The day had passed swiftly for Oliver. It seemed he had just had his breakfast, when he was out again with Fred and George for a pick-up game of Quidditch. His days of playing professionally may be past, but he still loved to fly. Lunch had found him eating lightly from a tray in his room, laughing and joking lightly with the twins as they remembered past pranks they had dragged Oliver into during their time at Hogwarts.

Before he knew it, lunch was done, his time was up and he was following Professor McGonagall through a damp corridor deep beneath the castle on his way to the Duelling chamber - and Malfoy.

McGonagall peeled off to the side as Oliver entered the room, to ascend to join Professors Flitwick and Firenze, who were standing on a sort of raised dais on an enclosed balcony to his right. The balcony almost looked organic, like it had grown out of the stone wall of the chamber. Dark bronze rails gleamed in the torchlight, and intricate carving was thrown into shadowed relief.

The chamber itself was large, as large as the Great Hall, Oliver would guess. Eight stone pillars supported the ceiling, all massively thick. If he stood against one and encircled it with his arms, Oliver knew he wouldn’t be able to touch his own hand on the other side. A faint prickling could be felt in the air, a warning that the chamber’s inherent magic was functioning. The room itself almost looked like it had been carved out of the bare rock; the walls were rough-hewn, and bore
tool marks in places, while the uneven floor had been worn smooth with age and use. From the corner of his eye, he saw Fred move off to stand in an alcove obviously intended for him as Oliver’s Second. It was the first time Oliver could remember him looking so serious, his freckles standing out sharply against his pale skin.

Draco Malfoy had entered while Oliver had been examining the room, being lead in from an entrance concealed in the shadows of the far wall. Professor Snape glanced across to Oliver impassively and leaned over to speak with his student briefly before turning to leave again. Goyle hovered nervously, until Draco motioned him to take his place with an impatient jerk of his head.

In the very centre of the room was a depiction of the Hogwarts crest carved into the dark stone, each quadrant of the shield engraved with a different metal – Dark polished bronze for Ravenclaw, bright straw-coloured gold for Hufflepuff, gleaming copper for Gryffindor and pure shinning silver for Slytherin. The effect was impressive in the flickering light, but somehow menacing as well; the torchlight making it glitter wetly, more like the stones themselves were weeping.

Oliver wondered how many people had died here.

Calmly, he moved towards the centre of the room, taking his position just beneath the school motto, *Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus*. Malfoy moved slowly to stand opposite him, above the Hogwarts banner, about three paces separating them. Oliver eyed him speculatively, waiting until Malfoy gave him a nod before moving away the proscribed number of paces to take up his position again, waiting.

When it came right down to it, Oliver found it difficult to be intimidated by Malfoy, despite his reputed skill as a Dark Wizard. He tried to keep that feeling in check, knowing that it could easily lead to a miscalculation that would cost Hermione dearly. He’d always been nothing more then a tetchy little snot desperately seeking attention and importance, in Oliver’s eyes, an image that no amount of Dark Marks could erase.

He waited, unmoving in the oppressive silence of the large chamber. He could sense the immenseness of the room, all the open space above his head as the ceiling vaulted out of sight, housing strange, rustling noises that brought to mind leather scraping stone, or scales on wood. Draco shifted slightly, changing his grip on his wand as he studied Oliver intently. Oliver could see the tense lines of Draco’s body, poised and ready to strike the moment the signal was given. Oliver forced himself to relax, muscles and posture loose and ready to move without thought.

The loud crack that was their signal caused both of them to immediately dodge and cast simultaneously. Oliver felt the magic crackle as what felt like a knee-reversal jinx zinged past him, missing by a good yard as he made it to one of the columns. His own curse had also missed, but forced Malfoy to swerve inefficiently and allowing Oliver to get off another jinx that scored on Malfoy’s shoulder. Nothing debilitating, but he knew from experience that the damn produce would be very uncomfortable for the next little while.

Oliver felt he could live with that.

With two well-trained wizards, he knew this contest could take quite awhile. While they were both fresh and alert, they were unlikely to finish this. It would get increasingly harder to think quickly enough, move fast enough and summon the necessary emotion behind each spell the longer this went on. Magic on this scale was more of a marathon than a race, and Oliver resolved to wait out the little ferret, if it took all afternoon.
Listening to Professor Binns while your fate was being decided in a dungeon far beneath you must surely break some sort of humanitarian accord, like the Geneva Convention, Hermione felt. It was her first class directly after this, and she found she was having enough difficulty focusing during Defence Against the Dark Arts class, which was considerably more interesting. Harry had to keep stepping in to subtly guide her when Professor Lupin had his back turned, a state of affairs that had never once occurred before in all their years together at Hogwarts.

“Careful, Hermione,” Harry whispered, as she realized she was using completely the wrong wand-work for well … anything really.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Hermione’s low murmur was just loud enough to be heard by her partner. He’d been so vigilant this class, and she was sure he must feel as though he’d been partnered with Crabbe or Goyle instead of one of the supposedly smartest witches in the school. His smile was slightly wry, but his eyes were warm and forgiving as he took up his position again.

“Just try not to accidentally remove anything I may want later.”

Grateful for his attempted distraction, Hermione smiled in return and resolved to force herself to focus for the remainder of the class.

Unfortunately for Harry, Hermione wasn’t as successful as she had hoped, and the last half hour passed in soggy discomfort for him as Hermione repeatedly whispered her apologies for hitting him with an Ever-Wet charm.

“…you may find that some spells react slightly differently than you anticipated on certain subjects. Many of these slight differences are often brushed off, even by reputable sources, as difference in intent of the caster. However, there is at least one Arabian wizard who has presented the theory that Muggleborn witches and wizards will have slightly different reactions to certain types of magic, due to the rather different nature of their blood…”

The signal for the end of classes interrupted Lupin before he could continue.

“Alright, class, for next week, I want lots of practice on those counter-jinxes, and a full parchment scroll on the uses of Switching spells in defensive magic. Class dismissed!”

Hermione began to stuff her scattered books and notes into her bulging rucksack when she noticed the shadows falling across her desk. Looking up, she found Harry and Ron looming above her, grinning mischievously.

Ron reached down to grab her arm, as Harry quickly shouldered her bag. “C’mon Hermione, there is no way even you can manage Binns’ class today.”

“Ronald!” Hermione tried to sound scolding, despite the difficulty of it while being dragged bodily from the room by her two ‘rescuers’. “Where are you taking me?”

“Back to your dorm – we can hide out there until tea, and I’m sure we’ll know about Wood by then.” Ron sounded very gruff, but it was the first time he had even remotely acknowledged Oliver in anything other than a derogatory snark since this whole mess had begun, and Hermione was reminded once again why he was one of her best friends. Sometimes, it was easy to miss how much Ron – and Harry, had both matured since she had first scolded them rather bossily about being out in the halls after curfew so many years ago.

“Ron, we can’t bunk off of classes like this, we’ll get —”

“Hermione, relax! None of your teachers are really going to go after Hermione Granger for skiving
off at a time like this; besides —” Harry turned to shrug at her, smiling, “detention later is better then sitting through History of Magic with you as wound up as you are.”

Laughing, Hermione smacked both of them lightly and followed them, somewhat guiltily, back to Gryffindor Tower. She was secretly very touched by their gesture.

“..-

THE COOL stone was soothing to Oliver’s chapped skin. He ignored the tightness of the burned flesh as he scanned the room meticulously, looking for any sign of the little wretch. Draco had taken the momentary distraction as he’d dealt with the flames thrown at his Second, to camouflage himself in some way. He really hated the rules to this damn match. No matter how much Snape liked to lecture that they were all based on common sense application, Oliver still found it was often just plain nastiness.

They had been at it for what felt like hours. The exertion had caused Malfoy’s baby fine fringe to plaster to his forehead, and Oliver could feel himself slowing and the effort to summon every new spell was getting greater and greater. He knew that now, it had become dangerous. They were getting tired, and mistakes were happening with greater frequency. A missed protection spell, a botched counter curse or jinx, and everything could be over in a flash.

A Disillusionment charm, Oliver thought. Which meant he would look like the stone that made up the chamber, or possibly one of the pillars. Concentrating, Oliver whispered a quick warming charm, and then shouted “Glacialis!”

Deep, bone aching cold spread throughout the chamber, raw and unyieldingly harsh. Intricate, crystalline frost grew along the walls and pillars like beautiful glass ivy, and the air seemed to shimmer with ice fine as glitter. Oliver stood still in the silent room and listened, intently poised, waiting for his opponent to give himself away. Sweat soaked clothes began to frost, despite the warming charm he’d cast, and Oliver continued to watch and listen as the moments dragged on. He had just begun to wonder if perhaps Malfoy had managed to cast a counter charm without him knowing, despite his vigilance, when suddenly he felt the rush of magic as a ragged voice behind him shouted “Sectumsempra!”

He had been ready for it, and managed to dodge and deflect most of the spell, but felt the edge of it catch him low on the hips and bite deeply into the heavy muscle of his thigh. Oliver spun around quickly, his footing suddenly treacherous on the now wet floor, pushing back his disgust at the lengths to which the other man was prepared to go to make a woman into a piece of property.

With a panicked feeling in his guts, he saw Malfoy step out from behind a pillar, unexpectedly close and now standing on the copper lion only a dozen feet away. He held his wand out at a precise angle as he advanced, shivering slightly with the after-effects of the numbing cold.

Oliver could see the sneer already forming on the aristocratic face, despite the great heaving breaths Malfoy was taking, and a small part of him noted the struggle with grim satisfaction.

Oliver was in trouble, and they both knew it. Snape’s training had done him well to get him this far. He was a better wizard than Malfoy, but this contest was not geared for the better wizard, but for the more ruthless. The sheer lack of conscience needed to succeed obviously wasn’t something that the unpleasant Potions Master could teach. Oliver watched as Malfoy stalked him, moving across the bronze eagle of Ravenclaw house, now only a handful of feet away. He moved wearily, matching his movements with a painful limp, his damaged leg shaking under him as it threatened to give out entirely. He couldn’t run – he would be spelled down before he got three steps. Oliver grimly began gathering his remaining emotional strength, ready to channel whatever he had left
into his defence. He had to make it count.

“You know, I think I’ll keep her, Wood. I don’t really think Greg would know what to do with her.” Malfoy was taunting him now, waiting for him to try something desperate. Oliver refused to respond, carefully calculating any possibility his racing brain threw out for him.

“Oh, I forgot, you actually like the little whore, don’t you? You certainly jumped in quickly enough when the law gave you an excuse to claim her. How long have you been waiting for a chance? Did you used to dream about her in her dorm, so close, yet absolutely untouchable while right under McGonagall’s eyes?” Malfoy was moving across the engraved motto on the floor, *Draco … titillandus* a thought began to tickle his brain.

Oliver wasn’t really paying attention as Malfoy continued to try to goad him into action, struggling to keep the slow smile from spreading across his face when Lupin’s words came back to him “… *skewered with the sword up you sleeve*…” Oliver adjusted his grip on his wand, handle now slick with sweat, and watched for the flickering movement that would tell him that Draco was about to extend himself and the final blow was coming.

When it came, Oliver nearly missed it, and almost reacted too late. Grey eyes shuttered, fingers twitched slightly over the dark wood wand handle, and then Malfoy was shouting, voice resonating in the vaulted ceilings of the stone room, and everything slowed down for Oliver as he marshalled what reserves he had left and forced leaden limbs to move with speed and agility.

“*Depello Visceraum!*” Malfoy’s spell hung in the air like shards of glass, caught in the impossibly stretched moment, even as part of Oliver’s brain noted the spell, and realised how dangerous Malfoy really was. Had he succeeded in hitting him, Oliver’s guts would now be a rather grisly, short-lived fountain before his empty body fell like a used sack to the floor.

Dropping down, Oliver was already yelling, his own voice raw with strain, “*Ferula!*” and dropped his wand to take firm hold of the conjured rod in one smooth motion that had him carried forward and up, the weight of his entire body behind him as he struck out, instinct alone guiding him and sweeping the staff through the intervening space, cutting the air with a shrill whistle.

Malfoy’s eyes widened; the blond wizard had not been prepared for this, had no way of getting his wand into position in time to stop Oliver from connecting with his body with the force of a sledgehammer. The extra sets of eyestalks from one of Oliver’s earlier hits were interfering with his ability to see, giving him confusing and contradictory information, causing Malfoy to react jerkily, like a broken stringed puppet. The wooden rod caught him low on his chest, forcing the air from his body as he folded inwards, inadvertently trapping it against his body. Oliver had felt the snapping *crack!* like dry wood in a storm as Malfoy’s ribs had broken under his hand. All this was noted dryly, dispassionately as his body continued to use the extra momentum to discard the staff as he rolled over his wand, coming up onto one knee, unsure in the moment as to why his right leg was refusing to take any weight, and confused by the slick floor.

Focusing, wand extended, he clung to the knowledge that it wasn’t over until he actually put Malfoy under against the roaring in his ears and the sudden tunnelling of his vision, images now only being perceived in hazy black and white. Malfoy was clutching his side, doubled over, but struggling to get his breath back, trying to raise his wand with trembling fingers. Oliver just felt weary, and disgusted when he whispered “*Somnus Quiesco Gravis.*”

And allowed the darkness to take them both.

-..-
He’d only been dozing when she arrived. He could smell the subtle change in the air as she sat next to him, a faint aroma of cinnamon and ink. He indulged by not responding immediately, just enjoying the fact that she was here, and was currently brushing his hair from his forehead.

Her fingers were cool, and made him feel uncomfortable and warm for some reason.

He allowed her to get back to her seat before he opened his eyes, not sure he wanted to deal with her embarrassment at being caught. She was curled up in a fairly large, comfortable chair, and Oliver had the sneaking suspicion that she had transfigured it from one of the ridiculously small ones usually supplied for those visiting the infirm.

“Oliver!” He was grateful she’d kept her voice down. As soon as he’d opened his eyes, he became aware of a dull throbbing ache in his skull, and the maddening, itching sensation of his bones being knit.

The Hospital Wing was quiet and he could hear Madame Pomfrey bustling about somewhere further down the row of beds, though thankfully, the curtains were drawn. Hermione was surrounded by large textbooks, legs drawn up under her skirt so she could balance her work on her lap. Her school robe lay discarded behind her.

“Wha’ time is it, then?” His voice sounded raspy with sleep. He was faintly aware of a tickly sensation along his right forearm.

“You missed dinner; it’s going on eight o’clock.” It was around this point that he became aware that the tingling along his forearm was actually being caused by Hermione’s finger as she traced absent patterns on the skin, just below his wrist. He could faintly see that she was tracing the shiny pink skin left after a bad burn; all that remained of Draco’s spell. He wasn’t sure what to think about that gesture, at the moment, so decided to focus on something simpler.

“I’m sure I’ll be able to get something later.” He watched her carefully for a moment. She was looking down, watching her finger as it moved, her hair falling like a curtain of spun caramel between them. He felt himself smiling. She wasn’t going to be Missus Goyle, and things looked pretty good right now that he might not even end up as a toad.

“How did Malfoy come out of it?”

Hermione glanced up at him, archly. “Second,” she said.

“Ha, very ha. I can see we still have to work on our sense of humour.”

“Oh, I don’t know... I thought it was pretty funny.” She was smiling at him again, cheekily. He couldn’t remember the last time she was so free around him. Slowly, it was beginning to sink in for Oliver. Hermione was safe —

She was also rather soon to become his wife.

Definitely not something to be thinking about when she was Right Bloody There, you twit.

“How did Malfoy come out of it?” But Oliver was at a loss for what to say. The comfortable mood fell away, and their easy teasing now felt awkward as they both became aware of their new status.

Hermione seemed to suddenly realise the way she had been touching his arm moments before, and hastily settled back in her chair, away from him.

“Well, Malfoy will be alright, in a few days. Madam Pomfrey was scolding everyone in the vicinity when the two of you came in, saying how barbaric duelling was, but … he’s going to be
fine, unfortunately.”

“Can’t make your last year too easy on you now, you’ll go soft.”

“Couldn’t you have considered it an early birthday present?” She grinned at him, but it was quickly gone again as she shifted nervously in her chair.

Oliver could hear the faint murmur of other patients further back in the room as he and Hermione searched for something to say to fill up the awkward silence. “I’m really glad —” he began, just as she started, “Oliver, I wish —”

She caught his eye and gazed at him with exasperation, lips twitching as she tried to hold onto her stern expression, until they both began chuckling. It felt good to laugh with her, though it didn’t completely dispel the earlier awkwardness.

“So lass, where exactly do we go from here?” Inwardly, Oliver grimaced. That hadn’t been what he’d meant to say at all.

Hermione hesitated, brows furrowed. Nibbling her lower lip, she frowned at him absently while she thought, an expression to be replaced by a mischievous look before she then leaned over and brushed her lips briefly against his cheek.

Without saying a word, she turned and gathered up her things, and replaced her black robe. Before Oliver could gather his potion-addled wits to say anything further, she had given him a fleeting smile; just a small incline of her lips really, and was gone.

Lying back, Oliver was thankful for the time alone to organise his thoughts. The glimpse of the small, glittering object as she’d turned back to him had caught him completely off-guard, and he needed time to think, carefully, about what to do next. Pinned to her robes, right beneath her house crest, was a familiar worn silver brooch, twin hearts entwined amidst a labyrinth of filigree patterning.

Oliver could feel the goofy grin grow as he stared after her, extremely pleased with the world just then.

-..-
Chapter 8: Further Back Than In

Consequentially Y ours

Or

AGentleman’s Duty

Chapter Eight ~ Further Back Than In

"Do you really have to go?"

While Oliver wished he could claim that her voice held a wistful note in it, or that the question had been motivated by anything other then polite interest, he still appreciated the attempt, and tried to ignore the prissy disapproval that Hermione was trying hard to conceal. She stood in the doorway, attempting to stay out of his path as he hunted out all his belongings from an astounding array of places. He was slightly amazed at how far spread they had become in the short weeks he’d been here. And he didnae even want to get started on how his socks ended up tangled with the books on the high shelves above the dresser.

"It's a good opportunity. The team in Luxemburg’s been expressing an interest in British players for a while now." His response sounded distracted as he inwardly grimaced at the lie. He continued to pack his not overly large bag with far more then it should reasonably hold without magic, a fact Oliver didn’t even really think about. Magic like this had always been a part of his world; he tended to only notice it when it was absent. The sturdy case of soft brown leather still looked good even after being bumped around the world, from Quidditch match to training camp, from Hogwarts to the Welsh mountains.

Hermione looked at him with open curiosity, the hints of her earlier disapproval momentarily forgotten as she pondered him, her teeth worrying her bottom lip slightly in a way he had come to recognise as Hermione at her softest, all mother-hen tendencies cast aside.

"What?" he asked, curiously.

She looked at him thoughtfully, as if trying to gauge how to say what she was thinking. Their relationship was hesitant and careful, and sometimes Oliver feared they’d always just be polite acquaintances, like someone you see on the Portkey route everyday on the way into work. She was worrying her lip again, and Oliver couldn’t help but notice how it started to swell ever so slightly, and wondered if it would look that shade of pink after she’d been thoroughly kissed.

As if sensing his guilty thoughts, she brought her arms up to cross her chest defensively as she leaned against the doorframe before speaking. "I just never thought I'd ever hear you consider playing anywhere but Britain, that's all. It's honestly a bit of a shock."

Oliver looked away, a bit uncomfortable with the deception, as well as the faintly accusing tone of her comment. His own strange thoughts this morning were making him edgy. "Yeah, well, I seem to recall someone no’ all that long ago telling me tha’ maybe it was time to grow up an’ use my talents for something useful."

His mouse looked at him with both shock and amusement, raising an eyebrow in mock reprimand as she reminded, "I seem to recall that we were discussing things other then Quidditch at the time."

Tension made Oliver’s reply sharp. "True, but maybe it's wha’ I'm best at. After all, I'm going to
have a family to support one of these days soon, now aren't I?"

The comment hung uncomfortably between them, and Oliver found he couldn't meet her eyes.

"Oliver, I -"

"Forget it, Hermione." He cut her off gently, feeling like a heel at her obvious distress. "It's fine, really. An' you never know, maybe nothing will come of it."

Hermione reached forward to capture his hand, and give it a quick squeeze. "Not if any of those recruitment agents have eyes at all. Please write me, and let me know how it goes, okay?"

To guilty to do anything else, Oliver nodded his agreement as he watched Hermione hurry from the room.

"-..-

The cobbled street was crowded with late afternoon commuters trying to get home in the cold grey drizzle. Oliver quickly checked the folded map Percy had thrust at him along with his document packet, shielding it as much as possible with the bulk of his body, feeling his pack shift precariously as he did so.

A heavy hand pulled him under the dubious protection of a small storefront awning, and Oliver grunted his appreciation to Charlie without pausing his study of the mystifying squiggles that were supposed to be telling them where the best place to catch further transit would be. Not for the first time this trip Oliver found himself wanting to strangle a certain Under-Secretary; at least a little.

Muggles! Getting here had been a relatively easy matter of floo-ing into a quietly-Ministry-maintained residence just outside of Rotterdam. Moving around however, had proved to be a trial of patience and virtues. Oliver thought maybe Percy just enjoyed inflicting punishments on him.

It took them the better part of a day to finally find the correct sequence of buses and trains to bring them the rest of the way. In the end, Charlie had crumpled the map, and flagged a curious, bright-eyed seven year old child while her mother had been distracted by some kind of official, and asked her for directions. Only a child wouldn’t think to question why two seemingly grown men couldn’t manage to catch a bus, and had to ask to have the various metal coins the Muggles seemed to favour identified.

Once she had removed her fingers from her mouth, she had proven to be fairly comprehensible; more so then Percy’s scrawled directions. She had explained, with some authority, that the large metal coaches were actually imprisoned dragons being forced to serve, and that they actually ate the strange metal coins used to board them, but the evil wizards who controlled them rationed what they were allowed from each passenger.

Charlie and Oliver chuckled at her very serious explanations, laughing in a ‘what kids won’t think of’ kind of way, but Oliver had to suppress a grin when he caught Charlie rather surreptitiously adding extra coins to his fare when the driver wasn’t looking.

The resulting detour was colourful, but they now stood inside the bowels of a stern, fortress-like building, wearing little visitor passes arranged for by the Ministry that allowed them to fit into the unfamiliar surroundings.

The bright lights overhead made the polished chrome of the utilitarian tables gleam harshly, seeming to emphasis that clinical detachment was as much a part of the uniform for the white-coated healer before him as the badge over his left breast pocket, proclaiming cheerfully for all the
world that Arts Willem Schuyler would be only too happy to help them.

Irrationally, Oliver hated the inoffensive tag.

“As you can see, De Heer Wood, the body is in a most unusual condition…” Unfortunately, his gesture only brought Oliver’s attention back to the pathetic little corpse presented on the examination table, and his translation spell began to waver again as his concentration dissolved once more. She should have had a simple, joyful childhood ahead of her. Instead, Lummi was lying here in a cold examiner’s office while the overly bright lights robbed her face of its remaining youth and personality, and made her lifeless body the grey of week-old muck. He refused to think of her as ‘the victim’; refused to dismiss the spirit that has once brightened this small body so casually.

The doctor had continued his explanation of his findings during Oliver’s inner struggle, “…volledig afgevoerd van bloed wa—“ Hard concentration brought the words swimming back into focus, “—en it was found,” though Oliver was sure the doctor was beginning to wonder about the strange Investigation Specialists who showed up and proved unable to follow a simple report to its end without asking for most of it to be repeated. It didn’t really matter anyway. This one was just like the others.

He didn’t dare look over at Charlie, knowing from the tenseness emanating from his corner of the room that the gentle man was close to ‘sharing’ his emotions with anyone in the vicinity right about now. He had to look, though. Merlin knew he wasn’t a Healing specialist of any sort, managing only the most basic of field dressings, and even those were, more often then not, pretty rough; Oliver being the sort to ignore injury as being rather irrelevant, more sort of a minor annoyance really, when there were more important things going – like a game.

Or an investigation into a small child’s death.

He had to look, take in every detail that he could of the last moments of this little girl’s struggle to live, knowing that Percy would have a team standing by to go through every memory he could squeeze into a Pensive. Someone was going to pay for this.

And Arts Schuyler droned on, with words that could never recreate the texture of the life they described with such technical precision.

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Fred could honestly say he hadn’t enjoyed himself so much in years. Being back in Hogwarts brought out a surprising bit of nostalgia for he and George, and having Hermione there as a sort of ‘Den Mother’ (she was rather too old to be Head Girl, she felt, so instead took a rather un-official role in Gryffindor Tower) just made it all the better, especially now that they had grown into something very like friends. She still gave them disapproving looks whenever she caught sight of one of their products, still acted swotty and bossy when she suspected that she may have caught them discussing mischief (which was almost always), but now it was tempered with a laughing gleam, carefully hidden in front of the younger years; an appreciation for their own peculiar brilliance that may, they were honestly beginning to suspect, have always been there.

All in all, it was good to be back.

Not so happy at this turn of events was a certain hulking Slytherin. He and George had taken every opportunity since Oliver had left to make Goyle’s life more interesting, and if they could manage to catch Malfoy with the same prank, so much the better.
It was a cold and windy March day, the kind of day that had always made him wonder why he had to get out from under his warm and inviting covers, the kind of day that shouldn’t be faced without warm, spiced pumpkin juice and a roaring fire, the late damp and chilly weather firmly locked outside. He and George would have to be getting back to their shop in Diagon Alley before long, but now they had a whole host of memories to chortle over during the slow season.

Ron and Harry had proven apt allies, with promising potential as future delinquents after their own hearts. Ron especially held a manic gleam of enthusiasm, born of years of torment now being paid back with interest. With their help, they had managed to pull off not one good prank, as promised to Oliver, but an entire week of them, each better then the last. Who would forget the Cabbage Queens? Or the Singing Slytherin they had unleashed one night in the Great Hall? Fred had thought that privately, McGonagall had liked that one, and had heard her giving Snape a hard time in the halls one evening over his student’s lack of talent.

The crème de la crème though, the one he and George were bending all of their considerable talents towards this morning, would actually be preformed by one Hermione Jane Granger.

She just didn’t know it yet.

Hermione was a genius of historic proportions when it came to creative magic – and the fact that she only ever used this incredible talent for mischief when Ron and Harry were involved made the Weasley twins want to weep at wasted potential. They had jokingly discussed the problem on and off for years, finally deciding that one of them would have to marry her in order to hope to have any sort of bad influence over her at all.

Trouble was, they weren’t sure that she wouldn’t have a stronger influence on them, and that though always kept them away. It was almost a tease, having the perfect source of potential mischief just sitting there, reading _Hogwarts, A History_ and as inaccessible to the pranksters as Snape’s undergarment drawer.

Nothing would please the boys more then to be able to recount the prank to Oliver when he finally came back from what every backyard-of-beyond place Percy had sent him this time. After all, they had promised to hand out a little payback to the gits, after all. But the look on Oliver’s face when they finally reveal that it was actually his darling fiancée who planned and executed whatever plot or other, would be something they could tease him over for years.

Not that they had ever doubted she had it in her, mind. Those kinds of under-estimations could get a bloke on the wrong end of a rather prissy wand in a real hurry, as Ron had discovered during his sixth year.

He still tended to flinch a bit whenever he caught sight of something yellow streaking through the air.

Fred paused on his way to the loo to savour the mental image of Marietta Edgecombe, _Sneak_ written clear as day across her acne-ridden face.

_Maybe it wouldn’t be too difficult after all._

With a spring in his step, Fred went off in search of his twin. Suddenly, he felt all warm and fuzzy inside, despite the grey drizzle outside the tower.

When he found George, he was enjoying breakfast in a nearly deserted Hall, and was already in deep discussions with their favourite Gryffindor witch.
“Greetings one and all,” Fred chirped with exaggerated cheeriness as he snagged a seat opposite his twin. Absently taking a warm sweet roll from the golden plate materializing in front of him, he regarded Hermione warmly as she sipped hot pumpkin juice from a mug clutched between her hands, warming them.

Hermione spoke without turning from her regard of George. “Whatever it is Fred, the answer is no.”

George grinned, leaning back to allow Fred to lead their assault. Winking at his twin, Fred leaned over to lay his head on Hermione’s shoulder, ostensibly to converse better with George. “You know, we’ve done a very thorough job this week of showing Mr. Goyle the error of his thinking, haven’t we George?”

George leaned in owlishly stroking his chin as he very seriously regarded his brother, completely ignoring Hermione. “Yes, I think we can safely categorize him as chastised.”

Fred’s voice took on the portentous quality of one lost in religious money-schemes. “As he should be, Brother George. But let us not forget, there is one other who deserves a little righteous punishment in their rather privileged life.”

“Sod off, Fred. I’m not getting involved –“ Hermione’s protest was cut off by George’s voice.

“It will likely be a few months before Oliver can fly again. Wounds like that don’t heal properly for a long time. I imagine it must be killing Oliver, not being able to do something he loves so much.” George never even looked at Hermione when he spoke, and his tone was mild, fitting in with Fred’s game seamlessly.

George was the milder twin, the one less given to wild gestures and wantonness – though compared to Fred, that wasn’t necessarily saying much - and despite her fondness for Fred, Hermione secretly suspected that George was the smarter of the two.

Hermione sat back slowly, gazing at the two brothers speculatively. She put down her paper very carefully, still with that far off gaze, and slowly got up from the table. Fred watched as she very deliberately pushed up her sleeves as she headed from the room.

Fred glanced over to his twin and grinned. Settling back in his chair with his hands cradling the back of his head, he relaxed. He knew they hadn’t really fooled Hermione – well, not really, but had rather gently reminded her of a reason worth breaking a few rules over.

His sixth year self would have fallen off his broom in shock.

-..-

As far as anyone was concerned, Oliver had spent the years following the war traipsing about the countryside, in pursuit of the game he loved most. In a way, he didn’t mind really, as his real purpose often did allow him time to consider how to best start up the leagues when the time was right, knowing that England needed something to be happy about again, and not really minding that he probably looked a right obsessive berk to the world at large for the persona he played for Percy’s plans.

That was, until now.

The subtle reminder that Hermione also shared that general impression had been a blow; far more difficult to swallow then even having to endure his mother’s, off-times clarion, haranguing on the subject.
Actually, in his document packet, shoved at him before as he’d hastily Floo-ed out of Percy’s office, had been a letter from the matriarch of the Wood family on the subject of his upcoming nuptials, and his general uselessness at the given time. His correspondence was always forwarded in this manner, allowing him to respond fairly normally, and helping to preserve the illusion that he was merely out of country on some nutter Quidditch errand.

Holding the rough-edged parchment absently in his hands, Oliver realized that soon, Hermione would be on the list of people he lied to on a regular basis; if she wasn’t there already, and he felt something inside him harden as that thought crossed his mind, causing him to glare at the letters he held in his hand, not liking the feeling that thought had given him at all, one thought humming away in the back of his mind, where he couldn’t examine it too closely.

How could he ever be worthy of someone like Hermione if he couldn’t even be honest with her?

Telling her anything could very easily put her in danger. He wasn’t too worried for his own sake; as his intended, Scottish Wizarding custom entitled her to his estate and a mourning period of a year and a day before, he was fairly sure, she could be forced into another one of these blasted Contracts, though even the thought of someone else attempting to claim her had his thoughts wandering dangerously close to Things He Tried Bloody Hard Not To Think About. Though, logically, he knew that Weasley would grow a pair and step up for her, if she really needed him to. No, he could easily accept the risks inherent in what he did, but he didn’t really think he had the right to give those same risks to Hermione to shoulder – he knew damn well that she would insist on helping if she knew what it was he was up to, and wasn’t fool enough to think she’d obey him out of any kind of marital authority, and stay out of it.

The owl his mum had sent had been blunt and to the point. She reminded him, ever so gently, that ‘…no son of hers was going to disgrace the family name by taking what wasn’t his to wed, no matter what law he hid behind’, and that he’d ‘…better make sure he had her father’s permission before he brought her home for the nuptials.’ The implications in that had caused the very tip of his ears to flame, a whole cloud of wriggly things making his stomach uncomfortable (but then, he knew he shouldn’t have let Charlie choose the pub they had supped in that night anyway, the roguish dragon-keeper having more then half his eye on the pretty bar maid, as opposed to the dubious quality of the establishment).

Almost as an afterthought, she included congratulations, and an admonishment that she expected grandchildren within the year.

Groaning in frustration, Oliver crumpled the family missive and chucked it into the fireplace on his way out the door.

The hotel they were staying in was a Muggle establishment; an attempt to keep out of sight in an overly cautious Wizarding world, and keep their movements clandestine. Oliver had already spent the first two days since leaving Britain putting in necessary appearances at the Bigonville Bombers’ pitch. He was supposedly attending a large conference being held in just outside of the city proper, his absence neatly concealed by the sheer volume of witches and wizards who would be attending.

The dark blue carpeting running down the short hallway absorbed the soft lighting, causing the old-looking brass fixtures to gleam brightly at the contrast. Oliver found the idea of making their mod-ern eklec-tric lights that looked like candelabrum slightly puzzling, but accepted it as one more mysterious Muggle ritual that he would never understand. Stopping at room 409, Oliver knocked once, sharply in warning on the dark wood door before entering.

Charlie looked up from where he had been bent over the room’s small desk. His distinctive red hair
was tousled and added to the paler-than-usual face staring back at him from cloudy and slightly unfocused eyes, and Oliver knew he was probably looking into a living mirror. “You took your time, now didn’t you?” Charlie remarked by way of greeting.

“Though’ I’d give yeh a moment to at least pick up yer dirty pants off’n the floor first. I had a few owls to look at anyway.”

Charlie grunted at the knowing accuracy of Oliver’s assessment of his previous activities, instead getting up to tack a make-shift map to the wall where it would be illuminated by the rather utilitarian floor lamp. Five dark circles highlighted locations they had visited in the last week. Images of the things he had seen would be fuel for a lifetime’s worth of nightmares, Oliver knew. Nightly hauntings in which he would struggle against a hill of sand, unable to find the answer or break free of the unstable footing in time to save them.

Dreams in which he would never be good enough.

Times like this he would pull out Hermione’s note, just to breath in the faint scent of cinnamon mixed with the earthy ink she favoured and know he had at least done that much for someone, though he tried very hard not to think about his reasons for being so comforted by that fact.

“Alright, Oliver; I’ve got it mapped out, got notebooks full of Muggle facts - now what does it all mean?”

The crude map Charlie had drawn was refusing to give him any answers under his heavy scrutiny. He felt so powerless – five children dead. Five little bodies left behind like empty sackcloth, no longer the receptacles of innocence and simple joy, but discarded, like the were simply used up. Oliver could feel his fists balling up at his sides, short fingernails digging into his palms. “We started in Wemperhardt.” He stated slowly, more trying to lead his scattered thoughts then imparting information that Charlie already knew.

“Northern Luxemburg. Right.” Charlie confirmed. He stretched out on the bed, wrong way round, allowing his head to hang over the foot slightly, and watched as Oliver began to pace upside-down across his field of vision. “You’re going to give me a headache if you don’t stop moving like that. Feels like I might be seasick – “ Curling slightly, he caught the hard-edged notebook as it was thrown at him. He fumbled with it for only a moment before finding the scrawled notes he’d taken. “Small boy, about nine. Found in a play park on February 28th. Body already buried, but from pictures provided, from which I may never recover you know, we were able to identify puncture marks on the neck, victim’s left side, and a distinct lack of blood. The Muggle please-men were completely baffled.”

Oliver nodded absentely, staring at the small cluster of black circles. “Then Liege - that was also in Luxemburg. Ten year old boy, same, what did they call it?”

“M.O.”

“Right. Died a few days later, March 3rd. Body found in the rubbish bins, behind a store. No bruises or marks teh indicate a fight of any kind. Two puncture wounds on the neck, no blood. Please tell me I’m no’ seeing what I think I’m seeing here.”

Charlie sighed, suddenly sounding much older then his boyish twenty seven years, and moved off the bed. “I’ll go flag down a maid or something; we’re going to need a hot pot of coffee.”

Oliver nodded, the leaden feeling that hadn’t left him since first seeing the photos of Michael Wessington’s remains intensifying.
Each body had been the same. Aachen, a city on the Western edge of Germany had been a small girl, eight years old. In Houffalize, Belgium, a boy of eleven. And now here, in Maastricht, the Netherlands, another girl, ten. Lummi Vandervick had been killed two nights ago, on March 12th. Muggle authorities were at a loss to explain it.

Frustrated, Oliver started to pace again, kicking the bin on the way by. They had desperately tried everything they could think of to find some other explanation, anything to show that it was a bizarre Muggle grain-killer, or even some kind of unthinkable accident, but the more they had seen, the more they were being forced to accept some very unappetizing conclusions.

**Vampires.**

They were clannish, intelligent, and purely evil in Oliver’s opinion, bleeding hearts like Hermione be damned. Usually, the Ministry kept close tabs on any local clans, keeping strict control over their activities. The creatures were cunning, knowing full well that attacks that resulted in Muggle deaths would place the whole Wizarding World in jeopardy of exposure, and would guarantee a swift and brutal retaliation from the Ministry. This approach had worked well to ensure that while there were still attacks, the victims were left alive, and rarely had much of a memory of the event.

He heard Charlie come in, setting a garish orange thermos on the small table by the door, and moving to look at the map over his shoulder.

“Looks like the work of a rogue vamp.” Charlie observed lowly, putting into words something they had avoided speaking of almost by unconscious accord. “I don’t think there’s much more we can do here. Ministry’s going to have to send in a team, track it down. Not much we can do for the Muggles, I suppose.”

“The reports they’ve sent from the other three victims all show the same patterns.” Oliver admitted, subdued. He stared at the pencilled map, drawn on cheap paper that was all the testament eight Muggle children would have... all they were able to give them, now. Five black circles drifted out of focus until they looked more like bruises, and Oliver quietly mourned the passing of a world were all he had once had to worry about had been the next big play or the next goal. Suddenly, he didn’t think he could deal with seeing three more small, violated bodies, listen to the same lack of information. Still staring at the map, he spoke quietly, “I guess there’s really no point in going t’see them too, now is there?”

“I’ve got enough to donate to three Pensieves already, not too sure what a few more stops at Muggle charnel houses are going to add.” Charlie’s words were fairly neutral, but his eyes were distant and haunted. “We’ve got enough to give Percy, and speed’s of more importance right now, anyway.”

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It was quiet for days following the breakfast conversation with Hermione, and Fred was beginning to get antsy. Adding to his agitation was the infuriating look Hermione would give them every time they even tried to get the conversation around to what she might be planning. He was beginning to worry that she wasn’t going to do it after all.

And as further proof of his nerves, he was sitting here, glaring at the back of her rather bushy haired head, instead of enjoying what was turning into a thorough trouncing of the Slytherin Quidditch team by Ravenclaw.

Obviously, it was beginning to affect his sense of priority.
“Oh look, I think that the Slytherin Chaser, McAlister, is being affected by Fluvian Gastrics. Fluvian Gastrics causes vagueness, and easy distraction in its first stages, but I suspect we’ll be seeing the characteristic red boils shortly –“

Even the strangely enlighteningly chatty observations of Looney Luna Lovegood was conspiring to distract him form what should have been a grand occasion of Serpent House Humiliation, but Fred was finding to his disgust that her commentary was like witnessing a train wreck; it was so morbidly fascinating you just couldn’t turn away.

“…really should get a cream for those. If they’ve already erupted on his bum it may explain his flying today…”

Of course, the apoplectic colours of McGonagall’s flush over several of her more innocent comments were a rare treat.

Sudden cheering erupted around him, and Fred realized with disgust that the snitch had been caught – and he’d missed the whole thing. Beside him, George was grinning and cheering madly, nodding at his fellow Gryffindors as they all went wild over their arch-rival’s defeat.

Prats. Fred thought irritably, and looked over to see if the source of his frustrations was also making a spectacle of herself.

But she was gone.

It took only an instant for the correct connections to be made in Fred’s mind. His scowl turned to a manic smirk of anticipation as he nudged his brother and indicated the vacated spot with a jerk of his chin. The players had begun leaving the pitch as they quietly slipped from the crowd, pushing they’re way through the stands to the enclosed stairs at the edge of the red and gold Gryffindor section.

Taking the stairs at a dead sprint, Fred had to squint against the bright sunlight as they burst onto the still empty field beyond the pitch. “How do we find her then?” George asked he held his hand over his eyes to scan for the rather distinctive figure that was, quite obviously, not there.

Fred slowly spun a circle, trying to figure where she may have gone. He could hear the rumble of other spectators beginning to make their way down from the stands behind them. “Well, I reckon we could go—“ He never got any further when a wild yell came floating through the air.

Without even looking at each other, they both nodded. “That way,” they said, and took off.

Cresting the corner of the Ravenclaw section of the stands, George stopped dead, Fred right behind him. Looking over his twins’ shoulder, he could see that they had found Hermione Granger. They had also found the source of the noise they had heard.

She stood before the locked doors of the outbuilding quietly, wand at her side. The unmistakable sounds of pure, marauder-type mischief echoed resoundingly from the locked room beyond. The occasional high-pitched, girlish shriek had him wishing he was recording this – for posterity, and future humiliation.

The door was actually vibrating slightly.

“Oy, Hermione –“

“Shhh!” she hushed quickly, and Fred noticed how she stood, head cocked at an odd angle as if to allow the air to pass over the shell of her ear and better capture the different sounds of distress and
chaos beyond; savouring them as an audiophile might savour a newly discovered Brahms.

“What did you do?” Fred asked quietly, trying to frame this moment in his mind forever.

She nodded towards a domed brass cage at her feet, door sprung wide. Confused, Fred looked back at her as George began to smile. “Hermione, you didn’t?” George whispered.

Irritated that his twin had obviously figured out the joke before him, Fred glanced back at the large-ish cage. A loud crash and fresh swearing erupted from against the door, and Fred almost winced in sympathy before catching himself. *These were Slytherins, after all.* More banging, punctuated by buzzing, like a swarm of hornets on a hot summer’s day…

Fred looked over at Hermione. “You did.” She just smiled primly at him, and then winked.

“Look out!” George yelled, grabbing them both and pulling them out of harm’s way as the door crashed open, and all pandemonium erupted from the room, spilling out in a blur of green uniforms, flesh, and trailing, buzzing blue comets trails.

It took only a moment for the herd to clear, players stumbling and careening in their haste to escape. Fred, George and Hermione looked at one another, as laughter bubbled up between them, leaving them gasping for breath as each one tried not to choke on their mirth. Grinning, he and George helped Hermione to her feet, doffing imaginary hats and making exaggerated courtly bows as they escorted her up to the castle.

The memory of Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini streaking from the Slytherin change rooms, shorts in hand, as a swarm of Cornish Pixies gave chase would be one he would cherish for a long time. They took particular delight in the prospect of being able to warn Oliver what he had to look forward too if he ever managed to get on her wrong side.

“- - -”

It took only two days for Malfoy to corner her after her little prank.

“I have to hand it to you, Granger, I never would have expected it of you.”

“You don’t seem to have suffered too badly, more’s the pity.”

He continued to regard her with disquieting amusement. “Oh, I still owe you, Granger, make no mistake about that.”

Setting her chin against his arrogance, she sailed over the comment as beneath her. “I’m sure your housemates were very impressed with your performance in the duel. Tell me, weren’t you supposed to be helping Goyle?”

Draco raised a pale eyebrow, and gave her one of his trade-mark sardonic smirks. “I had a very uncomfortable time of it for a bit. That is, until I reminded them just who they were dealing with.”

“Translation: You got Goyle and Crabbe to knock a few heads.”

Malfoy ready did laugh this time, a sound of genuine mirth that startled her. “Is that what you think, Hermione? Really?” He watched her, with startling curiosity, traces of his usual hauteur pushed aside for a brief moment. A strange look passed over his face, too quick for Hermione to properly analyse it. Pained, perhaps. “And I thought you were supposed to be the smart one.”
“Well, what am I supposed to think?” Hermione asked finally, unsettled and irritated at his odd behaviour. “I mean, they’ve been your body guards since first year.”

“Think about it for a moment, would you? I’m in Slytherin House. The House of cunning and ambition. Have you ever noticed – McLaggen was a Gryffindor. Diggory was a Hufflepuff –”

“Why, I do believe you’re right, Malfoy. What an astonishing thing! I think I have noticed, now that you mention it.”

“Obviously not. The average Slytherin isn’t a bodybuilding troll, Greg and Vincent aside. They don’t rely on muscles and physical intimidation, as a rule – we leave that to the other houses. We respect intelligence, and guile far more than muscle bound bullying. If I had relied on those two bookends to secure my place in Slytherin House, I would have been stuffed into a toilet my first week.” Giving a very startled Hermione a cruel smirk and a wink, he left her there to ponder her rather shaken convictions.

“..-“

Draco stalked down the damp corridor, head thrumming uncomfortably. He knew that Snape had assisted the overgrown Gryffindor, had coached him on how to beat not only Goyle, but also himself; what he didn’t know was why. Oh, he could guess. For the same reasons he hadn’t wanted to get involved when his father had commanded it- and even hearing that the Malfoy’s were involved wouldn’t’ve shifted Snape’s fears of their intentions.

They had probably rather intensified.

And while Lucius had promised to keep her under their protection had he won, he knew eventually they may have been forced to turn her over to Goyle again, and then were would they all be?

Probably all bowing down to that nose-less freak and his cronies his father had been forced to deal with for all those years.

But then, Lucius had a plan. He always had a plan, just sometimes Draco had to wonder if his plan wasn’t to get them all horribly killed.

Greeting the lieutenant at the door to the last dungeon on the left, he looked around meticulously before entering, knowing all too well that those annoying bloody Weasley’s knew more of the castle’s secrets than even the most proficient member of the serpent house. Pushing that irritation from his mind, he focused on the here and now, noting automatically the dark shapes collectively waiting in the room beyond. Moving leisurely to the middle of the assembled, Draco smiled lazily, preparing yet again to dazzle the ignorant with a load of hippogriff droppings.

“Good to see we’re all ready. Now that we have Goyle’s near fatal blunder under control again, we can begin to focus on what’s important. Really, Greg – next time you decide to help the cause, do us all a favour? Don’t.” Malfoy smirked at the ripple of sycophantic laughter, inwardly seething. Especially when you pre-empt my bloody plans, you great pillock.
Chapter 9: An Uncomfortable Affair

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Consequently Yours

Or

A Gentleman’s Duty

Chapter Nine - An Uncomfortable Affair

"..-

Dear Mister Granger,

Sir, I realise that this letter is rather unexpected, but I am writing to...

Quiet movements marked his passage across the parquet floor. The interruption would only hold for a few moments more, and Anthony wanted to be far away from here as possible by the time it was up. The place gave him the creeps – somehow he wasn't surprised that his cadaverous employer desired something lying in the depths of a place like this.

They had initially met three nights ago, were the mummy-ish man had stood, just outside the reach of the inadequate light of the alley, wrapped in odd, voluminous black robes. Mr. Pearce hadn't actually introduced himself during their meeting that night, but Anthony had privately given him that name for an overly sharp accountant he had known, in the employ of one of his first contracts. The man had had the same unhealthy pale skin of someone who never sees sunlight, and the same fevered light in his eyes. Anthony had watched it carefully, making sure it had wholly gone out when he slipped the thin blade between his ribs some years back.

Mr. Pearce had actually been almost silent during their encounter, speaking only occasionally to give short instructions in a strangely sibilant and rasping whisper. His companion had done most of the talking, eyes rolling in a head not completely grounded in the same world as the rest of them. When Anthony had asked for his employer's name he certainly wasn't green enough to expect his real one, but felt it customary to at least have something to go by. Mr. Pearce had remained coldly silent, as if he were a fly beneath his gaze, but the younger man had grinned manically.

"Mr. Nobody," he'd giggled, actually giggled, spittle dribbling into his short black beard; his mad scientist personae completely at odds with his otherwise handsome appearance. The man was clearly insane, Anthony had even caught him pulling a short stick out of his pocket, obviously polished with loving care. He shrugged it off as a minor peculiarity; he was a footpad, a very good one, not a psychiatrist, the difference in his mind being that though he used arms occasionally in his activities, at least it was all out where you could see it. Psychiatrists committed armed robbery in your head, and he knew which profession he considered the more honest. Besides, all of his employers were relatively strange, seeing as how they all seemed to feel that poking around in other people's pockets or houses was a perfectly legitimate way of acquiring something of value.

Mr. Pearce had handed him a strange worn metal charm. It had burned his hand painfully when
he'd taken it, though when he examined his palm for damage he’d been disturbed when he found that it was smooth and unmarred. The charm itself was of a metal he couldn't identify, and was suddenly certain no fence he’d ever worked with would be able to either. It was very dark, like burnished lead pewter, but it looked like it would almost flow out of its intricate twist at any moment and pour from his hand. It looked as something would if you could force oil into to hold a solid shape, and even shimmered with a slick rainbow when it caught the cheap incandescent light of the bare bulb shining by the garbage door of the bar forming one wall of the alley they were in. He’d been informed that he absolutely was to carry the charm with him when he made his way to the specified location, and the strength of his command was such that Anthony didn't even consider not abiding by the rather bizarre dictate.

Three nights later, and he'd made his way to this valley. The solid stone walls of the building had appeared to shiver right out of the fog at his approach, where no building had a right to be. He'd watched, uncharacteristically uncertain as tall marble colonnades had shouldered the mist aside, wide stone steps leading to an impressively large arched doorway. The Roman architecture was unmistakable, but the early morning gloom obscured any signage that may have identified it. Anthony, who knew himself to be a cool professional, wanted nothing more then to finish this disturbing job as quickly as humanly possible and be long gone before this place decided to go back to whatever faerie realm had conjured it, shimmering back into the gloom and taking him with it.

Twenty minutes later, the lone researcher proved to be no difficulty as he pocketed his tools once more, deftly scooped up his prize and slipped into the welcoming darkness.

He'd have to take precautions though; somehow, Mr. Pearce and his giggling companion struck Anthony as the type of employers who might prefer to keep his services exclusive.

And he had no intention of becoming anyone's Daedalus. That kind of service ended only one way, as that mythical artisan had learned too late.

”-.-“

The two weeks Oliver was gone went by unaccountably slowly for Hermione. All of her lessons seemed to be dull, and even Ron and Harry had been less of a distraction than usual. They had still refused to give in to her frequent suggestions that perhaps it was time to stop playing Wizarding chess, or Gobstones and allow her to help them organize their notes so that they could begin studying for the rapidly approaching NEWTS.

Both boys had stopped what they were doing and were now watching her in uneasy confusion. “Hermione, we’ve still got three months! That’s loads of time for you to help us, isn’t it?”

Muttering under her breath, and glaring at both of them, she gathered her books and stormed from the Common Room. “You might try a little less force, next time!” The Fat Lady huffed as she banged the portrait closed behind her.

“Sorry,” she muttered on her way past, but she wasn’t really certain she was heard. Ducking her head and hunching her shoulders over the books she held tightly to her chest, she barrelled down several corridors, still muttering.

“...Of all the mulish – and they’ll come to me when it’s the last minute wanting my notes! And I’m the overly worried one! They would never ... I mean, when have they ever —“ Her was anger cooling and she came to a halt outside of an empty classroom. She allowed her bag to fall from her shoulder as she slid down against the wall to sit cross legged in the empty hall. She wasn’t even sure what had actually set her off, most probably influenced by the stress of studying, but it wasn’t...
like she didn’t know Ron and Harry by now, and normally even had an affectionate tolerance for their procrastination. She wasn’t really angry anymore - she was more frustrated she decided as she picked irritably at a stray thread on her thick wool skirt. So much a part of her life; she had worn it every day she was at Hogwarts; for almost seven years it was part of who Hermione Granger was, maybe. *Me? Books and cleverness*... the voice of the past surfaced briefly.

She still found it odd sometimes to look in the mirror and see herself so old, like she had aged overnight and was trying to fit into her girlhood clothes of yesterday. Twenty years old, and about to be married, all before she meteorically got to try wearing anything other than this scratchy skirt. Absently she ran her fingers over the rather plain and sensible silver skirt pin.

She had finished coding her notes right after Christmas hols, a bit later then she would have wished, but it had been an enormous task to go through seven years of notes to pick out any fundamentals that may be on the examinations. She had set up a study schedule by New Years. And now for the first time, Hermione had to question why. Would she get a chance to use that knowledge once the Contract was filled? But she knew this was a ridiculous fear, as Oliver wasn’t like that, and she would certainly be able to go on and do whatever she wished - but what did she want to do? She really had no answers.

Grimacing at her foolishness, Hermione resolutely stood up, and shouldering her bag, she headed off for the library. She still had the exploits of Talbot the Mildly Terrible to cover if she was to cross off everything on her schedule for today.

Striding purposefully through the stacks, she felt the equanimity she had just gained slipping away when she realised her table was occupied. In her first year, Hermione had scoped out this small corner of the large library as it was sort of tucked away from the rest, almost folded in between the surrounding stacks of books and unnoticeable until you turned the last corner and were right on top of it. The table was scared, and wobbled slightly until she had shoved a wadded up old timesheet under the one foot, but she had spent a lot of time here during the first few months of that year, as she was teased by rival students and housemates alike, up until the Troll. And right now, she really didn’t want to work with a bunch of chatty Hufflepuff fourth years when all she really wanted to do was get to her studies until she could get her wayward temper under control.

Rounding the corner, fully prepared to glare at whomever was occupying her space until the gave up and left her alone, Hermione stopped short when she saw Harry, black head bent dutifully over his open books and painfully scribing out notes on a roll of parchment. “Harry?” she asked.

Harry looked up, his quill dripping large drops of ink on his uniform slacks as he startled. “Shit! Hi Hermione –” he distractedly greeted her as he tried to wipe up the spatters in his lap.

Shaking her head, she set her bag down and pulled out her wand. “*Scourgify!*”

“Thanks – I always forget that one, for some reason.” Harry smiled at her, a little uncertainly after the scene in the Common Room. “So, ah. Ron and I were discussing, and we reckon you’re right. A bit of a head start on the N.E.W.T.s wouldn’t hurt, would it?”

“You and Ron, huh?” She pointedly eyed the empty chairs beside him.

“We-ell, Ron thought maybe it was best if he let me talk with you first.”

Despite herself, Hermione could feel herself smiling. “So what is he, hiding in the Tower?”

“Actually, I think he went to the kitchens to get some snacks. He’s going to meet us here when he figure’s its safe.”
She tried, she honestly tried to remain stern, but she could feel the laughter bubbling up, causing her lips to twitch and ruining her convincing scowl. Harry grinned at her triumphantly, and she gave in and sat down to help him organize his own study schedule.

_Honestly, when had Harry grown up so much?_

The next morning a thick parchment roll was dropped alongside her plate of bacon with a soft thunk. Offering her crusts absently to the grey owl that had carried it, she unsealed it and began to read it over immediately. She didn’t notice Ginny, a little ways down the table, turn back to her own breakfast with a pleased expression.

The letter was surprisingly long, though a trifle awkward, and Hermione an image of Oliver bent over his correspondence, struggling to write it. There were surprisingly few details regarding his trip to Luxembourg and the Quidditch team he met with there, though she supposed he could be treading lightly in view of their brief argument before he left. Hermione frowned; he seemed oddly... defensive somehow, though she wasn’t exactly sure how one could be defensive in a letter. Filling it under Rather Odd, she dismissed it for now.

He went on to say that his mother had been in contact with him, and was looking forward to meeting her, which caused Hermione to blush uncomfortably, and he then went on to say he had sent a letter to -

“My father?!”

-..-

Brave clear sunlight was trying to break through the last of this long winter’s gloom and streamed through the high windows of the castle, bathing the flagstone floor in narrow bands of light. It was still rather early for a Saturday, somewhere near 9 o’clock, and the halls were fairly empty. Oliver shifted position, again, where he stood against the cool stone of the wall. He had positioned himself by the doors leading to the Great Hall where he could still watch the marble stairs leading up into the castle. A few sleepy students gave him curious looks as they shuffled past him to find their breakfast, and in truth, he knew his stomach would probably be growling from the scents wafting from the open doors, but he was too busy concentrating on how to make this a good meeting to notice much.

He’d arrived early, and taken a long walk through the castle grounds, a curious twisting in his gut that he’d tried to get under control before heading in to wait for Hermione. It had been calming, wandering along the quiet landscape, something in his blood always stirred by the lonely highlands, and he’d watched the mist drift in off the lake and enjoyed the stillness broken only by the occasional cry of a kestrel or the chitinous buzz of fuzzy Glumbumbles until he was worried she’d get down before he got back to meet her.

He’d contacted her da six days ago, and though he knew he probably shouldn’t be surprised by the quick reply considering, he still couldn’t help but feel that this was too soon. He really wasn’t sure he was ready to do this, but ready or not, in a few hours time he would be facing Mister Addison Granger for the first time and trying to prove himself good enough to be the provider for his daughter.

The soft chattering of the few students up this early on a Saturday morning had been the only distraction for him as he stood, waiting for Hermione to meet him. When he caught sight of her, being escorted down the wide steps by Weasley and Potter like it was a gallows march, the significance of it wasn’t lost on him, though he had to hide a grin at their bit of drama.
She was dressed in Muggle clothing, he noticed, a pair of dark denims with some kind of soft looking blue sweater that fit her well, though it was the first time he’d seen her without her robes. He crossed the hall to meet them at the base of the stairs, where they had paused for a moment, most likely to help settle any nerves Hermione might have.

“Oliver,” Harry quietly greeted when he had reached them. Ron managed a nod, but kept quiet, holding Hermione’s bag so tight, his knuckles were turning white.

Hermione smiled at him, fleetingly, and though it was sincere, Oliver could see by the resolute way she was holding her shoulders that she wasn’t really paying attention, more girding herself for something unpleasant. He reached for her bag, and after a moment, Weasley handed it over without comment.

“Ready t’ go?” he asked, suddenly wondering if he was ready. He was about to ask this girl’s – no, this woman’s father for permission to marry. His stomach felt like it was filled with heated lead, rolling heavily with nerves, and understood Hermione’s distracted determination. He had no idea if this man could ever accept well-meant duty as an acceptable reason to let his daughter go.

Hermione turned to focus on him intently for a moment then tossed her head back, as if shaking something off, and said determinedly, “Let’s go then. We’ll miss the bus in London if we don’t get moving.” She then turned to her friends and pulled them into a fierce hug which seemed to only embarrass them marginally, though they were both awkward to return it - patting her back uncertainly as she held them both for a brief moment, before pulling away with a suspiciously muffled sniff.

Harry smiled. “It’ll be alright, Hermione. Your dad’s great.”

Ron chipped in, “Yeah, and don’t waste the whole time studying, I mean, you packed enough bloody books for an army -” He broke off with a startled oath as Harry reached out and cuffed him before he and Hermione could start bickering.

Oliver reached over and gently propelled Hermione with a careful hand against the small of her back before an argument could break out; reminding her that Professor McGonagall was waiting for them outside the Headmaster’s office to see them safely out of the castle and on their way.

_Floooing was never a tidy way to travel_, Oliver reflected as he stepped from the grate into the back room of the Leaky Cauldron. He took the moment to run a hand over his robes to dislodge any soot that may have settled on them and waited only a moment before Hermione joined him, coughing slightly after her trip through the grate. Oliver opened his mouth to say something, but found he didn’t know what to say, so shut it again and merely motioned for her to lead the way out into the main room of the pub and from there into Muggle London.

They caught another one of the strange Muggle buses with no problem, Oliver glad that he had done this once before and could at least look inconspicuous while he watched the passengers with fascination.

They travelled for close to forty minutes before disembarking at a rather large station teeming with people who all seemed to be in a dreadful hurry. Settling his own bag more comfortably on his shoulder, he once again reached out and took Hermione’s bag from her while she scanned for something.

“Come on!” She grabbed him by his wrist, tugging him to follow her through the throng of people as she headed for a line of black or silver vehicles stretching in a long line down the roadway.
After stowing their bags in the boot, Oliver settled himself in the back of the taxi as Hermione had indicated he should while she stayed to give the driver their destination, so he was startled when a moment later found her sliding onto the slippery seat beside him, completely ignoring the empty one up front.

They pulled away from the station in silence, and Oliver watched Hermione’s face, fascinated, as she struggled with something. She had begun to worry her bottom lip again, brows furrowed in fierce concentration. After a moment, she turned to him, and though her expression had cleared somewhat, she was looking at him with a pondering expression.

“Oliver,” she began, rather firmly. Taking a breath, she tried again, “Oliver – “ This time it came out less like a command, but she still paused helplessly. She studied him instead, looking him over with a critical eye before her expression softened and she leaned over to ruffle his hair, almost playfully. “You still have soot in your hair,” she told him. “You look like a chimney sweep.”

“Well, I would hate t’ embarrass us both by showing up at Granger Castle looking so disreputable.” This teasing seemed to provide her with the opening she’d needed, as she suddenly looked serious again and looked up at him with an unconsciously appealing expression.

“Look, Oliver, I know you were trying to do me a favour with all this Contract nonsense, but – “ Here she seemed to struggle to say what she had on her mind without offense.

“Yer Da isna so likely to see it as such,” Oliver finished for her, seeing the cause of this uncomfortable conversation.

She scrunched up her nose a bit at this thought. “Not really, no.” The taxi had stopped momentarily and Hermione turned for a moment to watch the pedestrians crossing beside them. He watched her reflection in the glass,

“So, I’ll just ha’ t’ concentrate on charming yer mother instead, will I?”

She paused for a moment, still staring out of the window. When she spoke again, her voice was brisk and business-like. “Unfortunately for you, you only have my father to worry about, and he’s much more difficult to charm. I just ... well, I just thought you should know.”

The rest of the ride was spent in silence.

The house was in the middle of its row, neat as a pin with fresh swept walk and a well trimmed hedge. It was tall and narrow, as all houses in this part of the city were, with carefully pressed lace curtains in the front room widow that Oliver immediately knew to be a legacy of the absent Mrs. Granger. A chipped stone birdbath sat in one corner of a winter browned garden, surrounded by dried remnants of last season’s honeysuckle and delphinium. A small statue of a cat, with one ear folded over comically, lay lazily along the rim, trailing one paw playfully in the empty basin. Oliver silently handed a Muggle wallet over to Hermione to pay the driver and continued his curious survey of the house and yard. Despite the carefully immaculate appearance, he was surprised to find it still managed to feel welcoming. Late daffodils lined the steps to the house, and a brass plate on the white wooden gate simply said in flowing script, A Lilac Wood.

Oliver turned a questioning eye to Hermione, who had finished with the driver and had come to stand beside him in front of the gate. She actually flushed slightly, but answered gamely enough, “A bit of rubbish from my first visit home from Hogwarts.” She smiled, ruefully in remembrance. “It’s from a book; about not being able to go back, because it’s never quite the same. This was my lilac wood. I could be quite melodramatic as a teenager, I’m afraid.”
Oliver was amused by this image of a much younger Hermione. “I’ll never tell, lass. What was the book?”

Unlatching the gate, she didn’t bother turning to him to answer, rather matter of fact, “The Last Unicorn.” and lead the way down the walk.

Addison Granger was waiting for his daughter at the door, and immediately swept her into a tight embrace once she mounted the stairs. Broad shouldered and lean, he must surely have been a handsome man in his youth, but now his dark hair was dulling with age, and starting to streak with grey, and his back and shoulders had begun to slump a bit, as if carrying a weight with him wherever he went. Despite this somewhat premature aging, Oliver thought he was still an intimidating figure, and his movements as he came down the steps to shake his hand and take Hermione’s bag from him were precise and strong. His eyes, tawny like his daughters, were sharp and unrevealing as he looked Oliver over, from crisp leather shoes to slightly ruffled, but soot-free hair, and with a jerk of his head, he motioned for them to follow him back into the house. Oliver was unsure what a Dentist was, but privately wondered if it always required the ability to turn someone’s knees to jelly with a single disapproving stare.

Inside was every bit as immaculate as the outside, and smelled faintly of furniture polish. Dark woods gleamed in the sunlight let in from all the unshuttered windows, and from the next room, he could hear the sharp whistle of a tea kettle. Everywhere, there were curious objects of unknown purpose and strange design.

Oliver was so busy taking in his rather intriguing surroundings that he almost startled when Mister Granger spoke. “Show Mister Wood to the guest room, Hermione. I’ll get some tea on the table and perhaps you can both explain a few things to me.”

The room Hermione showed him to was at the back of the house, on the middle floor of the house. A dark blue and grey patterned comforter covered the bed, and a simple desk sat in one corner, the top of it battered and scared from years of use. A small shelf hung over a small dresser beside the door with several books propped up on it with what appeared to be a black box with dials taking up the remaining space on the shelf. Hermione breezed in to open another door, which showed a small closet with a number of empty hangers on an equally empty rod, saying, “This will be you for tonight.” She began compulsively tidying the room in her wake, moving items around randomly, and not looking to where Oliver had moved to set his bag down on the bed. “Bathroom’s down the hall, on the left, there’s a radio for you if you want it; help yourself to any of the books...” Oliver reached over and trapped her hand between his, effectively halting her progress.

For a long moment, he just held her hand between his, unsure what to say, but trying hard to hide his own nerves and offer some comfort for what was likely to be an awkward afternoon, for both of them. “Hermione,” he said eventually, when she would did not look up. “Hermione, how do ye want me t’ handle this, lass? I need you teh talk t’ me, tell me what you’ve told yer Da about all this.”

She seemed to shake herself slightly, as if throwing something off, and after a moment said calmly, “The truth, Oliver. I told him that the new law obligated me to marry.” And with that, she left him to unpack. It hurt to be reminded that it was only through coercion that she was bound to him at all, though he couldn’t for the life of him imagine why it should bother him so much beyond the fact that he felt ruddy awful for being the once to force her, despite the fact that he had saved her from Goyle. It was still a sore spot on his conscience, something he couldn’t help picking at sometimes, like a sick tooth. At least she seemed amicable to the slow friendship that was growing between them.
Was he ready for this? Pushing it to the back of his mind, he finished putting away his few possessions and made his way back down the stairs.

Mister Granger sat and listened while Hermione and Oliver took turns explaining to him the circumstances that had lead to them drinking tea in his sitting room right now. He listened intently, with no interruption or even a change in his expression that might indicate how he might feel. Oliver had the ridiculous impulse to tell him that he was secretly trying to make self spelling wands for Flobberworms, and that he was going to move Hermione to the moon, just to see if that guarded expression ever changed, but quickly repressed it. Oliver had the distinct impression that, aging or not, Addison Granger was fully capable of giving him a right smart ding around the ears that would have him seeing stars until the middle of next week. Hermione, for her part, betrayed nothing of the nervousness he had glimpsed upstairs. She regarded her father levelly, giving no apparent apology for what she had chosen to do, and presented the story matter-of-factly; one stubborn will set firmly against another.

Their narration had ground down to a halt, and still there was no indication as to what he might be thinking. He sat there, regarding them from behind square – rimmed spectacles for a full three minutes just sipping his tea. He was obviously a quiet man, and one much alone from the look of his home. Nodding once to himself, some inner decision obviously made, he placed his cup back in its saucer and said to them, “Lunch will be served in an hour. I imagine you still know where everything’s kept, Hermione, so you can make the sandwiches; mind you use the white plates and make sure the crusts are cut off straight.”

And with this astonishing bit of information, he left.

Hermione sat, staring at the empty chair for a long time, frowning.

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Her father was being a prat, that’s all there was to it, she decided crossly. Oliver was putting up with the whole business with remarkable patience, not even batting an eye when her father had suddenly broken off from a rather prosaic conversation on the horrors of aphids during the rather moderate British summer to ambush him with some remarkably sharp questions.

“So what was it you said you did for a living, Mister Wood?” Mister Granger didn’t even look up as he spoke, but continued to deftly slice the top from his boiled egg with precise care, and adding three careful twists of salt from a grinder before placing it back on the table exactly four inches to the left of the butter dish. Oliver set the relish down, next to the ceramic milk pitcher. Mister Granger seemed derailed for a moment, staring at it, bemused.

“Please, it’s Oliver, sir. And I didn’t - mention it, I mean. I –“

“Oliver is involved with professional sports; he’s currently working to have the leagues expanded.” Hermione cut in quickly, not really sure the strict truth was a good idea, under the circumstances. Besides, it wasn’t really a lie, now was it? No real need to clarify that in all actuality, there were no British professional leagues at the moment, so technically Oliver was unemployed. As she spoke, Hermione reached unconsciously to shift the relish back, so it once again sat at right angles to the mustard pot. Her father’s expression cleared, and he went back to focusing on his lunch, pointedly not looking at Oliver as he spoke.

“Sports? What, like rounders or football, something like that?” He was scraping each bite of his egg from its shell, every movement a curiously precise mirror of the one before.

“Quidditch,” Oliver clarified carefully, with a curious look at Hermione, unsure if she had ever
explained the game to him or not. “It’s played in the air, on brooms, and –”

“Sounds unconscionably dangerous,” he dismissed, and then continued to discuss advantages of garlic solution over nicotine dusting when dealing with rose beetles.

They had retreated to the front room after that. Oliver sat in a chair by the mantle, curiously examining a newspaper he found on the coffee table. Her father sat on the complete opposite side of the, admittedly small, room, thumbing through a well worn birding book Hermione’s mother had bought for him three Christmases ago.

For herself, she couldn’t seem to settle anywhere. It was a little challenging being home again – not in the overly emotional, nothing-is-as-it-was sort of way, but more that it simply required a readjustment of her thinking to reconcile the changes each time she came, almost as if she forgot them when she was no longer here. This had been the fortress of her childhood innocence, the little place she carried around with her, deep inside, that sheltered her during the war, when everything around her had been utterly horrible. And melodramatic or not, it was different now.

Right now, she didn’t know what her father was thinking. There was a time when she knew this man better than almost anyone in the world, but he wasn’t the same person anymore, and neither was she.

His book was resting on the little end table by his chair, a faded watercolour of the Kentish Plover regarding her from the worn cover; Hermione hadn’t even noticed him slip from the room.

“Why do ye no get oout ye’re books and study a bit? I know it must be weighing on ye.” Oliver’s eyes crinkled affectionately as she was about to protest at leaving him to his own devices. “This is not the first concerned father I’ve ever had to deal with, ye ken.”

Her stomach contracted as if hit with ice water at this sudden reminder of how much older Oliver was. Of course he had ... dated, and all that implied. Who had those girls been? Had he ever been this close to engagement with any of them? Had he ever loved any of them?

She was startled to find herself regarding these unknown girls almost as if they were some kind of ghostly rivals. Pushing aside her unexpected discomfort, she forced herself to look back at him with one brow raised. “Oh?”

He laughed with easy amusement at her proffered scepticism. “Well, this may be the first time I’ve been asking for one of their permission to steal their daughters away, but still, I imagine I’ll manage to keep myself out of trouble long enough for ye to get some school work in. Now go, get yer studying underway before yeh pace a trench through the carpet.”

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The room was dark, heavy curtains pulled tight against the bright moonlight. Dimly, she could make out the familiar shapes of her furniture as darker patches against the night-time shadows. She turned slightly, trying to settle more fully on her pillow, irritated by her inability to find sleep. Things hadn’t improved much between Oliver and her dad, and Hermione had to admit to herself that it was possible they wouldn’t, and the possible implications of that had kept her tossing deep into the night.

If her father refused his blessing, would Oliver call it off? He was rather old-fashionedly honourable to her Muggle eyes, as she knew many wizards were – would he still go through with the wedding without her father’s permission?
And why did it bother her so much that he might not?

Could he even back out at this point?

*Oh honestly!* The irritated thought finally drove her from her bed. Stuffing her feet into a pair of white moccasin slippers and throwing on her robe, she left her room, muttering grumpily to herself as she made her way down the narrow stairs. It was quite late, after midnight, and the silence of the witching hour enveloped the empty hall and soothed Hermione’s nerves. A grandfather clock that had once belonged to a rather misty great-aunt stood at the base of the stairs, quietly ticking its measured tones in the muffling silence. Down the hall, she noticed a glimmer of light creeping out from under the door of her father’s study. It wasn’t really all that unusual for him to fall asleep while reading, just forgetful, and the faint noises floating down to her told her he’d left the radio on again as well. She was about halfway to the door, which was slightly off its catch when she realised the noises she was hearing weren’t coming from the rather antique cabinet radio her father kept.

“She’s given two years of her life to try and save your world!” Not angry, but certainly spoken with a great deal of conviction; still her father had yet to raise his voice above his customary quiet, yet deep murmur. He continued to stand behind his desk, not having moved since Oliver had first braced him in here half an hour ago. The older man was staring at him with an unfathomable gaze, and Oliver watched him for a long moment, carefully biting back his first, ill-considered retort. Despite his earlier teasing with Hermione, he found that he was not at all sanguine about his chances of appealing to this man, who’d regarded him with cold detachment from the moment he’d walked through the door.

And now, he continued to consider him with a stare that was as hard to shrug off as it was to meet. The rumbling bass of his speech was expressionless as he continued to evaluate his unasked for son-in-law. “Two years of fighting and death and horrors she can’t ever tell me about – but she’s survived it all, and she’s strong. Did she really need you?” Somewhere, a clock chimed quarter past the hour.

It must have been awful, Oliver divined. Not just the war, but all of it. When Hermione’s parents sent her to Hogwarts, they sent her somewhere they could not follow; could not understand. In a moment of empathy, he felt the melancholy ache of natural parting must surely be too much for most anyone to swallow in the wake of all they had already faced.

“She probably could take care of herself,” he acknowledged, “but after everything she’s already done these last two years, I dinnae think she should have t’. Just once, I thought someone else should be looking out for her for a change.”

Addison Granger stared at him, considering. Oliver almost didn’t dare breath. Finally, he nodded once, slowly, in acknowledgment and stiffly made his way around the large oak desk and past Oliver but stopped before the door, one hand resting on the polished brass knob. When he spoke this time, he didn’t pin Oliver beneath his stern gaze. In fact, he didn’t turn from the door.

“It was two years of secrets and never knowing where she was. Two years of hell.” His head was bowed, as if the weight of that memory was a physical thing.

When Oliver replied, it was to give this man the only pledge he could. “I’ll look to her happiness. I promise.”

Addison Granger acknowledged him solemnly. “See that you do.”

And a silent agreement was made.
When he finally left the small room, Oliver felt drained, but too tense to sleep. As he passed the open doorway to the kitchen and saw the dim light spilling into the hall, he hesitated; not wanting to go another round with Mister Granger right then, but a soft sound, sort of a cross between a sigh and a murmur told him it was Hermione struggling with restlessness and not her father.

She was sitting at the small table they’d taken their meals at, staring into a mug held loosely in front of her.

“Well, now - this looks familiar. We really have to stop meeting like this, Mouse.” He didn’t bother to hide his grin as he watched her jerk in surprise from where he leaned against the door frame. The rather dim light was provided by the lit end of her wand, resting on the table beside her. For some reason, his rather light observation seemed to be causing the normally composed witch to flush. He crossed to the counter, and rummaging through several cupboards, managed to find a mug with little difficulty. A further search turned up a spoon and something that proclaimed to be Cadbury’s Drinking Chocolate, though he was reserving his judgment on that, and a pot. Rather pleased with his success, he looked around, realising he’d seen nothing so familiar as a cast-iron stove in the room, or even a wood pile to fuel one.

He must have looked pretty lost, because suddenly Hermione was taking the pot gently from his hands. “Here, let me. Go get some milk from the fridge.”

The cold box - he remembered it from lunch. He pulled the handle with a sharp tug, and nearly let go in surprise as a light came on from the interior. *How in the blazes did it know it was too dark to see?* Intrigued, he pushed the door closed again, and waited a moment before slowly opening it again. Sure enough, as soon as enough darkness had gotten in, the light sprang on again. *A gremlin, perhaps? They were small enough to sit inside and operate the light. Or perhaps something like a Hinkypunk, protecting its home?* He began to ease the door open this time, trying to catch whatever it was unawares, watching intently for the exact moment the light would come on and betray his presence…

He heard a snigger behind him, and rather sheepishly handed over the milk pitcher. Hermione took it without a word, but continued to grin at his embarrassment.

He watched Hermione as she poured enough milk into the pot for two, and placed it on a part of the counter that looked no different to Oliver except for a shinier finish and four circles drawn on it, two larger ones at the front, and two smaller at the back. He was startled when after a moment one of the circles under where she had placed the pot began glowing cherry red in the darkness. Hermione noticed him looking and smiled at him. “It’s a bit different from what you’re use to, isn’t it?”

“Aye, a bit,” he admitted ruefully.

Hermione was quiet for a moment, diligently stirring the milk in the pot with a wooden spoon. Oliver moved to lean against the counter at her side, not close enough to crowd her, but near enough to be companionable. “Hermione?” he asked, softly.

“Ohmm?” she murmured, still watching the milk with practiced care.

“Where’s your mother?”

The precise turns of the spoon stilled for a second, but that was the only indication that the question was at all uncomfortable for her. “She’s dead.”

Oliver winced, though he had expected that this might be the case. “I’m sorry.”
Hermione made a neutral sort of noise, the kind of noise one normally makes when there is nothing else to say, and the light from her wand seemed to be dimmer now, from where it lay, still sitting on the table by the door. Oliver forebear asking her any more, and cast for something light to say in the uncomfortable silence that followed.

“I’m sorry, Oliver. It’s alright to ask, really.” The smile she gave him was rather tired, he noticed. “She died during the war.”

“Death Eaters?” Oliver asked.

At her nod, Oliver would have pulled her into his embrace if it weren’t for the rather straight set of her spine that gave him the impression that such an action may not be welcome. She was fighting hard for the fragile neutrality in her voice, and if he were to comfort her, a he was inclined to do, she may not be able to hold it, and intuitively he was fairly sure she didn’t want to lose the comfort of easy conversation right now by subsuming the moment with sadness.

“So, is it going to be this hard when I meet your mother?” The question was light and rueful, and Oliver complied with her unspoken desire to change the subject.

“Worse,” he said, solemnly. “Yer no’ as loveable as me, so yer likely t’ find it rough going.”

She looked startled for a second, until he was unable to hold back the teasing grin, and she whacked him with the heated spoon across his upper arm with a solid thwack!

“What is your family like?” she asked after a moment. “All as funny as you?”

“Seriously? Let’s see… I have an older sister, and two older brothers, and my ma rules over the lot o’ us unruly ragtags with an iron spoon. I spent more time while I was growing up mucking out the shed, or the yard, or whatever else she could find for me then I care to remember.”

Deftly filling the two waiting mugs, she quickly washed the pot and placed it on the drain-board, to be put away in the morning. Oliver handed her one of them, and took the other for himself, but neither of them made any move to go back to the table.

The moon had come out again, and was picking out the caramel highlights in her hair, making them glow like liquid copper. She had one arm wrapped around her waist, and the mug of cocoa was cradled in the other hand. Her eyes sparkled faintly, animated from their teasing. He was beginning to think that in moonlight was the best way to see her, and the thought of course brought to mind the last time he had seen her thus, in the Hogwarts kitchens.

She’d kissed him, he remembered. She tasted of nutmeg and sweetness, the moment flavoured by her cinnamon and ink scent. It had only been comfort, of course, her seeking some kind of connection in her distress, but looking at her here in the moonlight, he began to wonder if she would ever do it again, and whether he wanted the answer to that question to be yes or not. He was startled to find he was honestly considering kissing her when Hermione broke his train of thought.

“Oliver?”

“Hmmm?”

“Do you think it’s time to tell me what you’ve really been doing for the last little while?”

Caught completely by surprise, he could only stare at her in shock. She stared right back at him, determined and impassive. “Hermione, I don’t –“
“Don’t, Oliver. Don’t answer if you must, but don’t lie to me.”

*Bollocks.* Hermione was entirely too clever for her own good, though she had startled him yet again; she was allowing him to dodge the issue, but not to hide it. Percy would probably be pleased – her intelligence would be a great asset, though he was beginning to have suspicions about that too.

When he didn’t answer right away, she sighed and asked, “Shall I help you? You haven’t really been chasing Quidditch teams, but whatever you are doing, Percy is aware of it. That rather suggests some kind of Ministry work, doesn’t it? Furthermore -”

“Enough, Hermione,” Oliver broke in gently, though he was unsure if he was stopping her to give her the answers she seemed to know already, or to stop her before she said something he’d have to deny.

When he didn’t continue, she gave a small sigh. “You can’t answer? I’m glad you didn’t lie, at least. I can handle secrets, Oliver, but not lies.” She reached past him, placing her empty mug in the sink, and began making her way back to her room. “Goodnight, Oliver. And thank you.”

She was halfway through the door before he spoke. “It’s not exactly the Ministry, ye ken.” He said it reluctantly, not entirely sanguine in his decision. When she turned back to come and stand by him again, he continued. “It’s Percy I work for, mainly. There’s no’ enough left of the Ministry to work with, not right now.”

She didn’t interrupt him, just stood patiently, waiting for him to continue. So he told her. Some of it was halting, but he told her everything. When he got to the end, she looked at him owlishly in the moonlight, fists tightly gripping the folds of her robes.

“Harry killed Voldemort; he bloody well killed him!” Though she didn’t raise her voice, it was thick with frustration.

“I know, lass, no one’s saying he didn’t,” he soothed. “But we cannae find a body. Presumably his Death Eaters have spirited the thing away, and ye know tha’ it won’t be for anything wholesome.”

She stood there, chewing on her bottom lip for a few moments, digesting everything he’d told her. “So all these Quidditch trips, they’ve all been for show?” He nodded, and she continued to regard him intently. “So, where were you last week when you were supposed to be in Luxemburg?”

Oliver laughed, gently. “I’ll tell you all about it on the trip back to the castle tomorrow,” he promised. “I think we can both use some sleep, don’t you?”

Hermione nodded, sheepishly, and absentely reached out to nudge the drain-board back a few inches from where it had been shifted. Looking over the rest of the kitchen while she quickly washed and dried their mugs, she then handed the already dry pot to Oliver while she put the two mugs back in the cupboard. Oliver notices she placed them with care, so that the handles went the same direction as those already there in the cupboard, at precise right angles, and half noticed rituals he’d observed the last day suddenly crystallized. Looking up, he caught her eye, and reached forward to brush his callused thumb across the high plane of her cheekbone, right beneath her eye, his touch nearly as gentle as his voice when he spoke.

“How long’s he been like this?”

She looked back at him with a sort of rueful sadness, though she smiled faintly in return. “Since mom died. He’s been getting worse for a while, but this last year it seems to have stabilized some.
It’s not so bad, really; not right now anyway, and it may never get any worse.”

This time it was Oliver who moved first, gently tugging her forward until she nestled in his arms, and bent to press his lips to her forehead in comfort. He held her thus for a long moment, just feeling her solid presence in his embrace until he felt her pat his shoulder in preparation to disengage. He looked down at her, heart swelling a bit as he realized how far they had come in realizing the friendship he’d told her he wanted from her.

When he finally made it back to his bed, he found that this time, he dropped off to sleep easily, the phantom feel of tangled curls still brushing his nose.

~..~

Hermione found her father already seated at the table when she made it downstairs the next morning. He was sitting at the table, carefully eating kippers and honey toast, one bite of the fish for every two bites of the toast, while reading the paper. Hermione made herself an instant coffee and sat across from him, enjoying the companionable silence of the early morning. Outside, a robin busied itself with its diligent search of their front flower bed.

The Daily Prophet was pushed across the table when she sat down, folded open to the article that her father had been reading:

Health Crisis Intensifies!

British officials are stymied in newest wave of outbreaks.

Manchester. Seven new cases of blood-sicknesses, two of them highly virulent, have cropped up in the last quarter year alone, a Ministry source disclosed. Each with its own set of symptoms and none with any leads to an easy cure.

“What concerns us most is the increasing frequency of sterility in the British Wizarding population. It comes on in previously unaffected individuals with little warning, and so far, there is no predictable pattern. We estimate that by the end of the year, fully 17% of the community could be affected.”

The unnamed official continued to say that the rather controversial new law, enacted by the acting Minister for Magic, Percy Weasley is by far the best chance at survival for a struggling country until cures can be found. Though highly unpopular, the law is being accepted by a reluctant population, largely, it is suspected, due to the endorsement of Mister Oliver Wood, a well-liked public figure and former Keeper for Puddlemore United and the reputation of Acting-Minister Weasley’s own rather old family. The Weasley name goes back twelve hundred years, and can be traced all the way back to Edwin the Forthright, a former turnip farmer in the west Firth county who became a highly distinguished Auror during the first Goblin uprising. Several notable figures in this rather long history have been..
He didn’t say anything at first, but watched her intently as she skimmed the proffered article.

“Is this what you want?” he asked seriously.

Hermione turned to watch the robin hunt through browned marigolds, bright red breast standing out sharply against the withered plants like spring’s promise personified, and she snorted softly at her own fanciful thoughts. Could she walk away? Let them break her wand— and the very thought was enough to make her slightly uncomfortable - and try to live a Muggle life, knowing what else was out there? “I’m apart of that world now. I didn’t watch Harry nearly get pulverised just to leave it to its own devices now.” She looked over and gave him a small smile, one half of her mouth twitching upwards. For a moment, she wasn’t sure he was going to respond, and perhaps he didn’t think so either, because when he did it came out fast almost tumbling and he had to start again, slower.

“He’s – he’s a good man.” He looked at her, clearly debating if there was more to say, decided not, nodded once and opened the Muggle paper instead. Hermione shook her head, affectionately; her dad, the fount of emotionalism.

When Oliver came down later, it was to find father and daughter, both with meticulously folded papers propped before them, cradling cooling tea mugs in hand. A fresh cup had been left on the counter beside a glazed red teapot, and when he passed by Hermione, she held out a letter for him without looking up from her article.

Frowning, he poured himself a cup from the still steaming pot on the stove, adding milk and sugar from the pots set out for him. He wrapped one large hand around the mug as he settled his hip against the counter to read his letter.

The frown only got deeper as he read, until he was glaring at the bleached parchment.

“Trouble?”

He hadn’t realised that he had been swearing under his breath in Gaelic until Hermione was standing beside him, her warm hand resting on his shoulder soothingly. Guiltily, he broke off to see if her father was glaring at him, but he seemed to be ignoring them for the moment. He hesitated, debating folding away and passing it off as something from the twins but instead he found himself angling the letter enough so that Hermione could read it as well.
The Albion Museum was the oldest British Wizard museum in existence, situated in the Conwy Valley, in Wales. Its wards and defences were considerable, and yet someone had broken in just two nights before.

Only one thing had been taken. A book, *A Treatise of Anatomy*, by Healer Muhyi al Din Sulayman. Written in 1764, according to Percy it was on loan from the Wizarding Ministry in Arabia, and quite valuable.

And not just because the cover was made of three different types of beaten gold, apparently.

What in the world could be so important that they would want this book? As far as Dark Wizarding crimes went, this would probably be the last thing he would pick off a list of things likely to be stolen. Of course, it was possible that it was something completely unrelated to the growing rumours of Dark activity, but though Oliver would be hard pressed to explain the feeling in his gut, he had learned to trust the primitive instinct that was now telling him that this was something that was going to make his life complicated.

By the time she was finished reading, she was swearing softly too.

He indicated with a jerk of his chin for Hermione to follow him to the front room, and waited for her to join him there before speaking.

“I’ll have to go into the office to speak with Percy about this one lass, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? Why?”

He stood there, casting about awkwardly for a gently way of easing into the subject, but gave up. “Well, I know it isn’t exactly going to be a gala affair, but I had thought perhaps you might want me around a bit, what with the wedding supposed to happen in the next few weeks -?”

Her eyes widened in embarrassed shock, as a furious blush spread across her cheeks, hot and pink on her winter tanned skin. “I hadn’t really thought about them being so soon.” Her voice almost squeaked.

“So, did ye have anything special you wanted for yer wedding day?”
She snorted indelicately, her nose wrinkling with her dry amusement “I don’t really have any
girlhood dreams of white ball gowns or sunset beaches, so no, I guess not.”

“No, and I suppose being forced into things like this isn’t exactly what you may have had in mind
as a little girl.”

She looked at him dourly. “Oh, I don’t know. Goyle certainly didn’t figure into any of my fancies,
but you make a very convincing Prince Charming.”

“Well, unfortunately, this Prince will have to check in with Percy before he can be at the lady fair’s
disposal again, but I won’t be long, I promise.”

“Do me a favour – let me know what you find out?”

Oliver grimaced internally. “Haven’t you got enough t’ worry about righ’ now?”

Hermione sighed, exasperated. “Really – why in the world did you tell me everything if you didn’t
intend for me to help?”

Definitely wasn’t going to obey him out of any kind of marital authority, then.

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Chapter End Notes

For those of you who may wonder, Mister Addison Granger is suffering from clinical
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). This is truly a very difficult disease to live
with, both for the sufferer and their family, as the sufferer is often aware of the fact
that the actions they feel compelled to take are irrational, but must take them to stave
off excessive anxiety related to a (fictional) dire consequence. This can also manifest itself in part in other, related personality disorders, as well as certain diseases, such as Alzheimer’s, especially in its later stages (particularly in the need to adhere to specific schedules).

I am taking some liberty with this, as in many cases I do not think that it is average for this disorder to strike at such a late age, but the human mind is a wonderfully complex thing and grief can be one of the most debilitating detriments to our mental health, so I won’t say this couldn’t happen, either.

Thank you for continuing to read - you are all so amazing. I’m thrilled every time I open my inbox and find your comments and such waiting for me *huggles everyone* Thank you so much!

Love,

Ny(ruserra)
Chapter 10: A Blushing Bridegroom

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Consequentially Yours

Or

A Gentleman’s Duty

Chapter Ten ~ A Blushing Bridegroom

Ten days? Where in the world did all the time between go?

Hermione was looking at her fast approaching wedding day with a growing feeling of dread.

And to her secret shock, perhaps a little curious anticipation, that had nothing whatsoever to do with a certain Scottish man’s rather gentle crinkle lipped smile, or amazingly broad chest.

Or the fact that Ginny seemed to take fiendish glee in detailing what other delights were likely waiting beneath a Scotsman’s kilt, a conversation that never failed to leave Hermione blushing furiously.

Pulling her mind back from the brink of what was probably highly inappropriate speculation, and the realization that it actually may be appropriate for her to indulge in such speculation only made her blush more heavily, and Ginny to smirk at her from across the common room table.

Organizing a wizard wedding was not something Hermione had ever anticipated doing on short notice, but the situation was at least helped by the fact that she and Oliver had had no intention of making a huge affair out of it — and even easier when she found out that she had very little to do at all, as Mrs. Wood had already taken over the entire event without so much as a by-your-leave. Hermione wasn’t sure if she should protest or not, and the whole thing left her feeling more then a little disgruntled.

It did leave her more time for her studies at least, so she supposed she would count it as a blessing, and decided to brush the whole thing off. Ginny, on the other hand, was incensed.

“That cow! I mean, this is your wedding!” Ginny was ranting in a hushed whisper in deference to the fact that it was late.

The common room was empty, and Hermione had finally put aside her books to open a letter she had received from Mrs. Wood that morning. She had abandoned sending her little notes of progress through Oliver very early on in the process, preferring to get right to the source, Hermione supposed, resigned. The latest update had Ginny pacing agitatedly in front of the low burning fire.

“Oh, Ginny, what does it matter?” Hermione groaned. Ginny’s tirades were almost as tiresome as Mrs. Woods officiousness. She had to wonder if this is where some of the Muggle stereotypes of Bridezilla may have originated; poor women driven past the point of homicide by unbearably
helpful, well meaning people all pulling in different directions. She gazed longingly at their Arithmancy text as Ginny continued to pace. Clearly, nothing more would get done until Ginny had had her say and calmed down.

“What does it matter? She’s making all of the decisions for you! She’s even arranged for robes for you, you know! Robes!” Ginny repeated, as if this were just over the top by half.

“Ginny! While I admit that Mrs. Wood’s interference is a trifle…heavy-handed, I’m actually rather grateful,” Hermione soothed. “I mean, look at it - when would I have the time to plan this stuff, anyway? I’ve got ten days left. A week and a half — and what do I know about weddings, let alone Wizard ones?”

The fiery girl finally stopped pacing, and Hermione was startled to see she was almost in tears of frustration. “But I was looking forward to planning this!” she wailed. Glaring at the offending letter for a moment, she abruptly stuck her tongue out at it, seeming to find a needed release for her anger. “She doesn’t even know you. You’ve been my best girl friend for eight years, and that fat cow is taking over my rightful place, you know.”

Hermione smiled at her, suddenly understanding the source of Ginny’s pique.

Ginny sniffled, more for effect then anything, and continued her tirade, the half-turned smile a small acknowledgement that all this was perhaps a tiny, teensy bit ridiculous. “I was looking forward to planning this, and I want my maid-of-honourly right to argue! How am I supposed to stick my oar in when she’s doing all this from Scotland?” She threw herself into one of the large armchairs forcefully, startling a quiet house elf that had just crept in to bank the fire. With a squeak of alarm, it scuttled across the flagstone floor and disappeared into the shadows. Both girls stared at its tiny, remonstrative parting glare, and burst into muffled laughter.

When Oliver came back, it was to find Hermione thoroughly ensconced in the library once more. He was somewhat rumpled and smelled of the outdoors, and as he came up to join her where she sat at a table with Ron and Harry he absently planted a tired kiss on the top of her head that never the less made her blush. He would only be here for a couple of days, before he had to make his way back to Aberdeenshire to wait for Hermione there until the ceremony.

“Oi! Don’t you have a home?”

Hermione suspected it was more form then substance at this point anyway, and just Ron’s protest to seeing things he’d rather not think about, so she was happy when Oliver just looked at him wearily, for a moment, not even really bothering.

He sat quietly while they continued to study, chair tilted back and propped partially against the wall. Hermione wasn’t actually sure if one could sleep like that, but Oliver appeared to be giving it his best shot, and had folded his arms against his chest and closed his eyes.

When Oliver opened his eyes again, it was to find the table cleared of books, and empty of its former occupants.

All except for Ron, that was. The lanky young man was sitting, quietly watching him, his belongings already haphazardly packed in his rather worn bag on the floor next to him. Even once Oliver was obviously awake, he continued to regard him in silence for a moment, eyes unreadable.

“I told her that I wouldn’t let you sleep here all night in that horrible chair at least.”
Oliver nodded, curious, but Ron just sat there, studying him.

I'm too tired for this shite. Nevertheless, he sat, knowing somehow that this was something Ron needed to do.

“I really would have stepped in for her, you know.” He was gripping a quill between his hands, mangling the feathers between his clenched fingers. For a long moment, he sat there, rolling the ruined feathers between his hands, staring somewhere over Oliver’s left shoulder.

“Of course you would have,” Oliver ventured, softly, thinking longingly of the soft mattress waiting for him.

Ron snarled at him. “I would have. I wouldn’t leave her to that lot, but the thing is –“ and here, he hunched his shoulders angrily, and glared.

I havenae the strength for this, Oliver thought wearily, but felt mean for the thinking it.

Ron had transferred his glare to the table. “I reckon - well, I reckon you’re better then Goyle.”

Oliver looked at him for a long moment, understanding what the other man was trying to tell him.

“Just well, make sure you never hurt her.”

“I won’t,” he promised, feeling sure of the place they had reached.

“Right, ’cause she’s got a wicked Canary Hex on her, mate.”

-..-

He found his somewhat stumbling way back to the guest room in the downstairs East Corridor. Most of the students were in their common rooms by now, as it was past curfew for all but the highest years. Oliver was lost in his thoughts of his conversation with Weasley as he wandered his way back to his room, so when he got there, he was completely unprepared to come across someone lurking in the doorway and nearly shouted in his surprise.

“Hermione! Wha’ are you doin’ here, lass?”

“Checking up on you,” she admitted, somewhat dryly. “I’m hoping this means I don’t have to go scrape bits of Ron off the library floor?”

Oliver reached out to hold the door open for Hermione, invitingly. “Actually, we jus’ had a few things t’ discuss. Clear the air sort of thing.”

She gave him an exasperated look as she passed him on her way into the room. “That’s not entirely comforting, Oliver.” Oliver just grinned at her, unrepentant.

Sighing in defeat, she gave up and asked instead, “What did you learn about the museum break-in?”

“No’ much. They have no idea how it was accomplished yet. The wards and charms are considerable, an’ set t’ go off if even a squib were t’ come within ten metres of the place.” He was too tired to even be frustrated anymore, after running up against yet another dead end.

“Frankly, I think the logic may be a bit, well, dodgy in thinking Voldemort or one of his followers took an antique book on anatomy, don’t you think?”
“I don’t know. It seems a little far fetched t’ me, but someone went t’ an extraordinary amount of effort t’ steal that particular book and nothing else. Who knows? There are more then just Death Eaters out there.”

Her mouth thinned a little at the thought. “You sneaking around in secret, the whole community just holding its breath, living in fear. It’s like they’re trying to make up for the blindness that made everyone deny that he could come back last time by denying that he won’t this time! It’s all just so stupid!”

“I think that’s just it, Hermione. We’re not all as clever as you, or as brave as you. You faced him, with Harry; you’ve seen him and he holds very little terror for you.” He moved away from her, trying to get a little space by going to sit on the end of the bed.

After a moment, he continued, though his voice hadn’t completely lost its disapproving edge. “These people only know that he came back when everyone knew he couldn’t - but there was no body the first time either. He just disappeared, for eleven years. Yes, people are scared, and no, it’s not helping, but it’s all they can do right now.”

Hermione just stared at him, thinking hard on what he had just said. Sometimes, he thought, she probably just forgot what it was like to be everyone else.

“So now we have to ask ourselves, is the book in anyway related to the Vampires?”

Her soft tone had made the question more of a hesitant, tacit apology, and he answered her question, instead of her voice, allowing them both to leave it behind. “I don’t see how a group of feeding Vampires can have anything to do with it. They’re no’ much for reading, I imagine.”

“I suppose not.”

“There was a researcher, Mycroft Pafft, killed during the robbery; the knife wasn’t found though. I’m afraid that’s all I’ve got so far.”

She grimaced distastefully. “And on that note, I think it’s time I head back to the tower. Snape’s patrolling tonight, and I don’t fancy scrubbing out cauldron bottoms from first year failures.”

He stood in the doorway, looking down at her. The corridor was hushed, and even the pictures were quiet as they slept in their frames. “Ye sure yer gonna make it back without detention are ye?”

“She didn’t get a chance to speak with him again at all the next day, though she told herself firmly that she was not at all disappointed. It wasn’t until two nights after he arrived that she met up with him again, this time under the curious stares of the rest of Gryffindor house. She had come in from her scheduled N.E.W.T. progress meeting with Professor Lupin, to find him seated at table by the stairs, in lively discussion with none other then Ginny Weasley. The Scott’s man seemed to be blushing.

_Uh, oh._

She hurried her steps and slid into a seat at the table just in time to hear the end of one of Ginny’s rather extremely off-colour stories that she had nicked from Bill. It involved a garden Gnome, a Kneazle and a potato, and it had stretched Hermione’s imagination in ways she was still trying to recover from. No wonder poor Oliver looked like he wasn’t sure how to react. Ginny had such an angelic face, framed by beautiful dark red hair and a cute, feminine figure that it always tended to
catch people unawares what a dirty mind she could have, a legacy, Hermione felt sure, of being the youngest, and only, girl in a family with six brothers.

Oliver seemed relieved at her interruption. “I was hoping to catch ye yet tonight.” His smile at her arrival was genuine, though she was sure it was more for her distraction then for her personally. “Seven days. How’re you holding up?”

Hermione felt like she was on a rollercoaster; the painful anticipation of her upcoming wedding, coupled with the curious fluttering in her stomach when he reached across to squeeze her hand in commiseration. Honestly, she thought, disgusted with her betraying hormones. You don’t even like broad shouldered types.

“Yeah, Easter hols start next week, so at least you’ll have all that extra time to breathe and well, deal with everything.” Ginny smiled, helpfully. “You really should get away, just the two of you, and do something relaxing for a few days.”

Alone with Oliver? Married, and alone with Oliver? Hermione could feel the heat of her blush spreading and sputtered indignantly “Ginny Weasely –“

“Actually lass, that might not be a bad idea.” Oliver broke in, carefully. Hermione looked at him, startled. “We could go to Wales, maybe. Conwy Valley’s not too far out, and it’s got some rather pretty sights.”

What in the world was he talking about? And Wales? Something tugged the edge of her thoughts. “I hear they have a Wizarding museum there -?” she left the thought hanging tentatively, hoping she’d picked up on his intent.

He agreed reluctantly, looking so much like Ron and Harry when she pointed out that they really should be doing their own homework instead of coping her ideas that for a moment she thought she had gotten it wrong and he really had wanted to go on a mini vacation with her until his hand found her knee under the table and squeezed it reassuringly.

She looked down to her work quickly, mind already racing with possibilities, and terribly conscious of the knee resting against hers that was rather too large to belong to Ginny, until she realized he was speaking again, preparing to leave.

“Goodnight ladies. I will see both of you in seven days.” Carefully catching Hermione’s eye, he allowed himself just to keep her gaze for an extra moment, and gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze in parting.

When Hermione sighed softly after he’d left, Ginny was quick to pounce on it.

“Missing him already? Just think, in another week, you’ll have that great body all to yourself in quiet Wales for an entire week –“

“Ginny!” Hermione hissed, aware of the curious stares of her housemates. “He is just, well, he’s becoming a friend. Nothing more.”

Ginny looked mildly contrite. “I understand. But honestly, there’s no harm in thinking about it a little. When he used to come round the Burrow with Fred and George, I always used to look forward to it. He was nice to me, even though I was the bratty kid sister of his friends. He talked them into letting me join in their pick-up Quidditch games in the back field sometimes.”

“Sorry, Ginny. Yes, he is a good man, and obviously you have fond memories of him.”
Ginny nodded. “Oh, yes. Oliver was the reason I was determined to become good enough to join in with my brothers.”

“Really?” Hermione murmured, not really paying attention as she leafed through her notes.

Ginny’s expression became mischievous. “Definitely. Quidditch is a warm game, and Oliver usually didn’t wear a shirt when he was playing. Let me tell you, that’s what I call motivation.”

What the hell was he thinking, mooning over her like that? The girl was a friend, and barely even that, the best friend of the little brother of his good mates, which, he firmly reminded himself, made her practically his little sister. She was most certainly was not for lecherous thoughts or calf’s eyes.

Feeling more satisfied with that stern reminder, he dialled the rotary dial, 6-2-4-4-2, and rode the telephone booth down into the subterranean Ministry Building.

The scritch and squeak of Miss Macier’s quill from where she worked at her desk was quite audible through the open door of the modest office. The subtle noise had been gnawing at Percy’s concentration for the last fifty minutes, his every attempt to focus on the rather overdue report before him skating away as soon as he tried to work on it. He raised his hand to gesture for the door to close itself, but halfway through the gesture, he stopped, irritably.

It wasn’t as if Miss Macier’s unfortunately squeaky quill were the root of his frustrations. He was irritated at his own inability to see. He had in his possession detailed reports on every unexplained occurrence within the last eighteen months. He had Pensives, and Jarvey birds at his disposal with completely accurate records.

And he still had no fucking answers.

Oliver’s arrival at least provided a distraction from the tedium of the still incomplete Sanitation reports, but Oliver’s account gave him nothing but new questions.

“I’m jus’ no’ sure, Perce. E’en Hermione is starting to get frustrated, trying to connect the Vampires to the theft of tha’ book. We’re all maybe seeing things tha’ are no’ there.”

“I’m sure Miss Granger will be a big help to you. I respect her intelligence greatly, and under the circumstances, she can aide you quiet easily, without necessitating excessive precautions against discovery. A very satisfactory benefit.”

His eyes narrowed, not trusting Percy’s bland, almost vague expression; several half considered suspicions of the last few weeks crystallizing in that moment. “Yeah, isn’t it lucky that she’s Contracted to me then, of all people? She can help, and all without you giving away how much ye might suspect’s going on. How do ye suppose we got that lucky?”

Percy didn’t bother to say anything that would insult their friendship. Instead, he sat back in his chair, looking resigned.

Oliver nodded his head, lips pressed tightly together. “How did ye arrange it? Fred and George wouldnae have helped ye in this.”

“Pre-suggestion. I knew that as soon as I told you to Contract someone, it was only a matter of time before you spoke with my brothers about it. I spoke with them a couple of weeks before I told you. I made sure to bring up the possibility of revenge against Hermione by remnants of You-Know-
Who’s supporters, should they ever surface. They are appallingly predictable, I’m afraid.”

“Ye realize tha’ she’ll hav’ ta live wit’ the consequences of yer shenanigans for the rest of her life! I thought she was supposed ta be a close family friend, ye heartless bastard!”

He grimaced. “You know better then anyone that I can’t afford to be anything less. It’s now your job to look after her in that way, a task I, thankfully, will have no part of.”

Oliver turned, but when he was about to reach the door, Percy spoke again, sounding tired this time.

“Maybe it was my own form of kindness. Better the man I know then some Death Eater’s son.”

Oliver didn’t turn around, and this time, Percy let him go.

“..-”

Ten days passed entirely too quickly for Hermione’s taste.

The county of Aberdeenshire was situated on the East coast of Scotland. It was made up of various smaller regions, and true to Scottish logic, the capitol city of Aberdeen was not actually in the county at all. Obviously, these people were used to doing things their own way, she reflected sourly. Oliver’s family lived in a small community in the south west. The region was called Marr, and they lived just outside of a middling large village. Hermione suspected that it was not all that far from where Hogwarts was hidden, but couldn’t say for sure. This was a remote part of Scotland, deep in the mountainous western edge of the county, and though it wasn’t a fully Wizarding community (Hogsemede was the only one of those in Britain), it’s small population was made up of fully two thirds magical people, which Hermione supposed made some sense. A remote location was hardly a deterrent for someone who can Apparate.

She was supposed to be met by Oliver’s older sister at the local pub, but the day was so lovely, the first really fine day this spring that Hermione decided to wait outside instead. The Prancing Pigeon was obviously a popular spot and Hermione watched through the hazy glass window as the pretty waitress wove her way between laughing patrons. A breeze was stirring, teasing her hair and bringing with it the hint of early flowering grass and crab apple blossoms that had her wanting to run and laugh and twirl in the street like she had when she was a child after being shut up all winter long away from the sun. It was a day that made you remember swing sets, she felt, and settled her bum on the low sill of the pub were she hoped Adrianne Margaret would see her, because she had no idea what the older witch would look like. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, just enjoying the sunshine.

The town was full of bustling people, and Hermione enjoyed the lack of furtive caution that was prevalent in so many of the communities she’d seen since the war. It made her feel safe and warm and she wished momentarily that she had been able to bring Crockshanks with her, and smiled at her own whimsy. She sat like that, letting her thoughts wander aimlessly as she lazily tried to identify the various sounds around her without opening her eyes until she became aware of the sunlight no longer hitting her skin.

She opened her eyes with a start, embarrassed to be caught languishing like this when she really should have been keeping an eye out. And of course, standing there to witness this moment of inattention was a woman who could only be Oliver’s sister.

She stood a few feet away and was looking her over appraisingly. Tall and angular, with the pale skin common Scottish people, she was a striking figure, and her obvious pregnancy was worn with
such grace that it only added to it. *Handsome*, Hermione thought to herself. *That's what they used to call it.* Her long black hair was pulled back and plaitted practically, though a few wisps had come loose and were blowing round her face in the errant breeze, and she gave Hermione the impression that this was a person very much used to handling any situation as it came along. A tartan was pulled tight to her shoulders, and pinned like a shawl, but it was her eyes that captured Hermione’s attention most. They were Oliver’s; hazel and warm, softening her otherwise sharp features.

“So yer it, then?” though the question was rather cynical, her voice was not, and Hermione was left with the impression that judgment had been held over for now. Hermione nodded, shoulders back and chin held high, trying not to show how nervous she felt at this meeting and terribly conscious of how she must look in her school uniform, not at all a women that would soon be getting married. Adrianne smiled at her, as if divining her thoughts. “Let’s get ye home, hen. An’ we’ll see how it goes ov’r a nice cup of tea, shall we?”

Their pace was somewhat slowed, almost like a stroll as Adrianne lead the way down the lane and away from the town centre, and Hermione adjusted her pace to accommodate the taller woman unconsciously. Along the way, Adrianne pointed out with some amusement the Muggle post office, which, Hermione noted, had three owls roosting on it, as well as a small kirk and a general type store that Hermione suspected from the way it sort of seemed to crowd the buildings around it, despite being smaller, was completely unnoticed by a third of the village’s inhabitants. The sign out front said *Up Yer Kilt* in gilt lettering that somehow seemed to leer.

True to what Hermione had seen of Wizarding custom, the house Adrianne eventually led her to was well removed from the rest of the village, lying about a kilometre and a half away. Hermione was actually glad of the heat the walking had generated by the end; despite the warmth of the sun, the spring air was still decidedly cool. The small home had the look of a cottage: walls made of rounded fieldstone, neatly turned flowerbeds under the windows and lining the porch, all enclosed in a gated yard. Of course, the fact that it was a Witch’s house was immediately apparent by the impossible angle of the elongated chimney, and the way that there seemed to be places on the second floor that were actually built out over the first, like afterthoughts. Fat lop-eared bunnies shuffled lazily in the yard, chins resting sleepily on their portly furry muffs. One chestnut coloured animal watched them pass with intent, glittering black eyes that it actually made Hermione uncomfortable.

“No animal that is ultimately destined for the soup pot should look at someone like that,” she huffed to herself, irritably. Her bag was starting to become heavy in her hand, despite the charms on it, and she just really wanted to wash all of the dust off and sit down. The rabbit’s watchful eyes followed her all the way down the walk and into the house, until the door closed firmly behind her. He then blinked once, and promptly began cleaning himself.

“We’ll put you in here, Ah think. Its go’ a lovely view of the yard an’ ye’ll get the morning sun. Let’s get yer things away an’ ya ken tell mae all about whatever it is Oliver’s go’ himself intae.”

When Hermione made her way down the golden stained stair, Adrianne was busy working at the kitchen counter.

“Set yerself down; tha’ wiss a long hike fae one’as nae used tae it.” Her thick brogue was much harder to decipher then Oliver’s lilting, softer accent was, but had a mesmerizing, hypnotic rhythm that was soothing to listen to. The table she had indicated was already laid out with thick slices of sweet breads with butter, pots of milk and sugar and a heavy black teapot steaming in the centre, and looked very inviting to Hermione’s empty tummy and sore feet. She gazed longingly at the pots of honey and jam and was guiltily thankful when Adrianne waved off her attempts to help and firmly told her again to sit. Sighing happily, she sank into the chair closest to the wood stove in the corner. No sooner had she settled then the pot stirred itself to pour steaming tea into a dainty cup set before her, milk and sugar quickly to follow.
“Nae then, lass, let’s have us a wee blether, shall we?” Adrianne lowered her heavy frame carefully into a chair, yet still managed to do it gracefully, seemingly perfectly comfortable in her gravid state. She looked at her house guest curiously while the pot hastened to fill a second cup. “Sae, ye’re tha’ Hermione Granger is ye?” She didn’t have to specify which one, really. Hermione winced inwardly at this reminder of her fame, but nodded, burying her reaction to the question in a quick sip of her tea that almost scalded the roof of her mouth. Adrianne’s mouth twitched, and Hermione smiled ruefully in return, apparently unsuccessful in her attempt. Adrianne paused for a moment, looking considering at her guest. “Ah’ll nae ask ye why he did it, but it doesnae seem like something he would do tae a lass he didnae think would welcome it.”

“He did, well- he did put a stop to a rather unsuitable arrangement by stepping in for me,” she admitted hesitantly.

“Aye?” Adrianne asked, but waved it off at Hermione’s obvious discomfort with the topic. “Nae matter; Oliver’ always’s wus getting involved where he’d nae right, but it looks like this time he did jus’ fine.”

Feeling emboldened by the easy way Adrianne spoke, she asked, “When am I to meet your mother? And, is she, I mean, well, does she -”

“Approve of this? Ah wouldnae fash yerself about tha’. She wiss beginning tae worry about Oliver ever bringing her home a daughter; he was always sae busy wiss tha’ ruddy sport of his.”

“Oh.” Hermione vaguely wondered what Emily Post would have considered the correct response to that.

“Ah think tomorrow will be soon enough. Tha’ll give ye a chance tae settle in a little first. Nae good tae jus’ spring her on ye right off, ye ken.” Adrianne grinned at her, teasing easily. “Ye’ll dae fine, Hermione. Noo, let’s jus’ look at all the things she’s planned fae yer wedding day, shall we?”

She liked Adrianne a lot, she reflected as she climbed into bed that night. Her warm manner and brisk dismissal of formality made it easy to enjoy her company and the two women had spent all afternoon in undemanding companionship. Adrianne’s husband, Jamie, was away, and from her comments Hermione felt this was a fairly frequent occurrence but she had never gotten round to asking. They had spoken at length about the wedding that was to take place on the Monday, in two days time. Hermione’s last thoughts before drifting off to sleep were was of her two best friends, and how she wished they could be here right now.

*I’m going to kill her,* Hermione thought to herself calmly the next evening.

She had woken up thoroughly refreshed and feeling almost optimistic for her upcoming meeting with the Wood family matriarch, helping Adrianne with a couple of simple chores before they had set off for the main house. The Floo Network, though easily accessible in every Wizarding home, Hermione was to learn, was not much used for visiting anyone within the same village up here in the Highlands.

The Wood Croft, Adrianne had called it, and Hermione was beginning to see why. A semi-enclosed compound, the main home lay in the middle, with two arms coming off to each side, housing additional small apartments, a barn, shed and other outbuildings. Old, it had probably been in the family for several generations, the whole structure was built of squared fieldstone, a remnant of earlier days. Hermione could see how the large enclosed yard would have been the perfect place to play when you were a young boy with a penchant for trouble.

The day had rapidly gone down hill from there. She had no sooner entered the home then Mrs.
Brighde Wood, who was a short-ish, beaky woman with iron coloured hair plaited to frame a surprisingly girlish face, had descended on her with a flurry of observations and inquiries, many of which Hermione thought to be highly personal, as she bustled her off to be fitted for her robes. They had kept her there for over an hour, standing still on a low hassock while Brighde and Kena, one of her other sons’ wife, had her pinned up and the robes adjusted to fit her rather unimpressive stature until Hermione felt she was ready to scream.

Then it had been her hair. The whole lot of them, flapping like a bunch of magpies, she thought crossly, giving her first one style then another as they tried to tame her rather uncooperative curls, and the whole thing punctuated by comments as Brighde proceeded to bring every aspect of Hermione’s character under the microscope of Maternal Concern, until she was sure she was going to hex her.

“Shame we don’ have ye fae longer, lass. One day’s nae enough time tae teach ye much of anything. Oliver mentioned yer mither’s been dead these last years? Weel, we’ll get ye up here after school’s done, teach ye tae do fae the tae of ye; cooking cleaning an’ such.”

Or:

“A barin’s jus’ the thing tae give yer frame some meat, lass. Ye’ve nothin fae the lad tae hold on tae as it is, an’ yer breasts’ll –“ but the pounding in her ears as the blood rushed to her flaming face drowned out the rest of what Mrs. Wood thought of her breasts.

Her embarrassed anger for Mrs. Wood did serve one useful service – Hermione was so distracted by her desire to throttle her that she didn’t have time to be nervous for her wedding that was to happen in just twenty-four hours.

Oliver came home sometime mid-afternoon, while Hermione had escaped his mother and was helping Adrianne get tea together in the kitchen.

“Adrianne!” He’d immediately come in to circle his sister in a careful bear hug, lifting her gently as though afraid his exuberant affection could harm the babe. Laughing, she swatted him smartly as he put her down, dropping a kiss on the top of her head.

He kisses me like that, Hermione couldn’t help but notice.

Is that what I am to him, a sister who needs protecting?

But she wasn’t sure why she thought it, and quickly pushed it aside.

He smiled at Hermione, squeezing her shoulder when he dropped a kiss to her head as well with almost absent affection, and shooed Adrianne aside to take over for her, admonishing her to sit at the table and talk with them a bit instead.

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“Then yer darling fiancée is goin’ tae break with mae, if yer goin’ tae be sae brawny, an’ ye can put the water on fae tea while ye get things together.” So Hermione got to sit quietly for a while and just listen as the two siblings talked animatedly about nothing in particular. Part way through, two other men had come in, laughing when they found Oliver, apron around his waist as he tended a stew while the girls sat and watched.

She was then introduced to them as Michael and Ian, Oliver’s two older brothers. Michael was broad, like Oliver, but shorter in stature, more like their mother, with the same black hair as Adrianne worn long and tied back with a leather loop. He’d laughed when introduced to Hermione, and startled her by pulling her into a huge hug, and kissing her loudly on the cheek.

“Let her doon Michael, ye’ll have tae find yer own lass tae pull at the pub later.” Ian nudged his brother hard in the ribs, smiling at his antics. Ian was much slimmer then his two brothers, almost
as much as Adrianne’s fine boning. At thirty four he was ten years older then Oliver and the oldest of the Wood children. Ian wasn’t nearly as extroverted as his siblings, and greeted Hermione gently, but with undemonstrative warmth, and she found herself liking Kena’s husband immediately.

The meal was a boisterous affair, with all four children, Hermione, Kena and the two senior Woods making for quite a lot of racket at one table. It reminded Hermione rather comfortingly of the Weasley’s household, and even had her thinking rather kindly of Mrs. Wood, seeing in her something of Molly’s domestic presence. Everyone helped clear the dishes, and while the boys settled down again at the table, the three girls finished cleaning up. And a few lads had shown up to steal Oliver for something they called a ‘blackening’ but which Hermione privately suspected was likely an excuse to get him slobbering drunk on the night before his wedding. She was strangely sorry to see him go, realizing with a bit of a shock that she wasn’t likely to see him again until the actual ceremony the following evening.

She was feeling positively congenial towards Mrs. Wood, who had been talkative and nice throughout the meal, thinking that maybe she had judged a bit hastily. That was at least until after the meal when everyone settled down for dessert and she turned to speak with Hermione again, and quickly had her flushed with embarrassment and wondering if the penalty at Azkaban couldn’t possibly be worth matricide.

Hermione hadn’t heard much about Mister Wood prior to meeting him this evening, and she had been quick to learn why. A stern faced man, he was quiet and much possessing of the practical nature for which the Scots were famous, but it was obvious very quickly that though he kept a firm hand on his sons, it was Mrs Wood who had the true authority of raising them, seeming to almost crowd out her quiet husband with her sheer garrulous presence.

“Brighde,” he said suddenly, almost as one would scold a puppy, and to Hermione’s utter astonishment, the woman who had seemed as unstoppable as a force of nature suddenly appeared almost to deflate a bit, and settled into her seat quietly for the remainder of the evening. Her husband hid a smile behind a cough and winked at a startled Hermione when he caught her incredulous stare.

Hermione wondered if it would be entirely inappropriate for her to kiss the man.

Adrianne’s sitting room was a small, comfortable place, perfect for curling up with a good book and just tuning out the world outside. And after they had been able to flee the Croft house, she had settled in to do just that.

As she sat there, only paying nominally paying attention to her book while her thoughts wandered, Hermione became aware of a growing racket outside. To far away to make out any detail, it sounded like a large party or maybe a parade, which was silly, as it was nearing ten thirty. A party then, though it did sound to be getting noisier. When it continued for another few minutes, and still seemed to be getting louder, she finally asked, "Adrianne, what's all that noise?"

Adrianne looked up from her needlepoint and listened for a moment. "Ouch nae, sounds like Oliver's creeling ha’ started."

“Creeling? Oh – I read about that. It’s a rather old custom. A bridegroom is taken out by his friends and family and forced to carry a creel or basket on his back with all kinds of rocks in it, and he’s made to walk all around town with it on his back.”
“Aye.” She looked over at Hermione and her hazel eyes were twinkling mischievously. “Ye gonna go save him, then?”

“What?”

“He’s allowed to stop if you go and rescue him with a kiss – unless you’d like to watch him haul the thing across town?”

Hermione spluttered, protesting as the almost rhythmic noise of the crowd grew outside, until she found herself hauled up, and pulled out the door behind Adrianne, where she would have to face her fiancée in front of a large crowd of fairly drunk Scots.

The evening air outside was crisp on her skin, and she was thankful she’d managed to grab one of Adriane’s rather ubiquitous Scottish shawls to throw over her shoulders as she was pulled out the door. The main crowd was a good hundred yards off, making its way leisurely up the hill as it paced the as yet invisible Oliver. It consisted of mostly men, though she noticed a few women standing on their doorsteps to watch the jovial procession as it passed, occasionally adding their own encouragements to the general noise.

Adriane pulled her into the lane, and Hermione shrank back against the gate as the group of merrymakers closed the distance. Hermione could pick out individuals now, able to recognize both Ian and Michael were they stood in the thick of things, shouting and laughing, and very obviously the worse for drink. A shock of red hair caught her eye before disappearing back into the crowd, and she knew the twins were in the thick of things as well. It wasn’t until the crowd drew within a few yards of where she stood, trying to pull the shadows around her, that she caught site of Oliver.

The fair-sized gathering were all laughing and shouting encouragements and Oliver paused to respond to some good natured jeering with something incomprehensible to Hermione’s ears, but she was sure wasn’t very polite. He wore well worn denims stuffed into mid calf leather boots, and a rough woven buttoned shirt that just added to the wild and transported feeling of the moment, like an ancient rite encroaching on a modern world. Firmly strapped to his back was a large woven creel, as she had seen fishermen use in documentaries on TV. This basket was then filled to the brim with rocks of all sizes, causing the weave to bulge out of shape in places as lads, in their mischievous fun, had forced more in then it would carry. She couldn’t begin to imagine how Oliver had gotten this far with this incredible weight pulling at him, and she could see were his shirt stuck to him in places from his exertions, and his hair was damp and clinging to his collar.

The men had just caught sight of her, and the volume, which she thought deafening, actually increased, and she was firmly pushed into what was fast becoming a ring of people around the staggering groom-to-be. With barely a moment to catch her breath, she found that she was suddenly the centre of all the noise and confusion. Oliver seemed no better off, and looked rather surprised to see her there. His friends were starting to get into the idea of crowd participation, shouting out ribald comments and commentary with impunity:

"Come tae rescue 'im, hen?"

"She'll leave ye tae carry, ya auld weegie bampot!"

"an' he'll be buckled on 'er kisses an' haf tae be packed home!"

"Giv' 'im fair laldy, then…"

"G'aun, show'us 'er winchin then!"
"Giv' him a buss, lass!"

And other shouts of things that had Hermione blushing hotly to think about.

A quick kiss then, to save him from his mates, and hopefully she would be able to escape this foolishness. Oliver’s own expression gave her no real hint as to what he was thinking, and he remained silent, neither encouraging her nor attempting to dissuade. Frowning slightly as she concentrated on making her legs work without stumbling, she closed the small amount of distance left between them in two short paces, and reached awkwardly for him, sliding her hands shakily up his chest towards his shoulders, but catching one of the straps for the creel. Good enough.

She looked up and him, and his expression was carefully blank even as he stared back at her with eyes that were much darker then his normal light hazel, and she had to wonder if she was embarrassing him – if maybe he would have preferred if she had stayed inside and not come out. After all, he hadn’t told her about this, had made no request that she come and save him – oh, god, he doesn’t really want this at all… She hesitated, not sure how to extract herself without further embarrassment, and started to pull back when a soft groan escaped from Oliver and he reached for her, preventing her from moving any further away.

“Hermione, if ye wan’ me to stand wit’ ye tomorrow, ye’ll no’ leave me t’ these bessoms.” He was smiling at her now and if she didn’t know better she would think he was flirting with her. It was leaving her stomach rather distractingly fluttery. This close, she could smell the alcohol on his breath, and knew they had taken him out for a few fortifying rounds before their sport had begun.

She pushed herself up on her tiptoes, intending to just brush his lips with hers and release him from this ridiculous game, but the moment she drew near, he startled her by reaching for her, encircling her in his strong arms. His breath was warm on her face, in direct contrast to the night air, and he was still smiling at her in a way she wasn’t use to, and made her knees week, not that she would admit to that sort of foolishness. Cocking his head to one side, his mouth no more then an inch from kissing her, he waited. His mouth quirked almost cockily as he watched her and though his hazel eyes were a bit glassy from drink, they were clear and intense as they stared into her own, swirling with things she could no more name then she could stand without his decidedly welcome support in that instant. The moment stretched between them and she wondered rather irritably if he was going to keep her waiting until she simply combusted in a heap of bewildered anticipation on the spot.

“Are ye goin’ t’ help me, Hermione?” he asked in a husky whisper, and it became obvious to her what he was waiting for. Bastard. She gave him a look that spoke volumes of her irritation, but gave a tiny nod, no more than a quarter of an inch movement of her head, but it was enough.

His arms tightened, pulling her surprisingly close against his body, and she was conscious of his strong thighs and of the rough feeling of his shirt beneath her fingers. His lips were warm against her chilled ones, and she hummed softly from the back of her throat in surprised pleasure at the contact.

She’d never really appreciated the attraction of a large man before. She was surrounded by him, his arms cradling her, his scent permeating every breath, his chest a solid wall against her; it was almost intoxicating, and unlike any kiss she had ever shared with any other boy, but she supposed that was the difference. Cormac McLaggen and Terry Boot had most definitely been boys.

The sharp taste of whiskey burned her mouth and she was startled to realise that she had ventured forth to explore his lips, tracing their outline with the tip of her tongue, but she wasn’t thinking clearly enough to be embarrassed by the realization. A deep rumbling groan could be felt under her palms where they were caught between them, flat spread on his chest, causing what thoughts she
had left to muddle even further, a heavy fog overlaying everything in her brain. She was so caught up in the moment that at first she didn’t understand what was happening when he suddenly released her and pulled away.

For a split second, Hermione thought he looked just as unsure about what had just happened as she felt, but it passed so quickly she couldn’t be sure she actually saw it before he turned to her with a teasing grin and said “I reckon that’ll about do, lass.”

Hands were reaching out to slap him good naturedly, or offer up congratulations as the men surrounding them laughed and teased them both, though thankfully Hermione found it too difficult to decipher what they were actually saying in all the noise. Oliver was gradually pulled away from her, and she found herself facing a swaying Michael instead.

“I may hae tae try this Contract nonsense myself. Oliver certainly seems tae hae gotten verra lucky.”

Hermione could barely focus on his teasing. She was aware of giving some kind of vague answer, but for the life of her, could never remember later what she may have said. Inside, her mind was whirling with useless thoughts and questions, round and round like a dog chasing its own tail.

The brief flare of, well, it wasn’t quite lust - attraction then, had shaken her badly. She was just beginning to feel that she could deal with Oliver, her friend. Oliver, the man she occasionally thought of snogging was not a place she was willing to venture right now.

Apparently, she thought with disgust, she was beginning to appreciate broad-shouldered types.

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Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:

So here we are, leaving poor Hermione the night before her wedding. I had really, really hoped to get this chapter all the way through to their wedding night, but found that there was just too much material to cover, and Oliver's family was just too much fun to cut them out once I realized the chapter was getting way to large to fit everything :-p

I do have the wedding writen up. As soon as I finish editing it, it will go to my beta and with luck, it will be posted in a week, maybe 10 days. (gasp!) You guys really have been wonderful, with all your support and reviews, and I love you all <3

- Ny(ruserra)
Chapter 11: A Bride for All Seasons

Consequentially Yours:
A Gentleman’s Duty

Chapter Eleven - A Bride for All Seasons

April 22nd dawned misty and damp in the small Scottish village in north-western Marr. The majority of the guests began arriving in the early afternoon, filling every nook and cranny it seemed, until Hermione found herself desperately looking for a quiet place just to gather her wits, before she was forced to strangle someone. Her hair was showing the intensive labours of Sleek Eazy potion, with huge curlers still dangling from it and escaped wisps trailing everywhere. Her face bore the green remnants of Esmerelda’s Skin Polish, and her face shone pink from their diligent scrubbing. She almost sobbed with relief when Ginny stepped out of the grate at Wood Croft, dusting off soot as she cleared the way for the rest of her family to follow. She took one look at Hermione’s steely expression and wild appearance, and immediately grabbed her and forced her from the home.

Hunting through several of the abandoned-looking outbuildings in the north wing of the croft, Ginny found one that seemed completely forgotten, pushed Hermione inside, and stood against the door. Hermione just glared at her, balefully.

“Go ahead and scream. I’m not letting you back out there until you’ve had it out - Oliver would be really upset if you turned his mum into a purple toad on his wedding day.”

Hermione continued to glared at her, looking more like a Cockatrice instead of a bride on her wedding day, before she began to swear inventively. And yell. Ginny just watched in fascination as her normally proper best friend proceeded to use language that would shock Charlie, who had the best cursing repertoire of anyone she knew. A man who worked with giant irritable lizards who could burn him, bite him and step on him with incredible weight needed a large variety of things to say. Every now and then she would helpfully offer a few that Hermione seemed to have overlooked.

She seemed to run out of words, eventually, though she was still muttering things occasionally under her breath. “Gosh, I though I had a good vocabulary, with six brothers and all, but even I didn’t recognise a couple of those.”

“They were Gaelic.” Hermione snapped, casting about as if looking for something to throw.

Ginny grinned at her. “Won’t Oliver be proud,” she observed dryly. This seemed to bring Hermione up short, and she looked at her blankly for a moment before she cringed, looking highly embarrassed.

A muffled banging on the door behind her back made Hermione stiffen, though Ginny was privately amused that the knock seemed to be hesitant, as if the person on the other side of the door wasn’t really so sure being let in was what they wanted at the moment. After a pause, the door eased open slightly, just enough for a familiar face to peer carefully inside.

“Do you realize that you can be heard clear across the yard? Or at least you would be, if there
weren’t so many large Scots drinking in it.” Harry told her, cheekily. He came into the room to
give Hermione a hug, followed by Ron. Hermione instantly relaxed, feeling that this is what she
had been missing; her two best friends were a presence she could hardly think about going through
this day without, and suddenly everything seemed much more right in her world.

“You look a right mess, now don’t you?” Ron noted when he saw her, and grinned at Hermione’s
glare, and hugged her as well. “You’re dad’s here. Mum made sure to collect him, but he wasn’t
happy about the Floo; said it made him a bit nauseous. I think Oliver’s dad is pouring beer into
him at the moment.”

“Why is it men always seem to use that as a remedy for everything?” Hermione asked the air,
exasperated.

Harry grinned. “It works, doesn’t it? We’re an uncomplicated lot, Hermione. In enough quantity,
alcohol’ll make almost any problem go away - or at least make it so you don’t care anymore.”

“Come on. We’ll have to get you back in there. I’m sure they’re all looking for you by now.”
Ginny gently reminded. “Ron is right you know; you definitely don’t want to go down the aisle
like that.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent under the determined ministrations of five women, as Ginny
and Molly Weasley joined the general committee. Somehow, it wasn’t as bad with Ginny there too,
but Hermione still found the entire ordeal a bit ridiculous. It was still an hour before dusk, when
the ceremony would begin, and Hermione escaped out from under the eye of Mrs. Wood, grabbing
a robe off the peg by the back door and heading out, desperate for some fresh air and hoping a
short walk would help settle her nerves.

It seemed that the property was filled with people, but fortunately no one stopped her as she
wandered out from the gathering near the main house, determined to find a few moments of
solitude. She descended a small rise, and the sound of animated conversations fell away, muffled
and swallowed up by the mist still hanging heavily in the air. The air was redolent with the smell
of crushed sweet grasses and the earliest of spring wildflowers, and she breathed deeply, exorcising
the irritations of the afternoon with each lungful. She let her mind wander, skimming deeper
thoughts like the wind rippling the surface of the pond, not allowing them to delve too deeply, and
so was not startled by the sound of soft footsteps behind her.

She knew it wasn’t Oliver by the scent carried on the breeze blowing past her; he smelled of apples
and leather and something spicy and warm, a knowledge that would have startled her if she didn’t
feel as though her mind was enveloped in a woolly blanket just now, lethargic and reluctant. She
turned slightly to see who had found her, and was only vaguely surprised to see it was Ian. The
small pond rippled again as the breeze picked up, rustling the leaves above her head, and Ian
seemed content to simply stand and watch its surface as she was.

“What are they looking for me?” Hermione spoke softly, not wanting to disturb the comfortable silence
between them any more than necessary.

“Nae, hen. Ye’ve a minute yet.” They stood like that a few moments longer, while Hermione
continued to let the wonderful solitude of this place drain away the last of her worries, leaving her
calm for the first time in days.

“Tis thought tae be a fairy glade, ye ken.” Ian told her, his deep voice sounding oddly flat, as
though the air hungrily stole its resonance.
Hermione smiled at this, thinking it appropriate. Seeming to shake off the mood of the place, Ian straightened, once more becoming the practical man she had known these last two days.

“A wedding gift from yer brothers,” he said, holding out a gaily ribboned horseshoe for her inspection. It had obviously been laboriously polished by hand, as iron didn’t take magic very well, until the dull metal nearly shone. Both upright arms were interwoven with ribbons of ivory and blue, giving it a braided look, and the curve had been meticulously etched with a single word: *Defens*. Hermione found herself oddly touched by the gesture as she let her fingers trail the smooth lettering.

“The clan motto,” Ian explained while reaching to secure the shoe to her upper arm by means of two ribbons left loose from the weaving. “An’ the shoe is said tae be for luck,” he smiled, finishing. Looking down at him, she realized the blue was the same shade as that in the tartan of the formal kilt he wore.

“An’ one from yer groom.” He made an odd gesture, seeming to grab something from the air, and then held out a woven circlet of white heather blossoms to her, their subtle fragrance reminiscent of lilacs in her nose.

“He made that?” Hermione asked, her emotions suddenly unsettled.

Ian regarded her with oddly compassionate eyes. “Aye.” He made her bow her head, ostensibly so he could settle the crown properly for her, but giving her privacy to settle her thoughts. “There ye go lass, I reckon that’ll stay.” He held out his arm for her, and lead her back to the house, allowing her to stay lost in her thoughts as they crossed the yard.

Everything for the next hour was a haze of flurried activity and nerves for Hermione as they all rushed to deal with a surprising array of last minute madness. The rings were forgotten and had to be fetched, courtesy of Fred and a great deal of drinking the night before, Hermione was sure; someone got very tipsy and fell in the pond out back, tracking green muck through Mrs. Wood’s pristine kitchen and dripping on Molly’s dress; a rather precocious little boy found one of Oliver’s old brooms and was happily diving birds and imaginary Bludgers, leading Michael on a merry chase when he tried to get him down, but somehow it all seemed to come together, though afterward, Hermione was never quite sure how it was managed. She had somehow stolen a few minutes alone with her father, a quite island of calm in an otherwise lunatic afternoon, and a moment she’d treasured. He had gazed at her, dressed in her ivory dress robe, a circlet of flowers in her hair and she smiled at him past the lump in her throat.

“I don’t want to muss you,” he protested when she held out her arms. She hugged him anyway, and he awkwardly embraced her, not sure what do with his hands so they wouldn’t damage the staggering amount of work that had gone into her appearance. When she pulled back, both of them had glassy eyes, but her father smiled tremulously. “You look beautiful,” he said quietly, and for a moment, his gaze was far-away, and Hermione knew he was remembering a day long past.

He shifted uneasily, eyes darting nervously around and she knew this was exceedingly hard for him with so many things out of place and unfamiliar to him, but he was trying so hard to be here for her, taking part in the only ways he could and fought to hold back the burning sobs rising in her throat. Only one escaped, and her father’s hands tightened on hers momentarily, but she beamed at him with a watery grin and shook her head, determined to remember this much, at least, and not to waste it crying.

“Have you met Mrs. Wood?” She asked, casting about for something to ease them past this moment.
Her father shuddered, an elegant expression of his opinion of that meeting. “Be careful of that woman, Hermione - she’s a menace of Valkyrian proportions!”

At his daughter’s muffled giggles, he added indignantly, “I expect her father’s name was Richard, and she probably wears an iron corset.”

They made a noisy procession as the women escorted Hermione to the glen where the ceremony would take place. The men had left sometime earlier to await their arrival, and she found herself surrounded by an escort of twenty women or more, all able, she knew, to claim close ties either to herself or the family that gave them the right to make this walk with her. She was relieved to see that some of the faces of those she cherished when she saw Molly walking a little ways back from her, and even Fleur smiled at her when she caught her eye. Adriane and Ginny walked to either side of her, and she was incredibly thankful for their presence.

She was surprised and delighted when she noticed Harry and Ron were with them, both of them apparently having staunchly defended their right to make this walk with their best friend, and when they noticed her looking in their direction began to goof off, walking with an exaggerated sway to their hips and batting their eyelashes outrageously so that she had to suppress her giggles.

The moon was out early this evening, as dusk was just ending and the moonlight shone, making the ground luminescent in its cold light. The lane wound down from the outskirts of the village, and into a shallow valley a half kilometre beyond. From the crest of the road, Hermione could see the field spread out below her. Decorated poles were wound tight with ribbon and fragrant flowers, like festive maypoles, and stood on either side of the lane where the road levelled out, then again several yards on, just behind the guests, and obviously her mark for where she should stop to allow the piper to play her down the aisle. At the end of this walkway, which was strewn with flower petals, stood a stand of massive weeping trees, resplendent with their covering of tiny, pale blue fragrant blossoms. Their branches had been woven and interlaced to make sort of a natural amphitheatre to stand around and over the couple as they were wed.

The sky above was the bruised purple of twilight, lightening to mauve where the last of the sun’s glow lit the horizon and illuminating the aisle between the guests with the last light of day. In this perfect hollowed backdrop stood Oliver. Fanning out a step behind an below him stood his three witnesses: Fred Weasley, looking as solemn as Hermione had ever seen him, though he might simply have been nursing the excesses of the night before; Charlie Weasley, his expression leaving no doubt as to the state of his head, and Michael Wood, grinning almost comically wide as he nudged Oliver and brought his attention to the women’s procession as they drew nearer. Behind them all stood their officiate, a plenipotentiary for the Civil service division of the Ministry, wearing deeply green robes of a conservative cut to underline his importance in the ceremony. Hermione was faintly relieved, thankful that Percy hadn’t decided to irritate her by performing the ceremony himself. The guests waiting patiently, their chattering slowly fading as more of them became aware of the women leaving the procession and taking their seats among the assembled, but she was barely conscious of their hush for the roaring in her ears.

Hermione stopped just beyond the twin standards, murmuring “breathe, just -breathe,” under her breath like a mantra as she watched Adriane escort her mother to their seats up front, leaving just Ginny, Ron and Harry standing with her. They would follow her, to stand as her own witnesses. Almost unwillingly, her gaze wandered to Oliver, standing to the right of the altar. He stared back at her, his eyes not leaving her face as she tried to decipher his expression.

Under his intense scrutiny, she was acutely conscious of her finery. The robe was a pretty cut,
flattering her most definitely not-willow figure, and Hermione had to privately admit Brighde Wood had really done herself proud. The bodice was of an almost corset style, lacing up with a wide satin ribbon and narrowing down to a point at her waist, and was cut to just skim the tops of her breasts in a modified square neckline. The three-quarter length sleeves were loosely cut, to be gathered by a pale blue ribbon tied in a bow just above the elbow, and flowed into an open bell just below, leaving her forearms girlishly bare. The skirts skimmed the tops of her shoes in front, and flared out to trail behind her in a modest train. Oliver’s circlet sat lightly on her, feeling just like a crown, and she defiantly forced her knees to stop knocking under her skirts.

When the first evocative notes of the pipes rose above the silent crowd, Hermione felt panic try to rise up as the distance between herself and the altar appeared to multiply and waver like a heat dream, and she could actually feel her head spin. The otherworldly call of the music seemed to urge her feet to move her, thought she wasn’t aware of any conscious decision to do so, and afterwards she was never quite sure how it was she made it down that aisle.

As she came to take her place beside her fiancé, hundreds of bluish glowing lights began to appear in the branches above them as fairies lit the trees making the canopy above them alight as though filled with tiny stars.

She must have looked faintly green by the time she arrived, for she felt Oliver’s warm hands on her arm, solicitously helping her manage the few shallow steps to the dais, but a gentle squeeze as he did so told her it was meant as a comforting gesture rather than in doubt of her ability to rise to her position.

The ceremony itself was held primarily in English, in deference to her own non-Scottish background, but Hermione still felt it impossible to actually focus on what was being said, her conscious sort of hovering languidly detached as the official finished a few ritual sort of phrases and began with a brief homily on the commitments of marriage. Oliver stood by her side, his gaze fixed unwaveringly on the old man as he droned on in his reedy brogue. The fact that he didn’t blink made Hermione fairly sure he was paying about as much attention as she was, and she had to bit the inside of her cheek to keep back her giggles. She suspected she may be going insane. Not that Oliver wasn’t distracting enough in his own right, she admitted privately. She had never really had the opportunity to appreciate men’s knees before, always tending to think of them more as a hinge then a sensual part of a person’s body, but she was beginning to think that perhaps she just hadn’t given them a proper chance. The kilt he wore was in what she assumed was his clan colours, dark and somewhat more ornate then the simple plaids Adrianne used each day, and was striking against his black short-waisted coat. A matching plaid was arranged over one shoulder, held in place by an ornate silver pin of Celtic design about the size of a galleon, and a chain and leather belt crossed his hips to hold the decorated leather sporran. Knee-high hose and black leather ghillie brogues, the traditional highland shoes that laced up the calf, only served to highlight the muscle developed by years of demanding athletics.

The knees in question were tanned, and lead the eye intriguingly to the widening line of thigh before disappearing underneath the heavy wool cloth. When Oliver turned slightly to quirk an eyebrow at her, she could feel herself turning bright pink at being caught like that and resolutely turned her attention back to the ceremony.

Their vows were spoken in Gaelic, and Hermione silently thanked Adrianne for helping her to memorize the short speech, so that she was able to get through it without stumbling. Words as old as the hills; an ancient arcane pledge, and she felt the magic of them prickle across her skin. A short benediction by the old man, and Oliver reached for his sgian dubh, a small garnet-topped dagger tucked in the top of his right knee-hose. The blood-binding was an ancient custom, and in Britain it was a ritual only the Celtic Irish and Scottish wizards still performed.
“Ye okay, lass?” Oliver asked her softly as he gently took her hand in his, palm upwards. She wasn’t sure of her voice, so she settled for a tight nod, but softened it with a somewhat tremulous smile. She resolutely fought the instinct to curl her fingers against what she knew was coming, despite knowing it wouldn’t really hurt all that much.

She was right. The blade was so sharp, she hardly felt it as it made a shallow slice across her right palm. Blood began to well immediately, and three drops were caught in a shallow, two handled chalice before Oliver was deftly wrapping a clean linen cloth around her hand. The assemblage was strangely quiet, a hundred people collectively holding their breath and not even the cry of an evening animal disturbed the unreality of the scene for Hermione. Her hand throbbed painlessly beneath the rough linen bindings.

She took the proffered dagger from Oliver with a surprisingly steady hand, noticing that the hilt was warm from his fist. Resisting the urge to wipe suddenly slippery palms on her robes, she took the hand he held out to her and placed the blade against the fleshy part of the palm opposite the thumb and looked up, keeping his gaze as she made the shallow slice. She couldn’t help but wince slightly as she felt the blade bite into his flesh, and she found the deep red of his blood momentarily startling as it beaded against his skin. She found it strangely mesmerising as she watched the three drops elongate and fall into the waiting chalice, and almost missed Ginny handing her a linen cloth to bind it with.

The old wizard whisked the cup away and placed it on the vine-carved altar. The air rippled almost imperceptibly as a shining light began to emanate from within, and Hermione realized that it was the cup itself that held the magic of this ritual, as opposed to any invocation; similar to the Goblet of Fire. Reaching into his robes, he produced a rather gnarled and twisted wand from its recesses, and tapped the glowing cup slowly seven times, before intonating, “Praenuntius!”

This form of augury was a very old magic, sort of a crude horoscope for the union, and when at first nothing happened Hermione was regretful. Not that she believed in divination much, but it would have been fascinating to see something she couldn’t even find described in one of her books.

Faint stirrings from the guests told her that they were disappointed as well, but then an image began to rise from the bowl, and everyone stilled, expectantly. The talisman was forming as if out of a ghostly pool. Faintly violet-tinged, it glowed softly in the darkening evening. It was fuzzy around the edges, as though drawn from its berth reluctantly, but the image began to firm up almost instantly, and Hermione began to realize that the compact, furry body she was looking at was a marten. It stood, ears pricked forward on alert, and twisting its head in a way that was almost hypnotic, as a snake might. Clamped in its jaws was a single strand of the same heather Hermione wore on her head, and she was aware of a sort of soft groan going through the crowd as she stared curiously at it.

The ghostly vision held a moment longer before dissipating as if scattered by a phantom breeze, and she was surprised to hear Oliver let out a breath he’d obviously been holding unconsciously. *Surly he didn’t really believe in all this stuff? And what had he made of the mystifying portent?* She would have to question him about it when she had the chance.

The fairy lights glowed even brighter against the now-fully darkened sky, and they painted bright spots against her eyelids when she closed them, part of her trying desperately to take it all in, analyse and understand it all right now, and the rest of her fiercely longing for the quiet and solitude of their room when this was all over. Fingers brushed her arm fleetingly, and she turned slightly, and managed to give him a wobbly smile in answer to the question in his eyes. *Yes, I’m alright.*
More Gaelic, and this time followed by a general murmur of laughter from the crowd, and the solemn mood began to shift to something more anticipating and eager, and people moved to sit forward on their seats. The bride and groom were motioned to face each other, and with a flick of his wand, the official had their two hands bound together with a strip of tartan cloth. People were grinning at them now, congratulatory. Oliver’s smile was a bit rueful, but made Hermione feel warm as he moved closer, using his unbound hand to gently finger her hair behind her ear.

A large bubble seemed to be pushing at her stomach, making it well up inside her, fluttering and wriggling the whole way as little electric impulses fired from tingling nerves and skated across her skin, making her shiver. It was clear Oliver had only intended for it to be a polite brushing of lips, but Hermione found herself moving in closer. There was something undeniably comforting in being held in even one of those strong arms and she was perfectly willing to admit to herself that she needed some comfort right now.

Somehow, he seemed to understand her need for that contact, to feel the shield of his body against all those eyes, and he looped his free arm around her gently. She expected he would smile at her, as he seemed to often do when he wanted to calm her or reassure her, but he didn’t. Instead, he was looking at her very seriously, staring into her eyes, as if seeking something, divining some answer, before his gaze dropped to her mouth and her thoughts scattered like so much wheat chaff in the wind.

It was a little awkward, bound to each other as they were. The cloth tie was tight, the wool itching against her wrist and her bound arm was twisted uncomfortably between them, but the moment his mouth touched hers she became oblivious to the discomfort. His lips were gentle, soft pressure caressing her skin, nothing like the bewildering, drowning flare of the night before, but seeming to ignite some slow-burning ember within her that made her flushing and shivering beneath his touch, all at once.

Loud cheering finally permeated the blanketing feeling of that kiss, and they broke apart without any embarrassment. With another flick of that wand, their hands were unbound and Oliver watched her as with deliberate care he removed the plaid on his shoulder. Hermione turned, to allow him to drape it properly, proclaimed now as a part of his family, and she could feel his hands on her shoulder as he fastened it with the same large silver pin. They trembled, ever so slightly. Somehow, that made her feel better.

Magic really was a wondrous thing, Hermione reflected sometime later. Tables had replaced the rows and rows of seats, each laden with so much food she was sure one would be able to hear them groaning under the strain if it weren’t for all the noise. It was incredible the din a group of semi- and fully inebriated people could make, though she wasn’t sure by this point which category she herself fell in anymore.

She had danced with everyone, it seemed — from friendly and teasing waltzes with Harry; to doing something strangely contemporary with a silly name with Ginny, Fleur, Luna, and strangely, Fred; and astoundingly bewildering jigs with Michael and Adrianne. She could truly say she was exhausted as she sat at an empty table on the outskirts of the main activity, happy to have a moment to quietly sip a small measure of Firewhiskey against the chill of the early morning air. Midnight had come and gone, unheralded in all the confusion and the knowledge that it was now the new day was sapping the last of her energy reserves. The bower in which they had been married stood across the improvised dance floor, the early flowering trees impossibly woven still an awe inspiring sight to her Muggle eyes, even after eight years of being a witch. Every now and again a whiff of their perfume could be caught on the night air, and if she would breath a little
deeper when it did, she wasn’t about to admit it to anyone.

She was extremely content, just now. Everyone was laughing, and even her father had been persuaded to dance with Brighde, though he swore to her afterwards that the woman had no sense of decorum, and two left feet besides, but Hermione thought he was secretly just scared she’d find out he hadn’t danced since her mom died. Two years ago, she had been frantically seeking along with Snape and Lupin, trying desperately to research anything that might stop the green pus leaking from what remained of Seamus’s left eye. There hadn’t been much laughter then.

The fairy lights gleamed pale blue-lilac in the night, like a thousand stars fell to earth and she found herself smiling. When Oliver dropped tiredly into a chair next to her, turned briefly in greeting, giving him part of her smile, before turning back to watch the trees. Some of the lights were moving around now, as the fairies, not having very developed attention spans to begin with, got bored and wandered off to different branches, making it look like a hive of buzzing bees. Occasionally, one of them would have drank too heavily of their sweet violet wine, and would fall to the ground with a lazy plap! that could be envisioned, if not actually heard. Hermione giggled.

“I made Ian and Michael help me wit’ it last night.” Though not actually smiling, Oliver still gave the impression of deep satisfaction at observing her pleasure in what he’d wrought for her.

“I wouldn’t have thought you able - you were pretty much the worse for wear last evening,” Hermione could hardly pull her eyes from the silly antics unfolding in the tree tops a few metres away, and the grin in her voice was unmistakable. “As I recall, it was drinking with Fred and George that got you into this mess. Are you planning then to spend all our important days drunk?”

“I was sober this morning, mouse.” He made a bobbing gesture with his head. “Well, more or less, anyway. I wouldn’t come to you on yer wedding night like that.”

_Wedding night._

Suddenly, the bottom dropped out of Hermione’s stomach.

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Chapter 12: Not Quite What We Were Before

Chapter Notes

I have the most wonderful reviewers, I really do. Thank you all so much for your continued support and interest. I know I'm getting better at getting these updates out, but I still do go slowly at times. This chapter has been sitting on my computer, almost finished, for the last eight weeks. I was just completely stuck. I knew what I wanted to say, what needed to happen, and yet, the words were just no-where to be found and the only thing I seemed able to write would have been rejected by cereal box editors ;-)!

Consequentially Yours

Or

A Gentleman’s Duty

Chapter Twelve – Not Quite What We Were Before

It was never a good idea to Apparate while very tired, or quasi-inebriated, or any combination of the two. Hermione had been glad, therefore, to find that Oliver had arranged for a Portkey at precisely one am to take them to a small establishment in Wales, hoping against hope that booking the place hadn’t been left up to Fred, as best man. Knowing his somewhat dubious sense of the appropriate, she figured that as long as they didn’t find themselves at a place that catered with heart-shaped beds or advertised rates by the hour, he would live to influence a new generation of Hogwarts students.

He’d live, Hermione decided once they arrived at The Coron Ohono Arthur, a wizarding establishment in the Conwy valley. She was relieved to see that the room she found herself in, once the dizzying whirling of the Portkey trip cleared from her vision, was clean and friendly, and most definitely not a den of ill repute, unless ladies of the night had taken to dollies.

It was a sitting room, the soft glow of waiting oil lamps welcoming to her, and rich oiled woods gleamed in the orange light. As she turned, she noticed that the far side of the room had been built into a tiny kitchenette, enough to get coffee in the morning, at least. A darkened doorway stood open along one wall, no doubt leading to the bedroom.
Hermione tried hard not to stare at it.

She was also aware of Oliver prowling about the rooms, examining everything with as much embarrassed curiosity as she herself was doing, drawing out the moment when they would have to face that reality, no doubt.

A bridal suite. On their wedding night. So much was implied in that single thought – intimacy on several levels, none of which Hermione was sure she was prepared to deal with, and she could feel strange dual sensations rising within her – nervous anticipation and fear twined, and mixing horribly in her stomach.

Oliver had moved into the bedroom and lit a few of the lamps in there as well, making that dark portal less intimidating, at least. She stayed out in the sitting room for the time being, ostensibly examining every inch of her new home for the next five days. She stalled, not at all sure how to deal with what was going to happen in that room this night. Not that she was a virgin, having done some exploration during the war that had left her thoroughly satisfied that it wasn’t worth the entanglement for the most part, and quite comfortable just leaving the boys nonsense to girls like Lavender and Pavarti. The fact that Oliver’s kisses made her tingle in places best not thought of, was an irritation more then an enticement, she firmly reminded herself.

When twenty minutes had gone by, and Oliver still hadn’t reappeared, she began to feel somewhat let down as the adrenaline slowly drained from her system, and she let out her breath irritably, knowing full well that she was being contradictory. She hesitated for an instant, but quickly pushed herself through the doorway, reasoning that they couldn’t put off this confrontation forever.

The room was large, with a high four-posted bed in the middle of the far wall, piled high with oversized pillows and creamy linens. Oliver had turned back the thick down comforter invitingly, and Hermione looked at the soft mattress with longing. Her luggage had been set to one side, resting beneath a delicate looking vanity table in the corner. A mug was waiting on a small table beside the bed, steaming gently.

Oliver was still dressed in his kilt, though the black Bonnie Prince Charlie jacket he had been wearing was now lying discarded over the back of a chair, and the leather thong at the neck of his linen dress shirt had come loose. He had obviously just finished unpacking his things, and now stood, leaning with his hands on the sill of the room’s looming artisan window, gazing unfocusedly into the night. It was open, and a breeze ruffled his hair as it gusted intermittently past him. He gave no indication that he had heard her come in.

Hermione quietly crossed the room and sat awkwardly on the edge of the bed. She picked up the tea left there for her and sipped it, finding the bergamot aroma of Earl Grey to be soothingly familiar right now. His thoughtfulness made her smile and relax a bit more, confident in the man
she had come to know these last two months, and knowing, one way or another, they would get through this awkward part of their marriage, too.

“Oliver?”

He obviously hadn’t heard her come in, but he gave no indication that she had startled him as he turned and faced her. She couldn’t help but appreciate the sight of him in his finery as he did so – eyes wandering lingeringly over his frame while she wondered if she would ever had the excuse to see him in such again, and was rewarded with that same infuriatingly raised eyebrow as he fought to suppress a smirk.

“Oh, honestly!” she said, exasperated, even as she blushed.

He laughed then, unable to stop himself. “Not my fault, now is it, lass?” But he smiled at her, obviously not upset. “If it helps any, ye clean up rather nicely yerself.”

Hermione huffed at him and blushed harder. This time, when he laughed, he got a pillow thrown at him for his trouble, but he was right – it did help.

They were getting sidetracked. Sex. That’s what they were supposed to be talking about. Even the word in her mind made her confused, heated and uncomfortable. Ginny’s teasing of a fortnight before came back to her, unbidden and unwanted. She took a deep breath, and plunged ahead while she still had her courage to brace him so directly on the subject. “Oliver –“ she began.

“Hmm?” His response was somewhat absent as he moved from the window to hang his discarded coat.

“Well should we – I mean, how would you –“ Her stumbling questions kept getting jumbled up, and infuriatingly, Oliver only cocked his head at her, pausing in his task, obviously not picking up on her attempt to ease into things. Irritation at the whole situation bubbled up, and she found herself speaking much more plainly then she may have liked.

“Perhaps you should undress me now.”

Her words fell like a gunshot, shattering the comfortable, almost domestic scene of a moment before. He stopped dead, and stared at her, hard. She found she couldn’t meet his eyes as he
seemed to be waging some kind of internal debate, perhaps trying to find the right words in the wake of her bombshell. *Except that it shouldn't be a bombshell,* Hermione thought, *relief/regret* pooling in her stomach. *It's what one expects on a wedding night, after all.* Hermione would have laughed if she hadn’t felt like crying; she was absolutely mortified.

“Well, don’t we have to, I mean –“ she tried to explain herself. This time, thankfully, Oliver seemed to pick up on what she was trying to discuss.

“No’ necessary, lass.” Hermione wasn’t sure if his voice was normally that husky and raspy, or if it was being imagined by her confused hormones. Either way, she wished it didn’t sound that way right now.

“But, don’t we have to - I mean, to avoid an annulment –“

He seemed to have himself under control again, no longer so hard and distant, and looked at her speculatively for a moment, one brow raised in sardonic amusement. “No’ unless yer havin’ a queer desire ta be rid of me already. It would have to be you or I who declared it, and frankly, lots of newly married are t’ tired on the night of anyway. Who’s goin’ ta say what we did or didn’t do on our wedding night?”

Perversely, Hermione found herself arguing now, frustrated and unsure at her own defensiveness. “Well, maybe we should do this, before something happens. I mean that was the whole point of this Law in the first place, and it is really important…”

“Hermione, I am no’ having ye come t’ my bed like that.” Something internal just seemed to have shut off; his eyes were flat again, in a way she’d seen from him only once before. His voice rumbled in the unnaturally still air between them. “It will happen, if ever, when it’s something ye want t’ do, an’ never-mind the children. It’s not yer responsibility t’ save the world from every problem.”

“But what if something does happen? You’re not immune to this epidemic, and I would hate to have gone through all of this to find it was all for nothing in the end!” She really wasn’t sure what was driving her on to argue like this, except perhaps the knowledge, deep down, that Oliver wasn’t going to let anything happen tonight that made her feel safe. Perhaps it was the tiny flare of hurt that he didn’t seem to have even considered the possibility of doing anything of the sort with her.

Oliver stared at her for a long moment; but when he spoke, it was quiet and calm, almost flat. “Good night, Hermione. I’ll be in the other room if ye need me.”
“Where are you going? The bed’s here, and it’s ridiculous to think you’re going to spend the next week on the couch—"

But he was gone.

She found herself sniffling quietly as she fumbled with the ties of her wedding gown. *Funny, this isn’t something I had thought to do alone,* she thought as her fingers twisted uncomfortably behind her, struggling with the hook-and-eye closures.

In one short evening, she had managed to change what she had been coming to anticipate as a quiet extension of the solid comfort of her developing relationship with Oliver into a deterioration that normally took years of married life to achieve. His rejection stung bitterly, and she was confused by her own contradictory emotions.

When she finally managed to crawl into bed, she lay exhausted; staring at the wall with the covers pulled tight to her chin and tried not to cry.

It was a long time before sleep finally rescued her, still huddled chill-ly in a miserable tangle with the sheets.

-..-

The couch was fairly easy to Transfigure into a perfectly adequate bed, or at least it would have been, if he weren’t in such a state. As it was, one of the cushions exploded in a shower of stuffing and it took him three tries before he produced something even remotely acceptable to sleep on.

What he ended up with was slightly too short, and the mattress was thicker on one side then the other, but he was too angry to even notice as he began removing his costume in preparation to lie on the one remaining pillow.

When she had so brazenly told him to undress her, it had sounded more like a command then anything, and he’d almost obeyed before his mind had had a chance to catch up with his libido. Twice now he’d caught her lingering appraisal that left him with little doubt that she at least found him not wholly unattractive, and the way she’d been stumbling and blushing as she attempted to explain her concerns had given rise to a small flame of hope that perhaps she might not find the idea of being with him in a more traditional sense, someday, completely unacceptable.
He’d been wrong, as it turned out, and his rather foolish hope had come crashing down around his ears when she’d brought up that damned law. She wanted to make sure she’d done her bit, apparently.

He was angry enough to be honest with himself, and the source of his frustrations came as a bit of a shock. He knew he’d been thinking of her as more of a woman lately, had even had to catch himself as his thoughts had strayed dangerously, but now he was forced to actually look at his behavior and accept the fact that lust was certainly possible between them, at least on his end, and he might even be on his way to developing actual feelings for her, feelings that involved the right to hold her close to his body at night and feel her heartbeat slowing under his hand as she drifted off to sleep in his embrace.

He could blame this new vision on Fred, he decided. During the rather blurry hours before the actual creeling, he had confided his honeymoon plans to his friend when he had started to pry.

Fred had given him a lewd wink and clapped him somewhat haphazardly on the shoulder. “Wales? Good thinking – nothing else to do on a wet Welsh afternoon then stay in bed.”

And that was just it. He had no right to think of her that way at all. Turning, he punched the pillow that felt like rocks beneath his head before throwing himself down again. She was still the best friend of his friend’s little brother, only a year ahead of Ginny, the girl with little red pigtails who used to tag along, begging to play Quidditch with them. The fact that she was nearly two years older than Ginny, and in all actuality only four years younger then himself somehow, didn’t seem relevant.

She was just scared, and trying her best to deal with a very difficult situation; and he would make sure that he didn’t let his own feelings interfere. Obviously, she was capable of being more mature about this whole mess than he was able to manage.

_I promised her friendship when this began, and if that’s all I can have from her, I’ll consider myself lucky._

He fervently hoped he could keep his end of that bargain.

The mattress was lumpy, but he barely noticed beneath his swirling thoughts as he twisted over, tangling his leg in the cover as he did so.
It had been nice to be home again. His hadn’t been home like that since before the war, and he hadn’t realized how much he’d missed it - and it had given him a queer turn to walk in to his family home and see her there, taking and laughing so easily with his sister; almost like she belonged there; a part of his family. It had felt – comfortable. Nice.

Feelings that, now, felt uneasy and awkward in his gut.

And then there was that augury. They were important to his people, usually a fair indication of how good a match might prove to be. Of course, there were rarer occasions when they proved to be a warning – a portent of future mischief or strife.

What the bloody hell was the marten supposed to mean? Martens were clever; they were also mischievous and thieves. He wasn’t sure how any of that might fit in. And the heather, long held as the symbol of Scotland, was also the personal flower of his clan, and a symbol of luck and fidelity. How in the blazes did that fit together? Could he assume the heather to pertain to himself somehow? Then what with the marten – was it Hermione?

He gave up on the pillow; it felt like a short plank beneath his head anyway. The problem with this kind of magic, he reflected, was that it was rarely of any use until it became obvious, usually well after the fact.

The mattress wasn’t much better than the pillow, and he rolled around a bit, trying to find an even moderately comfortable position before giving up again.

He could still remember the look in her eyes after he’d kissed her at the creeling. He hadn’t meant for it to happen; hadn’t even mentioned the custom to her, but somehow he must have known she’d find out, because he hadn’t been surprised to see her there in the lane. The alcohol had loosened him a bit more then he’d liked, but he hadn’t seen the harm, until suddenly she was there, and he was trying to remember why it was a such a bad idea to taste those pretty lips, or muss her unruly curls.

She seemed to have forgiven him, perhaps not minding as much as she might have, but he cursed the fact that he could still remember the tang of her skin, and the feel of her sharp tongue tasting him in return.

-...-
Things remained strained the next morning, and Oliver had to quietly acknowledge that they would likely remain so for a while.

He awoke to the smell of freshly brewed tea, and the sight of Hermione puttering quietly in the tiny kitchen just fifteen feet away. He eyed her carefully, not sure how far they may have stepped back in their relations last night, and desperately trying to remember if he’d thought to put on pyjamas in all his turmoil.

“Good morning, Oliver.” A mug was shoved in his direction while Hermione seemed to be trying to avert her eyes, and he realised that while he’d remembered his pyjamas, he’d failed to put on a shirt. Mentally, he shrugged, deciding it was far too comfortable right were he was to move and change yet. He casually settled down a bit farther beneath the heavy comforter and tried not to think of it as a somewhat fluffy shield against her probable anger.

She sat stiffly in a chair a few feet away and sipped her own tea, robe pulled tight to her body like armour, and he realised she was expecting another argument.

“Morning, Mouse.”

Hermione’s head came up, and she stared at him frostily. *Oh, boy,* he winced inwardly.

Neither of them spoke again for several long minutes. She went back to staring at the cup cradled in her hands, ridged posture speaking louder than words just how uncomfortable she was to be there. Oliver balled up his anger and disappointed hope, and firmly locked them in a tight mental box. Getting out of here, that was what they needed; before they managed to ruin their friendship anymore.

“Look, Mou-Hermione, we’ve go’ access t’ the museum offices and such this evening, once they close up. Did ye perhaps want t’ play tourist there for the day?”

She smiled, looking relieved, before her expression shuttered again, but she wasn’t able to keep the anticipation and pleasure from her eyes.

Twenty minutes later, they were on their way.
The Albion Museum, or Cywreinfeydd Yr Alban in Welsh, was beautiful. It had been constructed over a thousand years earlier, there when Dublin had still been a Viking settlement and Scotland itself no more then a collection of minor holdings to Anglo-Saxon warlords. Wales, or Cymru to the inhabitants, was a perfect place for such an ancient relic. There was just something about the misty, rocky land that spoke of unchanging values that gave you a real sense of stepping back in history as you entered the valley.

He’d been right, of course. The minute Hermione had stepped through the doors, she’d been lost in fascinated discovery for hours. He’d watched her as she’d immersed herself in the various exhibits, unlike any Muggle museum’s, he was later told, and he could practically see her trying to absorb all the new information being presented as if she were a sponge.

In particular, the museum was widely known for having wonderful Arthurian exhibits, and the main floor was largely devoted to the Pendragon and his knights, both legends and fact; for with magic there often wasn’t much of a difference. He’d trailed companionably behind her as she experienced recreations of Badon Hill and Camlann taken from early consciousness-preserving magicks well before the advancement of Pensives, and conversed with the memories of Galahad and Bedivere on subjects as far reaching as early magical theory and the first stirrings of the suppression of Magical creatures by the Wizard class. Surprisingly, house-elves were only mentioned once.

Merlin was a topic that would entertain a scholar such as herself for years to come, being considered the father of much of today’s modern magical theory and practice, so he managed to steer her clear of the entire top floor by pointing her to some interesting exhibits on the Picts in the opposite direction. The combination of their activity and the security of the crowds seemed to ease much of their earlier tension. It was comfortable between them again, at least on the surface, and Oliver was happy to trail behind her and just let her enjoy herself for the day. They had time, since she wasn’t due back to the school until Sunday, so for today he enjoyed just playing tourist to her enthusiasm. He’d been here a few times, as it was right next door, sort-to-speak, from home. Though not often enough to become blasé, he found that seeing it through her eyes made everything new again.

“Actually, Albion itself is taken from the Welsh elfydd, for earth or world. It’s the oldest name for Great Britain, but is sometimes used to represent just Scotland, which I suppose is why the Welsh name it Alban, which is technically their word for Alba, which is Scotland. I wonder –“ Hermione continued to prattle on, meaningless, relaxed and safe conversation being the order of the day.

Five o’clock found the large building nearly empty. The curator’s office was on the second floor, a small split level off the first landing leading to the upper levels. Oliver had never met the man, but Percy had quietly had a word, asking him to cooperate.
Mr. Ethan Daniels looked up from his desk, startled when Oliver knocked on the doorframe of the open door as they let themselves into his office. The expression was no more then a flicker across his smooth face, but Oliver got the distinct feeling they were not a welcome distraction.

“You must be the investigators from the Ministry, then?” The question was neutral, and he didn’t wait for an answer before continuing rather fussily, “I really don’t see how all this is necessary. I already accommodated the first team of you Ministry chaps when it happened – they turned the whole place upside-down and ruined the carpet in the East wing with all their traffic. I just don’t see what more you expect to find.”

Oliver smiled coolly at him, and just stared. It didn’t take long for the man to give in, the sudden lessening of his self-important air signalling reluctant cooperation. Oliver waited until Daniels put the work before him into his desk, before he pointedly motioned Hermione to a seat and sat himself, in absence of an invitation.

“Jus’ a few more questions, sir. If you don’ mind?” The question was asked mildly, but it was still childish, as something about his man’s lack of courtesy just rubbed him the wrong way.

“Actually, I’d like to see a copy of the security layout for this building, if you please,” Hermione’s voice broke in firmly. Oliver suppressed his surprise at her interruption, simply raising his eyebrows at the motionless curator, as if to ask what he was waiting for.

“I don’t really see how that’s necessary,” he blustered, fidgeting with his a ring on his left hand.

“This is the Ministry asking,” Oliver reminded him levelly. He sat there, completely unruffled as he allowed the man to carefully consider the situation.

It took him a full minute to make his decision, and while Hermione took the blueprint to a small table by the window to examine it, Oliver filled in time by asking questions, most of which were probably already asked a few dozen times during the initial investigation. He wasn’t surprised that he didn’t learn anything.

As soon as Hermione finished her examination, she and Oliver left the room, with permission to look around. They were safely down the hall, before he asked hopefully, “Did you learn anything from all that?”
Hermione shook her head. “Not much. The wards are extensive. Frankly, I can’t see how any witch or wizard managed to get in.”

The main floor corridors were empty now – even the stragglers had made their way out, leaving the stone corridors chill with the absence of so many bodies. Oliver felt it was the perfect backdrop to his rather useless thoughts, and was startled when Hermione broke the silence.

“I never realized just how little power the Ministry still has left.” Her voice was hollow. “He was very close to refusing, wasn’t he?”

“People don’t feel safe, and that’s the Ministry’s job. If we don’t get this mess cleaned up shortly, Mouse, there won’t be a Ministry anymore. If people don’t start to feel safe again, soon, the whole thing’s likely to collapse.” Oliver grimaced. “Come on - let’s get down to the employees’ entrance. We can poke around a bit where it happened. Maybe we can find out something about this book.”

“Mr. Daniels didn’t seem to have much of an idea as to who might want to steal it, did he?” she mused, thoughtfully. “He seemed to feel it was rather boring. As a matter of fact, he rather emphasised how boring it was, didn’t he?”

Oliver grunted his agreement, adding this to his list of reasons why Ethan Daniels was a slimy bugger.

As they crossed the large entrance foyer on the main floor, Hermione grabbed Oliver’s arm and stopped him. “Just a moment,” she said as she pulled out her wand. “I want to try something.”

“I thin’ the investigators did a pretty thorough job of it when they came here, Hermione.”

“You said Percy sent investigators after it happened? Not Aurors?”

“Yes,” Oliver said, giving her an odd look.

“Then his men probably didn’t do this, Oliver. It would be a big tip off to anyone watching that he suspects this isn’t just a robbery and may actually be a Dark crime. And since he didn’t send Aurors –“
“He was trying t’ make it look like a normal investigation. Smart.”

She closed her eyes, and concentrated for a moment, before swishing her wand in a baffling chopping motion, like cutting and bisecting a circle.

“An’ what exactly’s supposed t’ happen now?” Oliver asked, dryly.

Hermione glared about indiscriminately. “Nothing, apparently. It was a spell Moody taught us, awhile back. It was specifically developed during Voldemort’s first uprising — by Dumbledore, perhaps. That peculiar tattoo of theirs? I think it detects whatever spell he used to give it to them. No Death Eater has crossed this threshold in the last twenty eight days.”

“Well, tha’ opens up a whole different trunk of problems, now doesnae’ t?”

Hermione looked at him, unhappily. “Well, it could mean that it was just a normal robbery.”

“Or it could mean tha’ someone’s using the Imperius Curse again.”

They slept in different rooms again that night, and every night thereafter. Each day saw an increase in the tension between them, as opposed to a resolution, and by the fourth day, Oliver wasn’t sure how far they were from being strangers again. Conversations thinned and cooled until it was mostly silence whenever they were alone together. As a result, they spent most of their time out – anything and everything from sightseeing at the Welsh princes’ fortress, Dolwyddelan Castle, at the head of the valley, or long hikes up the mountain passes, troup ing long trails with streams of Muggle tourists to experience incredibly defined echoes and picnic with a view of the valley.

The rift in their relationship becoming an ever-widening chasm under the weight of hurt feelings and ego.

It had begun raining sometime over the course of the night, and by the time they got up Friday morning, it had decided to settle in for a nice, Welsh all-day wet. They had planned another hike today, to see the famed fairy glen at Betws-y-Coed through which the river Conwy flowed, but everything outside was turned to thick grey muck, making the outing entirely unappetizing. Resigned to spend the day in barricaded silence indoors, Oliver spread himself out at the small
breakfast bar in their tiny kitchen with all his notebooks and reports, determined to at least pass the
time usefully if he could have nothing else. Hermione seemed to like the idea, as she curled up in
one of the large arm chairs with a thick novel, feet pulled under herself as she tried to stay cozy in
the damp chill of the day. Soon, the only sound in the room was the dry rustle of pages as they both
lost themselves in their distractions.

Only, he wasn’t really lost. He grit his teeth as, once again, he found his eyes drawn to her, sitting
there not fifteen feet away, but as far as the moon, for all of him. He’d planned on spending this
week getting to know her, trying to gently deepen their relationship, make her more comfortable in
his presence. Even ten days ago he would have thought nothing of setting up on the short
chesterfield instead of the bar, encouraging her to settle next to him while he worked, stretching his
long legs out so that their thighs touched, that simple contact enough to keep him happily in one
place while he read useless reports and notes.

Instead, in a matter of one evening, they had managed to cock things up so badly that even that
simple touch would be an almost unbearable intimacy. But somehow, he just couldn’t go to her,
and even begin to have a conversation that would end this. He couldn’t pursue anything with her if
it was under the shadow of the damn Marriage Law. It would be an affront to all the feelings he
was distinctly suspicious might have been possible between them. He couldn’t even begin to have a
conversation that would have her trying to take a meaningful act and turning it into a duty.

For Percy, no less.

“You aren’t studying?” He found himself asking the question without even realising he intended to
speak.

She looked up, startled by his voice but barely spared him a glance before turning back to her
book. “I didn’t bring any of my books with me. I – well, I guess I thought I could manage without
for a week.”

He grunted softly, and turned back to his reports. Times like these he missed the beautiful
simplicity of playing Quidditch; when he was on his broom, with the wind in his ears, drowning
out the sounds of the crowd, it was just him and the Quaffle, uncomplicated and demanding.

He pulled himself back to his reports and speculations, but found it difficult to focus as he became
aware of the quiet sounds of Hermione’s restlessness as she squirmed and wriggled, looking for a
better position in her large chair. He’d only managed to write a handful of words in the last ten
minutes, but he was coming to realise upon closer examination, that they weren’t so much progress
as complete gibberish, when suddenly Hermione burst out:
“There must be some notes on the book; an annotated copy or something! I mean, how are we supposed to figure out who stole if we can’t even begin to guess why?”

Oliver found himself growling at her, the nonsensical words on the parchment mocking him. “Don’t you think Percy’s men thought of that already? Or do you think you’re smarter then the lot of them?” *Probably are,* Oliver added in the privacy of his own head, but couldn’t seem to stop himself. Tension and frustration were finally erupting and he almost revelled in the release of it.

“Don’t be stupid. Of course I don’t,” she snapped, glaring as she shut her book with a snap.

“Well, I mean, that’s just wonderful. The great Hermione Granger has decided that there must be something there, because she’s at a loss. If that was all it took to break this mystery apart, it’s a shame we didn’t bring you in earlier, now isn’t it?”

Instead of fighting back, as he’d expected, her shoulders slumped a little, and she looked down at the floor with a hurt expression. “No, I just – damnit, there has to be something!”

Oliver suddenly felt very foolish. “Yer right, Mouse,” he agreed, awkwardly. “We probably should go and take a look. It’ll be at least as helpful as what I was doing here.”

"Its Hermione Wood now, isn't it?" Her look was almost challenging.

But she felt more like she was trying to convince herself. Hermione Wood was a lie. She wasn't. She was still Hermione Granger, a figurehead and a symbol - and a completely separate entity from the man before her.

She could only hope that someday, perhaps she could figure out who Hermione Wood was as well.

“..”

The journey back to the museum was silent, and when the building seemed to rise up out of the mists when they passed the edges of the anti-Muggle wards it was almost a relief.

The museum had been built out of the remnants of one of the old forts or castles built in the area by
the Saxon kings. Castles that had been virtual warrens of corridors and hallways connecting every part, many of them never walked by the nobility that had lived there, being the almost exclusive domain of the vast numbers of servants needed to keep up a place like this. They were convenient for the museum’s purposes, though, as they discretely connected all the main exhibits. These non-public corridors, or the now ‘Employees Only’ portion of the museum were narrow, and frankly, Oliver was beginning to feel a bit shut up by the looming stone walls. They had been down here for what seemed like ages, in actuality only seven minutes or so, but it was enough for him to understand something about himself.

He really didn’t like closed in spaces; at all.

Hermione didn’t seem to have the same problems. She was happily poking around, rather more like an extension of the tour of exhibits above as she lead the way from a small map she had bullied out of Ethan Daniels. When, many twists, turns and stairs later, the corridor eventually widened out to deposit them in a room, Oliver breathed a sigh of relief. It may well have been the size of a large closet, but felt positively palatial to him after the cramped confines of the corridors.

From the look of it, it seemed to be a bit of a laboratory and office combined. Two solid, plain-looking desks stood in opposite corners, making the cramped space closer still. The wall behind them was covered in towering shelves of reference books, and even from here Oliver could see how haphazardly they had been shoved back on in places, as one might when thoroughly focused on some new discovery. Two largish tables filled with arcane equipment filled the centre of the room, magic sparking from a few of them ominously.

“Right, then. Why don’t you take the shelves, and I’ll see what I can find in his desk,” she said, distastefully. Both desks were piled high with papers and odd assortments of equipment and experiments, and in one case, the petrified remains of what may have been someone’s lunch. For once, Oliver decided not to do the gentlemanly thing.

“How the devil should I know?”

He manfully stifled his amusement in a cough; rather convincingly, too, he thought, despite Hermione’s glare, and turned to the piles on the shelves before she could comment. Unfortunately, a few minutes of digging proved that the shelves were no safer than the desks, as he pulled a ratty, moth-eaten stuffed badger out from behind the tomes of Goblin history in a cloud of dust.

Minutes ticked by unheeded as they continued to carefully sift through the accumulation, until an
amused snort from behind him drew his hopeful attention back to Hermione.

“At least I know I have the right desk,” she observed dryly, pointing to the tarnished glint on the desk, just uncovered by a slide of papers that were now pooling at her feet. Peering closer, Oliver could just make out the name Mr. Mycroft Pafft etched in spidery script across the plate.

“Well, there is that –“ but he was interrupted by the rather quavering voice of Mr. Thammassy Barrows.

“Wh-what is it that you’re doing? Get away - get away, girl! That’s not to be trifled with!”
Chapter 13: The Twilight of an English Mind

Consequentially Yours

Or

A Gentleman’s Duty

Chapter Thirteen – The Twilight of an English Mind

It took them the better part of an hour to calm him.

“…but you’ve made rather a mess of poor Mycroft’s desk, now haven’t you?” he was saying, with a mournful glance at the partially straightened surface. “How is anyone to ever find anything again in all that?”

Oliver was rather shocked when, instead of taking indignant umbrage at the old wizard’s comments, Hermione shot a sidelong glance at him before giving the old timer a sort of half shrug and an apologetic smile, as if to indicate that it had been his fault that the desk was now in such a violated state. Before he had even had a chance to marshal his indignation, she was going on.

“There are so few who appreciate the importance of a scholar’s organizational system; even when it looks so haphazard to the dis-inclined.”

Mr. Barrows shot her an amused glance. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re trying to do, young lady.”

Hermione merely gazed back at him, rather primly, at being called out. “The question is: is it working?”

He laughed. Unlike his nervous sort of quaver, his laugh was deep and rich and made him sound much younger. He threw back his head and roared, slapping Hermione on the shoulder as he did so. She took this with good grace, smiling and even joining in to giggle a little uncertainly. Oliver was worried that Thammasy would do himself serious harm, the way he was carrying on, and was trying to come up with a plan if the auld man should have a serious fit on them.

Oliver’s worries proved unfounded, as he got himself under control very quickly, but his short lived mirth proved to have had one rather large benefit.

He and Hermione were now apparently bosom buddies, and were quickly bonding over some rather technical, scholarly humour that had Oliver completely lost after the first turn. When Hermione rather slyly brought the conversation back around to ‘poor Mycroft’ and his research, Thammasy was much more inclined to treat them as compatriots.

“Well, seeing as how you’ve got such an interest in it – I suppose it wouldn’t hurt –“ He was back to being quavering and fussy, it seemed. Looking around with almost comic care, he nodded once, before rocking slightly to get the momentum to pull himself up from where he sat. The noise of his joints as a few of them popped was plainly audible. Hermione stood back with a small wince, and they watched as he shuffled across the small space to the other desk. He pushed the ratty chair out
of his way, and knelt before the desk with a grimace and more popping of his bony knees. After squinting at the wood from several angles, he began working his age-stiffened fingers along the front edge of it, worrying the wood relentlessly until he seemed to catch the edge of some invisible seam. A sharp crack indicated that he had jarred something loose, and slowly, he wiggled a shallow drawer from where it had been hidden, invisibly smooth against the rest of the wood facing.

With reverent care he lay the last vestiges of his late colleague’s work, his remaining legacy, on the cleared area of the desk; a battered, dirty notebook, held together with twine to keep loose pages from escaping, looking to Hermione’s eyes like Tom Riddle’s diary after its trip through the girls toilets.

“Why did he hide his documentation, Mr. Barrows? I mean, wasn’t he doing rather innocent research?”

He gave a funny twitch of his lips, not quite a frown, but it wanted to be. His faded blue eyes stared into the distance of the bookshelves for a moment before he shrugged, pushing away the question. “Academic jealously, I suppose. He was a bit of a queer fellow – had a real thing for Cockroach Clusters with his morning tea. Very odd taste, if you ask me.”

And that seemed to be all they were going to get out of him. With a sort of nod of his head, he turned back to them. “Well, things to do, the museum doesn’t stand still for the likes of you. See that you don’t touch anything else, or we’ll never find it again - and watch for toads when you leave.”

Bemused, Oliver and Hermione just stood there, watching his retreating back as Thammassy Barrows tottered out of the room and down the hall. There was a pause, before either of them moved, when Hermione gave herself a shake, as if coming out from under a fog.

“Did he just say toads?”

It was Hermione who noticed it first, though Oliver had to acknowledge that he made no move to stop her.

They had finished with the drawer, emptying it of not only the battered notebook, but a tatty quill; a strange sketch that Oliver thought he could possibly make a bat out of, if he were to squint at it sideways and use a pair of scissors; two Sickles; and a half-sucked lemon candy, among other things of equal apparent use.

Hermione had made a few frustrated noises, but softly, as she was still caught up in the thrill of discovery. She had been right, and Oliver had to admit he wouldn’t have stood a chance of getting the auld man’s confidence were he alone. The smell of old paper, which at first had been only faint and hardly detectable, was beginning to cling to his nostrils, becoming so permeating that Oliver was afraid it would be capable of suffocation if they were to remain much longer. He found himself hunching his shoulders, curling slightly as the walls returned to the periphery of his vision. The notebook was laying on the desk, the other items from Pafft’s secret stash spread like fallout all over its surface. Oliver had taken the expedient route in cleaning its surface, and used an arm to sweep the remaining detritus onto the floor.

They had left the book alone, knowing that a man who was paranoid enough to hide such prosaic research so thoroughly was also more than capable of placing enough jinxes and hexes on it to make anyone who tried to open it very sorry, especially if they didn’t like being a turnip. Oliver
would take it back with him, and have one of the Curse Breakers take a look at it, but he could see
the way her eyes kept drifting to it, and a couple of times, her hand actually started the journey
longingly before she managed to stop herself.

They were still looking, examining every inch of the room with renewed enthusiasm, careful not to
acknowledge that there was probably nothing more to find; admitting they were done here meant
going back to their room.

Lost in his avoidance, Oliver didn’t notice when the shuffling sounds of Hermione’s search of the
shelves slowed and gradually stopped. For a long moment, there was no noise to be heard in the
room, beyond the occasional pop from the strange conductors on the experiment table. Oliver
pushed another pile of useless papers aside with a sigh, wondering if it was time to admit defeat.
He wondered if he could somehow pretend exhaustion, though of course that would mean
relegating Hermione to the bedroom for the evening, but perhaps –

Hermione screamed. Well, actually, it was more of a strangled yell; as though it was far to clichéd
and unproductive to scream, but she couldn’t quite help herself from doing it all the same. Oliver
was out of his seat before she had finished. It proved to be a wise motion, when she crashed into
the chair he’d just vacated as she scrambled away from the shelves with such force that both she
and the chair went toppling to the floor in a painful tangle of limbs and splinters. Her left hand was
smudged, he noticed, a shiny viscous liquid that even in the half light shone like silver. Oliver’s
blood froze.

Where once had been a smooth face of book shelves, ancient dark stained wood of indeterminate
origins, except possibly a scrap yard, was askew. The smooth line of the shelves that one would
expect of normal furniture was interrupted by a faint shimmer, almost like the wood in a section
about two feet wide and five tall had been stretched thin. It wavered like torchlight. Hermione was
cursing, struggling to free herself from the wreckage of the chair, and though Oliver reached down,
offering her a hand, he still kept a wary eye on it. A faint, coppery taste on his tongue made him
realize he’d bitten the inner part of his cheek.

“I’m fine; of all the stupid –“ A quick glance showed that despite some minor scrapes and a lurid
purple bruise on one cheek, she seemed alright.

“Wha’ happened?” He tried to sound calm, to force down his unease. He reached down and took
her wrist, turning her arm so that her palm was out of her line of sight, and casually wiped the
smudge from her skin before she saw it. He let his breath out once he saw the skin underneath was
pink and unbroken.

“I was examining the titles of some of these books, and well, I noticed this one.” She stooped to
pick up a thin, green covered book from where it had fallen, and held it up for his examination, but
it looked just like everything else in this room to him; one step beyond a junk pile.

“I don’t,” he started - but then stopped. She relinquished the book to him without a word; only a sly
look for his sudden understanding. There, on the cover of the book, half-hidden in grime, was a
strange symbol, like a bisected knot.

Or, if he squinted at it sideways, maybe a bat.

Turning the book over, he could just make out the title, Hidden Mysteries.

“I thought that perhaps, if this Mycroft Pafft person was worried enough to use a secret drawer,
then he might have had a larger secret to hide as well.”
“You cast a Revealing Charm?”

She nodded distractedly while still twisting, trying to examine herself for damage. “I figured the bookshelves were the most likely, being almost as overdone as the drawer trick.” She paused to glare at the bookshelf, as if to blame it for her fall. “Obviously Mr. Pafft reads too many bad novels,” she said with disgust.

Oliver wisely chose not to laugh.

“Anyway, I had to be touching the shelf as the thing I wanted to affect, and when I cast the spell, it was like the whole thing just shrugged beneath my hand. You could actually see the wood ripple and distort.”

“Frankly, I think I would ha’ jumped a wee bit too.”

She looked at him sharply, looking for any hint that he was making fun of her, but he kept his face impassive, turning to stare more fully at the stretched patch of wood. After a moment, she turned back to it, too.

This close, he could almost hear a tinny whine emanating from it. The thin sound vibrated uncomfortably against the bones in his ears, almost on the edge of hearing. It was an itchy noise, all prickles and burs, making him want to twitch and scratch the inside of his head. He shook it, trying to get rid of the feeling.

“Seems harmless enough,” Hermione said, but her expression was dubious.

Oliver didn’t say anything, but took a careful step closer, and poked his wand at it.

It slid through the once-solid wood with some small resistance, like pushing through pea soup that had been left to boil too long. Oliver allowed it to slide in half-way, and stopped. Nothing attempted to pull the wand from his grasp, or hindered him from pulling it out a few seconds later. The wavering portal rippled faintly as the wand emerged, completely unmarked.

“We really do want to see what someone would have wanted to hide here so badly,” Hermione admitted worriedly at Oliver’s questioning look.

“I reckon its safe enough. The auld codger didnae seem the type ta keep monsters in his office.”

“Do be careful.”

Oliver grunted an acknowledgment and reached out, carefully.

It felt more like thin wet mortar than pea soup to his questing fingers, and the chill was enough to make him glad the bookcase wasn’t deeper than its three quarters of a metre. Sensation was diminished to almost nothing in the charged space inside the case, and his hand throbbed bloodlessly. The numbness extended well up past his elbow, almost to the point of contact with the barrier when his fingers grasped something, but his deadened senses could tell him little more than that it was heavy.

“Did you find anything?” He could hear the anxiousness in her voice, caught somewhere on the knife-edge between worry and excitement.

“I’ve go’ something, but it’s wedged in there good.”

“Any idea what it is?”
“Yeh cannae feel anything in there; it’s like wearing six pairs of gloves, all atop of each other.”

“Cold?” she asked, stepping close to examine the shimmering surface curiously, as if she were hoping to see what he had gotten hold of through the stretched transparency.

“A mite chilly, but nae cold enough to freeze you numb. Stand back a bit, so’s I can have a go at chuckin’ it oout.” He looked around for the edge of the portal, and braced his arm against it, flexing his knees for leverage and heaved, hard.

It almost felt like the bookcase was releasing its prize reluctantly, and when it came free of the barrier, the sudden lack of resistance was enough to make Oliver stumble, and what emerged was enough to make him wish Percy’s men had found it themselves. Behind him, Hermione gasped, and the sound cut off abruptly in a way that made Oliver sure she had just bitten her own lip against the reaction. Oliver really wished he could stop finding bodies.

“A bit of a strange thing to find in a man’s bookcase, would ye nae say?”

“His own killer? Yes I would say so.” Hermione’s voice shook, suspiciously bright. At Oliver’s questioning look, she shook her head once against his concern, and instead pointed out, “He’s a Muggle.” Her tone indicated that she thought this should be obvious.

“What makes yeh say that?” Oliver bent to examine the body, being sure to kneel in Hermione’s line of sight as much as possible.

Death rarely made anyone prettier, and after a few days they tended to take a pretty sharp downward turn towards unsettling. Pale, blue-tinged skin was sagging, beginning to lose the elastic quality that made it look alive and not like some waxen simulacrum. His eyes were wide, and the expression on his narrow face was surprised, as though death had somehow managed to sneak up on him, but the irises had hazed over with milky film to look like pale glass marbles. Blood was dried to the side of his head, originating somewhere near the hairline, and Oliver was relieved to see it wasn’t silver, but dried to a dark, almost black colour. The man was dressed from head to toe in close fitting dark clothing, but enough wizards were wearing Muggle clothing these days for that not to be definitive.

“Look at his ear.” Hermione broke in impatiently, as though sensing he remained unconvinced. “No witch or wizard wears a Muggle hearing aid.”

“A hearing device? He was a deaf assassin?” Oliver shifted to point out, “Looks like he stopped something pretty heavy with his skull; that’s probably what killed him.”

“Why not? But I suspect he could hear fine; it was probably modified, to assist him in his line of work, possibly in listening for the tumblers in locks. Who knows?”

She sounded a bit calmer now that she had a puzzle to solve, and she circled to kneel on the other side of the body. Her face was still an ashen grey, but one look at her expression told him it would be useless to protest. Carefully avoiding the bloody contusion on the side of his head, she began methodically turning out his pockets, but Oliver noted she gripped the edge of the material so tightly her knuckles were turning white.

“What I don’t understand, is how in the name of Morgana’s knickers did he manage to get past the anti-Muggle barriers?”

Hermione sat back on her heels suddenly, looking serious. “With this.” In her hand, she held a slick twist of metal. It glistened wetly in the palm of her hand, looking to Oliver like it almost *pooled*
there, liquidly. Hermione was cradling it clumsily, as though trying to hold it without actually allowing it to touch her.

“It’s a talisman; a very Dark talisman and I don’t even want to think about what it’s made of.”

“..”

Of course, in the end they’d had to wait until someone from the Ministry was dispatched. It was Oliver’s responsibility to stay with the body until the Auror turned up, but she’d only squared her shoulders, her mouth set in a determined line against his suggestion that she go down the hall, to wait instead in one of the break rooms they’d passed on their way down.

Forty-five minutes later, the Aurors had come and gone, and they had Flooed back to the inn. Hermione must have opened her mouth during the journey, for she had been dropped onto the hearth rug at Oliver’s feet, spluttering and coughing. She had complained huffily about unreliable fireplaces through streaming eyes once she had been able to breath again. When Oliver pointed out her probably error, she glared crossly at him.

They had spent the remainder of the evening in rather strained company, though Oliver noticed with some concern that though Hermione had taken to retreating to the bedroom as soon as it was decent to do so each evening, to escape his company, she was still moving about the small sitting room, compulsively driven to action.

She was still rather pale and agitated, and after watching her putter around the small apartment, uselessly straightening and moving things for twenty minutes, Oliver stood and placed himself directly in her path.

When she stopped, she looked at him a trifle crossly, but he held out his arms slightly, inviting. Not crowding, and being very careful to keep his expression neutral, letting her make the decision to come to him; silently offering to turn back the clock; offering intimacy again.

She stared at him, a strange expression on her face, but she slipped into his arms willingly enough after a moment, a soft sigh escaping her.

Her hands were cold, so cold Oliver could feel it right through the fabric of his shirt. He tightened his arms, fractionally, and began tentatively rubbing small circles at the base of her spine, secretly pleased when she didn’t pull away.

She turned slightly to rest her check more comfortably against his chest, but after a moment, she gave a bitter sort of laugh. “You’d think I’d be used to it. That we’d been through enough that I wouldn’t start developing nerves now.”

He didn’t respond, pretty sure she didn’t need him to.

“Spells usually don’t leave the bodies gruesome like that, and well, if they did, you were too busy with the business of staying alive to take it in,” she reflected, softly. “You saw, but it was like the mind was too caught up in what you had to do to survive to give you any time to think why you should be disturbed by it. Everything else just sort-of, shut off.”

“Be glad you’re not used ta’it, Mouse. Tha’ was a man’s life; an’ I reckon no one should ever be able t’ jus’ lose sight of tha’, an’ dismiss it sae coolly.”

She twisted to look at him, but didn’t try to pull away. “I think it’s the accent,” she said finally, like she had found the answer to some mystery.
Oliver looked down on her, and enquired warily, “Oh?”

“It makes everything you say sound more reasonable than it probably is.”

He grunted quietly, and tugged her down on the couch with him. She sat without protest, seeming content just cradled against him as she got lost in her own thoughts. He let her, just running a soothing hand down her spine as he read this morning’s discarded *Prophet*, and listened to the little hitch in her breathing finally start to smooth out and disappear.

He was starting to become aware of her, the feel of her hair against his neck, the scent of cinnamon and her warmth gradually feeling as though it would burn him where she lay, still curled peaceably by his side. Soon, he would have to make some kind of comment about the time – it was nearing two in the morning, and she should get some sleep after all the chaos at the museum – but he was loath to disturb this sudden truce, and turned back to his paper instead.

When, a quarter hour later, she began to shift uncomfortably, it was as if she was somehow divining the direction his thoughts were taking, and scolding him for delaying.

Hermione sat back quite suddenly, and began fidgeting with the hem of her top, not looking at him at all. Oliver’s paper lay forgotten on his crossed knee, and he found himself reaching to rub the back of his neck, fidgeting, the arm that had been holding her just a moment before feeling suddenly useless.

“It will only be harder if we make a big deal out of it, you know,” she said, still looking at the loose thread she was picking at instead of him.

“A big deal…?” Oliver let the question trail off, not sure of where she was going.

She just looked at him, like he was being obtuse. “Sleeping arrangements.” She returned her attention to the hem of her top, but not quickly enough for him to miss her pink cheeks. “I expect you to join me this evening, and I’m certainly not sleeping on that horrible couch.”

Left feeling suddenly adrift, he watched her stand and sweep imperiously from the room. She paused at the doorway, turning, and said simply, “Come to bed, Oliver. I’m tired.”

Oliver felt as though her gaze was burning him, even after the door was safely closed behind her.

*Merlin help him.*

-.-
Chapter 14: Temperance and Forgiveness

Chapter Notes

Love, as always, goes to my very patient beta reader, NephthysMoon

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Consequentially Yours

Or
A Gentleman’s Duty

Chapter Fourteen – Temperance and Forgiveness

-..-

McGONAGALL APPROACHED her as soon as class was over, barely waiting until the last student had scrambled from the room. Shutting the door firmly behind her, she turned back to regard her long-time pupil with pursed lips.

“Well, Miss Granger –“ she stopped, looking suddenly like she had bitten something sour. “Oh, for heaven sakes — Mrs. Wood.”

It was the first day back at classes after the Easter break, actually the first day Hermione had spent in the castle since her marriage. Hermione couldn’t help but feel annoyed at the fact that it hadn’t been longer – for so much to have changed in her life, it somehow seemed ridiculous that only a week had passed in the lives of everyone around her; that they couldn’t feel this great chasm of time, too. And that just left her feeling irritated at her own irrational musings.

Professor McGonagall fought for a moment, discomfort clearly written on her face, before she continued, brusquely. “You do realize, Mrs. Wood, that while you’re particular situation has changed, Hogwarts is, first and foremost, a school, and as such you are expected to maintain appropriate decorum while you are still a student here.” She took a moment to glance down at her favourite pupil from over-top her square spectacles, perhaps mistaking the cause for Hermione’s disquieted expression, as she continued, somewhat more gently, “While I will be the first to agree that, er, romance between yourself and Mr. Wood is of course to be welcomed, this is, most definitely, not the place for it; so I must ask you to be cautious of the example you are setting for the younger years. A room has been prepared in the downstairs East Wing corridor, for Mr. Wood, as he has expressed an interest in remaining close to you thus far; you, however, will be expected to retain residence in Gryffindor Tower - and I know we won’t have to discuss this any further.”

Hermione could only stammer her assurances as the mortifying discussion ground to a halt, and her professor ushered her towards the door just as the next class arrived.

Much as McGonagall had predicted, Oliver took up residence within the main part of the castle, only occasionally leaving for small ‘Quidditch trips’, and Hermione was secretly glad to have this final reprieve from her complicated relationship with him that McGonagall’s strictures were providing her, especially with N.E.W.T.s practically around the corner.
Still, though evenings and weekends found herself and Oliver perfectly cordial to one another, even friendly, she couldn’t help but be thankful for the chance to push everything to a safer distance in her mind.

In quite moments, she would occasionally, and slightly guiltily, think back to the feel of crisp linen sheets warmed by a strangely affecting masculine presence, and the feel of his skin as it twitched beneath her hesitant hand as he slept.

After delivering her imperious missive to come and join her, she had retreated to their bedroom, carried there by courage born of the moment, perhaps. Moonlight lanced through the cloud cover, dimly illuminating the room in soothing greys and shadows, and the faint cry of a nightingale came in through the open window. When, what seemed like hours later, Oliver gently eased the door open and slipped into the room, she felt her false bravado begin to dissolve as layer by agonizingly slow layer, he carefully prepared to join her where she feigned sleep, watching cautiously from beneath lowered lashes. Frankly, she felt slightly ridiculous, after her earlier chiding and demands for this very thing, and yet, now that she was facing it, she could feel her confidence vanish like a summer wind, and no amount of self-recrimination seemed to be able to right things.

The mattress shifted, dipping as he sat on the edge of it, simply watching her, seeming to be warring with some inner voice as he made no move to slide further into the bed. One of his hands moved, reaching for her, only to be arrested mid-motion, hanging uncertainly between them for several heartbeats, before falling back to his side.

Hermione wasn’t sure if she were grateful, or impatient for this horrid anticipation to be over, so the full-blown awkwardness could settle in.

Somewhere, the nightingale had fallen silent, his sweet tones hanging in the cool April air like an after-image when you squeezed your eyes tightly shut after staring at the sun. Perspiration beaded minutely along her wrists and collarbone, absorbed instantly by the heavy linen sheets and spots began appearing in front of her eyes before she realized she had been holding her breath as he continued to watch her. She lay very quietly, still feigning sleep.

Oliver finally moved, whatever inner monologue he’d been having apparently resolved.

The bed dipped further as he settled himself on his back, one arm crooked behind his head as he stared at the ceiling, his warmth perceptible even though she lay a good foot away from him, and Hermione felt small flutterings begin, deep in her belly.

He really was a powerfully built man, she reflected, unable to force her eyes closed - to take that necessary step towards sleep. His broad shoulders would have rested uncomfortably close if the bed hadn’t been so large. Dimly, she heard the rustle of his drawstring sleeping pants as he shifted, looking for a better position, and she was acutely conscious of every rise and fall of his chest as his breathing began to settle, and then slow.

It was a long while before her taut nerves settled enough for sleep, despite the weight of all that had happened that day, but gradually, she began to feel the lassitude of sleep creeping up on her, making her eyelids suddenly much too heavy, and any further thought on such worries far too enervating to bother pursuing just now, when Oliver’s warmth surrounded her, and the scent of apples hung tantalizingly under her nose, and she surrendered to a sort of deep relaxation.

Briefly, she wondered —

But she was already asleep.
NOW THAT the time remaining to N.E.W.T.s could be measured in weeks, instead of months, the atmosphere around the castle became extremely tense. Everywhere you went, there were teenagers, and some not-so teenagers, heads bent in furious concentration as they desperately tried to cram ingredients lists for potions, complex star charts, complicated wand movements and other, seemingly endless bits of information.

Of course, on top of that were all the parchments assigned by the various teachers, who seemed to feel, as Ron frustratingly lamented, that their time was better used on piles and piles of homework than on ‘actually memorizing the bloody stuff!’, and Harry was nearly incoherent with fatigue most evenings, with the added pressures of Quidditch practices, and captaining the Gryffindor team.

Oliver, of course, never missed watching a practice.

They had managed to settle into a comfortable routine; Oliver spent most evenings and part of each weekend keeping Hermione company as she studied. He would spread out with his own work, pouring over large maps and sheaves of reports as he made meticulous notations. Most of the time, it was in connection with work Percy had for him, but every now and then he seemed to have enough of it, and pulled out a thick, battered notebook, tied together with string. Hermione managed to look over his shoulder one evening, unnoticed, and had to stifle a laugh when she found it was a playbook, painstakingly filled with pitch notes, possible recruitment choices and other plans for the future of the now-defunct British League.

*A Treatise of Anatomy*, by Healer Muhyi al Din Sulayman turned out to be a colossal bore. It had been a hectic week: Snape had taken sadistic delight in tormenting Harry over his latest potion failure, allowing the Slytherins a good long laugh at his expense, never mind the near-perfect work he had turned in just the class before. In Herbology, they had been assigned to Greenhouse Four, where the tray of vicious Honey Creepers they had repotted as seedlings were deemed mature enough for the class to harvest. Now four feet in height, this was no easy task as the seventh years diligently fought the numerous tentacles intent on squishing them to a pulp. Nearly two hours of concentrated effort had yielded several bruises, a nasty cut across one cheek, and a scant half cup of the necessary pollen. Ron had somehow managed to produce twice that, and Hermione had left the class in a distinctly foul mood. In addition to all this, were three enormous essays added to their expected homework, and Hermione was beginning to feel like that famous camel.

“Yeh don’ look like yer getting much done this evening, lass.”

She had been so involved in her own misery, she hadn’t even heard Oliver come around the stacks.

“Why don’t yeh put that aside for tonight. I’ve go’ something that might interest you more than,” and here he craned to look over at her cramped notes, “the fascinating uses of bat shite in wand making.”

“Oliver!”

He grinned at her, already moving her textbooks to her bag, and somehow, Hermione couldn’t keep her irritation at being interrupted during her bout of self-pitying peevishness. Her mood was further forgotten when he lay a familiar brown notebook on the table between them. For a moment, she almost didn’t breath.

“Is that –?”

“Perce had it sent as soon as the Curse Breakers were done with it.” They were both grinning rather
foolishly now, their excitement infectious and far out of proportion to what a foxed notebook should warrant, but neither of them couldn’t keep back the feeling that this was important, and Hermione waited expectantly while Oliver lay the book open and began slowly reading and absorbing what Mycroft Pafft had to tell them.

Minutes dribbled by, and Hermione tried to hold on to her excitement, and not demand answers. Oliver began flipping the pages faster now, obviously skimming.

After ten minutes, Hermione felt a curious whistling in her belly, like air let out of a balloon, as Oliver had begun jumping whole sections of the book; seemingly random choices.

With increasing disbelief /incredulity Oliver was skipping larger and larger sections, until finally he threw the book down in disgust. For a moment, he seemed beyond speech, simply staring at the book as if willing it to reveal some secret, or perhaps simply to become something else. “Bollocks,” he finally cursed, without any real energy. Hermione reached for it, smoothing the spine rather primly as she laid it open.

“Wha’ever they stole the damned thing for, it certainly wasn’t for what’s written in it.”

Hermione bit her lip, cradling the notebook as she leafed through it, without really seeing it. “Perhaps,” she said slowly, “perhaps it’s written in code?”

Oliver gave a half-hearted grunt.

“Obviously, someone wanted it,” she said, pushing away her own disappointment. “You really can’t be sure until you actually read it, instead of just scanning.”

Oliver did settle down to study it, but without the sense of impending discovery that had lit that first night. Unfortunately for Hermione’s piece of mind, he seemed unable to do so quietly, concentrating on the offending manual with such fierce determination as to almost seem to occupy more space than was normal, which only made it that much more difficult for her to keep her eyes firmly focused on her work.

Previously, their evenings together had been easy and comfortable as each worked in productive silence, with only the occasional low comment of encouragement to break the quiet. May was now half gone, and after almost a week of listening to Oliver’s frustrated noises (which were definitely interfering with her studying) Hermione finally insisted on reading it herself.

“Ye have too much studying of yer own, lass —” he’d protested, being pulled from his glaring match with his current page.

“Which I’m not getting done with all your noise. You radiate frustration even when you’re quiet, and make it quite impossible to work,” she’d responded waspishly.

So she’d taken the book from him, and somehow found some spare time here and there to read it, adding it to her already overwhelming reading pile.

And if she found it as bad as he, she wasn’t about to admit it.

“[..]"

“The presence of so many of the tiny, Furry-Footed Tattlewidges may be interfering with some peoples’ ability to concentrate on the game today - Oh, look, I think Erin Leslye just fell off her broom. Tattlewidges, of course, are a common problem for studying students, especially around exam time …”
It was uncharacteristically warm, even for June, and so it was that Hermione found herself sandwiched between Dean and Oliver, sticky and uncomfortable on what was possibly the hottest day of the year so far, a captive audience to Luna’s increasingly ludicrous theories and advice.

“Gryffindor scores another 10 points. Ginny, you’ll note, is wearing a necklace of polished black agate beads, a very sensible precaution against lurking Gremlins…”

Above them, Ginny and a fourth year Chaser cheered as they sped by, waving to the stands as their fans roared back in enthusiastic response. It was the final game of the year, and the heat was making it particularly grueling on players and spectators alike. Blake, the opposing Seeker, was slowly lapping the playing area, scanning diligently. Circling far above, Harry was invisible for the moment from where Hermione sat, though she knew he was poised and waiting to swoop in at the slightest flash of gold. Further down, Ron paced warily in front of the goals, keeping a careful eye on the play up-pitch as he waited for the Quaffle to come zooming out of nowhere. Across the field, Hufflepuff fans were watching each play anxiously, some appearing almost too nervous to look. Dennis Creevey was cheering so vigorously, Hermione was beginning to wonder if he might succeed in launching himself into flight with all his gyrations.

The house standings were close this year, with Gryffindor and, amazingly, Hufflepuff in close competition for the House Cup. Harry had trained his team maniacally, and had thoroughly trounced Slytherin, and taken Hufflepuff with a very comfortable margin. Ravenclaw had done equally well this season, leading them to be Gryffindor’s closest competitors for the Quidditch Cup. Both Cups would be decided by today’s match, and Harry needed to win this match by a margin of 200 points to overcome Hufflepuff’s lead.

The game had been very evenly matched. Ravenclaw was fielding a good team this year, and a new Keeper was making every shot count for the Gryffindor Chasers. Beside her, Oliver seemed wholly enthralled in the game, pausing every now and then to explain a particularly fast play, or convoluted strategy. He was so patient, so obviously having a good time, Hermione didn’t have the heart to inform him that after all her time at Hogwarts, she was following just fine. Besides, though she certainly wasn’t about to admit it, especially not to herself, having Oliver lean in like that was rather pleasant.

On impulse, she reached out and captured Oliver’s hand, where had been resting on his knee, twining her fingers firmly with his at his startled look. He cocked his head, staring at her for a moment, before relaxing into a pleased smile. Squeezing gently, he turned back to the game. She had the distinct impression, though, that he now kept glancing back at her, from the corner of his eyes, instead of watching the game, and had to rather sternly suppress the warm feeling that flooded her stomach.

The noise of the crowd made conversation quiet impossible, though Hermione was more than content to leave things as they were; it seemed like talking only encouraged them to royally muck things up anyway, and she was beginning to suspect she could stay quite happily like this, just enjoying his warmth and presence, for the rest of the week, if only they didn’t have to move; she’d even put up with the Quidditch.

Letting her gaze wander past the zipping blurs of navy and scarlet, she saw the N.E.W.T. examiners – who had arrived the evening before, crowded into the teachers box, where it stood nestled between the Slytherin and Hufflepuff stands. One witch in particular had to keep ducking while Hagrid waved and cheered as his favourite students manoeuvred to take the lead. Her irritated glances and sour expression were completely lost on the half-giant as his enthusiasm sent her covering below her peers. Hermione allowed herself to smirk, just slightly, when she reappeared, prim little hat askew on her once-perfectly coiffed head, as she watched warily from
where she crouched behind her seat. A rumble beside her told her that Oliver had noted it too.

Unlike O.W.L.s, the practical portions of the seventh year exams would be held first, and would begin the following week. Only for Harry would Hermione have put aside her books for an entire afternoon, but really, Ron was right. This was their final year at Hogwarts, and there were a few things that were even more important than studying, and even Hermione had to admit that sometimes, you had to take the time to savour the little things. Of course, the smell of Dennis’s cologne, made overpowering in the damp heat, was making it desirable to savour without breathing too deeply, she reflected.

The game lasted an agonizing five hours, three houses hanging on every goal and save, when, like a freight train, Harry came diving out of seemingly nowhere, and captured the Snitch from under Blake’s fingertips. The Gryffindor fans erupted, as Harry did a flyby, executing several playful barrel rolls before being swarmed under by the combined weight of his team, and two stands of spectators cheered themselves hoarse.

The final score had been 240 -170, and Hufflepuff, for the first time in a century, had won the House Cup.

It was hard to return to studying, after the charged atmosphere of the pitch, but Ancient Runes wait for no man – or witch, Hermione reflected with tired amusement.

Her feelings for Oliver were still rather confused, and she was loath to have them uncovered where she would be forced to examine them. Thankfully, Oliver seemed equally content to avoid any further emotional confrontation, and so, as graduation had crept inexorably closer, things settled nicely into a comfortable pattern. The fact that the safe constraints of the school would be lost in just two short weeks was something Hermione was trying hard to push from her mind. Of course, the fact that she was currently in his room, she admitted, made it much more difficult to ignore these things.

By unspoken accord, they had avoided being here since their return; whether to avoid the allusion presented by the bed, or simply to avoid being so intimately alone together, Hermione was unsure - but the library had been infuriatingly crowded this evening, and even the Common Room had been denied her when she had been driven out by a raucous game of Exploding Snap – well, actually, it hadn’t driven her out so much as forced Oliver to drag her out before she hexed someone. Unfortunately, being here was only bringing thoughts to the fore that she had been successfully ignoring. Hermione turned her hand over. Her palm had long since healed, leaving behind only a thin white scar, almost pearly in the dim light. It had been allowed to heal naturally, without the use of potions, as was the tradition, and for the first few days back to Hogwarts Oliver had tended it for her, changing the linens each night and massaging her hand with strong fingers smeared with an ointment that was faintly scented with comfrey oil and calendula.

He watched her, contentedly, as she sprawled out in a rather amusing heap on the hearth rug, mountains of books spread out around her, where she’d made a sort of nest for herself with her bag, piles of half-written scrolls and various other supplies. A handsome tawny quill was shoved carelessly behind one ear and her cheek was smudged with ink where she’d absentely swiped it, and he had to admit, even if only privately, that there was something so Hermione in this, that he had to fight the urge to lose his fingers in her hair and discover the taste of her skin, starting with that ink smudge.

For her part, she seemed to be slowing down. Faint circles like fading bruises highlighted eyes that were glassy from lack of sleep, and though she had been staring diligently at her notes, she had been reading the same page for the last twenty minutes without blinking, lost in some inner reverie.
He was momentarily surprised when she looked up rather suddenly.

“Oliver?” she began, startled.

“Mmm?” he indicated he was listening, trying to sound like she was interrupting him, instead of being caught staring at her.

“Where are we going to live?”

Oliver felt himself flushing beneath his collar, and rapidly spreading up his neck. Until that moment, he could honestly say he hadn’t really thought about it. Such a simple thing. Such a basic thing; and he hadn’t discussed it with her, hadn’t even bloody discussed it with himself.

But no, that wasn’t entirely truthful either. Her words had evoked an instant image of a simple stone cottage, lonely highlands; family. The image came to him so easily, so naturally, he couldn’t question the fact that, on some level, he’d just associated having a home with being back in Scotland, and apparently hadn’t bothered to inform the rest of him.

But would Hermione be contented with that? Scotland was not exactly the hub of the magical world. There were far fewer strictly wizarding places tucked away in Marr than in London, and she might find it too isolated to be happy. A’course, even the entirety of Aberdeenshire might not be big enough, with his mother there.

“Because I think we should have that sort of thing planned, at least —”

“Well, Mouse, I’d say that depends on what you might want to do now that you’re almost free of school.”

She looked away, staring into the fire while one hand began picking at the rug. “Actually, I haven’t decided.”

“Have they noo discussed it with yese?” he asked, confused. “Career counselling or some such?”

Still looking at the fire, Hermione nodded reluctantly. “I, uh, well I spoke to Professor McGonagall and everything. I did! And I got the information packets, you know, about how the Ministry Needs You! and other rubbish like that. I just…”

“What?”

“I just … haven’t found what I want, I guess. It’s all just, so different now. I thought, before all this, I wanted to be an Auror, with Harry and Ron, but now everything’s changed, and I’m not sure if I’ve not had enough of chasing Dark wizards around, frankly.”

She continued staring at the fire, obviously upset with herself for not having something as important as this figured out; planned, and Oliver found himself leaving his chair to kneel on the hearth rug.

“Ye don’ even have ta work, if ye didnae want, you know –”

“I most certainly will not stay just stay at home!”

“- I had a pretty good career before the leagues stopped,” he continued, ignoring her outburst, “so we’re alrigh’ if ye wanted to do something with yer House Elves, or something like tha’.”

Hesitantly, she smiled at him, obviously embarrassed by her assumption. “Thank you – but I think
I’d like to do something, at least for now, that – there’s still so much to be done. It still feels as if no one’s really living; there’s no joy in anything.”

Her eyes sparkled with hopeful animation, the firelight turning their normal mix of tawny and chocolate to molten bronze. He shifted closer, slowly; more leaning in than actually moving really, continuing to watch her in the flickering light of the fire. She seemed to catch the subtle movement, her eyes dilating quite enticingly as she swallowed, her gaze betraying the new direction of her thoughts when her eyes darted to his lips. He smiled, and moved in closer still, slowly, so close that he was sure his breath was ghosting her skin and he could see that tempting ink stain, urging him still nearer from the corner of his eye.

Since their return from Wales, she had pulled back again, turning away from whatever they had gained during their week together. Frustrated with her seeming cool and then warm-again mood shifts, he had had a hard time allowing it, wanting to make her acknowledge him, to admit to what they had started. He waited until her eyes slowly closed, something inside him crowing with triumph as beautifully long lashes drifted down to rest on faintly freckled cheeks, and he closed the distance, touching her skin so gently, he wasn’t sure at first she felt it. The second time, he used just slightly more pressure, grazing her skin as softly as silk might, enjoying her softness even as he teased her.

Her eyes flew open, shocked, as he made to drag his thumb back across her stained cheek for a third time. He grinned, mischievously at her confused stare, and leaned back. “Ink,” he explained softly, privately smirking just a little. He was tired of their little game - she responded to him well enough, but come time when thought had time to chase itself around her head, she always seemed to talk herself out of it, banishing him back to some safe place in her mind. He bloody well wasn’t going to let her again. He would go slow, as slow as she needed, but he was going to go forward, not back, and if backing off slightly this evening was the only way to make her aware of the potential between them, he would find depths of patience hitherto unknown to witch or wizard.

Pleased with her obviously wanting look, Oliver searched for something to ease things back a little ways, and let her stew in her frustration. His eyes fell on a parchment, obviously a letter, stuffed between the pages of her Arithmancy book. Navy ink in an angular hand adorned the visible corner of it.

“Who’s been writing to you, then Mouse?” he asked with no more than friendly interest, satisfied in the diversion this unassuming question should provide. He wasn’t really listening, not closely, too busy basking in the success of a moment before, when a name caught his attention.

“… heard from Viktor in so long, I—”

“Viktor Krum?” Of course he’d heard - who hadn’t heard that Hermione Granger had been dating one Viktor Krum during her fourth year? What the hell did that wanker want?

Hermione nodded, and suddenly her expression clouded.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing doesnae make yer face sour like a bowl of cold oatmeal. What is it, lass?”

“Oh, thank you for that image. I can see why you were so popular with the ladies, Mister Wood,” Hermione rolled her eyes before continuing, “Viktor wrote to ask me how I was – apparently, he heard about what’s been going on here. He asked if I was happy; if I wanted him to try and
intervene. Apparently, he feels he could remove me from my contract, if I wanted – something to do with an uncle at the Bulgarian Ministry, I think, though I don’t know how he’d expect that to make any difference –”

Something in his gaze must have got to her, because she allowed her ramblings to trail off. Oliver waited a moment, until he was sure he could speak without any of what he was feeling showing on his face, and then asked, as neutrally as he could manage, “Did ye want to talk to Mister Krum about his offer, then?”

Hermione stared at him, searchingly, but he kept his face impassive, and she glanced away again, looking pensive. Oliver felt something inside him tighten painfully and when she won’t even look at him, new worries made him feel positively ill.

“It’s late, Oliver, and I have my exams starting this week. I think it’s time we both get some sleep.”

Of course, all this did was remind him of the last time she had given him suggestions about sleeping, and he had to bite the inside of his cheek in frustration, and even some desire. He watched her shift around, trying to pack everything as quickly as she could, never raising her head.

He startled her when, as she turned to leave he stopped her with a steely grip on her arm.

Apparently, he’d decided to ignore her, as before she could even scold him, he’d pulled her close, staring into her eyes with such intensity, she felt her reprimand dying on her lips. Wind tanned skin glowed faintly in the warm light cast by the fire, one errant lock of sandy fringe making her fingers itch to push it back in spite of herself, and she felt her eyes close again without her willing it; waiting. Moist breath against her skin, and he was kissing her, fierce, determined, and not terribly gentle; the warm, wet pressure of his lips gliding over hers before he was nipping, coaxing her to open for him. Only his hands on her upper arms were preventing her from leaning further into that embrace, or from tangling her fingers in his hair.

She could taste the apple he’d eaten earlier, the cocoa he’d been drinking, but she could also taste him, and it was quickly threatening to make her forget why this was such a bad idea. But just before her unease could push its way into panic, his grip loosened and fell away. Hands that had been holding her arms so tightly, were now cupping the back of her head. His kiss gentled, teasing licks and nips as he pulled back, watching her eyes as he butterflied soft thumbs over the high points of her cheeks. His lips crinkled into a smile, warm and affectionate as he continued to gaze at her, apparently content with everything that had her stomach rolling like a ship under heavy storm.

Staring back at him uncertainly for a moment, Hermione quickly grabbed her bag and left, only just slowly enough to not be considered running.

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THE FIRST day of their exams dawned hazy and sticky, causing Harry to eye his robes with distaste as he contemplated how unpleasant and damp they were going to be by dinner time. Just his luck, Potions was scheduled for first thing this afternoon, meaning that, not only would he be working over a fire during the hottest part of the day, but he wouldn’t even be able to concentrate fully on his Defence Against the Dark Arts N.E.W.T. without it being overshadowed by the looming presence of the exam directly after.

Soft snores were still coming from behind the curtains of Ron’s bed, but Harry made no move to wake him up, feeling rather glad that at least one of them had been able to get some sleep, even if only by dint of passing out over a text book.
By the end of their first exam, Harry was wishing he’d had a little more sleep himself, as he struggled to get thorough the last of the practical set by the Ministry. “Once again, Mister Potter, please demonstrate your duelling technique? Somehow, I do not think an Experiamus is sufficiently, well, threatening, frankly. I’m sure, you of all people, understand how important it is to react quickly and with something that works in such a situation? Now, let’s try that again -”

_Frankly, Sir, it works almost as well as a knee to the bollocks,_ but Harry managed to bit back his comment and ground his teeth instead, as he was lead through the exercise again. By the time he made it to lunch he was fuming, painfully recounting every detail to Dean and Ron, who, after the first few minutes of the narrative, began to guffaw, loudly.

Potions was every bit the nightmare he’d been expecting, but with the added silver lining of Snape not being able to do more than just stand there and glower as the examiner, a Madame Pinniette, gave grudging praise to Harry’s correctly leaf-green shimmering *Sanctimonious Soother._ Somehow, every bit of sweat, and even his burned thumb, seemed worth it for that one moment when Snape looked like he might swallow his own tongue.

Suddenly, his week was looking up.

Tuesday was Charms, and Wednesday was Herbology. On Thursday, Ron came down from the Divinations Tower nearly bent double with laughter, finally being free of the batty old fraud that had simply lapped up his augury of his own painful execution, scheduled, he told them, for the day after his exams, and committed by the Bloody Baron. Even Hermione couldn’t completely maintain her disapproval at this sort of cheating, and even allowed herself to smile, fleetingly. Ron of course, teased her about it for the rest of the day.

And finally, it was Friday, and they had finished the last of their exams, Transfigurations, and had enjoyed a free period, where they sat around feeling more like rung out sponges more than triumphant students, before venturing forth and managing to snag Hermione out from under the nose of the Ancient Runes professor, whom she had sat with last. Hermione, of course, was being typical Hermione, and had nearly managed to work herself into a nervous mess before they had even made it to the dinning hall.

“I think I missed the question about Leif Ironson, in 1067 —”

She had turned to go, as if she were going to go back and give the correct answer _now._

“Hermione –

“Oh, but —” she protested unwillingly, clearly still torn.

“Let it go, Hermione.” Harry couldn’t help but grin at her, sharing his amusement with Ron over their friend’s infrequent bouts of ridiculousness. Hermione looked up at him for a moment, before sheepishly biting her lip with a sigh. For the next half hour, Harry still caught her sneaking glances towards the hallway, as if she hadn’t quite managed to give up the idea just yet.

Harry found himself echoing that sigh, blissfully aware that they now had a whole week to themselves, with no studying, no homework, and absolutely no professors to muck it up, and he found himself feeling content with the whole world as he enjoyed the uncomplicated speculation as to whether there would be pudding with dinner this evening.

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THE FINAL train ride on The Hogwarts Express was looming like a gateway to her new life. Of
course, as seniors, and over-aged ones at that, most of them could simply Apparate from beyond
the school gates, but no one seemed to be even considering it. Hermione wondered if it was
because of all that had happened to this particular group of young adults, or if previous graduates
had felt the same need she did, to end the adventure as it had begun? Whatever the motive, she
found the journey down to the platform seemed surreal. Bird song sounded unnaturally loud
through the open windows as she and Lavender made their way down for breakfast. Bright patches
of repaired stone stood out glaringly against the worn steps of Gryffindor Tower, and Hermione
smiled, thinking of the generations of feet it would take to wear it to uniformity again. Somehow, it
was enormously comforting just now to know her stay at this seeming eternal castle would not go
without visible evidence for some time to come.

The walk down to the village and the train platform there was full of relieved chatter as laughing
groups of students rattled on, promising to write, to Floo, to keep in touch over the summer. In
amongst them, in small pockets, the senior students made their way; still chatting, but quietly; still
laughing, but somehow restrained. Hermione watched as plumes of steam rose above the trees that
still hide the train from view, just letting Ginny and Luna’s chatter wash over her. A few paces
away, Oliver was conversing with Harry and Ron, and Hermione watched as he tipped his head
back to laugh at something Ron had said.

They found a compartment near the back of the train, Harry was rummaging in his bag for a deck
of Exploding Snap, while Ron was already sitting, staring out the window at Hogsmede, perhaps
trying to memorize the details of the village that had been so much part of their lives at Hogwarts.
Hermione was straining to get her trunk up onto the storage rack. “Crap!” she swore, as she put her
jammed finger in her mouth, turning to use her shoulder to keep the half-falling trunk from sliding
to the floor again. It was this need to keep the heavy trunk from falling on her that prevented her
from jumping when she felt two arms reach around her.

“Le’ me get tha’,” Oliver said, gruffly. He spoke right beside her ear, and for a moment she
completely forgot what she had been doing. Fortunately, he didn’t seem to expect a response, as
she felt quite unable to breathe while he easily slid her trunk into its place above the compartment.
For a moment he looked at her, before dropping his arms quickly and taking a step back. He jerked
his head towards the hallway, and said, “I’ll let ye have some time with yer friends.” There was no
trace of hurt in his demeanour, only wry acceptance.

“How about I just use my wand?” she was forced to wonder, belatedly.

“What was that about?” Harry asked, as Hermione came to sit beside him. She shrugged, not
wanting to delve too deeply into things just now, and turned the conversation to ask about their
plans for the summer instead.

The witch with the trolley had already been ‘round by the time Oliver joined them again, and from
the way his eyes flicked over her, sitting beside Harry, Hermione knew he was fully aware of the
deliberateness of her chosen spot, but he made no comment, taking the place left for him by Ron
without a word.

It was getting dark by the time they pulled into King’s Cross. The whistle blew, signalling for the
sudden, noisy exodus as students fumbled to cram the last bit of their belongings into overflowing
trunks, or collect Familiars and robes before heading out into the choked aisle. Hermione gave one
look at the crammed mass of bodies, and raised an eyebrow at her companions, settling back to
wait it out. Their rolled eyes and impatient expressions poorly disguised their pleasure in having
this excuse to put off the moment just a little while longer. But, no matter how much Hermione
wished it otherwise, in a surprisingly short time the crammed aisle cleared, they had their things
gathered together, were through the barrier and were standing awkwardly in the thinning crowd of the Muggle part of the station.

“Well,” Ron began uncomfortably, looking down and around their feet.

“Er, yeah,” Harry responded, looking for a moment like he was debating. With a shrug, he pulled Ron into a startled hug, ignoring the looks he was getting from the Muggle guard when this sudden move caused Hedwig to squawk reproachfully.

Hermione was pulled into the hug a second later, and it was a tangle of arms and chests as she revelled in having her two boys close for perhaps the last time, at least like this, and the three of them stood grinning at one another, even once Harry had released them. Hermione sniffed, quietly, but by blinking rapidly a few times, she quickly it under control; now was not the time for that. From between Harry and Ron, Hermione could see two shocks of familiar red hair, and knew they saw it too, and even though Molly and Arthur stayed, lingering by the stile, they could feel the moment of separation had finally come.

“Right then,” Ron said, roughly, turning to Oliver. “I expect you to talk care of her, mate —”

“Ron!” Hermione squeaked, aghast.

“And don’t mind her scolding, that’s just how she tells you she cares,” he finished, grinning at her, having neatly circumvented her imminent protests.

Harry reached over and shook Oliver’s hand, while looking over at the gaping Hermione. “We’ll owl you – and there are always visits…”

She nodded, absolutely sure that if she opened her mouth, she’d give herself away. And with a final flurry of hugs, and fierce promises to get in touch soon, Hermione was left standing with Oliver under the electric lights of the station.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:

This chapter was originally supposed to incorporate what is now going to be chapter 15 as well, but, as always, this story is sometimes writing itself, and consulting me very little, so what was supposed to be contained nicely within 8,000 words or so grew to be 16,000. ;-p

That said, my current estimate is that we are probably going to have 19-20 chapters before we're finished, instead of the original 16 that I thought, and there will be a small epilogue at the very end. And I can't say thank you enough to all of you who have been reading and encouraging me for so long (or even for not so long - new readers are always a wonderful thing *grins* You guys are amazing - and I really adore you <3
AFTER a great deal of discussion, they had finally decided to settle in Marr, at least until Hermione had decided what direction she wanted to take, and so it was that she found herself Apparating once more to the outskirts of the small township, just as twilight darkened the night sky around them.

They had discussed possible living arrangements for days, but it really came down, in the end, to the fact that though Hermione had job packets and offers galore, she still didn’t know what she wanted to do. Oliver had hesitantly suggested returning to Scotland, and she had been surprised to find she liked that idea, remembering her time with Adrianne and her welcoming home. Oliver was likely to be away a fair bit, at least in the foreseeable future, and he was reluctant to leave her completely alone in such an unfamiliar place, despite her indignant reminders of her ability to take care of herself, and so with considerable reluctance she found herself agreeing to Brighid Wood’s offer of taking residence at Wood Croft.

Of course, if the suggestion had been to live in the main house itself, not all the sweet smiles and softly burring reassurances in the world would have made her agree. Wood Croft was a relic from a time long past, were it had been common for land owners to divide their holdings between their sons, and so it still held several croft cottages on the extensive property.

Hermione found herself taking deep breaths, trying to brace herself. Noticing, Oliver smiled reassuringly.

"I told her we’d be wanting t’ spend the evening alone, Mouse – give ye a chance t’ settle in before havin’ t’ deal with tha’ lot."

She gave him a thankful smile, pausing to enjoy his profile in the faint glow still left in the sky. He suited this place, she decided; strong and capable and somehow … she wasn’t sure she had the words, but being here with him felt terribly good at the moment, and she wasn’t sure how she felt about that, either. Things had just become so tangled and confused since Wales, when they had seemed to be finally heading for a comfortable and rewarding friendship. Now, she wasn’t sure if she might not like him to actually mean it when he kissed her, or worse yet, do more than just kiss her. But there was every possibility that he was just responding to their forced proximity, and she didn’t want to contemplate the mess that would be left to deal with if it proved to be no more than that and she allowed it to get out of hand.

The warm yellowish glow of lights became visible as the crested the small rise and Hermione got her first look at her new home. A modest cottage, certainly more than enough for her and Oliver’s needs, stood below them. Built of pale rose-coloured granite, it appeared a little less magical than Adrianne’s corkscrewing home, with its small second story perfectly in-line with the first, and both its chimneys being arrow-straight, but it was framed on either side by two massively twisty trees.
that almost gave the appearance of holding up the walls. In the gathering gloom, Hermione couldn’t tell what they might be, but made a firm promise to herself to review her Herbology text in the morning. Softly glowing light spilled from the windows that someone had obviously been thoughtful enough to leave to greet them, and a newly erected owl roost stood outside the kitchen window, ready to take deliveries.

Craning her head around, Hermione tried to take in every detail as she followed Oliver up the lane, but found that she only got the barest impressions of a freshly tended walk, and a yard in need of trimming before she was startled by Oliver suddenly reaching for her, and gently swinging her into his arms.

“What are you doing?”

The look he gave her was unreadable, but he answered lightly enough, “I think, Mouse, tha’ it’s tradition t’ carry a bride over the threshold of her new home. Much harder for her t’ run away, I’m sure, or something like tha’ – ouch!”

He chuckled at her flaming face, and completely ignored her swat as he freed a hand to open the door, holding her as easily in one arm as if she weighed no more than Crookshanks, which she most certainly did, she reflected sourly. Even still, she stopped squirming, not wanting to make it more difficult for him, since he was obviously determined in this bit of sentimental foolishness, and her stomach was just fine, thank you very much, and most definitely not fluttering, nor was the hand that was now curling behind his neck there for any other reason than to help her maintain her balance.

A little voice in the back of her head was primly suppressed before it could call her a liar.

“Ready to make a home of our own?” he asked quietly, still looking at her with that uncomfortably intense expression. She nodded, slowly, unable to look away as he pushed the door open with one shoulder, and carried her inside, his grip on her, if anything, cradling her closer to his broad chest, until she could feel his breath stirring her hair where her head rested just below his chin.

The floor in the kitchen was of grey slate, with the same rosy hue as the outside stone. The table was scrubbed wood, and appeared level and inviting, already with several covered dishes steaming gently between the two place settings. A rather lengthy parchment waited on one of the bone china plates, she noticed.

“Do you think it’s possible for a soul to exist in two bodies?” Hermione asked sardonically, as Oliver gazed at his mother’s handiwork with rueful amusement.

“Sounds like a rather romantic notion, Mouse, though I’m fairly sure that’s not what ye meant.”

Hermione shuddered. “Not when talking about your mother, no. I only meant that it appears that she is channelling Molly Weasley with frighteningly accurate results.”

It was Oliver’s turn to shudder, as he bent to set Hermione lightly on her feet again. “She certainly manages t’ kill a moment, without even being present. I’m sure it’s a skill necessary tae a mother of a couple of healthy young men growing up with access t’ so many nice barns and such, but I’d rather hoped she’d leave off by now.”

Hermione couldn’t help but giggle, despite the rather uncomfortable way thinking of a teenaged Oliver in relation to young women’s persons in the privacy of an outbuilding was making her feel. She moved off, making a vague comment about putting her things away, hoping to find a little
privacy to put her muddled thoughts in order. Oliver seemed to understand, as he let her go, allowing her to carry her own bags for perhaps the first time since she’d known him.

There were two rooms on the upper floor, reached by a narrow stair at the back of the kitchen, and Hermione crossed the short hall to the larger of the two, obviously intended as the Master Bedroom. She had no more than entered the room when she was enveloped in a shockingly bubble-gum pink cloud of vapour, smelling faintly of roses and hellebore root, and – Dragons?

“Oliver!”

THE NEXT few days were like a scavenger hunt, if you felt a scavenger hunt was like traversing a mine-field of pranks with the only reward in sight the possibility that you may be able to hex the red-headed bastards who had laid it. No part of the cottage was safe from their attentions, and by the second day, Hermione had taken to wandering the house with her wand poised, as even a trip to the bathroom the first night had proven that nothing had been held sacred, when a lisping, little girl’s voice had issued from the singing toilet seat:

_Tinkle, Tinkle_  
Little Star  
No need to wonder where you are  
Up above the bowl so high  
Like a fountain in the sky  
_Tinkle, Tinkle_  
Little Star  
Oi, how about you leaving off, eh?

Oliver had found it hilarious. He could, Hermione pointed out irritably, as it hadn’t been him who had crept into the loo in the middle of the night and half asleep; nor he who had blasted a hole in the tile of the cramped shower in their shock. Oliver had fixed the damage good-naturedly the next morning, but that didn’t stop him from chuckling at her for days to come.

He hadn’t laughed nearly so much when it had been his broomstick under attack. It had been over a week now, and Hermione was secretly amused that it was still a lovely pale lavender, with little peach hearts all over the tail end, with nothing Oliver had tried having any effect, whatsoever.

Crookshanks, ever sensible, had shaken one disdainful paw at the first explosion, and taken to exploring his new kingdom, stalking mice in the gardens and field for the next few days instead.

Irritating though the twins’ house warming may have been, it did suffice to distract them from any awkwardness as they settled into the small cottage, serving as a common battleground and uniting front, as well as just taking so much of their energy as to not allow time for discomfort, and it was with considerable shock that Hermione realized that two weeks had passed.

The small cottage, which Oliver had dubbed something complicated in Gaelic, and Hermione was sure this was simply because it amused him to her hear try and pronounce it, was sound, if old, and had been thoroughly cleaned prior to their arrival. It was furnished in what Hermione tended to think of as sort of as vintage college dorm, being just slightly above milk-crate end tables, or cardboard box bookshelves, but it was very true that the furnishings were well worn, and serviceable, if not ascetic, and with magic, they were able to make things stretch surprisingly far. Of course, Oliver had money from his playing days, quite a bit of it to be sure, but somehow, Hermione didn’t want to use it for this, being rather content with the warm, if not beautiful, atmosphere at Cot Buin a’ Fiadhach Luchan, which, when pressed, he’d finally laughingly
admitted to meaning *Home of the Fierce Mouse*. Of course, she was rather irritated that she didn’t find this out until after she had wasted considerable time learning how to pronounce it.

The trees had turned out to be *Cuileann*, or holly trees, so planted, according to Oliver, because of their male and female nature. Only female holly plants bore the distinctive red berries, and their dependant relationship had long been accepted as a talisman for a happy family, and a good start to a married life, though by the reddening of his ears, and the way he didn’t meet her eyes as he told her had Hermione convinced they also had something to do with fertility, too. In addition, they were considered a powerful talisman of luck and protection, explaining why they were incorporated into the very wall of their cottage. He also pointed out that the talisman was especially effective as Holly traditionally presided over the month of June.

The whole family had descended on them the second day, and though Hermione was pleased to see Adrianne again, she could have done without Oliver’s mother, especially when, in her enthusiasm for grandchildren, she began nudging her son and making nodding motions to the bedroom as the family was preparing to leave for the night. It was a good thing Oliver had had the foresight to take Hermione’s wand from her before dinner.

Adrianne’s husband, Jamie, turned out to be typically Scottish to Hermione’s eyes, being tall and brawny and red-haired, but was delightfully mild mannered with a quick humour that often had her in stitches. Oliver admitted to liking him, which, Hermione felt, was a big concession considering the man was married to his sister, and having observed Ron’s rather hostile attitudes to anyone giving Ginny so much as a friendly smile. Michael was also around, staying at the main house and loudly proclaiming himself to be on-hand for the birth of Adrianne and Jamie’s first child - though what he though he could do to aid things, Hermione had no idea.

When asked what they had done for a honeymoon, Oliver had admitted to taking Hermione to Wales, and with a start, Hermione realised that of course his family knew nothing of his real purpose, only seeing a former Quidditch player who refused to abandon his former glory days – a perception that hit uncomfortably close to home when compared to her original impressions of him. He was so much more than that, she’d learned, and found herself indignantly defending him under their combined criticism.

“Could ye nae think of something more suitable?” Jamie had asked, clearly trying to be as diplomatic as he was able.

“Really, Oliver, Ah though’ Ah’d taught ye better’n that – Wales may’ve a bonny league almost in the sky right noo, but Ah’m sure Hermione would hae preferred something a wee bit more romantic –“

“Hush, Michael. Ah’m sure he knew wha’ he wiss doing.” Adrianne admonished. However, the look she gave him was only slightly confident.

What business was it of theirs to be discussing what she wanted like that? “Actually, we had a wonderful time – it was exactly what I would have wanted, though I hardly expected Oliver to know that. It was quite a lovely surprise that he knew me so well.” Whatever issues she had with Oliver were personal, and she’d be damned if she let them start on him.

Of course, the leering was not an expected consequence of her rather determined declaration. Nor were the speculative looks from Adrianne, or Mrs. Wood. Raising her chin, she attempted to barrel through anyway. After all, it was none of their business just how tepid her real relationship with Oliver actually was, and what did she care if they assumed otherwise? “It took a great deal of thought to pick something so personal; it was a lovely holiday.” Her glare seemed to have provided the correct response, finally, at least in the boys, for Michael and Jamie were both looking at their
plates now, rather contritely, and even Mrs. Wood seemed satisfied, but Adrianne still watched Hermione from eyes that had grown thoughtful and speculative. She looked over to Oliver, but her triumphant feeling faded at the look he was giving her. It was only there for a moment, but it was certainly a fact that long after the rest had left, he was withdrawn.

The days were rapidly flying away from her as she settled in with surprising ease at *Cot Luchan*, and she grew to love every square inch of the place, for all it’s wonders and marvels. She quickly lost track of time in the strenuous task of making the small cottage home, which included ousting the remainder of the twins’ pranks, along with an assortment of rabbits and a couple of mice. The front gardens needed tending, and with a slight shock, and a surprising amount of pleasure, she realised that they were hers to do with as she pleased. It wasn’t long before she was digging out her old Herbology books and cross referencing with her Potions text, to plant probably the only garden in all of Marr that was geared towards things like the Felix Felicis or the Confusing and Befuddlement Draught.

The afternoon was bonny and warm, threatening to burn the back of his neck as he worked to fix the rather ancient well that stood on the north end of their yard. Even with magic, it wasn’t an instant process, as magic didn’t prevent him from royally mucking up and causing a sink-hole with his carelessness. Of course, the pump in the kitchen was nothing to the shiny taps he’d grown accustomed to at Hogwarts, or even Hermione’s home, but he rather suspected that those innovations had been taken from the Muggles, somewhere along the way, apparently after his home had been built. Sometimes, Oliver was forced to wonder if it was just arrogance that had the wizarding community convinced the Muggles might plague them for magical solutions to every problem if the Statute of Secrecy were ever breached. From his experience, it seemed that it was the Muggles who provided most of the solutions, albeit unknowingly. More than clever enough by half, the magic folk might be in for a rather rude surprise to find that they might not really be needed.

The short Highland summer may be coming to an end all too soon, but for right now, the midday sun was fierce, exposed as he was, but he threw his effort into his work and ignored it, lost in the hammerings of his own thoughts. Two weeks. Two weeks they’d been here, and he’d yet to make any sort of dent on her stubborn determination. Oh, she talked with him easily enough, even laughing occasionally over something inconsequential, but it was always at arm’s length from her real emotions, always perfectly cordial and cool. He could only presume that he would still be sitting in this depressing purgatory until he simply burned up from his own wanting.

It was partially his own fault, he admitted. Sitting there, listening as she blatantly told his whole family what a thoughtful, attentive lover he was had made him burn inside, in ways he wasn’t sure she would have appreciated under any circumstances. He’d like to be that man, the one who knew her so intimately that he could plan romantic holidays for his wife with some degree of success, to be the man who was responsible for the little blush that had been upon her cheeks when speaking of their holiday in the way his family had taken it. And what had he done when her words had made him squirm with the fact that she had to lie for him, that he hadn’t been able to even do that much for her? He’d slunk away to brood. Oliver didn’t brood, never had. So what the hell was he doing?

He dug harder, throwing his shoulders behind the motion determinedly. It made no difference, his thoughts continued to keep time to the heavy *whumphs* of dirt being thrown above him head by the shovel he’d enchanted there. *Shink.* Another shovel full of loose soil flung over his straining shoulders to land on the lip of the partially cleared hole. *Whomph.* Another small avalanche of dirt was shifted by his be-spelled wand as it dug into his deposited pile, clearing the rim. He’d gladly channel all his energies into building her a home, if only he could woo her with his ability to provide for her, take care of her, and be that solid presence in her life, like the holly-impregnated...
stone walls of their cottage; protector and sheltered. Merlin knew he hadn’t found any other way to
dent her resolve.

He snorted. Fanciful thoughts for a man who couldn’t even claim to have bedded his wife with any
degree of success; even in the embarrassingly simple step encouraging her to lay a touch closer on
their bed, let alone draw her into his chest and hold her to him as she slept. His hands tightened on
the handle of his shovel grimly. He knew, if he didn’t manage to open her up soon, she would
become set in her perceptions, things would cool and stagnate in the overly-polite and distant
Wood household, and he’d – no, they’d both be facing the hell of being married with so many
walls up between them. He’d been so intent on being patient, that mayhap he was allowing this to
happen, and he’d be damned if he just sat back while she carefully fortified herself behind
emotional walls designed to keep him out.

It was with new resolve that he dug into the chore, mind far more pleasantly occupied by a soft,
brown mouse.

The clock in the corner ticked softly, barely heard over the rustling of turning pages. It wasn’t so
grand as the Weasley clock by any means, but had been given by them, whom she held as dear as
her own family, and it was rather remarkable in its own way.

Just as one would expect, it had the normal three hands on its front, measuring out each day as it
was supposed to, but Hermione had been assured it possessed some small magic of its own that she
would have to figure out with time. Of course, it had been a constant source of puzzlement and a
little nigging bee buzzing around her thoughts as she worked around the house, her mind always
circling back to it, only to be frustrated by its seeming-mundane-ness.

Tonight, she had determinedly forced it from her mind, opting instead to work on the equally
frustrating task of deciphering Pafft’s book. Oliver had gone out with Ian, most likely out to some
pub, so she was alone in the house for perhaps the first night since they’d arrived, and she was
actually enjoying it. Silvery moonlight came in through the open shutters, turning the beautiful
rose-grey stone of her kitchen to deep stormy-mauve instead, and she moved around the darkened
room easily as she brewed herself a cup of milky tea. The stone was cool on her bare feet where
they poked out from beneath the dragging hem of her sleep pants, and she stooped to fill
Crookshanks’s water from the pump while she waited for the kettle to whistle.

Oliver’s barn owl, David, pronounced da-VEED in his soft bur, hooted softly from where it roasted
most nights above the eves, but the deep whistle of his call was so familiar that she barely heard it,
and she smiled softly without realizing it as she fished the tea leaves from her cup and guiltily
gathered a few biscuits and retreated to their bedroom.

The leather cover of Pafft’s book was warm in her hand, the rich leather dark with the oil of much
handling, and for a moment, Hermione just sat there cross-legged on their bed, propped up by
cramming not only hers, but Oliver’s pillows against the headboard as well, and contemplated the
-cracked binding, just feeling, trying to clear her mind in hopes of making some intuitive
connection. The scent of peppermint curled under her nose from the steaming mug on her
nightstand as she waited hopefully for some feeling of inspiration, some sign that tonight might go
any better than any of her previous attempts to wring something useful from the dratted book.
When nothing came, she opened it to her marked page with a weary sigh.

I SHALL desire thee, whoever thou art, that intendest the noble (though too much abused) study of
physic, to mind heedfully these following rules; which being well understood, shew thee the Key of
Galen and Hippocrates their method of physic: he that useth their method, and is not heedful of
these rules, may soon cure one disease, and cause another more desperate...
There are four Natural Virtues bred in the body of Witch or Wizard, being Muggle Born or Pure, being Blood, Choler, Flegm, and Melancholy, though the very un-naturalness of the Muggle-born will affect the disposition of these principles...

Oh really – the old man had just liked the sound of his own voice, or the sight of his own spidery script, as the case may be, she thought irritably. Why bother copying out such passages, pertaining as they did to such mundane things? Though she was certainly thankful, at least on some levels, for the researchers apparent need for obsessive footnoting, thereby ensuring she had large passages of the original, stolen book to study, she simply couldn’t help being irritated by the shear waste of energy being employed, when much less exhaustive notes would have sufficed for his rather prosaic purposes, as if the additional quotations added extra credence to his work, unable to stand on its own. Besides, why in the world would someone bother to translate old Arabian into almost equally incomprehensible old English?

Frankly, she was much less certain they were going to find anything in the book, by this point – though at first unable to imagine why simple research notes such as these would be hidden so carefully if they didn’t contain anything helpful, after reading any amount of Mycroft Paft’s verbose and overly-impressed-with-itself commentary, she was beginning to understand perfectly – but she had nowhere else to even start at the moment, and though Oliver hadn’t stressed the importance of what he was doing, Hermione had eyes, and could perfectly see what the stress of not knowing was doing to the world she had fought to protect almost two years ago now. Death Eaters were no longer quite so scary as when she’d been a girl – going up against Voldemort in all his snake-like glory had seen to that – but she understood history, and knew full well that there were likely many other groups than just the remnants of Death Eaters who were waiting at the fringes, ready to take advantage of the upheaval.

Eight Muggle children dead. A loose Vampire. A stolen book. Think, Hermione. This is just like trying to track Dark Magic during the war – you know how to do this. A dead man in a bookcase. But struggle as she might, her mind just wasn’t cooperating, instead she would notice the way Oliver’s pillow smelled beneath her head, and she breathed in deeper, before she could stop herself. A stray wisp of her hair brushed her nose, causing her to swipe it with annoyance, while unconsciously wondering what Oliver’s hair would feel like between her fingers. Frustrated, she let herself forward to plant herself face first in the pillow in her lap, and groaned. Why couldn’t she concentrate? Even for one blasted evening? The burly highlander had slowly begun to take over her life, working his way into her every thought, no matter how innocent or mundane.

“Uhm… Hermione? Is everything alrigh’?”

Of course, her husband would choose that moment to walk through the door.

She blew out a frustrated breath, still face-first in the pillow. “Just fine, Oliver,” she answered, refusing for the moment to surface. It was nice here; she didn’t have to see things that made nerve endings she hadn’t even been aware she had tingle and dance in an annoyingly perky way; didn’t have to smell the way his soft scent, which she had never noticed so much as now that she was trying not to, filled each room he was in given more than five minutes; and certainly didn’t have to notice just how everything tended to become background to the handsome highlander when she wasn’t guarding her thoughts.

Unfortunately for her new-found determination to see how long she could possibly stay there, Oliver’s next comment pulled her up with an involuntary jerk.

“Michael and Ian were asking if ye were in a family way yet.”

“What!” she squeaked.
But Oliver had moved over to the far end of the room, struggling to get out of his shirt with fingers that were slightly less coordinated than when he left, and Hermione momentarily wished she hadn’t lifted her head from the safety of the pillow.

She’d left her bedside lamp lit to work by, and the yellow glow didn’t quite reach the far end, casting him into rippling shadows and relief’s. It was like watching a marble sculpture come to life, each muscle was ridiculously highlighted as it flexed, looking perfect and controlled in a way that only professional athletes ever really achieve. Both arms were above his head, and she couldn’t seem to look away as the hem of his shirt rose in slow motion, now above his navel, and twisting slightly, now one bronze nipple was visible as he got one arm free - and Hermione was suddenly quite sure that this was somehow worse than seeing him with no shirt on at all. There was a teasing quality to it, as each inch of his powerful chest came into view, that had her unable to look away. For Merlin’s sake, the man actually had a stomach that more closely resembled a rock wall, or a washboard perhaps, eked out in impossibly sharp definition by the deep shadows her feeble light could not quite touch. With one final flick of his wrist, he sent it to land untidily in the hamper in the open closet. Of course, that also meant that he was now fully aware of her eyes on him. She glared at his amused look.

“Oh, stop it. You look very impressive, and you know it,” she snapped huffily.

Oliver laughed. “So do you, Mouse.”

“I most certainly do not. I’m possibly pretty – if you really stretched the point. I have hair that can most kindly be described as bushy, and I’m rather short, and not terribly thin.”

He stopped what he had been doing, which, for Hermione’s peace of mind was perhaps not the best thing for him to have done. She couldn’t understand why he had been undressing here, except to think that he must have drank more ale than she originally thought. His hands stilled and he turned to regard her, head cocked to one side contemplatively. Unfortunately, this also drew attention to the fact that his denims were unbuttoned, and hanging rather precariously on his hips.

“I donna think I’d care ta hear tha’ again,” he said quietly.

Hermione goggled at him, before bristling, “What? I can be realistic about myself, and I don’t require any ego stroking from you, thank you very much. I’m quite comfortable as I am.”

“It’s no’ yer ego I’d care t’ be stroking lass.” While Hermione began to splutter indignantly, he continued as if she hadn’t spoken, “A touch mental, I’ll grant ye, but certainly no’ plain.” He grinned at her, clearly amused by her helpless railing.

“Just how much did you drink tonight?” she humphed.

Oliver crossed the room to join her on the bed, still wearing those damned slipping trousers. As he came into the glowing circle of light thrown off by her lamp, the strange shadows receded, making his skin look warm and living once more, less like the cold perfection of a sculpture but more inviting, too. A fine trail of dark brown hairs started just beneath his belly button and just served to draw her embarrassed attention back down to the waistband of his pants, though she fought to keep him in only in the periphery of her vision and not stare, and certainly not give away how uncomfortable he was making her. Afterall, it wasn’t as if he were actually indecent, with only his shirt missing, and it would be mortifying to admit that she was having a hard time handling the sight of this much of him. Which was completely silly, as he usually came to bed in just a pair of well-worn sleeping pants, so the fact that he was wearing denims instead shouldn’t make any difference – but it did. Perhaps it was the half-undone fly, which simply screamed things she didn’t particularly want to think about just yet, or the way that his hip bones became visible briefly as he
walked, offering tantalizing glimpses that she definitely didn’t want to think about.

“Why is it every time I’m friendly wi’ ye, you accuse me of being drunk?”

“Not drunk, merely excessively relaxed. And you have to admit, you’ve set a fine precedent for yourself, haven’t you?”

He grinned at her again, and she couldn’t help but wonder at what was different in his mood these past few weeks. He shifted her scattered notes and joined her on the bed, stretching out to lean on one elbow as he faced her. She’d forgotten that she’d left her current book on the bed, turned over to keep her page and unfortunately uncovered when he moved her things. He picked it up curiously before she could stop him, and she felt her face flame as he read the title and lifted a sardonic eye to her. Damn Ginny and her vitiate sense of humour – and her own inability to ignore an unread book, no matter how ridiculous.

“Kiss of the Highlander? Is there something I should be reading into this?” He easily avoided her wild grab, and Hermione was quite sure that if it were at all possible, she could fry an egg on her forehead for the heat she was radiating. The cover, of course, left absolutely no question as to what kind of novel it was.

“Absolutely not!” she choked.

“Are ye sure, then? Seems to me tha’ perhaps I’m being negligent here somewhere, I mean t’ drive you t’ such lengths. Or is this some sort of physiological ploy?”

“Nothing of the sort. Merely- merely Ginny’s questionable taste in hen gifts.”

“I see. An yer reading it because—?”

“Because Ginny bought it for me and it would be rude not too. Besides, Dad hasn’t sent over the rest of my books yet and frankly, it was the last thing left in the cottage that I haven’t read.”

“Don’ tell me ye waded through all that Lockehart trash my mum sent over, did ye?” Oliver winced when she nodded, and moved to set the suggestive book on the bedside table. Hermione began to breathe easier at his apparent willingness to let the embarrassing topic die.

“Oh, and Hermione—“

He caught her lips before she could even respond. Warmth spread rapidly from the wet slide of his mouth on hers, causing her belly to tighten nervously, even as she leaned in – only slightly, mind. His large hand was cradling her head and nape of her neck, positioning her just so while he lazily spread his attentions between kissing her and gently worrying her bottom lip with his teeth. She was grateful when he moved back, placing a comfortable distance between them again without pressing things further, despite a hundred protesting hormones that wanted to follow him across the bed.

“If ye wanted a kiss, all ye had t’ do was ask.”

His comment seemed nonsensical for a moment, before the fog cleared enough for her to remember the cause of this awkward conversation. He was smirking at her, clearly enjoying the fact that he’d flustered her. “I’m sure I’m much better than mere paper, lass.”

She glared at him, refusing to be drawn into this conversation, and was surprised to hear herself say “Oh, I don’t know. Some things are better left up to the imagination.” Because at least if I imagine it, I don’t realize how much better the reality really is.
He tensed, no longer smiling, and searched her face for a moment before relaxing again. “So, any luck wi’ Pafft’s damned book tonight?”

“I haven’t finished it – a lot of it is very redundant –”

“Is that a no, then?”

Hermione sighed, hating to admit so much defeat, when he was clearly hoping for something. “I haven’t found anything yet, no.”

Oliver rolled over to his back, one arm bent behind his head as he stared at the ceiling. Tonelessly, he informed, “Percy scraped together a team this morning from the Magical Creatures Unit. They’re looking for tha’ Vampire, but it’s a pretty damned wide area t’ cover.”

Hermione paused for a moment, confused by his recalcitrance. “You don’t think it’s a Vampire?”

“Something isnae right in all this. I jus’ think maybe we should hold back, not spread ourselves quite so thin before we’re really sure.”

“I thought you and Charlie were sure. Didn’t you go and examine the bodies yourselves?”

“Aye. But tha’ doesnae mean we’re right. Yer the smarter than either of us– what do you think?”

“I think that I’ll spend more time working on that book. If there’s something there to be found, I’ll find it for you Oliver, I promise.”

He rolled over from his regard of the ceiling, to watch her again, propped on one arm. He didn’t speak for a long moment, and his scrutiny was beginning to make her uncomfortable.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you –” Hermione spoke, somewhat hesitantly. “Statistically, Muggle-borns have a slightly higher chance of producing a Squib child, at least under normal circumstances… does, I mean, would it bother you, if we were to have…?”

She couldn’t tell what he was thinking from his expression; his eyes were dark and inscrutable as the question hung between them.

“I’m no’ so sure I believe tha’ ye would ever be capable of producing anything bu’ an exceptional child, Squib or no. But no, if it fashes ye, I wouldnae be bothered in the slightest; I will be proud of any child we produce.”

“Oh.”

It was a completely inadequate thing to say, but really, he’d just spoke of them producing a child; of it being not only a remote possibility that he had dismissed it as when she brought up the subject in Wales, but as a far more possible then merely probable. ‘I will be proud of any child we produce…’ the possessive quality of that statement, and the inherent satisfaction was doing strange things to her hormones again.

“Actually, we- I mean, with the epidemic and all, squib births are up everywhere, and me being Muggle-born probably means we have a better chance –” Her babbling was cut short when he reached out and captured her hand.

Turning it palm up, he began running his thumb over the slight ridge left on the palm, something he seemed to do more and more recently. After a couple of beats, he looked at her lightly, and said simply, “I think ye’d make a fine mother. Donnae doubt yerself so much.”
Nothing more was said between them, and Oliver’s breathing had settled out to soft snores long before she was able to fall asleep that night.

~*~

FOR THREE days, the passages culled from Pafft’s notes danced just outside of Hermione’s reach. Something was tickling her brain, some fact that demanded understanding and she was irritable in her frustration. Thankfully, Mrs. Wood didn’t deign to visit, so Oliver was spared the awkwardness of having his mother hexed with anything too nasty. Hermione was almost disappointed.

Blood is made of meat perfectly concocted, in quality hot and moist, governed by Jupiter. It is by a third concoction transmuted into flesh, the superfluity of it into seed, and its receptacle is the veins, by which it is dispersed through the body...

Oliver was off helping Michael on the main family property today – gathering the harvest or some such. She was sitting in the yard, once again struggling with the book, trying to at least enjoy the late August sunshine while she glared the assorted contents of Pafft’s secret drawer on the lawn beside her, pondering if simply burning everything in the fire grate would do more than simply satisfy her growing frustration, when she suddenly saw it.

She blinked.

Then took off at a run for the main croft.

~*~

SHE FOUND Oliver and Michael, both shirtless, in the barn, engaged in brotherly competition as they threw the baled grains to the loft, seeing who could get the hundred pound bales farther or higher. The crop was magical, of course, destined for use in the potions market and especially for use in the complicated flying solutions that were used on broomsticks and even on magic carpets in the Middle East, so that may have accounted for some of the incredible heights being achieved.

“Michael, could you excuse us for a moment, please?”

Michael looked over at the dwindled pile of bales by the door, and grinned. “Sure, hen. Oliver can finish up here when yer doone wi’ ‘im.”

Oliver nodded absently, still staring at the barely repressed excitement in Hermione’s frame.

Michael had jus reached the door when he called back mischievously, “Ian’s ‘round here somewheres, sae Ah’d no’ take tae long tae roger her.”/ “If ‘e didnae roger ye teckle this morn’ ye can always fin’ me fae some help, hen…”

“Haud yer wheesht, ye filthy bletherskate!” Oliver yelled after him, scowling.

“I think I’m glad I didn’t understand that.”

“Ye may want t’ pretend ye didn’t hear it, noo.”

Hermione dismissed it with a wave of her hand, far too caught up in her own tense excitement to really take in the rather graphic nature of Michael’s comment.

“What’s go’ ye in a fankle this morn’, Mouse?”

““It is Voldemort – someone’s trying to get him back.”
Oliver stopped for a moment, obviously switching gears. “How do ye know tha’ from reading tha’ mucky auld book?”

Hermione looked at him, one eyebrow raised. “Do you really want me to go through all the technical bits with you?”

He winced. “Ah, noo, I think a summary will do nicely, lass.”

“Sulayman wrote a whole section on the principles of the Natural Virtues —” seeing his rather blank look, she regrouped. “It’s an eighteenth century concept of the body. He talked about the differences between the blood of a Muggle-born witch or wizard and a Pure-blood one.”

“So?”

“Well, we always knew they were different, but Sulayman actually goes on to define the differences, and some of them are rather fascinating —”

“What differences?” Oliver asked, cutting her off before she could lose track of the point.

“Muggle borns have a, well, a quality to their blood that doesn’t become active until somewhere between nine and ten; it the awakening of magic in their blood.” Hermione went on to explain how this gene actually re-wrote the genetic code at that age, a sort of magical puberty that literally created magic where there hadn’t been any previously – basically brought a new person to life. The concept was fairly esoteric, and Sulayman was the only one to have devoted any real research to the phenomenon. It was extremely powerful, but very limited, as after the age of eleven, it became completely dormant.

“So wha’ does all this mean?”

“I’ve been studying Blood Magic this year, under Professor Snape. It’s extremely complex magic, but if someone were adept enough, they could probably adapt this – use it to basically re-write the person they wanted to bring back.”

“How many could do it?”

“I really don’t know, Oliver. I could.”

He expelled the breath he’d been holding sharply. This was it. This was finally it, were one frayed little end finally gave, and the pieces started to fall into place. “Tha’s why Golye wanted you. If ye hadnae have signed my Contract right away, there probably would have been more.”

Hermione’s eyes widened, fractionally.

“So they knew of the auld man’s hole in his bookcase, but if they knew abou’ the hidey hole, why didnae they empty it?”

“But they didn’t know about it, Oliver.” She shook her head when he looked down at her sceptically. “They probably knew nothing about that. The very fact that that drawer was undisturbed I think proves that.”

“But we found the damned thing by using the sketch from the blethering drawer; how would they have known —”

“Think Oliver, who would have extensive knowledge of what kind of hidden places were in his own museum?”
“Daniels? He’s a right shite, but I’m noo so sure he’s a murdering shite. It could be a Vampire though – I mean, what better way to conceal what they’re up to, an’ then they can simply collect it from the carrier”

“Ew. Actually, no, they couldn’t. Blood magic is incredibly precise, and the digestive acids in the Vampire would completely ruin it for any kind of ritual use.”

Even the lack of answers couldn’t dent his excitement. They finally had a start – a tiny hold on what was happening. He could see the same excitement rising in Hermione, the way her eyes danced and how she couldn’t keep the grin from breaking free the minute she stopped thinking about it.

He wasn’t sure what caused it, but they were leaning in to each other - and for a change she seemed to be participating too, one hand actually tangling in his hair before he’d even touched her. Sunlight streamed in from the window above the loft, and filtered down until it was just a mere golden glow causing mahogany and caramel highlights in her hair to sparkle. He revelled in the sweet rush of her eagerness, the sharp tug at his hair that had him angling his head obediently.

Her lips were crème and satin, a combination he was convinced would become addicting if she would only continue to kiss him like this, and when her tongue softly sought out his own, he didn’t even try to stop the groan that escaped him as everything seemed to explode between them.

He didn’t realize he’d manoeuvred her up against the barn wall until he felt the slight jolt of her contact, but it was quickly lost again as he felt one small hand begin to explore the planes of his shoulders, stroking and lightly raking her nails until he felt he would snap. Hot little kisses were burning his skin along his neck and jaw as she abandoned his mouth to taste his skin, nipping the sensitive area just below his ear before moving down along the tendon to his collarbone. He’d been sweating prior to her arrival, having worked hard trying to get the work done with for the day to get back to her, but she didn’t seem to mind his damp hair between her fingers, or the slightly musky odour of his skin. Somewhere, in the back of his mind he was smacking himself, grating that it was too much too soon – she’d only just managed to come to him, and he was going to muck it badly if he didn’t manage to stop thinking with his bollocks, but that voice was far, far too distant to make it through the red haze of having Hermione in his arms.

She squeaked in surprise when he hoisted her up against the wall, but quickly caught on to wrap her legs around his waist for balance, but Oliver quickly realized that this was a tactical error, as the feel of her pressing him so closely was rapidly undoing what little restraint he had left.

It was the sound of the door being slide on its hinges that finally percolated into his awareness, and he knew - just knew - that he really didn’t want to turn around and see Ian’s smirk, but especially didn’t want Hermione to see it.

“What ye plannin’ oan getting tha’ stacking doone yet, lad – or were ye caught in a wee braw dwam?”

Slowly, Oliver released his grip, and Hermione slid to her feet, resolutely keeping her eyes to the floor so he couldn’t catch her gaze.

“That’s alright Ian. Oliver and I were finished here anyway,” Hermione said as she slipped from the barn. Ian stood staring for several quiet minutes as Oliver tackled the remaining bundles, probably not sure if he should tease or apologize, but in the end, left without a word.

Oliver cursed under his breath for the full twenty minutes it took him to finish with the bales.
Neither of them mentioned what almost happened in the barn that afternoon, and things quickly slipped back into their comfortable routine again. Or at least, they did on the surface; frankly, Oliver felt the tension could be cut with a knife.

He’d allowed things to go too fast, and while it was certainly gratifying to know that she felt the tension between them too, she obviously wasn’t ready – or perhaps didn’t want to be ready. He had to admit, over the last five months, he’d come to care – and care deeply – for the brunette witch who was currently curled up in his bed.

Resolutely, he went off in search of the most tedious, exhausting job he could find.

They tossed ideas between them over the next few days, trying to piece any more bits of the puzzle together, and Hermione insisted, and Oliver reluctantly had to agree, that the area around Mo I Rana might bear another look. It was a long shot at best, but Hermione agreed that it was unusual behaviour for a Dragon, and while they didn’t know exactly where the damned thing was heading, it’s not like it probably knew either, other than to find a suitable new range. He had to hope it was going to stop in around where they found it, so that’s were he would suggest to Percy that he start.

The conversation in the Floo was short and too the point. Percy was more than ready to grasp at straws in hopes they proved long enough to climb out of their current mess. Hermione, on the other hand, was proving less than tractable when he explained the situation.

He had to get away from her. “Actually, Hermione, I’ll be gone for a wee bit. I’m going out to Norway, check around a bit. If you’re right, there could be a clue there as to what’s going on.” This was just sort of blurted out. He’d not really planned to go, intending to meet with Percy and have him send a team out instead, thinking it very likely that any Dark Wizards in the area had cleared out long ago. Damn.

“You can’t leave me here!” Hermione squeaked indignantly. “I’ll pack a few things and we can be gone in an hour.”

Shite. “Hermione, there’s no need. I’m unlikely t’ find anything –“ She glared at him sharply at this lack of faith in her reasoning. “An’ I can get Percy to send someone along with me if you’re really worried.”

“I absolutely will not stay here and wait. Apparently, your mother is quite concerned by the fact that I am not yet with child. She was trying to give me sex tips this morning.”

Sex tips…? In the moments it took Oliver to recover from that disturbing image, Hermione had already left to gather what she needed for the trip, an action he realised with a sinking feeling, that he had agreed to in his distraction. His plan to get away from the temptation she presented had just backfired spectacularly.

Oliver groaned and began to hit his head rhythmically against the nearest tree.

It was a testament as to how truly intolerable things with Brighde Wood that Hermione would instead jump at the chance to be alone with Oliver right now; frankly, the slippery slope of her feelings were becoming a trifle heady. Her suggestion of having a guide had gone over well, though she was rather shocked she’d managed to slip in the suggestion of having Viktor Krum do the guiding. Durmstrang being a Northern school meant that Viktor knew the area far better than either of them.
She was actually rather grateful for the excuse Viktor provided her, once again charging in like a knight in shining armour, to save her from herself. His presence, she was sure, would provide a comfortable buffer, give her the space she needed to come to terms with everything – to slow down the overwhelming emotions that were ambushing her with such wild impulses as what had almost happened in the barn.

Clearly, a chaperone was a perfect solution.

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HE’D ONLY been home for a couple of days before his father had tracked him down. Sometimes, Draco wondered what it would be like to have a normal father, who inquired about N.E.W.T. standings, or job opportunities, or even if he’d enjoyed his last semester of school.

Invariably, such speculation made him shudder. His father didn’t enquire as to his grades, because he knew what Draco was capable of and didn’t believe in patronizing him by expressing any doubt of his achievements. He was well aware of what Draco was likely to be doing, as he had been grooming him for a place in one of his many holdings for the last twenty years of his life, and he was also very cognizant of the fact that his son would not have returned to that hell-hole of a school if he hadn’t ordered him to do so, and wouldn’t lower either of them by pretending otherwise.

Draco found he far preferred this approach.

Tessy, at least, he was fairly certain the creature’s name was something like that, anyway - though it may have even been Eric for all he could bother to remember, was potting about the room, quietly picking up the remains of his lunch as he sat, staring moodily at the fire. The damned manor was always cold, even in the height of summer, and he sent the elf scurrying with a demand for more wood.

“Really, Draco, finding amusement in tormenting the servants? How tacky.” His father crossed the room to take the deep chair beyond him. Crossing his legs casually, he settled himself a little deeper into the wingback. “Weasley is proving slightly too astute for his own good. He may find himself in trouble one of these days.”

Draco merely raised a brow at him, considering.

“His marriage law is inconvenient, at best.”

“Does he suspect something?”

Lucius looked at him sourly. “Of course he suspects something; the wretched man is far too distrusting. The question is, do his suspicions bear us any difficulty?”

“If he really knew anything, wouldn’t he have arranged for Granger’s marriage right away, instead of leaving it to chance? I mean, she is a friend of his family, or some such rot, and you would think that it would occur to him that there are a lot of people out there with a grudge against her.”

Lucius looked speculative. “You may be right. The law may have just been meant to test the International Wizarding Council, see how far support may spread. He certainly suspects the possibility that there was more intelligence behind things than the Dark Lord and his assorted band of miscreants can account for.”

“Either way, she’s lost the lot of them now,” Draco said with cool detachment.

“For the time being, certainly, though I’m not sure if she won’t be of use in the future. She’s
unwholesomely bright, for a Mudblood, and she may just be clever enough to finish what that bunch of zealots started.”

“Don’t tell me you’re missing old snake face so much you’d like to see him back?”

“Hardly,” his father said dryly. “But where one has tried, others can follow, and I’d just as much rather to know how to stop them, without going to so much fuss next time.

Besides, let us not forget that if they succeed, they will quickly find out that though Potter may have killed him in the duel, we were the ones who poured that damned silver potion down his dead throat to make sure he couldn’t come back. I imagine they would get — testy about something like that.” A cold smile ghosted his pale lips as he stared hard at his son, as if to burn the reality of the likely unpleasantness if they didn’t come out on top.

“Greg stopped by a while ago.”

“Ah. Very good. And how did things go with the others?”

“They’ll follow along, but I’m still not sure how useful that’s supposed to be.”

“Draco, have you ever used that pretty head of yours for anything other than a Bludger target, I wonder?”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:

One sunny day in the middle of the night
Two dead boys got up to fight
Back to back they faced each other
Pulled their swords and shot each other

A deaf policeman heard the noise
And came to arrest those two dead boys
If you don’t believe me, this lie is true
Just ask the blind man - He saw it too!

I had to include this rhyme – it’s the basis for this chapter’s title and a perfect expression of where Oliver and Hermione are now; both united in wanting the same things, yet unable to meet eye to eye. Yes, sometimes I am a bit of a sap.

A couple of additional notes – there really is a book called Kiss of the Highlander, by Karen Marie Moning. I found it listed on Amazon, so I can’t give any claim to its merit, but the title was just too perfect to pass up.

Yes, there is a great deal of slang in this chapter, though hopefully it is fairly self explanatory in the contexts that have been used. If necessary, I will start providing a glossary at the end of each chapter that we spend with the Woods, but I had hoped to skip that if possible ;-p I will say that Michael is a very, very naughty man. O.o
I could honestly write this part of the story for ever. I had all kinds of scenes and little
observations and looks at the new Wood household that I wanted to include – Just
background stuff and window dressing, really – but eventually I had to concede that
this chapter had to wrap up, as it was now approaching 10,000 words ;-p My beta is an
awesome person who constantly makes me split chapters, as I can go overboard
sometimes, but I felt that splitting this one to include some of those missing scenes,
while enjoyable to spend more time at Cot Luchan, would only end up slowing the
story down. I had to think about it really, really hard though. *lol*

My beta would also like to point out that she has warned me that I’m likely to be
stoned in a public square for all the tension in this chapter, but in a good way. I’m not
sure how you can be stoned in a good way, and neither is she, but I suppose we both
figure that enough of me will be left alive to at least finish the story.

Oh, and as a last note, all sections from A Treatise of Anatomy, by Healer Muhyi al
Din Sulayman were actually taken (or at least adapted from) a real book: Culpepper’s
Complete Herbal, which was written in the 17th century.

Love from,

Ny(ruserra)
“Really, Mouse, I donna see why yer still so angry with me. I mean, we didnae get into much of a disagreement, and a man’s got to do something in the face of all this boredom.”

Hermione stopped her careful packing, mid-motion, her hand still hanging in the air between them as she glared incredulously. “You hit him!”

“I think you’ll find he hit me first – well, at least, at the same time. It was a lively disagreement.” Oliver’s smirk was certainly self-satisfied, despite the conciliatory tone.

Hermione could only glare, and throw up her hands - a move which seemed to cause her husband no end of amusement. She muttered to herself as she pointedly focused on roughly shoving all her carefully folded clothes into her bag.

Of course, there was no way that Oliver was going to confide the real satisfaction he’d had in landing one on The Bulgarian Menace’s jaw, nor did he want to examine too closely the reasons behind his recent desire to do so.

It had been three weeks since they’d set out from Cot Buin a’ Fiadhaiche Luchan, and to be totally honest, Oliver’s plan to get away from his too-tempting wife had backfired spectacularly. Now, not only did he have to deal with the wanting she engendered in the forced closeness of camp, but he also had Krum hovering over everything like a great big bloody duck-footed vulture.

Of course, her insistence on coming, though buggering awkward, saved him from nearly making the biggest mistake of his marriage to date. Leaving Hermione behind, after the way he’d pushed her in the barn, would have nearly guaranteed that the woman he came back to would be barricaded behind emotional walls he’d never get through, even if he lived to be as old as Merlin himself. She’d have had far too much uninterrupted time to talk herself around, rationalize things…

Mind you, a slowly freezing camp with that Bulgarian twit fumbling around was hardly the ideal circumstances to begin trying to work on her, either. Oliver sighed in frustration, and began tightening the leather straps for the riding harnesses. He didn’t muck about with long-distance flying like this, especially when he was responsible for the life of a soft brown-haired witch. The way she rode a broom was almost painful to watch – if he’d had any idea, he’d have packed her on the back of his broom before she had time to blink, let alone argue, but frankly the idea that there was something magical Hermione wasn’t good at was so foreign as to have never crossed his mind.

If it wasn’t so dangerous, he’d have found it quite adorable.

It hadn’t taken Hermione long to secure agreement from Krum to join them on this little adventure, and they’d have been packed and off in a matter of hours, if it hadn’t been for the need to explain
things to his mum. As it was, the Wood matriarch was only too ecstatic over a planned holiday between her son and his bride.

Somehow, he should have known.

True to his word, his former Quidditch nemesis met them quietly, in an out-of-the-way pub in Denmark. The directions he had given were good, and they’d found the Wizarding place with little difficulty. Very Bavarian-style rough-hewn beams crossed the ceiling above their heads, and a large, and very busy, trestle table dominated the space near the bar. Pushing their way back through the crowds of after-work patrons, they found Krum tucked into a booth at the back. His harsh features had warmed instantly when he caught sight of them, moving quickly to take Hermione’s one remaining bag that she’d managed to keep Oliver from carrying, a move that Oliver was pleased to see caused a black scowl as soon as Viktor wrested it away from her.

“Viktor, it’s been too long…”

“Herm-own-ninny,” he was responding, looking far too much like a besotted schoolboy for Oliver’s tastes.

“Krum.” But Oliver’s grudging greeting was lost as Viktor swept his wife up in a hug that was far tighter than necessary, and Oliver’s hand tightened so much his wand creaked in protest.

Maybe we can ‘accidentally’ leave him in a river somewhere, he thought in irritation, as he settled stiffly into the booth.

The ale was decent; if a little cold, and the serving wench was a trifle buxom. Hermione seemed to notice as well, and he was amused, and secretly pleased that it seemed to really irritate her.

It was about the only thing he was pleased about, frankly. They had been two hours in this pub, hashing out plans and ideas. If Oliver was honest with himself, part of his irritation came from the fact that he was used to doing these kinds of missions on his own initiative, and certainly didn’t enjoy sharing the leading of it with someone whose worth was yet to be proven.

Maybe, possibly, a small part of his irritation could be that Hermione smiled at Krum far more frequently than necessary, in Oliver’s opinion.

“Smartest idea is probably start at south coast, at Arendal. Follow north to place where body vas,” Viktor was reiterating, as he turned to eye Oliver questioningly. “You think you can still find it?”

“Of course I bloody well can.” Oliver glowered, momentarily forgetting that his mum raised him better than to curse in front of a witch.

“Oliver!” Hermione hissed and knocked her knee sharply against his under the table, before turning back to the conversation. “There might be a lot we could miss, if we started closer to Mo I Rana,” she agreed.

Oliver rubbed his abused flesh resentfully. “An’ have either of ye considered that I was just south of Narvik when I found it? That’s more than a thousand kilometres north of where you two wan’ tae start. We’ll be greeting the snow before we’re done.”

Wholly lost in the excitement of discovery, Hermione barely spared him a glance. “Yes, but the body’s not the only thing that was found in Norway, Oliver. Percy’s reports also mentioned strange lights appearing over the coastal cities on a couple of occasions.”

“An’ Perce also noted that it was likely nothin’ more than Northern Lights coming south a little un-
seasonally.” He was being a bit belligerent now, he knew, but the thought of travelling the length of Norway dragging along Viktor Krum was enough to set his teeth on edge.

They both ignored him as they continued to discuss whether they’d make it before the snow flew, and what supplies they would need.

Oliver was a little ashamed when he sat back and sulked.

But not enough to stop.

Honesty, wasn’t it someone else’s bloody turn to save the world this time? Hermione was forced to wonder. Three weeks! Three long and gruelling weeks— on broomstick no less! And she was sure that when she had so forcefully insisted on coming, she must have been under the influence of some kind of Imperious Curse.

And, to add insult to injury, there was almost zero noticeable improvement in her flying skills.

Of course, there were other reasons that proved the lack of wisdom in accompanying two pureblood wizards when they had both made their living off of being highly competitive - often against each other. Hermione just really wished she’d remembered that while she was still safe and sane in Scotland, and the fact that she could even think of anyplace with Brigide Wood that way with any degree of seriousness, she felt, only proved there must have been a spell involved.

Unfortunately for Hermione’s piece of mind, the disagreement of this morning wasn’t nearly unusual enough. Oliver and Viktor seemed to have some sort of unresolved issue to contest, and it touched absolutely everything they did. Nothing could get done that didn’t involve at least one argument, some sort of silly male one-up-manship that, frankly, surprised Hermione. She’d always rather thought Oliver to be above that sort of childish behaviour, especially after his patient handling of Ron a few months ago, but there was absolutely no sign of that man now. She’d like to attribute that to the nature of their journey; worry over what they might find, and impatience to finally get ahead of whatever it was that had been sending him all across the continent for months, but she wasn’t so sure. Whatever the cause, Oliver was definitely tense and irritable, and after a few attempts, Hermione gave up trying to talk to him about it. Instead, she settled for spending more time with Viktor, carefully planning their route when they were in camp, trying to leave the quiet Highlander to his thoughts, and not push him to confide in her. So far, her considerate strategy hadn’t yielded any results, and Oliver continued to scowl blackly.

Of course, inviting Viktor along had backfired on her in one small way, as he could hardly chaperone them at night, and she would never even consider exposing their tentative relationship to outside speculation, even from a friend like Viktor, by insisting on separate tents. So a strategy of careful avoidance was put in place, and most evenings found her staying up, carefully tending the fire as she pored over new maps until she could be sure Oliver was asleep, before slipping in to join him. Occasionally, Oliver would be tied up with their brooms, and she could sneak into bed first, as he insisted on tending hers for her each night. The way he focused so completely on the task, even after giving his own broom barely cursory care, was confusing, even as she convinced herself that he was only being so meticulous because of her abysmal lack of ability. Working by wand-light, carefully he would snip stray brushes, testing the loft and cushioning charms, then checking the balance before allowing her back on again in the morning. Frankly, the careful attention he gave the task made her warm in a way she wasn’t sure she didn’t welcome, even as she scolded him that, as the smartest witch of her class, she was perfectly capable of looking after her own gear. Sometimes she would stay up, just to watch him at it from the safety of the warm circle of firelight, finding something very calming in his quiet intensity and patient focus.
Viktor just watched these exchanges with eyes that glittered with amusement.

But still, most days saw her entirely too busy to worry. Now late September, Norway was beginning to show signs of winter’s impending onset. The days were getting considerably shorter, the sun now nearly completely set by six-thirty each evening, and travel over the mountains was severely hindered. The brush ends of their brooms built up with ice in the rapidly-falling evening temperatures, despite warming charms, and the extra weight tended to interfere with the balance while the ice caught and dragged at the winds at unexpected moments, slowing them down and making flight unpredictable and dangerous. There had been more than one extremely close call, and Hermione knew it wouldn’t be much longer before they’d have to give up anything but Floo progress if they wanted to get further north.

The days were gruelling, and if Hermione was only slightly less stubborn she knew she would have conceded long ago to riding behind one of the boys, instead of slowing everyone with her less-developed flying skills. Still, each morning saw her struggle out from under Oliver’s heavy arms, and into her warm gear, trying to be ghost-like in her silence, so as not to face any more potentially awkward alone-moments than absolutely necessary. On tiptoes, she would gather her jumper and denims, her wool tights and her favourite comfortable tee and scamper off to the next room to change.

Leaving her heavy coat until they were ready to mount, she would hurry out to set the morning fire, and start the coffee to brew. Early on, she had tried to get breakfast together, a bundle of nervous energy in the early morning silence as she worked to keep herself busy and not feel the irrational guilt for avoiding Oliver again. Viktor quickly interceded after that attempt, claiming Hermione had enough that she was responsible for, and that he had to do something to earn his keep. Frankly, Hermione felt the blackened toast and lumpy oatmeal might have been the catalyst of his decision.

Coffee, at least, was something she could handle. And if she wasn’t the one who usually preferred coffee, that was something she resolutely ignored.

Her boots crunched over what was left of the scrub grass this morning, frost making everything stiff beneath her feet. The trees glittered with crystalline beauty in the faint, early morning light, and Hermione had to pause, despite the cold, just to admire them. Somewhere off in the distance, a hart took off for the safety of the tree line, the sound of his hooves fading disturbingly quickly, leaving nothing but silence in his wake.

The chill cut her admiration short, however, and it was only the work of a few minutes to get the fire burning hotly, the crackling of the wood standing out sharply without the sounds of her campmates up and about. No birds called, no wind stirred the leaves above her head. Frankly, the silence was making her jumpy this morning, almost like the land was reaching out to her, trying to rob the air itself of noise. “Oh, honestly,” she muttered, shaking herself.

“Herm-own-ninny.”

The sound of Viktor’s halting greeting nearly caused her to jump out of her skin, and her barely-stifled shriek brought a crash and a muttered oath from the other tent. Hermione glared at him, even as she was secretly relieved that his greeting had woken Oliver, too.

But still, not a sound disturbed the world outside their camp.

"..-"

IT HAD been a quiet night, mainly because everyone was too exhausted to waste energy with conversation, though he knew he probably had a similarly chastised expression as the one he saw
looking back at him across the fire whenever he caught the other man’s eye.

There’d been a storm over Sandnessjoen, a small city on the coast of the frigid Atlantic Ocean, which had quickly turned to sleet in the upper atmosphere currently occupied by two competitive wizards and one entirely too stubborn witch.

Oliver was perfectly willing to admit they should all have their heads examined for staying up as long as they did, but somehow the normal shenanigans he’d been carrying on with Viktor had gotten out of hand, and of course his stubborn wife wouldn’t hear of descending while they were still so obviously willing to go forward.

She could have bloody well died today, and all he would have to hold to himself in comfort would be that he didn’t back down first, like he was still some empty-headed schoolboy back in second year.

Thankfully, he’d noticed the grips on Hermione’s broom icing up, noticed the tightness of her eyes that betrayed her bravado, and told Viktor he could fly off to the moon if he was of a mind, but he had a date with his wife’s coffee back in camp.

Truth be told, her coffee was always slightly burnt - though that certainly never stopped him from drinking it, and possibly he was actually beginning to develop a taste for it. But like it or no, he’d drink a gallon of it to keep her out of the sky tonight.

So dinner was a quiet affair, the stew Oliver had made being thick and nutritious, if not having anything more to recommend it, and the warmth, though welcome after the chill that had set into everyone’s bones was only encouraging the sleepy silence, when suddenly Hermione’s bushy curls shot up.

“Wait! There haven’t been any more Muggle deaths since last April, have there?” She was gripping her bowl tightly, and Oliver knew that if she were to let it go, she’d be waving her arms around in her apparent agitation.

“No, than’ goodness.”

Viktor eyed them curiously, no more sure of where Hermione’s brilliant mind had taken her than he was.

She took a deep breath, obviously trying to slow down. “Then, well, don’t you think they might have been looking for something specific?”

At their blank looks, she hurried on impatiently “If there haven’t been any more deaths, then it’s likely to suppose they found what it was they wanted.”

Oliver blinked, hoping desperately that he didn’t look as broadsided as Krum did.

Her triumphant gaze slowly turned thoughtful. “Or,” she stared hesitantly.

“What, lass?” Oliver had to clear his throat, feeling a little self-conscious when he realised how strained he sounded.

“Oh, they didn’t find what they wanted at all— and we’re now looking for something other than bodies.”

They both stared at her in fascinated horror. Slowly, reluctantly, as if pushing the words through a vat of thick Bubotuber Puss, Oliver asked the obvious.
“Either way, we’re running ou’ of time, aren’t we, Mouse?”

The new sense of urgency caught them all, and remained the unspoken drive behind their short stops and infrequent rests, and brought them well past Sandnessjoen, and only sixty or so kilometres south of Mo I Rana by the next time they set camp. By common agreement, this one was set as a more permanent settlement, with greater care taken as to the setting of camp structures, and even a more permanent sort of shelter set over their fire pit. It had taken the handful of hours before dark, and even a few more after first light to get all the wards in place; neither he nor Viktor willing to discuss why they felt the need for such heavy protection out in the middle of the brush. For a base of operations, it would serve.

After the frenzy though, found them spending a quite morning around the campfire just resting after the herculean effort it had taken all of them to get there. Hermione especially was flagging— not that the stubborn witch would admit it, and Oliver worried that she’d not tell him if her fatigue became serious. He’d tried to convince her to just stay around camp this morning, maybe checking their gear over for wear and strain, or possibly looking for anything they might have missed in the stack of notes and reports now that they were practically on top of where he’d found the body, way back in March.

Of course, she’d refused that right smartly, and eventually he’d been forced to concede, before the argument had a chance to seriously escalate.

At least Krum hadn’t tried to help her on her broom again, after Oliver made sure to explain in private later that he might have to break a few of his fingers if he ever tried it again.

Come to think on it, the bastard had done nothing but smirk at his fuming, instead of looking satisfyingly intimidated… but the truth of the matter was, he hadn’t come close to being helpful again come time for Hermione to mount.

Honestly, Oliver wasn’t usually this kind of man; threats being more Fred’s style than his, but just something about the way the Bulgarian’s dark eyes followed Hermione as she puttered, oblivious, around camp each evening just set his teeth on edge.

Of course, the fact that he’d offered his Mouse to have her marriage annulled somehow, with the assistance of some mysterious relative, might have something to do with why Oliver found himself wanting to hit the other man more times than not.

Just maybe.

And Hermione, of course, only too happy to sit and chat with her old friend each evening, patently oblivious to anything else brewing, and while Oliver always considered himself a fairly smart wizard – certainly far smarter than many thought him to be, still The Menace seemed to be able to keep up on subjects that often left Oliver’s brain hurting.

Each evening seemed to find them on a new topic, like two kindred souls, and Oliver ground his teeth just a little harder; and every night saw him slip into bed alone, though Hermione’s tactics were blatantly clear. Still, he didn’t try to circumvent her attempts to evade him. Though the wizarding tent they had was sturdy, and far more spacious than the Muggle tents he’d used with Charlie, the walls weren’t all that thick, like with much that was magic looking far more solid than they really were, and if it was to be an argument, he certainly didn’t want to give his hovering nemesis any extra ammunition.

He could be patient.
He just had to keep reminding himself of that.

Not that things weren’t right bloody awkward between him and his infuriatingly fascinating witch right now, anyways.

He wasn’t sure what had changed his resolve last night – actually, he was fairly sure his resolve hadn’t changed, so much as didn’t matter a bloody bit by the time he’d gotten back to the tent…

Krum had been asking questions around the supper fire that they all shared at Hermione’s insistence. Questions about their courtship, about the wedding— frankly about things that Oliver would rather not talk about until he had things more settled with Hermione and knew where he might stand, and interspersing the whole thing with comments about their Quidditch career, anecdotes and slightly off-colour stories that he wouldn’t have minded so much if they had come from Fred, or even George; anyone but bloody Krum.

He’d had enough, and after roughly aiming his wand at his dishes with a quick cleaning charm, he stalked off to their tent, before he’d done something to the blighter that might really get him in shite with Hermione.

He was actually a bit surprised when she followed, not ten minutes later.

“Oliver?” Her voice was tentative, not sure as to his mood, no doubt. Frankly, he wasn’t so sure of his mood, either.

He acknowledged her by raising himself from the worn bedspread, where he’d dropped, hoping to clear the red haze from his eyes, and maybe feel like someone he might even recognize again.

“Oliver, is everything… well, I mean, I know Viktor was perhaps being a bit pushy, but honestly, I think he was just trying to… well, to offer an olive branch. You two haven’t exactly had a lot of success burying your past history these last few weeks…” her voice trailed off as she met his stony stare, before rallying with determined conciliation. “Really, I’m trying to understand – to help, even. I mean, I understand that you’ve been competitive with him your whole career, and that this can’t be easy, having someone like him involved with something you’re used to being solely responsible for, but honestly, is it really that…” Her voice was rising; she stopped, took a deep breath, and tried again. “I mean, Viktor’s obviously trying, despite how familiar his comments may have seemed tonight – can’t there be some sort of middle ground, where I at least don’t have to worry if it’s going to come to blows again; about how bad the next one might be?”

“Oh, Krum’s tryin’ alright. Tell me, Hermione, has he brough’ up our Contract again? Asked you if you’re ready to chuck it all, have it annulled?” Hermione’s eyes widened, her face going absolutely white, and he winced as soon as the words left his mouth. This was definitely not the way to bring it up, even if the question had been burning him for the last few weeks, but before he could even attempt to retract, Hermione had found her voice, and was glaring at him.

“Is it so hard for you to understand that I might have friends who care about me, Oliver? That someone might actually be worried about what I want, rather than what the Ministry has decreed for me?”

“I seem t’ recall giving you the option, lass. I asked you if there was anyone yeh would prefer to me.”

“Yes, and I had so many options, too. It doesn’t matter who I allowed myself to be Contracted to, Oliver, I was still Contracted; Property.” Suddenly, the steam seemed to leave her. Her shoulders slumped under her heavy green jumper, her face looked more drawn than he’d seen it since he’d
convinced her to share a dance with him so many months ago; an event that almost seemed like it had happened to a stranger, now; a man to which everything had seemed so much more simple, if only he could just managed to befriend the feisty girl who was to become his wife.

“No one can deny that you’ve been a gentleman, Oliver, far more so than anyone would have the right to expect, but the truth is, I never really had much of a choice.” Hermione was staring at the wall now, her hands twisting in front of her absently. “If, well, if it helps, when it comes right down to it, I was… honoured to spend what choice I did have on you.”

He stared at her, not able to mentally shift gears in his present frustration and take in what she might be saying, only knowing that if she did leave, if this was all he could have of her, than she at least had to know; know what she did to him, know that they were still an option. “You know we’ll make this work, lass. You don’t have to run to Bulgaria to save yourself from me.”

Brown eyes stared at him for a long moment, looking… incredulous, maybe? But giving him absolutely no hint into what thoughts were spinning behind their depths. Whatever it was that she searched for in his expression though, she didn’t seem to find when she sighed, “Is that what this is about? Honestly? Because I very clearly recall being there when I let you give me this scar.”

Oliver just shook his head, frustrated by her sad demeanour and cryptic words. Like that answered anything between them. “Actually, I should thank Viktor. He reminded me of something I seem to have forgotten since I quit Quidditch.”

“What’s that?” She seemed almost hesitant to ask, the intensity in his narrowed eyes obviously making her feel uncomfortable.

“You have to fight for what you want. And frankly, Hermione, I’m tired of wanting you and getting nowhere.”

The words hung in the air between them, demanding acknowledgment, something from the woman who was slowly driving him crazy.

Somehow, he wasn’t surprised when she just left.

Some furious pacing and a few muttered oaths took him round and round the small room, not even noticing when he barked his shin on the way past their bed. He’d told her outright; he wanted her to stay, that he wanted her, and it hadn’t even sufficed to keep her in the room. Instead she gives him some nonsense on the Contract, like that was the only claim he had on her. He thought they’d moved beyond their rather sordid beginnings by now. He’d hoped they had.

’…when I let you give me this scar...’ What the bloody hell had she been on about?

If he was honest, though, he had been the one to bring up the Contract; taking out his jealous insecurity on her in wild accusations. He was jealous of someone for perhaps the first time in his life, and he had no idea how to deal with it; jealous of the fact that Krum could offer her something she might actually want. Merlin knew, he didn’t seem to be able to.

Frankly, he was surprised he wasn’t a purple toad by now.

‘…honoured to spend what choice I did have on you...’

Thinking back on her saying that was doing strange things to his gut; he knew Hermione better than this. She was just shy enough, just… understated enough that this was probably a rather large compliment. Where some other girl might come out and say ‘I wanted to be with you’, or some other blunt but probably equally exaggerated encouragement, Hermione told the truth, with no
embellishments to make herself more plain. He was going to have to learn to hear her more clearly, to really pay attention to what she said.

’…when I let you give me this scar…’

Blethering hell. He really hadn’t been listening, had he? Just because he hadn’t seen the letter until after the wedding, didnae mean she didn’t have it before. She could have gotten out of it then, if she’d wanted Krum’s company to his.

His pace eventually slowed to find him staring at the small vanity on her side of the room. A silver-handled hairbrush laid neatly oriented parallel to the mirror; a wedding gift from Kena, he remembered vaguely. He’d often watched as Hermione sat, seeming to find some kind of inner satisfaction in calmly taming her unruly curls each morning, when she thought he was still asleep.

Soft sounds drifted in from the front room, telling him that, despite his behaviour, Hermione was still in the tent.

She’d made the decision to stay. She was willing to try and work things out with him. _She’d let him give her her scar…_

He was listening, now.

And he couldn’t keep the goofy grin from spreading across his face.

”-..-

“What’s go’ ye so busy, Mouse?”

His voice was soft, conciliatory; probably trying to indicate that he wasn’t here to continue their fight. Her shoulders stiffened defensively anyway, though she managed to relax again immediately. She was rather proud of not having to resort to counting to ten or some other temper-controlling technique.

Of course, it might simply mean she’d decided to hex him and be done with it, she realised, when she noticed her wand was still held tightly.

Apparently, the same thought had occurred to Oliver; he tried to keep the trepidation off of his face as she turned slightly, wand still in hand.

She could see the exact moment when he realised the table she’d transfigured was now exactly where his favourite comfy chair stood not an hour ago. He was masterfully trying to mask any reaction, holding onto his politely interested expression for all he was worth. She almost smiled as he flinched when he noticed the small curl of smoke that was rising from its surface.

She didn’t answer his question, instead holding up a vial filled with some kind of silvery substance for his inspection.

“Wha’ is it?”

“I asked Percy to send us samples from everything that was found at the scene. This was in Mycroft Pafft’s bookcase.”

Oliver shivered before he could stop it, obviously remembering something unpleasant. She’d have to ask about it, later. “An’ what are ye trying to do with it?” he asked, revulsion plainly colouring his tone.
Strange.

A soft pop! from the collection of tubes and burners she’d laid out reminded her of what she’d been doing. The skullcap solution had begun to boil, twisting in faintly luminescent blue ribbons through the heated tubes of her distillery. Carefully, she added Nixie hair, counting quietly under her breath. When she got to twenty, the swirling solution turned garish orange. She sighed happily, and left it to simmer for exactly two minutes.

“I’m trying to identify it. This same substance was found in the body you found; almost like it had been fused to the blood. If we could just figure out what this is, we might know what they’re trying to do.”

“I though’ they were trying to use blood magic to get tha’ snake-nosed bastard back?”

“Mmm-hmmm,” Hermione confirmed vaguely. She slowly reached over the basin of her tube-construction, and gingerly let five drops of toad venom fall into the orange mess boiling below. When no explosion occurred, she let out a small breath in satisfaction.

“So, the silver goo is likely jus’ a by-product of whatever they’ve used t’ muck with his blood, yeah?”

She jerked up in surprise, frowning. “No, actually. See, this silver property in the blood is the result of something that’s been added. Calx of Mercury would do it, but in spell working, it’s very volatile, and would actually be counter-productive in any kind of blood or healing magic.” She glanced down, frustrated, at the orange mess bubbling in the small cauldron. “There’re a few other things that might be responsible, but I’m testing to see if mercury is at least a component.”

“What would tha’ mean, if there is mercury in it?”

“It would certainly make things much more complicated, Oliver. Someone had to have fed him this potion; someone who didn’t want him to be healed.” Someone who was close enough to get to him at the end of all the fighting; someone inside his own ranks; but she didn’t have to mention any of this – she could see the gears in Oliver’s head already turning, putting it together only slightly slower than she had.

“So, tha’ first body – they’d actually attempted to make him over as Voldemort? They weren’t just using his blood t’ try an’ heal him?”

Hermione sighed. “No, they would have had no reason to try with the blood magic, I suppose. I’m thinking that they didn’t know about this other component until their attempted resurrection blew up in their faces.”

Oliver smiled grimly, clearly not liking what he was thinking. “So, then they switched t’ kiddies, tryin’ t’ use their blood to replace Voldemorts.”

“Well, if I’m right about the mercury, then yes, that’s the most likely scenario.”

“But tha’ didnae work, either, so now what are they up to?”

“Well, it may have worked, Oliver. They’ve stopped attacking Muggle children. They could have succeeded.”

“But no’ if that sludge over there is mercury based.”

Hermione nodded, reluctantly. It was hard to think of those poor children, dying alone in some
alley, the last victims of a war that should have been over long ago.

Somehow, she was glad Harry didn’t know anything about this.

Still, she pushed that far from her mind as she turned back to her experiment. She felt, more than heard, Oliver move in close, no doubt watching her reactions, too impatient to wait for her to tell him the verdict; like a little boy. She smiled at the image, before pushing that out of her mind as well.

She wasn’t kidding when she said that Calx of Mercury was extremely volatile, and she wanted to concentrate. Her wand was a comfortingly familiar weight in her hand as she gently un-stoppered the vial Percy had sent her. With a careful swish and flick that would have made Professor Flitwick proud, she sent a tiny silver ribbon twisting through the intervening space, to join the potion base boiling gently in its basin. As it slid into the bowl ripples of deep red began radiating from the point of impact. Red was good. If she allowed the mercury (for she really was quite sure that’s what she was dealing with, despite how much she wished she was wrong) to mix with the Skullcap too quickly, the dark green waves would be the only warning she would have before the explosion. Hermione concentrated on controlling its descent whilst simultaneously casting a small ward using wandless magic.

The ribbon had almost completed its decent when a loud boom shook the tent, causing the bottles and phials on the table to rattle as they knocked against each other.

What in Merlin’s name… Hermione’s concentration wavered, right before she felt herself slam into the small island counter; a counter that she was sure had, only seconds ago, been at least ten feet behind her, and through a wide doorway between the kitchen and sitting room. That’s going to leave one heck of a bruise, was all she could think as she desperately tried to draw air into her empty lungs. The pitiful remains of her work was sending up acrid smoke, rapidly filling the small space of the front room, until Oliver’s murmured ‘Ventus’ had fresh air gusting gently through the open flap.

A muttered string of Bulgarian profanities filtered in from outside.

“Probably just trying t’ do something nasty to my broom,” Oliver muttered darkly under his breath, though he chuckled at Hermione’s reflexive, and at the moment, unconvincing scowl. “If ye like, I’ll happily go knock some sense int’ him for ye,” he offered, without any real hope.

Despite herself, Hermione found herself laughing, though it came out more like wheezing. “Depending on how I feel in the morning, I just might take you up on that, Oliver,” she allowed wryly.

Gingerly, she tried to sit up, and immediately, he was there, easing her up gently with one hand braced behind her, and one against her stomach, preventing her from going too quickly. For once, she allowed it without protest, settling against the strong support and letting Oliver do most of the work.

“Flitwick always warned us that a broken spell was an experience you never forget,” she admitted irritably. And he was right. Magic built up in a properly set spell, flowing between the caster and their object until the final words or motions, or combination thereof, released it. Any interruption of the caster’s concentration caused all the potential energy to backlash like a snapped elastic band, releasing the entirety of the summoned magic in one quick burst. Despite always believing herself to be a hands-on student, Hermione wasn’t sure she really appreciated her new understanding of why Hogwarts had such good charms in place to prevent practicing students from bringing their spells down around their ears. Her brain was still muddled by the backlash, her thoughts coming
entirely too sluggishly for her enjoyment, and frankly, her whole body hurt.

“Ye’ve go’ a cut on yer forehead, sweetheart,” Oliver’s voice was muted, though she wasn’t sure if that was just because of her slowly returning senses; or if she was just imagining the tenderness there.

Blinking, she realised that some of the haziness of her vision was due, in fact, to blood that had dripped inconveniently, and some rapid blinking was able to clear the worst of it.

“Everything still there, Mouse?”

“Hmmm?” she murmured, still trying to work out exactly what had happened. Clumsily, she struggled to get up. “I should get set up again, I need—”

Oliver’s restraining hands were gentle, but no less firm for that. “I think, lass, what ye need is bed, an’ possibly a hot bath.”

She knew there was a reason, an important reason why she had to continue. Irritably, she tried to swat his hands away. “Mercury!” She was rather proud when she managed to make her thoughts cooperate enough to get this far. “We have to figure out —”

“Lass, I donnae care if Merlin himself needed to know. But I think, if it fashes ye, that we can conclude that it is Mercury. It looked pretty volatile from where I was standing.”

“Oh, but —” but his finger was against her lips, and for some reason, this seemed to make it much more difficult to speak. And slowly, the haze was clearing, and she could see his logic. She blushed, angrily, but his eyes were catching hers, and something about the soft expression on his face was making it very difficult to be irritated. She stared helplessly as his lips curled boyishly. It really wasn’t fair when he did that.

Something seemed to distract him from their staring contest, and he reached out to touch a spot just below her shoulder.

His fingers grazed the entwined silver of her *Lukenbooth* lightly. “You still wear it.”

She looked at him, pushing away her disappointment by his obvious surprise to answer evenly, “Of course; you gave it to me.”

She wasn’t prepared for the force of his smile, and she was momentarily lost in how his lips crinkled over his teeth, how his eyes became more green than hazel when he was happy like this, and how incredibly alluring that smile was…

She resisted the urge to shake her head, and smiled tentatively back.

His fingers, which hadn’t left the brooch, now trailed up to gently caress her cheek. “I hope you know Mouse, I’ll not let you go, now.”

She could feel her heart literally stop in her chest, before resuming at a frantic pace. He was attracted to her, she knew, but this was the first indication he’d ever given that it might be more – that he might want more than merely a physical friendship. She knew his every action with her was kind and considerate, that he truly was a good man, but she was a creature of words – and she needed them from the burly highlander, because she certainly didn’t understand people, let alone boys, well enough to be sure of what was happening between them without them.

She needed to know that this was real, that there would be something there to catch her in the light
of morning, because sturdy friendship was far preferable to being trapped in a failed relationship, with no hope for divorce.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione asked, trying to steer for something safer, “Did you say something about a bath?”

THE WOODS were eerily quiet as they touched down. Come to think on it, Oliver hadn’t heard much for wildlife on any of his scouting trips with Viktor in the last two days. The thought of a storm coming through that was big enough to silence this forest was something his mind tried to shudder back from. Part of his thoughts immediately focused on what spells he could strengthen their bivouac with, and the larger part, on how to convince Hermione that they needed to stay in camp and wait it out, despite the fact that the skies were clear for miles.

The sun was still high enough in the sky to provide them with some light, even in this dense cover, but the rugged terrain provided for numerous possible covers that would have to be checked from the ground. Dark needles caught his robes as he secured his broom, and turned to reach for Hermione’s.

Of course, she’d already taken care of it and stalked off towards the rocky outcropping that made up the eastern edge of the clearing they’d chosen for landing. Lichen crowded for un-used space on every surface, some even growing on top of old growth, making the rocks look like they were covered in large paint splashes; whites and greens warring with browns and purples and rusts. The trees formed a sort of protective screen between this clearing and the open shoreline that ran not a handful of yards to their east. Half a mile away, a tributary of the river Tena, the largest of Norway’s northern rivers gurgled and splashed its rough passage in its banks.

“I think I’ve got something you should see, Oliver,” Hermione’s voice was muffled as she crouched low over something on the ground, beyond the trees. Dead leaves crunched under his boots as he made his way over, trying to peer over her shoulder, but her unruly hair nearly obscured everything.

“What is it, lass?”

“Dragon tracks,” she stated calmly, shifting to give him a clear view. Deep impressions had been pressed into the soft ground here, but the rounded, weathered edges nearly obscured the details and told him that they had been here for months. Movement somewhere beyond his left shoulder alerted him that Krum was making his way to join them.

He smiled, tiredly, his thoughts still more than half back in camp enjoying hot biscuits. “Dragons are a fairly common sight in these parts, lass. I’m afraid we don’t have the wizards we need to keep them all locked down the way we’d like, anymore.”

Hermione smiled, patiently. “Yes, but Oliver, these aren’t Norwegian Ridgebacks” When he didn’t immediately show any greater interest at this, she blew out a sharp breath. She had a smudge of dirt on her cheek, he noticed absentely. Of course, Viktor had already knelt down beside her, immediately showing concern in her discovery. Hermione beamed at him.

Oliver could feel the skin on the back of his neck and forehead tightening, and remembering last night, he took a deep breath before he said anything.

“Dragons are running loose all over the place, it seems. Look, I’ll admit, we’re a bit out of their range, but—”
“Is definitely not Welsh dragon, either,” Viktor cut in, as if he hadn’t been speaking. “Hungarian, maybe? See, here, and here?”

“That would put it thousands of kilometres out of its range, Oliver,” Hermione pointed out softly. He blew out a breath. Of course, he really should know by now to trust her instincts. But why the bloody hell did The Menace have to have learned that lesson so much better than he had? Nodding his head, trying not to simply reach over and knock Krum’s head from his shoulders and save himself future aggravation, he spoke slowly, trying to share her enthusiasm by offering, “When Charlie and I were up here the first time, we were tracking a dragon…”

“Yes, I remember you mentioning that,” Hermione replied vaguely, busy taking measurements and discussing toe spacing with her good friend. Oliver would bet his best broom that Krum knew no more about dragon tracks than his fat Uncle Auolstine. He tried counting to ten. Then he clenched his teeth together for good measure to make sure he didn’t yell as he spoke. “Yes, but we were tracking a great big ruddy Hungarian Horntail at the time.”

Krum jerked up in surprise, scowling. “You might haff mentioned that before, English.”

“What! Me? You might try keeping —”

Hermione stood with a glare, effectively ending their argument before it could really gain steam. When she was sure they were going to be quiet, she turned her back on Viktor, much to Oliver’s private enjoyment, despite his suspicion that she was only marginally less annoyed with him right now, and asked in a carefully even tone, “Did Charlie have any ideas as to what might drag a Horntail so far?”

“The beastie wa’ barking. We had t’ track it without magic for weeks in weather far worse than this. He had no idea what would ha’ driven it so far, but it didnae stop for anything—”

“Without magic?” she asked intently.

Oliver had to suppress a small smile. She was wonderfully sexy when she was intent on the trail of something, not that that was probably something he should be appreciating at the moment. “It was nursing- apparently that makes them a might tetchy were magic’s concerned.”

“You track dragon across Norway and you didn’t think this important thing?”

Oliver glared. “I track a lot of things. No, this one didn’t seem all that more important than any other. Besides, there really is such a thing as coincidence in this world. It’s no’ so surprisin’ that I would find the body in the same sort of vicinity as the tracks, as that’s the thing I was following at the bloody time. That doesnae make them related.” He was just being irritable with that last bit, because he sure as hell knew that Hermione thought they were related.

“But it would take an awfully tempting distraction to draw a nursing dragon so far out of its range; a broken spell would do it.” Hermione’s voice was soft, but carried sharp and crystal clear in the cold air between them.

A broken spell. The image of Hermione, crumpled halfway across the room flashed before his eyes; that had been a fairly small incantation. Dear Merlin. Some nutter wa’ out here mucking with spells that made big enough booms to draw dragons thousands of kilometres…

“You’re going home t’ Marr,” he growled to her before he could stop and perhaps think of a better
way of approaching the sudden protective urge that momentarily took over his thinking.

“Excuse me?” she asked, quietly. If she had been angry, he thought he could have handled it better; but her whole frame was shaking, trying vainly to suppress her hurt at his sudden dismissal.

“Hermione, I—” But he didn’t get any farther than that, before she turned on her heel, and made for her broom.

He’d taken no more than two steps in her direction, when he felt a restraining hand on his shoulder. A very strong restraining hand.

“Let her go, Vood. Camp is not far from here; she needs time to cool down. And so do you, before you make another stupid suggestion.”

There was probably some wisdom in that, he thought, despite his surprise that it was coming from Viktor Krum, of all people. Let her go back to camp, have a few minutes to rant and throw things, before he attempted to reason with her. Of course, any possibility of getting her to go home was shot to bollocks now, he realised. Instead, he’d have to focus on damage control; get her to at least agree to some kind of safety measures. Ideas blossomed and spun, running useless circles behind his thoughts as he stood, still watching as the dark speck that Hermione made against the late afternoon sky faded from sight.

He was therefore startled when a harsh voice broke him out of his revive.

“Serves you right, Vood. Herm-own-ninny. She does not realise it yet, but she does.”

This is a rather surreal conversation. “Loves me so much she’d like t’ take her wand to me at the moment, no doubt,” Oliver dismissed, remembering his behaviour last evening, uncomfortably.

Strangely, he felt better; his worst nightmare was coming true – that Hermione would get dragged into something far too dangerous because of her unflagging loyalty. But, in the midst of it all, he was beginning to truly understand her, and maybe some of his hope was justified. And, she had to have expected his reaction.

She couldn’t be too mad, right?

Unconsciously, he sped up, making quick work of the remaining distance to the brooms and rapidly checking his gear before throwing a leg over to mount. No sense giving her too long to chew on things.

“Oh, and Vood?”

Oliver turned, somewhat impatiently, to where Krum stood a few feet away, looking slightly awkward on the ground as he always did, but no less serious in this moment for that.

“You’re a very lucky man— and if you don't realise your good luck, I vill realise it for you.”

Oliver nodded once, before lifting off.

"...

Overgrown bully… how dare he try to shut her out. Her hands were actually shaking by the time she landed, making getting out of her harness take three times as long. In the end, she simply used her wand with an irritated huff, satisfied to have shown the assortment of leather straps just who they were messing with. “I’ve faced Voldemort, after all,” she seethed at them, “And battled Death
Eaters! And not to forget one very large and irritable Devil’s Snare.” She jammed her wand into her back pocket, for once unmindful of Professor Moody’s long ago advice involving lost buttocks, and stalked into camp proper. “I do not need to be left behind like unwanted baggage – while he goes and tries to play hero!” Without even bothering to pull out her wand, she had the fire lit with one angry glare. “He can’t be – I mean, he couldn’t—” but he could, of course.

He could get hurt.

Her steps slowed. Damn it.

She didn’t want to face this yet; she’d rather stay safely angry. It was a lot less complicated, and didn’t promise quite so much heartache at the end. Warily, she scrubbed her face with one hand, not entirely surprised to find it damp with frustrated tears.

He could never come home.

Home to a rather haphazard cottage in the Highlands; home to a lonely village in Marr; home to Brighde Wood’s rather suggestive nosiness.

Home to her.

The thought of never being able to finish working things out with him, of nurturing what they’d started to build… Of never finding out what it would feel like to be really held in his strong arms, or of finding out if their children might someday have his kind eyes, or unmanageable Quidditch obsession…. Never getting to love him.

Her aimless pacing changed direction, and by the time she’d reached their bed, she was practically running. She could feel a choked sob crawling up the back of her throat, but she ruthlessly clamped her teeth around her lip against it. In one lunge, she’d scooped up his pillow and crushed it to her, burying her nose as deep as she could, letting his scent permeate her lungs. She needed something of him right then, needed to believe that everything was somehow going to be okay.

Hermione wasn’t sure how long she stood there – it couldn’t have been long; not nearly long enough, when she heard the step behind her, and a voice quietly drawl;

“Hello, Mudblood.”

She turned slowly, finding herself every bit as angry as before her pillow therapy.

There, in all his arrogance, stood Draco Malfoy, though for once, there was no evidence of his trademark smirk on his carefully controlled features. His grip on his wand was deceptively lazy, and Hermione had no doubt that it would come whipping up like a striking cobra if she made one wrong move. Beside him, close to the floor was the glowing blue nimbus of a Patronous, and curiosity momentarily got the better of her when Hermione felt her eyes slide down to get a better look at it.

Anger was quickly replaced by shock, and she could feel her heart stutter and pick up a little faster.

Watching alertly from Draco’s side, the pointed furry face almost seemed to leer at her, revealing needle sharp teeth. She’d only seen the creature once before, but it was enough to recognise it for what it was –

It was a marten.
Chapter 17: (Most Definitely Not) Uncle Tom’s Cabin

Consequentially Yours

or

A Gentleman's Duty

Chapter Seventeen – (Most Definitely Not) Uncle Tom’s Cabin

".."

THE CAMP was a mess. There was still a few smoking holes, for shite’s sake. How could he have possibly been so far behind her as to miss this?

This wasnae happening. There was no way that this could possibly be happening. She’d just been in the clearing. She’d been hurt by his thoughtless comment, and he was here to make it up to her, possibly by the strategic use of kisses - though whether more for him or for her, he wasn’t admitting - until she was no longer angry and at least put her wand down.

She was most definitely not missing.

Slowly, Oliver picked his way past the charred remains of their tent flap; inside was even worse. Last night, Hermione had playfully transfigured his chair back, trying to hold her laughter at his expression. He’d tried, honestly tried not to show his horror at the holes where the stuffing now poked out, victims of the broken spell’s backlash and one arm was distinctly lower than its mate. She’d teasingly promised to fix it when they got back this evening. It was now standing there, like the last survivor in a pub brawl. The room was trashed; a mess of splinters and stuffing and broken dishes. Even his pillow, which seemed to have been blasted to pieces, lay scattered among the wreckage. Though that part he was fairly certain had probably been Hermione venting her frustrations at him before the apparent disaster struck.

What the bloody shite had happened?

Her broom was still in camp, the leather harness a mass of twisted and charred straps beside it. Vaguely, he could hear rushing in his ears, the muted sound of voices.

It wasn’t until he felt the restraining hand on his wand that he realised it was his own voice he was hearing, yelling guttural profanities as he added to the general destruction. This was not going to help his Mouse; and there was no way in Merlin’s knickers that she was going to be captive a moment longer than his wand found its mark.

Warily, Krum watched him pull himself together, one painstaking muscle at a time. When he seemed sure Oliver wasn’t going to start Cursing again, he began methodically sorting through the wreckage. Without a word, Oliver started beside him, shifting debris in hopes of finding some answers.

The camp fire was small that night, and somehow seemed to lack any real warmth with only the two of them to share it. They had searched for something, anything to give them some kind of clue
as to what to do next. Oliver honestly hadn’t realised how much he’d come to depend on Hermione until she was no longer here to help him make sense of things.

How much he’d come to depend on her smile, just to make the world seem right.

It took them over an hour to sort through the debris, using every charm and spell Oliver could think of to try and wrangle any more information out of what was left, but they hadn’t turned up anything worth the effort. Several Apparation points were detectable, though it’s not like the bloody things came with names, was it? As near as they could tell, this fiasco had started in the tent. Hermione seemed to have been taken down quickly after the fight moved out into the camp proper. Somehow, Oliver was not surprised that she’d fought like a wee hellcat – if only it had been enough. They’d managed to uncover some of her notes, left intact in the wreckage, but nothing that looked like it had been dropped deliberately, no note saying ‘They’re taking me to Gregory bloody Goyle’s place’, or something similarly helpful.

He sighed, looking around their stripped-down camp. “Assuming it’s the same one who’s setting off spells for the dragons, we should probably continue the way we were heading.” He knew it was the best course, the only course until they had something new to go on, but it still felt like he was quitting on Hermione, carrying forward as if she weren’t his primary concern.

Viktor Accio’d out a map from his tent, and moved closer to Oliver to unroll it on a rock. While he quietly took a moment to find the right section, Oliver tried very hard to ignore it was where Hermione usually sat for meals.

“The body wa’ in a rain-wash, right abou’ here,” Oliver indicated the spot with a jabbing finger, a bit north of their current camp.

Krum barely gave it a glance, black eyes focusing instead on tracing river ways and elevation lines. After a moment, grunted, and looked up. “Ve should start around here, maybe,” he said, pointing at a spot further North.

“Look, ye bloody bastard,” Oliver heard himself exploding, “I’m no’ so in love wit’ ye that I want t’ spend the rest of the winter freezing my knackers off wit’ you up here! I found the body south of there, why the name of Merlin’s balls do ye want to go tha’ far North?”

“You found body here, yes?” Viktor asked, ignoring his outburst as he indicated the area Oliver had pointed out. “Here, look at map.” Carefully, Krum began tracing the spidery trace of a river, just east of the rain-wash. “See? This is tributary of River Torne, which flows North-South, at this point.”

Oliver glared at him, understanding immediately what the bugger was getting at – and he was right, damn it. The Nifflers probably found it by the banks, and dragged it the quarter mile from the river. He let out the breath he’d been holding. “Fine. The body washes south, than what we want to look for is likely further along the river.”

Leaning further over the map, Oliver pointed to what appeared to be a largish town on the fjord twisted coastline. “We probably wan’ t’ head into,” he peered a little closer, “Narvik first. It looks like it migh’ be the best place for supplies”

Krum just stared at him for a moment, his expression carefully neutral. “There is no Vizarding settlements there, no Vizarding settlements anywhere this far north. They must get supplies from else place.”

“I still think this place is worth a look,” Oliver insisted stubbornly.
“Fine, ve check Narvik.”

Oliver glared at him, fully aware he was being patronised. “Just saying Narvik – I mean, where?”

Viktor snorted in disgust.

“What? It’s a city,” Oliver said, as if this should be obvious. “Well, town. You can’t just walk in and hope to find a something we don’t even know what we’re looking for.”

“Not so smart, English. This is North Country, not holiday in Soho. If ve find anything besides deer around Narvik, vill probably be vot ve look for.”

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HER HEAD hurt. And her mouth tasted like something that might have been scrapped from the bottom of a first year’s cauldron. For a moment, Hermione allowed herself the luxury of leaving her eyes closed, and letting herself ignore the likely consequences awaiting her once someone was aware that she was awake.

She wondered idly what Crookshanks was doing – if he was behaving for Adrianne, looking out for her the same way he seemed to look out for his mistress. She missed his somewhat squashed face, and the way he would occasionally insert it between the covers to press his cold nose against the small of Oliver’s back early in the morning, causing the highlander to jump, and often fall out of bed in the process. Crookshanks always took advantage of his absence to insinuate himself between them, purring loudly as he kneaded Hermione’s side. With a few grumbles, Oliver would usually leave him there, and they would all drift back off to sleep. Somehow, by the time she woke up a second time, Crookshanks had usually managed to curl into the large man’s side, and she would watch the two of them sleep cuddled together.

It was with this somewhat playful image that Hermione braced herself to face her captors.

It was, therefore, a bit of a disappointment to find herself completely alone when she defiantly opened her eyes, ready to brace them.

She was lying across a rather comfortable lounge. It was covered in deep green fabric of incredible softness – she actually had to resist the urge to rub her cheek against it a few times, and snuggle in deeper. With a sigh, she pushed herself up, noticing that at least they hadn’t bound her, though a quick inventory told her that she no longer had her wand.

Too much to hope for, really. But, one can always hope for dumb captors. Malfoy was most definitely not dumb, though. Arrogant, snivelling and spoilt, but not dumb. She hoped, wherever he was, his head hurt as much as hers did right now.

It had been rather petty, she supposed, but as soon as she’d heard the soft pops of Apparition outside the tent last night, she’d known she wasn’t going to escape, so she’d settled for getting in as many pot shots at Draco as possible before they had a chance to restrain her. From what she rather foggily remembered, she’d done a fair job.

It had taken her less than a second to dismiss her shock and to force her body into some kind of action. Seeing the marten definitely took her by surprise. She put no stock in divinations, of course, no matter how old the method or how un-involved Professor Trelawney was, but it still was something so completely unexpected that she’d been momentarily unable to process anything else.

Her surprise worked in her favour; noticing her distraction, Malfoy had let his eyes flicker down, just for a second, to see what it was that was confusing her. A second was all she needed. Springing
forward, she managed to cock her fist and smash in into his nose with a satisfying crack! Small pops and sizzles from outside the tent told her that reinforcements were waiting outside, so instead of diving for the front flap, she dove for the kitchen island. Ugly green pottery shards rained down, littering her hair with a fine coating of sharp, glittering powder. Twisting frantically for her wand, still thankfully in her back pocket, she slammed her back against the cupboards as she heard another explosion above her. She winced for her countertop.

The sound of Draco’s breathing told her he was only a few feet away, and there had been at least three Apparitions, that she had heard, outside the tent. But if they wanted her dead, Malfoy could have done that already, instead of pausing to speak with her, so she could only hope they wanted her alive.

Of course, that didn’t mean she’d go down without a fight. The other Wizards were outside; Malfoy, on the other hand, was conveniently right here. It would make whatever they wanted with her a little more palatable if she knew he was suffering just as much as she was.

Sweat was dripping down her neck, making the place between her shoulder blades itch uncomfortably. Dozens of little pottery nicks were tingling and stinging as she curled, preparing to roll. “Confringo!” she grunted, knowing her wild aim couldn’t be helped, but hoping she got lucky, even as she heard an answering “Confundus!” from a few feet away.

She slammed into the small wall framing the doorway, almost knocking the breath out of her lungs. Trying to huddle into the half-metre of cover it provided, she silently cursed her fondness for biscuits before bed as her hips seemed just a little too wide to skootch comfortably. Another curse winged by her, sending down a small rain of plaster from the edge of the doorframe above her, and she tried to scoot just a little closer to the wall.

“"I really hope Oliver didn’t borrow this tent from someone,” she muttered, before taking a deep breath and sending back an answering hex. Faintly, she registered the sound of the coffee table exploding and Malfoy’s muffled curse, and she grinned, grimly. Crouching down, Hermione tried to peer past the doorframe and get a brief look at her opponent, before launching herself across the two metres to the opposite wall. “Episphaira!”

From the corner of her eyes, she caught the vague image of a large, Muggle glove, the kind used for fisticuffs, firmly catching Malfoy under the chin, before she skidded forcefully into the opposite wall. He was caught so by surprise, it didn’t look like he’d get his wand up in time.

“Nidorate!” The force of his anger was clearly behind it, as the wall actually bowed before snapping back and completely disintegrating, and, feeling that perhaps capture might be a virtue at this point, Hermione had flung herself through what was left of her kitchen, towards the tent flap.

The rest of the room she now found herself in was as nice as the lounge. A thick brick fireplace blazed merrily in one corner, making the room pleasantly warm. Several gilt frames adorned the walls, and even one ancient-looking tapestry, hanging by what turned out to be the door to the loo. The carpeting was thick, and would probably be wonderful to wiggle one’s toes in. A large sleigh bed rested against the far wall, dividing the room in two. All in all, it could have been much worse.

Everything, of course, was decorated in shades of green. For one moment, Hermione had the urge to stick her tongue out at it. Instead, she busied herself by examining the fireplace, but of course, it wasn’t connected to the Floo network. Just an ordinary Muggle fire, no matter how much Hermione strained her woefully limited wandless magic to will it otherwise. Pushing back on her heels, she blew a frustrated breath. No good there, then. The wide wooden mantle was ornately carved with tiny roses, all intricately intertwined in a repeating pattern of some kind. Frankly, staring at it too long was making her eyes cross, but still, she pushed up into an awkward sort of
half-crouch, and gave some of them a perfunctory try, looking for any that could be pulled or prodded into revealing some hidden secret.

“Cleaning the fireplace, Granger?”

She really wished it wasn’t some sort of evil villain code, to always enter a room so silently so as to cause one, who, in the interests of escaping, was leaning under the heavy mantle, to jerk up suddenly; and of course, bang their head on said mantle hard enough to knock themselves silly.

Across the room, Draco sniggered.

“Was there something particular that you wanted, Malfoy, or were you just here to be your irritating self?” Thankfully, the stars were starting to clear from Hermione’s head, and she was able to force herself to stand properly, if a little wobbly, and feel less at a disadvantage.

Malfoy looked as awful as she felt. A beautiful bruise coloured the right side of his jaw a livid purple, while dark circles hung under both eyes, probably due to her fist knocking him square in the nose during those first few confused seconds in the tent. All in all, it made the ache in her head much more bearable, and she made no attempt to hide her satisfied smirk.

“Bad day?” she offered sweetly.

For a moment, she thought he might hex her. For a moment, she was pretty sure he thought he might, too. But slowly, his hand relaxed on his wand, and he let out a steady breath. “Just stay over there, if you don’t mind, Granger,” he said in an impressively even voice.

“Why am I here, Malfoy?” Under the circumstances, she was rather pleased of the asperity in her tone.

He sighed, and rolled his eyes. “Look, can we just try not to kill each other for the next little while, Mudblood?”

“Oh, yes, because that’s exactly the way to gain my cooperation!” she glared back.

“Fine. Granger. Can we try to pretend we don’t loath each other for now? Just for something different?”

Hermione continued to glare. “Why am I here?” she gritted out, slowly.

Looking away, over towards the mantle, Draco finally spoke, “Believe it or not, we’re just keeping you out of trouble,” he said tiredly, and moved to throw himself into a rather formal looking chair beside him. He regarded her, for a moment, legs dangling over the arm, focusing on her with an intensity she found more intimidating than any of his other odd behaviour.

Considering for just a moment, she settled to the floor in front of the hearth, and waited, though she was sure to keep her expression as sceptical as she felt.

“Frankly, your husband is being a royal ass, bringing you straight to them - practically had you wrapped in a giant bow,” he remarked, almost absently, watching as he twirled his wand between his long fingers.

“Who are they?”

His head snapped up at this. “Oh, come on, Granger, don’t give me that. You and that over-grown gorilla you call a husband have been working on this for a quite a few months now, haven’t you?”
How did Malfoy know what she’d been doing…? “Ethan Daniels,” she guessed, resignedly.

“One of ours,” he confirmed. “An old family…”

“Friend?” Hermione guessed when he paused. She couldn’t quite keep the condescension from her voice at the thought of the Malfoys having anything even resembling a friend.

“Debtor, actually.” He smirked, obviously enjoying her irritation.

Hermione started at him for a long moment. “So, you’re trying to tell me that you’ve suddenly taken an interest in – what? My health?”

Malfoy just rolled his eyes, as if it were she who were being obtuse. “Granger, you could take up Blast-Ended Skrewt farming for all I’m going to lift a finger for you, but unfortunately for everyone involved, you’re just a little too unwholesomely smart to be left lying around. You don’t really think Greg took a sudden liking to your buck teeth, do you?”

“And suddenly I remember why I punched your lights out in third year.”

“Funny, Granger. Funny. I’ll just leave you to your Cinderella impression, then, shall I?”

“A Muggle reference? You’re slipping.”

The blond merely rolled his eyes. “Everyone knows it’s a wizarding story, Granger.”

Damn it if the little prick didn’t actually make a move to leave. Glaring, Hermione seethed, “Wait. What is it you wanted, Malfoy?”

“That’s better,” he settled back in his chair, sighing obnoxiously in exaggerated comfort. “Now, what I need to know is, how much does that Puff-head Wood, know?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to be more specific,” Hermione grinned sweetly.

So fast, Hermione wasn’t even sure she saw him move, Draco’s legs dropped from the arm, and he sat poised, looking like he were ready to launch himself at her at a moment’s notice. “Look, this is not a negotiation here – We hold all the fucking cards. This doesn’t have to be unpleasant; tell me what we want to know, and rest assured most of it is easily verifiable facts, so don’t bother screwing with me, and this won’t have to get uncivilized.”

She stared at him, incredulous, before glaring around her prison, pointedly. “And this is your definition of civility?”

“Try for one minute not to play the goody-goodly little martyr, will you? You’re surrounded; held captive by superior forces, if you’d like. Would it make you feel better if I were to stick flaming wand wood under your fingernails? Or perhaps deigned not to feed you? Or worse, fed you that overgrown oaf’s rock cakes, maybe? You have very little options, mud- Granger.”

The stubborn set of her jaw must have been enough to let him know how effective Hermione considered his threats.

He sighed, suddenly looking weary and much … older than the bratty boy she’d left back in Hogwarts just three months ago. “Don’t do this, Granger. The effects of Veritasium are not pleasant, especially when it’s not brewed by a master, and frankly, we don’t have one on hand at the moment. Besides, there’s no real reason for you to go through that. Answer some questions; a simple spell will tell us if you’re telling the truth or not, and frankly there’s no Gryffindor glory
being lost by giving in on this, because in the end, you’d rather I win than they do.”

This whole conversation was taking on an eerie, almost surreal quality, as the known quantity in
the situation, namely one Slytherin Prince, was subtly becoming someone else before her eyes. It
was like finding out that Professor Trelawney was actually Professor McGonagal in disguise.
Frankly, it was unnerving in the extreme. “Why do you care? I would have thought you’d prefer
the hard way, or even the Veritasium. Why…”

Steel grey eyes were lost in thought, looking in the flames as they flared in a sudden draft. “I don’t
like you, Mudblood. And frankly, what you stand for makes me ill, but there are some kinds of
filth that I don’t want any part of.”

His gaze, when he turned it back to hers, was cold and expressionless once more. “So, Hermione,
what’s it going to be?”

Hermione took a deep breath, before cautiously asking, “Who, exactly, are they?”

“Krum!” Oliver was shouting to be heard over the force of the wind. “Krum!” he tried again when
his companion failed to respond; the howling gale conveniently covered whether or not he was
simply being ignored. The wind gusted for the hundredth time, sending icy sleet against the
exposed parts of his skin. It’d been half an hour since he last felt his fingers, though he was fairly
sure the grip he had on his broom might only be broken by a spell – or crashing into the side of a
mountain.

And there were mountains all around them; channelling the wind into a shrieking, driving thing
intent on knocking them out of the air. Frankly, with the sky one uniform shade of grey, he was no
longer sure if they were even travelling in the right direction, and he didn’t dare take his eyes off
his malevolent surroundings long enough to check the Point Me charm mounted on the front of his
broom.

The storm had hit, just as Oliver had predicted it would, and they were unable to outrace it as
they’d hoped, leaving both of them as sitting ducks at the mercy of the elements. They should have
taken cover when it first became obvious that they’d never out run it. Instead, with one determined
look, they’d both urged their broomsticks higher, hoping to get above the worst of it. It worked for
a while, but the higher they went, the colder it became, until eventually they were driven back into
the full fury between the mountains.

Thoughts of Hermione; of where she was, what was being done to her, had him driving headlong
into the wind behind Krum, trusting the other man to guide him in the fierce Northern storm, but
this was rapidly turning into suicide. He had no time to be nursing broken bones or exposure. No
time to go back and find a Mediwitch if the inevitable crash happened.

“Krum!” he bellowed, forcing himself to drive his broom closer, grimly enduring the sting as the
sleet and snow drove into him that much faster, and with greater force. This time, the Bulgarian
slowed and turned, the stubborn set to his eyes telling Oliver he’d been deliberately ignoring him
earlier. In truth, Oliver felt the same need to fly faster, farther, to find Hermione before those
bastards had a chance to hurt her in any way.

But not like this. Driving headlong into a howling gale wasnae going to save anyone, and he made
sure the stern expression he sent back to Krum conveyed that. Briefly, Viktor’s features tightened,
and he turned to glare out at the swirling wall of white ahead of them, as if wanting to hex the
storm itself into submission. For a long moment, they both hovered there, surrounded by grey rock
and biting sleet, and Oliver knew he’d have to jinx the other man if he stubbornly refused to take shelter.

Seconds ticked by, and slowly feeling was beginning to return to Oliver’s fingers as he continued to hover with his back to the wind, tiny pinpricks that screamed and burned in protest, and finally Viktor turned, pointing his broom towards the valley floor.

Oliver let out a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding.

The farther down they got into the valley, the darker it became as light was lost to the snow’s obstruction and the looming walls of the mountains surrounding them. There was no finesse to their descent whatsoever, and at times it was more like falling as they tumbled about roughly in the wind’s grip. Down here the winds were even stronger, and there were a few times when Oliver thought he or Viktor really were going to be smeared across the rock walls.

Growing determinedly, right from the mountain side, a tree loomed suddenly out of the grey uniformity, branches reaching from the bare rock like icy caltrops. Too late to swerve; but trying anyway, Viktor crashed into it sideways and his furious curses were loud enough to be heard even above the wind.

Each time the large man tried to extract himself, new branches would grab him, entangling his robe and broom even further.

“Sheeban po dyavolite!” he grunted, caught in at least three places. Oliver couldn’t help himself, and roared with laughter, even as he tried to pry his frozen hands off his broom to find his wand and help.

“‘Mayka sheebanyak!’”

The tree, of course, chose that moment to give way, and with a loud crack! Viktor and his broom tumbled gracelessly the rest of the way to the ground. Fortunately, that was only twenty feet or so, and when Oliver landed in the deep snow, the amount of cursing still coming from the prone Bulgarian convinced him he wasn’t seriously hurt.

He glared sourly up at Oliver when he came into his view. “You know English, you could try giving me hand, instead of laughing like hyena.”

Instead, Oliver made sure to kick some more snow at him on the way by.

By the time Krum had dug himself out, and found his broom, Oliver had already used his wand to make a wall out of the snow to enclose their campsite and block the wind. Of course, that did nothing to stop the wind coming over the top, and Krum glowered at him, daring him to object when he flourished his wand, and with a snarled “Coerceo!” had them completely enclosed. Still muttering darkly, he stomped off.

In truth, Oliver hadn’t been planning on adding to their structure any more than necessary, knowing that there were still hostile wizards and witches in the area and not wanting to stand out from the landscape any more than they had to, but he let it go. The storm provided more than enough cover for the moment, and any wizard who was daft enough to scout in it was welcome to join them for sausages and tea. Besides, the sudden silence was a relief.

Viktor had a nice blaze going by the time Oliver was finished setting a few heating charms and wards, and the tents were up. Firelight danced off the white walls and ceiling, making weird shadows in the reflected light, and Oliver could clearly see the twigs still stuck in the other man’s
“Ye done acting like a little girl, then?” he asked, teasing.

Krum just shot him a tired look. “Shouldn’t you be doing useful thing, like make dinner?”

Oliver smirked, but moved to get a few potatoes peeling themselves, and some water on to boil. “If you’re not too afraid it’ll bite yeh, you could try helping.”

Viktor grunted, but got up and joined him.

They worked in silence, the wind muted behind their walls and allowing time for Oliver to think clearly for the first time in hours. It was easy to ignore his companion, who seemed to be equally lost in thought, and instead he tried to focus on their next move. Unfortunately, easy as it was to ignore the things around him, it was not so easy to ignore the thoughts of Hermione that kept intruding. He’d been pushing the desperate feeling away, locking it in a box and trying not to listen to it rattle. If he allowed himself to think of her abduction that hollow feeling that sucked at his insides, making him crazy with worry and fear, would take over. He needed to keep a clear head, to think for both of them right now. She needed him to stay focused.

Hermione had been right all along – obviously the key to what was happening was out here in this semi-frozen wasteland, and they’d obviously not been careful enough to avoid detection. Why had they simply taken Hermione and left Krum and himself alone? It didn’t make any sense, unless they truly didn’t believe they were any threat. But again, why leave two witnesses behind, who could just as easily raise an alarm back in England? Two lone Wizards might not be much of a threat, but they could easily come back with more. So why take Hermione, and betray the fact that they knew they were there?

“Vood,”

“Mmmm?” he acknowledged, still worrying the dichotomy of their enemies’ motives.

“Why did you Contract Herm-own-ninny?”

Startled, he jerked up to stare at the other man’s face in the firelight, but saw nothing but open curiosity. “A truce then?” Oliver asked sardonically, leaning back a little to grab another sausage to spear on his stick.

Viktor shrugged, a small smile tugging his features. “Nothing better to do during all this.”

Oliver stared into the fire for a moment, considering. With a shrug, he answered. “Honestly, Fred Weasley talked me into it. Seemed t’ think Hermione might get herself into trouble wit’ the wrong sort rather quickly. Turned out he was right.”

“Fred is one who works wit Dragons, yes?”

“One of the twins, actually.”

Viktor shrugged once, not really caring, before getting back on point. “He vas right? Vot happened?”

“There was a duel,” he said shortly, not really wanting to think about those few dark hours when he thought it was possible he might lose.

“She told me about that part. She seemed to think you vere very braffe.” Krum seemed reluctant to
add that last part, but for some reason seemed to feel compelled into honesty.

Oliver snorted, dismissively. “I’m sure she’s thought me an arse many more times than she has ever though’ me brave.”

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The wind continued to hammer on their walls, and the fire crackled almost defiantly in its wake. Oliver smiled at his fanciful thoughts.

“How did you fight for her? You could haff been killed trying to win a vitch you neffer wanted.”

“It was the righ’ thing tae do.”

Viktor snorted. “I thought ve vere being honest. There must haff been some other vay, but you didn’t try to find other vay, did you?”

Oliver thought carefully before trying to answer. “I’d had a chance tae get t’ know her a bit by then,” he stopped, remembering their argument in the Library about the merits of fighting for creatures who didn’t even want freedom, just because it was the right thing to do. “She’s stubborn and prickly and no’ the easiest lass tae get t’ know, but she’s fiery, and has far more passion than one little body should be able to hold.”

It was Viktor’s turn to stare out at the fire. “You loff her.”

His voice was uneven, but Oliver pretended not to notice. “She’s easy to care about,” he responded, not exactly sure why he was so needled.

Viktor merely looked at him, his black eyes shadowed by his heavy brows, and making him look almost intimidating in the strange light. After a moment, he turned back to studying his hands were they hung clasped loosely between his knees. “Ve should get help. Maybe your Ministry –”

“No, we shouldn’t,” Oliver surprised even himself with the force of his contradiction, and Krum just turned to stare, one eyebrow raised questioningly, but Oliver wasn’t paying any attention for the moment. He was far too busy working through his sudden conviction that going to the Ministry right now would be the wrong thing to do. “Hermione said tha’ someone was playing silly buggers with the others – tha’ someone tried to prevent anyone from bringing Voldemort back by feeding him some kind of silver potion.”

The Bulgarian looked positively floored, but Oliver was following his sudden epiphany, and didn’t dare stop to let Krum catch up. “If there’s someone else mucking about up here, some small group of saboteurs, that might explain why they just took Hermione, and left us alone. I mean, there can’t have been that many of them.”

“But if they don’t vant the others to raise Voldemort, then vhy take Herm-own-ninny? She is best chance we haff.”

Oliver threw his sausage stick at the fire with some force. “I donnae know, damnit,” he growled. He stared out at the flames as they licked around the new fuel, fists clenching and unclenching as he tried to fight the urge to throw something else in after his stick. “All I do know is tha’ if they took Hermione, then the other rutting bastards don’ know we’re out here – an’ if we bring a great big mucking group up to search blindly, we’re goin’ to lose tha’ little advantage real quick.”

Krum blew out a breath, before speaking. “So, ve are stuck between two groups who vont to keep dead var going?”

“That’s about the shape of it.”
“And ve are outnumbered?”

“By quite a bit, I’d imagine.”

He nodded. “Vell, then it is good thing ve played Quidditch.”

Oliver threw back his head and laughed. It felt good to laugh right now, but it was still short lived. With a solid heave, he pushed himself up from the ground. “I’m goin’ tae bed. You can try yer Wronski Feint on them in the morning, if yeh like.”

Krum snorted once, his shoulders shuddering under the noise. “Go to sleep Vood. It may not help your beauty, but there’s some hope you’ll be less grumpy.”

He was still sitting by the fire when Oliver finished cleaning up and when to his tent.

“Vood,” he called after him, quietly mocking. “I’m offended I didn’t get invite to vedding.”

-..-

For days she saw no one but Maisy, the house elf who brought her meals and set the fires for her. In the interests of keeping what little company she had, Hermione had eventually stopped trying to talk Maisy into revolting against her foul master. She hadn’t seen Malfoy since she’d been brought here, though she wasn’t sure if her new isolation was somehow intended to bore her into being more talkative, or if he’d simply forgotten about her for now.

Frankly, she didn’t put much faith in either option. Which left her with one other thought.

*What if Malfoy had done this on his own?*

If this was some kind of personal power game, and he’d acted as some kind of maverick, and Lucius didn’t know what his son was up to? He could simply be away, covering his tracks and taking care of his responsibilities to his father.

But then, why did Draco want her? Why would he be acting separately from his father and his designs? Thousands of questions turned over and over in her mind, keeping her far too busy to notice any boredom. None of it made any sense. And of course, when she wasn’t worrying about her captor’s plans for her, she was thinking about Oliver – and Viktor. She had to presume, to keep her sanity, that nothing had happened to either of them. There were only three others in Draco’s little raiding party – and with two of them tied up in keeping Hermione under control, that would only leave even numbers to take the two men on. Surely, Malfoy hadn’t wanted to get into such an uncertain fight? No, that wasn’t something Malfoy would do; she’d just have to believe that they had what they wanted. She allowed herself to push it from her mind.

What was Oliver doing now? What went through his head when he came back to find her gone; the campsite destroyed? *How can he find me when even I have no idea where they’ve taken me?* If it were Harry or Ron, she knew they’d get help; start combing the country side for her, and making a lot of noise in the process. She had to hope that Oliver would think things through a little more, first. As near as she could tell, Malfoy was a completely separate consideration from the group who’d likely dumped the body. Several times, he’d referred to ‘they’, obviously not wanting ‘them’ to succeed. Just because Malfoy had known where they were, didn’t mean that other group knew, and if Oliver went floundering around with a search party, it wouldn’t stay that way for very long. Even the most dim of Dark Wizards would notice that much magical activity going on in such a remote area.

*But what then?* She was giving herself a headache, trying to imagine what he might do, but at least
it was something to keep her occupied while her captors ignored her. Frankly, she thought she’d settle for being ignored; she still wasn’t sure what to make of Malfoy, of the fact that she hadn’t been harmed yet, or of his apparent motives. He was right, Veritasium would give them all the answers he wanted, and she knew she wouldn’t be able to stop herself from spilling anything they wanted to know.

Instead, she settled into what was fast becoming her favourite green lounge, in front of a perfect fire. Maisy, once Hermione had stopped frightening her with talk of cloths, proved to be hopelessly eager to please, and had turned out to be most adept at acquiring books for Hermione’s reading pleasure. She felt so useful sitting and reading her afternoons away, she realised ruefully, that she might slip into hibernation at any moment. Still, that didn’t stop her from pulling the heavy blanket just a little tighter as she settled into Édmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

“Where did that disgusting Muggle novel come from?”

She refused to show her surprise at his entrance, and made a point of finishing her page before turning and glowering sourly at his presence. “What do you want, Malfoy?”

“Some light entertainment,” he smirked, moving over to the same chair as last time and making sure she was aware of the wand in his hand.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest and huffed. “I have no intention of being entertaining for the likes of you.”

“And yet you manage it so nicely,” he told her sweetly, one corner of his smirk trying to twist into a real smile.

If anything, Hermione tightened her crossed arms even closer to her body, and glared.

“Come on, Granger. I’m not any happier to be here than you are to see me, but because I don’t want to extend your stay any longer than absolutely necessary, I’m actually trying to make headway towards solving our mutual problems, before you fucking take root here. As it is, I’m going to have to have the place fumigated, just to get your smell out of the upholstery. Any longer, and I might seriously have to consider burning the place to the ground.”

“With your House Elf still in it, I suppose,” she retorted, scathingly.

Malfoy had the affrontery to just shrug in the face of her, admittedly impotent, anger. “It is rather disgustingly friendly with you at the moment, it would seem,” he acknowledged suggestively.

He’s only doing it to get a rise out of you, Hermione. Do not go trying to give him a broken nose to match his bruised jaw. Just because he’s rich does not mean he’s going to throw away a perfectly good servant who can’t fight back. It was still several moments before she picked up her book, pointedly signalling the end to her side of the conversation.

“All right, knock it off Granger. Unless you want to stay here?”

“I can’t imagine anything you can possibly say that will induce me to help you in any way.” Of course, she was just staring at the page. It was impossible to concentrate on the words in his rather odious presence.

Finally, his amused veneer seemed to crack. “I could make you a widow,” he gritted out past clenched teeth.

“I think you already tried that, Malfoy. As I recall, Oliver beat you with a rather large stick,” she
was pushing her luck, she knew, making him angry, and probably pushing him towards those methods he’d hinted at in their first meeting, but honestly, she couldn’t imagine any circumstances in which she could willingly help Malfoy. Besides, an angry Malfoy was one who would hopefully be prone to making mistakes, and she’d get every advantage she could for Oliver right now.

Her little altercation with Malfoy left both of them feeling unsatisfied, she suspected, but it did lead to one bright point for Hermione. As she watched him leave, she noticed that he didn’t bother to lock the door behind him in any way. Feeling stupid for not even checking once in the last few days, she’d sulked in her nest on the lounger for a full half hour before groaning in frustration, and pushing all the blankets to the floor. She stormed over to the door, still embarrassed that she had overlooked the fact that she apparently had more freedom than she’d thought for the last three days.

The handle turned easily in her hands, and she took a deep breath before easing it open, straining to hear evidence of anyone beyond. No one disturbed the quiet outside her room as Hermione slipped past the door. The hallway she found herself in was just as lavish as the room she’d been given. Rich oak wood wainscoting gleamed along the walls and from the framed portraits lining them, and Hermione allowed her fingers to run along the smooth wood as she crept cautiously over to inspect them. Of course, she didn’t recognise any of the pictures inhabitants, and none of them seemed to share the Malfoy blond hair, or sharp nose, and most of them took one look at her, and began whispering disdainfully to their neighbours. Hermione rolled her eyes. Figures someone like Malfoy would only have Purebloods up on his walls. But it also warned her that even though Malfoy was nowhere in sight, she was still being watched carefully. Somehow, the opulence of her surroundings just made her flesh creep a little bit; trying to cover a horror with a nice veneer didn’t make it any more palatable, and somehow she thought she preferred Grimauld Place; at least its vileness was out in the open.

Forty minutes of determined exploration turned up nothing. The wards surrounding the, well, what appeared from the inside at least, the cottage, made it quite impossible for her to leave without her captors assistance, and of course her wand was nowhere to be found – not that she hadn’t spent considerable time trying to find it. Two more bedrooms turned up on her search, along with a library - or perhaps a parlour with a lot of books, she wasn’t really sure; a kitchen and a locked and warded room that she was guessing was possibly some kind of a study. And of course everywhere, the colour green and furnishings that just screamed of wealth. Malfoy must have left after speaking with her, because she hadn’t run into a single soul during her inspection, besides two elderly House Elves in the kitchen. Even Maisy must be accompanying her master. None of the fireplaces seemed to be connected to the Floo, all the windows were actually spelled onto the walls, similar to the ceiling at Hogwarts, and didn’t really open up to the outside, and the only door wouldn’t open and actually threatened her when she tried. Hermione wasn’t sure if she’d ever get used to inanimate objects being so cheeky.

Dejected, she allowed her legs to fold, dropping herself onto the chesterfield just inside the parlour. Of all the rooms in the house, this was the only one she found inviting. For some reason, a different hand had held sway here and the overall effect was warmer, though somehow minimalist, with less thought to impressing a visitor’s lowliness on them and more to serenity. Somehow, Hermione found it soothing.

Though it was getting dark, she didn’t bother getting up to light one of the many lamps, instead allowing her head to fall onto the back of the chesterfield. The material felt nice against her neck, no hint of the lumpiness that was admittedly present in the ones in Gryffindor Tower, and for a moment felt almost like she was committing a betrayal to be thinking anything of Malfoy’s better than Gryffindor House had had. She still hadn’t found any hint of where she was; each window she’d found had shown a different scene – even those right beside each other. Most had been
trained on different landscapes; a rainforest, complete with colourful macaws and blooming orchids in every tree, what appeared to be a vineyard covering acres of rolling hills, a veritable maze of red rock stretching up from a barren valley floor. A few seemed to be used for other purposes, and one was even trained on the Atrium of the Ministry itself. Absolutely nothing she could even begin to deduce her location from. Instead, she just allowed her body to sink into the cushions, arms flopped loosely at her sides and tried not to think.

She’d almost surrendered to her Zen-like state when the faint pop of someone arriving permeated her muddled non-thoughts.

“…still don’t see why we’ve let it go this long,” someone was saying.

Hermione didn’t dare move, even to press herself further into the shadows, afraid of making a sound. When the second voice spoke, she was glad the room was as dark as it was, leaving her virtually invisible from the hall.

“You’re impatient, Edgecomb. Let them stumble around a bit longer – they might even discover something useful…” She’d bet Crookshanks and Oliver’s favourite broom that this unmistakably smooth voice belonged to none other than Lucius Malfoy. “Besides, steps have already been taken to ensure we have an insurance policy.”

*Oh goody, Daddy’s home.*

The voices were fading as Malfoy and his guest made their way further into the house. She sat there for a full three minutes before daring to move. Blowing out the breath she’d been holding, Hermione crept down the hall, thankful that this part of the house was filled with maps, instead of alarm-raising portraits. The door to the room she’d assumed to be a study was closed, but light spilt from under the door, belying their presence. Carefully, she pressed herself to the smooth wood, listening intently.

“…sure it’s wise, allowing them to get so close?”

“Second thoughts, Lucien? I’m surprised at you. You’re daughter’s not nearly so hesitant.”

The second man grunted, obviously not pleased, but not willing to pursue it further. The sound of a decanter being opened signalled a momentary halt in the conversation as Hermione could hear the soft splashes of two glasses being filled.

“I brought the device, though I don’t know why you’d want it,” Edgecomb was saying, and Hermione heard the sound of something heavy being set down.

“Call it forward planning. Somehow, I don’t think I want that just sitting around in that rabble’s rather unstable hands.”

“Just think – with this research, we can identify Mudblood children before they become a nuisance. We could, if we chose, prevent any of them from polluting our world ever again. That would put an end to Weasley’s Marriage Laws in a hurry, wouldn’t it?”

“And yet you still aim so low, Lucien. Rid ourselves of the Mudbloods? That was always his work - surely you didn’t suddenly become a believer?”

“That old claptrap? Not likely.”

“Besides, they fulfil a useful role, a few of them are even worth their magic. Blood will always count, and as long as they stay in their place, they’re welcome to their menial existence. I certainly
have no interest in making sure the sewers flow and the commoners stick to the laws.”

“I’m not really sure where yourloyalties lie, Malfoy.”

“I’m not really sure where yours do, either, Edgecomb, and right now I don’t really care.”

A drawer was closed with a faint bang!, and Lucius continued, “Weasley still has a man out in the field, and he’s getting very close to finding our friends. We’ll have to monitor events carefully; they have the child, and despite the fact that the man is an unwashed Shaman,” and the sneer was unmistakable in his voice when he said the word Shaman, “his research is very convincing.”

“You want to be in place to snivel before the Dark Lord when that rabble managed to wake him up?”

His voice was positively threatening, and Hermione could just imagine Lucius’s cold smile when he responded, “I’ll point out, Lucien, that I haven’t spent the last few years rotting in some shack on the tundra. We survive. We always survive, and we conquer. You would do well to remember that, when your spine starts to soften.”

“And Weasley’s Marriage Law?”

“What of it?”

“It’s… foul, that’s what.”

“The Under-Secretary won’t try to keep it up. It will fall to public opinion before the year’s out.”

“He certainly seems to be trying to shore it up – even used that publicity stunt with Oliver Wood.”

“Of course he did. He’s waiting for a reaction from the IWC.”

The second man, Edgecombe, was silent for a moment. “He’s aware of the Austrian’s influence, then?”

“Despite his unfortunate background, the Under-Secretary is a very shrewd man.”

“The Austrians will not be happy to have their connection to us known so widely, Malfoy.”

“You really are a simple creature, aren’t you? So he is aware of some irregularities in the IWC - Britain is in no position to challenge anyone. The Under-Secretary will be taken care of, when it becomes necessary.”

The clink of a glass being set down was the only sound before the soft noise of Apparation. Unfortunately, Hermione didn’t have time to scramble for cover before the door was thrown open.

“Why, Ms. Wood – I trust you heard something to interest you?”
Chapter 18: He Who Should Have Remained Bloody Well Unborn

Chapter Notes

Would you believe my laptop died again, almost as soon as I finished posting my last post? *headdesk*

I'm now fighting for time on my husband's computer as we contemplate sending my laptop to electronics heaven, so I only get to actually write/beta/post/surf when he's not home and I am, as he needs his computer for work most of the rest of the time. Needless to say, this has slowed things down incredibly :-p

Without further ado, here's the new chapter:

Consequentially Yours

or

A Gentleman's Duty

Chapter Eighteen – He Who Should Have Remained Bloody Well Unborn

Squaring her shoulders, Hermione followed Lucius Malfoy into the previously warded room. From the corners of her eyes, she saw that it was exactly the type of place one would expect of a family as rich as the Malfoys; the gleam on the polished brass desk blotter alone was making her eyes water. Lucius gracefully slid into the chair behind the massive desk - clearly meant to leave anyone on the other side of it with a feeling of supplicating God, motioning as he did so towards the portable bar to his right.

“Help yourself, please.” His voice was almost melodious, and coldly courteous.

Instead, Hermione took the opportunity to let her eyes wander the room, examining the empty portrait behind the desk, the now expected fireplace against the opposite wall as the bar. A large leather journal took up space on the desk’s surface, seemingly tossed there haphazardly. A silver glint on the book shelf behind her drew her attention, and she found herself moving before she’d even realised it.

“I can only marvel at your manners, Ms. Wood. Clearly, Gryffindor House has done you some service,” Lucius commented blandly. He leaned back in his chair and steeped his fingers,
watching her as she poked around his office.

It was much more difficult to be flippant with Draco Malfoy’s father than it was to talk back to the Ferret himself, only because she wasn’t at all sure he wouldn’t simply *Crucio* her, without even losing the somewhat bored expression on his face. So although Hermione’s tongue was allowing itself to be intimidated, Hermione herself continued pointedly examining the bookshelf.

The object that had caught her attention was laid out with some obvious care. The metal was bright, even in the relative shadow of the shelves, its construction so intriguing that Hermione actually put her hands behind her back to remind herself that it was quite possibly very dangerous to touch. From her periphery, she could see Lucius watching her with a disturbingly curious expression, seemingly strangely intent on what she would make of her examination. The head of the device was solid, about the size of large egg turned sideways. From either side, came twisted twin tendrils, which encased some kind of receptacle or phial held firmly beneath the head. For a full five minutes, she examined it, trying to decipher the purpose of this unusual construction, and trying to identify the traces of spells that were placed on it.

“A gift from my compatriot,” he murmured, seemingly unwilling to disturb her examination.

“Do you mind,” she asked distractedly, gesturing to a quill lying on the desk.

It was handed to her without a word, and she carefully used it to shift the device to better see the head. Manoeuvring it gently, until the previously shadowed parts came into view, she gasped and dropped the quill with revulsion.

At the front end, slightly lower than the natural centre, were two small needle-sharp prongs, spaced about three centimetres apart. They were still stained with the blood of their last victim.

“You’re helping them,” she accused.

“Of course we are, Ms. Wood. What they are studying is powerful magic, after all, and very useful,” Lucius Malfoy responded, sounding both bored and strangely triumphant, as if her identification of the object pleased him.

And to think she’d begun to believe Draco, even just a little bit; he was still the same, always willing to sell himself to come out on top.

Without another word, she turned and left the study, feeling the man’s mocking gaze on her the whole way down the hall, but he let her go without a word.

Her prison was pleasant, more along the lines of a gilded cage. House Elves tried to see to her every need, not that she would let them; though she took great satisfaction in the fact that she had finally convinced them to allow her to come into the kitchen to make her own tea when she wished it. She tried to ignore their uncomfortable expressions when she was there, and their nervous whispering, as though they might be punished for even allowing such an unnatural thing to occur. It wasn’t long before she’d had enough, and began poking about the house once more.

It was only the work of a couple hours to gather up what she’d need, and that afternoon found her planted firmly in the kitchen, earnestly trying to foist any of her purloined treasures to the room’s inhabitants.

The rolling-eye stares and the careful way the three creatures hugged the outer walls would have made her feel guilty if she wasn’t doing this for their own good. For a straight hour she tried to impress them, to cajole them – anything to convince them that their freedom was a wondrous
gift, and that self-liberation was a perfectly acceptable route from an intolerable situation. She treated it rather like a filibuster, figuring if she never gave them a chance to object, she might make some progress out of sheer determination, but the hands that held out the stolen socks were regarded like live snakes, and the poor brainwashed creatures were actually afraid to approach her, in case she might unexpectedly lunge at them and force freedom on them, she supposed.

The fact that it was nearing the supper hour and that she had completely halted its production was a smugly observed fact. Really, she felt rather ridiculous with her theatrics, but the fact that she was furthering her cause in the home of one of the worst offenders, while at the same time managing to make rather a nuisance of herself only added to her satisfaction.

Of course, all good things had to come to an end, and eventually Lucius Malfoy himself was forced to come and discover why his guests’ dinner wasn’t appearing, which of course resulted in her being warded out of the kitchen, but all in all, she felt she had made valuable progress towards equality. And she had managed to secret several of the socks in some of the cupboards, in case some of the creatures were simply too shy to accept such a radical change in fortune in front of the others.

And it rather worked nicely to test her earlier theory – mad as he was, Lucius only glared. He had no intention of killing her, or even seriously harming her - at the moment, anyway.

Which, unfortunately must mean that she was still useful to him alive, in some fashion; likely, he was hedging his bets on the likely victor.

Still, seeing Lucius Malfoy so irritated was something she took with her to her dreams that night.

She’d begun going through all the books and papers she could find in the parlour and bedrooms, trying to pass the time more than out of any real belief that there was anything to find, so it was with considerable surprise that when she pulled the drawers in the small stationary desk in the front room that she found something not quite right. She had to shimmy the second drawer just to get it out, and when she did she noticed the drawer was heavier than it should be, considering all it held was a few quills and a half-empty pot of emerald ink. Curious excitement made her hands shake a little as she carefully removed the contents and contemplated the innocuous drawer for a moment. She then picked it up and shook the drawer slowly, next to her ear; faintly, she could hear a shuffling sound, as something shifted around inside. Setting it back down on the desk, she began running her fingers lightly over the sides and underneath, looking for any irregularity that might signal a mechanism for opening it. This turned up nothing, and she scowled at it, before picking it up again. She began examining the inside, studying closely the patterned paper that covered the bottom but still found nothing, thought she reached inside and ran her fingers over it anyway.

That’s when she found it. At first, she wasn’t sure what she was feeling, it was so tiny. There was a small pin-hole in the front left corner, and when she pulled her hand away and tried to look at it, she found it completely disappeared in the pattern of the paper. Thoughtfully, she reached into her hair and removed one of her pins, and popped the rounded plastic cover off one of the ends. What she was left with was a sharp, narrow flat end that she carefully manoeuvred into the tiny notch completely blind, feeling it out with her fingertips.

It took two whole minutes of patient fiddling before she final felt it slide in place, and she was able to use it as a lever. The whole bottom proved to be only a thin veneer when it came up, and underneath it had concealed a stack of parchment. Her heart picked up its beat a little when she riffled through them, and noted that they seemed to be formula notes, similar to ones she would make when trying to work out a spell or potion variation.

And they were very complicated.
She took her time to put everything back the way she’d found it, and concealed the parchment in her robes as she hurried back to her room. She leaned against the closed door for a moment, wondering how angry the Malfoy’s would be if they discovered her spying, and determined to read the papers and slip them back into their hiding place before they had a chance to be missed. She summoned Maisy, ostensibly for a cup of tea, she questioned her in a carefully offhand way as to whether her master was expected back this evening. When the little elf shook her head, large ears flapping noisily in the quiet room, Hermione felt herself relax.

With a steaming cup of earl grey, she settled in for a night of interesting reading.

- - -

Somehow, the morning light didn’t make anything look any better to Oliver’s eyes. Their temporary shelter had held up well, of course, but another morning of waking up without even the residual warmth of Hermione left on his sheets had put him in a distinctly foul mood. The truce of the night before wasn’t mentioned in the light of day, and the gruel-like stuff that Viktor served up seemed to have more lumps than gruel, at least in Oliver’s bowl, but he didn’t really taste it anyway, so didn’t bother to do anything other than glare.

They were up in the air before the sun had even broken over the tops of the mountains between which they’d sheltered, but at least the air wasn’t as cold this morning, and the covering of snow that had yet to be broken and spoilt was somehow hopeful. Viktor had kept to his insistence that they only do a fly-by of Narvik on their way through the mountains, seeming confident that what they sought would be further north yet. It was irritating to know that Krum was only forcing the issue because Oliver had insisted a city would be a logical place to look. As they flew nearer, Oliver began to see what the Menace had meant.

They were starting to fly over signs of habitation now, a nice break from all the barren landscape. Small settlements and Sami camps gave way eventually to a larger town, built on the head of a fjord. Lots of activity surrounded the few ships in harbour, lending credence to the town’s position as the last major port north. He had to smile when he saw the rail system, stretching far and away into the eastern horizon. It was something he recognised and understood, unlike the bulk what he saw so far below.

But for all this, it was still tiny. Less than 20,000, at the very least. An anthill completely bent on the prosaic pursuits of surviving in such a harsh clime.

And just to add insult to injury, there were several deer just outside the city limits.

Still, they were here and strengthening their *Imprudious* charms, he and Krum swooped in low, using small charms designed to detect Wizard activity or presence in strange places, but both were unsurprised when they met up an hour later with no results. The temperature near the ground was a much more pleasant 5i0;C, and Oliver was sorry to have to face the higher altitudes again.

Clearly, Narvik offered nothing to the passing witch or wizard.

The sheltering mountains that surrounded the town stole the daylight quickly, and they picked up hurriedly, trying to push on before the darkness stole anymore time from them.

Krum had begun to question getting help again, pointing out that it was now three days since Hermione’s disappearance without any sign of where she’d been taken turning up. Oliver remained adamant; more bodies stumbling about out here meant more risk - he didn’t want to make her
captors feel so desperate as to have to hurt her. Krum was right, though. Time was slipping through his fingers, and every day – every hour that Hermione was gone was time he could spend with this thoughts of the horrible things could be happening to her.

He could never get over how he almost missed it.

They were flying over forest now, one of the few they had passed this last half-day as they approached the invisible tree line, and all Oliver was really thinking about at that moment was wrapping his hands around the neck of whatever witch or wizard had taken Hermione. They were following the tributary again, the river valley cutting a wide swath through the landscape like an ancient battle scar. The sun had begun its descent, leaving the whole scene in the blue haze of twilight, and Oliver knew they’d have to land soon.

Maybe it was something about the light, so like the false dawn light of his dream, or maybe something had actually been churning around in his subconscious since they got here, but he nearly fell off his broom when he realised what he was seeing.

“Krum!” he bellowed, still staring rather wide-eyed with shock.

“You haff seen something?” Viktor came looping back with a graceful barrel roll, a move that would have caused some serious ribbing if it weren’t for Oliver’s distraction.

“I’ve seen this place before,” he admitted slowly.

Viktor turned on his broom as they hovered, staring out over the twisted conifer forest below.

“Where haff you seen it?” he asked, dubiously.

“After I dealt wit’ the body tha’ we found – a week later I had a vision of it being dumped,” Oliver could hear the strain in his voice, and knew Krum could as well.

“Vision? From Spell Imprinting? I haff heard of this, maybe one, two times most. Is not common.”

Oliver shuddered lightly. “Believe me, there’s no mistaking it; an’ it was happening righ’ here.”

Viktor examined the terrain below them, thoughtfully. “So they vere using river to get rid of body?” To be fair, Oliver wasn’t completely sure he didn’t imagine the smug tone of the question, but he glared sourly nonetheless.

It was dark under the trees when they landed, but a muttered Lumos provided enough light to examine the undergrowth. Oliver headed immediately for the river bank, carefully picking his way over the snow-encrusted underbrush. The crackling of dry leaves and twigs was loud in the close air under the trees, and he couldn’t help but wince when he set off a small slide of pebbles with an incautiously placed foot. Slowly, he scoured the rocks, bare of snow here because the sun’s rays weren’t blocked by dense trees, bent almost double.

When he found it, he felt a small bubble of tension in his chest release itself. Dry, almost invisible if it weren’t for the glittering quality in the light of his wand, dark silver stains could be picked up amongst the rocky crags. He let out a breath, and stared in silence for a good ten minutes, trying to sort out his jumbled thoughts.

They’d been here. The bloody body had been dumped here, and dragged south by the river a good few hundred kilometres and picked up by a pack of Nifflers – an’ if the Wizards in his vision had found the thing nearly as heavy as he had with all that silver goo inside, he’d bet Hermione’s ugly cat that they didn’t drag it far.
Magical experimentation took control, space, and equipment, which meant it didn’t just happen to occur here on some chance encounter and the buggers had moved on – with nothing to drive them out, they were still near, and he and Viktor had better quietly find a foxhole, quick.

It was the work of a moment to signal Krum, using some Quidditch hand signs they were both familiar with, and Viktor was backing out of the trees, heading towards the bank as quietly as his awkward gait would allow. When Oliver shone his glowing wand over his find, Krum knelt precariously to run his fingers over the long-dried stains in horrified wonder, and Oliver had to remember he’d never actually seen the silver blood before. Frankly, the sight of it still turned Oliver’s stomach. He only allowed his companion a brief moment to gawk, before extinguishing his light. Deep twilight had reached the river valley by now, hiding their take-off in the relative safety of the shadows. A sliver of a moon was rising high, its light diffused somewhat in the uncertain light of dusk, but was still enough for them to find a sheltered camp a safer distance away.

This time, of course, they used little magic, and Oliver was mildly pleased to see Viktor struggle to do things without his wand. A bit petty, but Oliver was beginning to accept that he was like that sometimes.

He didn’t like the idea of being out here blind, knowing that they were sharing the area with a bunch of nutters but not knowing just where they were squatting. It made every shadow more sinister, because of what it could be hiding. Almost a year he’d been working on this, and yet here at the end there was no anticipation, only impatience to be done and on to the far more important task of finding Hermione. He almost felt sorry for the bastards, knowing they’d bear the brunt of his frustration that he should have to waste precious time on them. He knew, though, that they were his best shot at finding Hermione’s captors. One of their number was a saboteur, and that one was the most likely to have the information Oliver needed. And if he had to squeeze it out of them, one by one with his bare hands …

Well, he was a patient man.

Further scouting of the area by broomstick was out of the question - just increasing the risk of exposing themselves to their quarry. They discussed the problem, a bit awkward at being forced together like this, until Viktor shot up.

“Vait – I might haff something – an old trick ve used in orphanage,” he said, urgently fumbling through his pack. “Eba!” he cursed, tossing it back to the ground and turning to Oliver. “Do you haff Herm-own-ninny’s things? She must haff had hair pin.”

Baffled, Oliver awkwardly pawed through Hermione’s few possessions, before handing over his prize. Deftly, the Bulgarian unfolded the metal until he had a long straight wire before twisting it with practiced fingers. When he was finished, he held his creation out for Oliver’s inspection; cradled on his rough palm was a small figure that faintly resembled a bee, wings outstretched as if about to take flight.

“Alrigh’ I can see why you might not have been so popular wit’ the girls in your orphanage, but I’m no’ so sure how this is supposed to help.”

Without bothering to answer, Viktor closed his hand around the bee and brought it to his lips. Speaking between the space left by his curled thumb and first finger, he began whispering to it in a guttural undertone. For several moments, the only sound between them was the popping of the damp wood in the campfire, and sounds of Viktor’s spell, until with a jerking motion, he lifted his hand and flung the bee into the air. It took flight immediately, hovering almost silently above them.
“Now, hand me bowl,” he commanded.

Without hesitation, Oliver tossed the remnants of tonight’s soup over his shoulder and passed over his bowl.

“I hope that wasn’t comment on my cooking,” Viktor muttered.

A quick Scourgify had the last of Oliver’s dinner gone. Viktor then cleared a relatively flat space on the ground, set the bowl down carefully, nudging it until it was precisely placed, before muttering a quick incantation that had water gently streaming from the tip of his poised wand, filling the bowl in moments.

“Now, ve are ready,” he said with satisfaction. With a wave of his wand, he had the bee zooming off, the tiny buzz of his wings lost almost before he even cleared the campfire.

Muttering inaudibly and glaring with heavy concentration, Viktor bent over the bowl. An image had appeared, fuzzy and multiplied somewhat confusingly, as if looking through multiple eyes at once, and with a start Oliver realised he was looking through the bee’s eyes. A sharp word from Viktor caused the image to clear, though it remained restricted by the small confines of the bowl.

Oliver looked over at the quiet man, eyes dancing with mirth. “Now I see exactly why ye were nae so popular with the girls.”

Viktor looked up with a sly smirk, before directing his attention back to his spell.

“Can yeh direct it?” Oliver asked as the scrying showed the bee passing through the forest they had come through earlier.

Tiny beads of sweat were beginning to appear on the other man’s face, and he grunted “Yes, but if you don’t mind, is not easy. Is not very smart.”

Despite this warning, Oliver found himself curling his fists, trying to physically contain his impatience and not bombard Krum with demands. Seconds ticked by, agonisingly slow. He rocked on his heels a bit, watching as the image changed from forest to plain, from river bank to valley before finally alighting on something useful.

“There!” Oliver’s hand shot out, grabbing Viktor’s shoulder.

“I see it,” he gritted, trying to hold the image steady.

Their little spy had found a small shack standing all alone on a barren meadow. Frankly, from the looks of it, Oliver thought it must be a Wizard dwelling, because there was no way something that dilapidated could stand up to even a gentle breeze without magic holding it up.

“Can ye get it inside, do yeh think?” Oliver found himself whispering, despite the fact that the shack in question was at least a kilometre away.

The image tilted as their bee angled, landing on seemingly the only window. Moonlight was filtering down, making it impossible to look through the dirty pane of glass into the room beyond. Instead, Oliver found they were staring at the bee’s reflection as it crawled across the only egress. The image began shaking as it found a notch out of the glass through which it wriggled inside. Oliver held his breath, digging his fingers into the dirt at his feet, anticipating what they would be facing tomorrow.

Compound eyes apparently took efficient advantage of what little light was available, and it was
only a beat or two before they had a clear view of the interior. Of course, it was larger on the inside than the outside would suggest, being spacious enough for a small cult and their disgusting Snake Lord with loads of room to spare. Heavy furniture was strewn about the space, its placement rather haphazard to Oliver’s eyes. Viktor held the bee quiet on the window sill while they took all this in, before directing it further.

There was dust on everything.

Oliver let out a breath in a large gust, and viciously bit the inside of his check, before he howled in rage. It was obvious no one had been there for months.

Where the blethering hell was he supposed to look now?

It was the work of only a few moments to pack what remained of their camp. They would have to check the shack for themselves before they left, of course, but there was nothing to find and they both knew it. They were both quiet as they flew, dejection and frustration radiating in waves Oliver was sure would be noticed by anyone visiting even the moon. He’d kept it together for Hermione’s sake this far – he knew needed to function, to think coolly and without blowing things up with his wand, and so he’d kept a tight lid on his feelings. He could feel his control cracking, desperation and fury twisting inside him until he thought he might choke on the bile in his stomach. He was almost relieved when they touched down again – even concentrating on finding nothing beat being left to his own thoughts of inadequacy right now.

One thing the little trick with the bee hadn’t been able to convey was the damp mustiness of the place. They shuddered carefully away from actually touching anything more than necessary; the smell alone more than convincing that it might be more than their lives were worth. Ten minutes was more than enough to determine there was nothing greater to discover. Surprisingly, the only things not crumbling and decrepit about the place were its Anti-Muggle charms.

“Vot now?” Viktor asked once they were outside, taking deep breaths to try and clear the stench of rotting rags and mould from his nose.

Oliver didn’t answer right away. Instead, he turned, staring blindly out at the little basin in which the place was situated in. There was nothing fucking here; no Death Eaters, and no hints to tell him where to find Hermione. Staying out here was just ambling blindly, hoping the bastards eventually got bored and returned her of their own volition – but leaving just felt wrong, like he was abandoning her. The hollowness in his chest began to throb again, threatening his hard-fought composure. He blew out a deep breath. There was really only one avenue left to them.

“We go back to London,” he said heavily, not turning. *I’m no’ leaving you, Mouse,* he promised silently. *I’ll be back.*

Grimly, he forced himself into action, grabbing his broom and his pack in one arm as he strode back towards the mouldering cabin, not bothering to check if the Menace followed him.

He had a small trick up his sleeve, having no interest in slogging back to Britain by broomstick. Using a potion he’d had Hermione brew for him before they left – an emergency escape plan, of sorts, Oliver temporarily connected the crumbling fireplace to the Floo network. He’d been thinking of her when he’d asked her to do it – in case something had happened that he couldn’t fix in the field, he’d wanted a way to get Hermione to a Healer if the worst happened.

This really hadn’t been what he’d had in mind at the time, frankly.

His flat in London was just as horrible as he’d remembered – even more so now, because he’d
never remembered thinking it was so empty feeling before. Viktor just looked around with a faint look of disgust.

“What?” Oliver grunted, defensively.

Krum just stared back incredulously.

While Oliver could admit that the furniture was somewhat …lumpy, and the paint might be peeling in places… but it was a bachelor’s home, and he’d be willing to bet that if one were to take a close look at Krum’s flat, it wouldn’t stand up so well either.

Besides, its no’ like he would ever have considered bringing Hermione here.

A shower and a decent meal later, and Oliver felt like a new man. He made sure to point Viktor in the direction of his tiny bath when he was done, and took advantage of his time alone to Floo Percy. He appreciated his old mate putting aside being his boss to commiserate as his friend when he roughly told him of what had happened in Norway. For a few precious moments, he was able to hand the concerns of keeping things together over to Percy, and just vent his frustrations, free from prying Bulgarian eyes. For a few precious moments, he was able to just be a concerned husband.

But he still tried to block out the persistent voice that asked, An’ how well did ye love her then, as her concerned husband?

When Fred and George showed up, not half an hour later, with a bottle of Odgen’s, Oliver didn’t even question it, not realising until that moment just how much he appreciated seeing his friends.

Two hours and some Floo’d in pub food later, and Fred was lounging on a cushion, claiming the floor was by far safer, because you didn’t have to fall as far. “’s’a empty hole? Really?”

“No’ a blasted thin’ left. They mu’ have cleaned out long ago.”

In a corner, Viktor nodded emphatically. “Only thing not falling apart vere the Anti-Muggle charms.”

“Who invited the Bulgarian again?” George asked Fred, not turning and continuing to stare at Viktor rather suspiciously.

“Relax Gred – he’s no’ go’ any bees wi’ him this time.” Oliver hadn’t really taken that much to drink, preferring to keep a clear head, but what alcohol hadn’t done, apparently exhaustion made up for.

Fred up from his cup, to peer blearily at the man in question. “Nope. No bees,” he announced, closing the matter. The room was quiet for a moment, before Fred suddenly began picking up the conversation again, as though there had been no interruption. “Why would a place that disgusting have Anti-Muggle charms? I mean – I mean, you have to have something worth protecting, before you bother to protect it, am I right?” As he was speaking, he’d begun waving his arms around, only barely missing taking out Viktor’s nose with his cup

“There vas nothing vorth protecting in that hoffel,” Viktor grunted, sourly keeping a close eye on Fred in case he tried to assault him again.

“If I were to want to protect something, I might try to disguise it with something disgusting, that no one would want to look at too closely.” George’s voice was quiet as he mulled the problem over. “I mean, think on it Forge – we use fairly disgusting things all the time, to disguise our honest intentions. Puking Pastilles, while vile, rather effectively prevent anyone from questioning you too
closely on your very noble desire for freedom.”

Fred looked at his twin in awe. “A whole house? Why don’t you come up with these ideas when we’re in the workshop?”

Oliver smiled tiredly. “It’s a good though’, guys, but I’m telling you there wa’ no illusion in place, no concealed doors, no hidden treasures of any kind – it wa’ jus’ a rotting shack.”

“But what if what it’s concealing isn’t in the shack?”

Oliver dropped his hand from where he’d been rubbing tiredly at his face, and stared at George, intently. “Not in the place?” he prompted carefully.

“There was a fireplace, wasn’t there?” George pointed out. At Oliver’s nod, he elaborated, “You average evil genius is going to need a very secure place to do their nefarious things. What could be more secure than having the only entrance out in the middle of nowhere, the only fireplace connected to yours protected by a smelly, rubbish looking place that might fall down on you?”

“So your basic Death Eater has to know to Floo to that specific fireplace, then Floo from there to where ever it is they hang out,” Fred finished.

George picked up again, “Now, they’ll probably have wards up on their actual lair, something all their henchmen have been given a pass to; some kind of counter-spell, or something.”

Viktor winced. “Ve neffer effen checked if awful fire vas already connected to Floo.”

Oliver was just staring at the pranksters. “The world really does look different from yer eyes, doesnae it?” he marvelled.

They plotted well into the night, discussing and discarding plans of assault, until they finally had a working plan of attack. Oliver contacted Percy, asking for assistance, and the wee hours of the morning saw Hermes arrive at Oliver’s window, fastidiously trying to keep his feathers from touching any surface more than absolutely necessary. Once his burden was removed, he took off in a burst of speed, not even pausing for the handful of owl treats Oliver had offered him. “Prissy bird,” he muttered to himself as he shuffled back to the other room with his prize.

With a flick of his wrist, he bounced the small package off of Fred’s forehead, causing him to wake with a jump. “Whaa…?” he managed, looking around, while surreptitiously trying to wipe the drool from his mouth.

“Perce came through for us. You and George can take that with you an’ see what you can come up with.”

Fred unwrapped the parchment carefully. “Where did you guys find this, again?” he asked around a rather large yawn.

“It was on the body of a thief. Hermione was sure that they used that to get him by all the wards.”

“It’s as good a place as any to start. If they’d already come up with someway to get their own people past wards, it makes sense they’d use it again, instead of re-inventing the self-spelling wand.” George ambled over to join the conversation.

Fred whistled lowly, appreciating the skill of another inventor, while using the parchment to handle the small glyph. “I don’t know how long it will take – we’re not Hermione, by any stretch, but I still think this falls well within our area of … special expertise.”
“Mischief?” Oliver asked, sceptically.

“Controlled mayhem,” George grinned in obvious anticipation.

They split up, each concentrating on their specific tasks. Oliver cornered Percy, and asked some pointed questions about the Norwegian government, and their ability to miss Death Eater activity right in their own backyard, but in the end had to give up when Percy pointed out that the previous management here in Britain had missed it for nearly two years. Percy did have Ms. Macier look up the official Floo designation for the shack they’d found, though, so the trip wasn’t a complete waste. Viktor was visiting Diagon Alley, gathering spell ingredients and anything else he thought might be useful. By suppertime they were meeting back in Oliver’s flat, grim determination was being subverted by the excitement of impending action.

“This truly is disgusting,” Fred complained, throwing a small leather pouch down on the table. A muffled clink could be heard as it landed. “Do you know what they used to make that thing? House Elf blood. I mean, as if the buggers don’t have enough to worry about in life, some mad Wizard with a knife is now using their blood to make Pass-Wards. It’s ingeniously direct, though. About the only thing immune to Wizard magic is House-Elf magic.”

Oliver was reminded of how Hermione had tried to handle it without actually touching it and shuddered. “Were you able to split it, then?” he asked, trying hard not to think about having one of those gleaming liquid-looking metal twists in his pocket.

George picked up the pouch, and poured its contents onto the table. Five tiny, and subtly hypnotic glyphs shone wetly back at their curious glances. Shaking his head to break the spell, Viktor pointed out, “There are only four of us. Who is fifth for?”

“You weren’t planning on holding this party without me, now were you?”

A large, many-scarred red-head swaggered into Oliver’s tiny kitchen, having obviously let himself in with his typical lack of regard for privacy rights.

“Charlie!” Oliver greeted, grinning broadly and for the moment not caring. He clapped a hand on the other man’s shoulder, drawing him into the scheming.

George grinned in greeting to his brother, but didn’t break stride. “We couldn’t split it any more than this – five’s all we get. Somehow, keeping it all in the family is more sporting, anyway – even if that family does include Viktor over here.”

“Hey!” Viktor’s protest was mild at best, having gotten mostly used to the twins by now, or at least used to ignoring them.

Oliver couldn’t agree more. He knew he should turn this over to Percy, let him send in a team of Aurors and wait for them to bring in prisoners. But there was no way in Hades that he was just going to sit back and let others handle this. He spent all of his time trying to protect people he’d never met; he’d be damned if when it came down to something that actually meant something he wasn’t the one doing it. Even if it did mean working with bloody Krum.

“We have absolutely no idea what might be on the other side of the grate, I understand,” Charlie clarified.

“Ye donnae have tae sound quite so cheerful about it,” Oliver glared. “There cannae be tha’ many of the bastards. I mean, Harry an’ Ron an’ Mou – Hermione did for a lot of them the first time around, an’ the Aurors did for even more.”
“I thought they’d all be hiding under rocks, for fear Harry might find them,” Fred joined in.

“Well, we’ll just have to see how many managed to fit under this rock,” George shrugged. “Most of the Purebloods that were involved the first time that didn’t end up in Azkaban have gone broke. Public opinion has kept witches and wizards from their businesses and shops. They blame them for everything that’s happened.”

“We’ll have tae set Apparation points once we get inside an’ get the wards down.”

“So the Aurors will be able to follow at that point, and they can watch us mop up,” Charlie smirked.

Oliver grinned back, feeling more than a little like he’d enjoy some mayhem right now. “Remember, we need the buggers alive. One of them ha’ better be able tae tell me where Hermione is.”

“We’ll find her, Oliver.” George clasped his shoulder reassuringly.

I suggest we wait until morning, gentlemen. A good night sleep will give us our edge back, and not being the middle of the night might increase the likely hood that more of them are home when we come calling,” Fred said, clapping his hands sharply.

“-..-

She’d snuck the papers back into their hiding spot the next morning, and as near as she could tell, no one had missed them. The parchments proved to be as she suspected, research notes on Blood Magic. She couldn’t help but feel a little uneasy at how close some of the trains of inquiry had come to cracking the problem presented by the Calx of Mercury potion. Of course, she couldn’t seem to stop herself, much to her disgust, from spending considerable time pondering solutions during her time alone.

The portraits along the hallways were all of long dead, noble families, which of course meant none of them were willing to converse with something as lowly as a Muggle-born, so Hermione spent most of her days poking through the rather small library in the parlour, or staring at the maps that filled some of the frames that weren’t stuffy portraits, hoping to figure out something useful, something she’d be able to tell Oliver when he came.

Because he would come.

It was the fact that he might try to come alone which worried her most.

He was, in her experience, intelligent, and very capable. He wouldn’t let worry get in the way of good judgment; he’d go for help. The fact that there really wasn’t much help to be had was something she tried to resolutely ignore. She just had to believe that he would find it, and in the mean time, she’d keep reading, and staring at maps until her eyes grew dim each evening. So far, she’d managed to ascertain that the map in the downstairs drawing room needed its glass replaced.

This time, Draco found her in the parlour, chatting with Maisy. And though she was aware of his entrance, she pointedly continued her conversation with the House Elf, until pity for the small creature’s rolling eyes, and nearly tangible fear that she was displeasing her Master by staying made Hermione let her go.

With a resigned sigh, she spoke first. “You’re not really keeping me here to question me.”
“No, more to keep you out of the way. Though I still want to know what Wood has figured out – it might give me a better idea of what he’s going to do next. Frankly, Granger, we’re playing a close game right now, and if it looks for a second like Wood’s making the wrong move, we’ll turn you over to Goyle and the others and count our losses,” Malfoy agreed easily.

Hermione had to fight against grinding her teeth at his casual threat to give her to Gregory Goyle. “Keep me out of the way? Out of who’s way? Why in Merlin’s name does it matter where I am?”

“Because if that dim-witted husband of yours brought you straight to the one’s trying to raise old Snake Face himself, do you really think you’d leave the place alive?”

“Why? Because I helped Harry defeat their Dark Lord?”

“Vengeance might be part of it, but they’re trying to raise him, and so far they’re not having much luck.”

“And why is that, do you think?” Hermione asked, staring back pointedly.

Malfoy’s answering grin was arrogant.

“That does not make us in any way shape or form on the same side,” Hermione shot back with as much asperity as she could muster. “And I would no more help them than I would help you.”

“That’s presuming you had a choice, Granger. At least a few of them have a brain, and would recognise that you’re far more valuable under an Imperious Curse than dead. You’d be mixing antidotes and counter-spelled potions before the hour was out.”

“But you want them to succeed – you’ve been helping them gather victims all along!” she accused, trying very hard to push away her relief that she hadn’t been turned over to them. She wasn’t going to let herself feel grateful to the Malfoys for anything.

“We want to understand the process ourselves, Granger. We do not want them actually getting to use it,” he rolled his eyes at her.

“Always ready to sell yourself to the ones with power, aren’t you? You haven’t changed one bit, even with everything that’s happened – you’re still the same sycophantic little toad.”

When there was no immediate response, Hermione finally looked up from where she’d been pointedly staring since Draco had come in to bother her. His pale face was perfectly blank, and not a hint of what he was thinking marred his expression; except for his eyes – they blazed at her, and Hermione was forced to admit that she’d upset him in some way. His expression cleared immediately when he caught her looking, though he couldn’t quite mask his furry completely when he spoke.

“Don’t be such a fucking child, Granger. I never said I wasn’t in this for myself - just that, for a change, our short term goals are in agreement.”

“And you expect me to help you with them, how? I highly doubt your going to just let me go once you’ve gotten rid of the others, are you?”

“You’re still our best bet of finishing their research, too, you know,” Malfoy acknowledged. “But as I said, I’m sure you’d much rather it was us, than them.”

“Frankly, I don’t really see a difference,” Hermione sniffed.
The sound of a fist slamming into something hard made her jump, though she tried not to show it.

“‘You know, I’ve had –’”

But the sound of someone else entering the room cut him off, before he could continue. “Then, perhaps Ms. Wood, it’s time we explained it to you,” Lucius Malfoy stopped, three paces into the room when he caught sight of Hermione, and greeted her with a wintery smile. “Ah, Ms. Wood. I trust you’ve found your stay with us not entirely unendurable?”

Hermione blinked, unsure as to what this meant, but sure she wouldn’t like it. Fortunately, Draco saved her having to ask.

“They’ve fucking done it, then?”

“Really, Draco, language. She may be a Mud-blood, but Ms. Wood here is still a witch.” Lucius gave her an appraising glance and smirked at her obvious discomfort. “I’m afraid that our time together has come to an end, for now, Ms. Wood. Our friends may have made the rather unfortunate blunder of stumbling onto a viable solution to their problems.” He turned to his son, one eyebrow raised questioningly, “She does know what we’ve done, doesn’t she?”

Draco’s gaze flicked over to where Hermione sat, mind obviously whirling as she took in her change in fortunes. He nodded reluctantly. “She knows why they haven’t been having any luck. And we can count on her having shared that with him, though I doubt he understood any of it, without her there to draw a map for him.”

A rather nasty feeling was trying to crawl its way up Hermione’s stomach, even as she ignored the by-play between father and son. If they had found a viable solution…. No, the Malfoys didn’t want that any more than she did, and it was galling to admit she’d have to trust in that. She was staring at Lucius, she vaguely realised, even as her face scrunched in thought. “Then you’ve brought me here for what reason?” she asked, slowly.

“To deal with the problem, Granger. I thought you were supposed to be the smart one.”

Hermione cut in with annoyance, “It’s Wood now, you know, Malfoy. I’m sure you read the notice in the Prophet and everything. Or at least, had someone read it to you.”

He smirked coldly, the expression not meeting his eyes. “I think I prefer to ignore your recent association with evil companions, actually.”

“Really, Ms. Wood,” Lucius cut over their squabbling, “I would think that you would be grateful for our interference. Without it, you would most likely be dead by now. Of course, you’re chances of surviving are still rather low, but at least you’ll have the satisfaction of sacrificing yourself to save others. Isn’t that what you Gryffindors dream about?”

“Dead? And how is it you think I would be dead by now, if not for your kind concern?”

“Let’s try being direct, shall we? You are, despite your other faults, one of the most talented and intelligent students to come out of Hogwarts in a great long while, and you and your husband were heading straight for our rather charming friends. It wouldn’t have taken you long to realise how to access them, and I’m afraid they have specific wards up to keep those of … shall we say, lowly origins, out. You would have been killed quite painfully, just trying to pass the threshold. Really, they don’t teach you nearly enough about the Dark Arts at that school.”

A cold, leaden shiver tried to shudder its way through her belly. Hermione straightened her spine and tilted her chin, to glare squarely at her captor. “And we both know you didn’t bring me here
for my health. So let’s try being direct, as you suggested.”

Lucius’s bland expression twisted briefly into a humourless smile. “You’re incessant snooping must have turned up copies of their research by now. I’m sure you already have ideas on how they could complete it, but what I need from you is your best ideas of how to sabotage it.”

“You want me to tell you how to stop them?” She was incredulous.

Draco pushed himself up from where he’d been sitting by the fire, obviously agitated, in direct contrast to his father’s almost bored indifference. “No, Granger - you’re going to stop them – from the inside. Stop them from bringing old Snake Face back, and finish what we started two years ago.”

She couldn’t seem to find her voice. It was like listening to the Giant Squid suddenly rise up out of the lake to recite poetry – the Malfoy’s were sitting there, asking her to stop the source of supreme evil. None of it made any sense, but still remotely she heard herself asking, “And what do you expect me to do?” but her voice didn’t sound right to her own ears.

“We’re going to turn you over to them - explain how we’ve captured you, and remind them of your value in case none of them are bright enough to put it together themselves. You will be put under an Imperious Curse, of course, and made to finish their formula, and resurrect Voldemort.”

“And if I’m under an Imperious Curse, what do you expect me to do?”

“We’ll handle the Imperious Curse, Granger. You’ll be fine. You just have to convince them you’ve got the solution, and make sure that when they use it, it ruins their chances of bringing him back.”

She stilled. All three of them knew what they were telling her to do would result in whatever was left of the Death Eaters killing her as soon as they realised what she’d done. Probably in as painful a way as they could manage.

Images of a deserted Diagon Alley, of half-empty House tables and furtive stories in the Prophet pushed their way into her thoughts, frankly against her will. She didn’t want to think of others just yet, she wanted a few more moments to be terrified. The Wizarding community was barely recovering – they wouldn’t survive the new terrors that would come with the resurrection of Voldemort. People were just used up, and there was nothing left to draw on. It wouldn’t matter that Voldemort had nothing but a ragtag bunch of followers left – once they began their rise, more would ooze out of the cracks – those always looking for the biggest bully on the playground.

“You’ll have a chance, Granger. You’ll know what’s coming, and in the confusion, it’s always possible you can take advantage of it somehow.”

“That’s not really much of a chance, Malfoy. I don’t see either of you volunteering to take care of this mess.”

Lucius crossed the room to sit in one of the wing-backed chairs facing her. He steepled his fingers, and smiled mockingly. “Now, now Ms. Wood, I think you forget – You’re the good one, not us. Somehow, I don’t think you can not do what we’re asking, can you?”

Hermione just glared at him, refusing to answer something they already knew like that.

He waved it off, lazily. “Really, this way is much more direct than our methods of plotting and subterfuge, which take time, I might point out. Just think of all those dead Muggle borns if he comes back.”
She narrowed her eyes, and raised her chin a little higher to bolster her flagging courage. “I thought you would want that,” she challenged.

“I assure you, Ms. Wood, you have very little idea as to what I want.” He shifted, dropping his hands to the arms of the chair and leaning forward. “Now, can we expect your cooperation? And remember, expose us, and all you will ensure is that they will succeed.”

Hermione closed her eyes and pressed her lips together tightly. There was little enough chance that she’d survive this. Oliver would blame himself, of course, being the sort to take far too much on himself. He’d probably continue to work too much – drive himself too hard with no one there to make him look after himself. She was in shock she realised distantly, but did nothing to stop it. Spending her thoughts with Oliver was soothing and far more pleasant than opening her eyes to the blond men currently in her company. She would have been surprised, if she’d been conscious enough to question it, that her most comforting thoughts were of the man who had so chivalrously forced his way into her life only seven and a half months before - but for right now, she found herself breathing in deeply, trying to capture the memory of his apple and leather scent, curling her fingers when she felt the ghost of his touch, and above all, his wonderfully crinkle-lipped smile that always told her he had everything in hand.

When she opened her eyes, no more than a few seconds later, she was feeling much calmer. “Yes,” she said steadily. It was, after all, the only way, if they were close enough to make the Malfoys worried.

“Then it’s time we introduced you to our nimble-minded associates.”

She had one other hope up her sleeve. He said that she and Oliver had been close – Oliver was more than clever enough by half to figure out how to get to them, even without her, though obviously the Malfoys bought into the whole Quidditch jock persona, too. Oliver would be there, all she had to do was hold on long enough to meet him.

“Come on, Granger, looks like you’re getting a change in accommodations.” Draco stood, and gestured impatiently for her to do the same.

Sandwiched between the two men, Hermione was escorted out of the room, and into the foyer. She tried not to shiver at Draco’s touch as the noise of Apparation told her that he was taking her tandem to her final destination.

Chapter End Notes

Authoress's Note:

As was pointed out to me, I made a mistake last chapter - a silly one that I actually knew better :-p Cyrano de Bergerac was not written by Molière but by Edmond Rostand. My only defence is that I was reading Molière at the time, and had a brain cramp. Thank you to Katia Dashwood, both for being a wonderful reviewer, and for catching that. I know my chapters aren't perfect, though they are beta'd as many as
three times before they ever see posting here, but I hate actually putting down something that's out-and-out wrong.

As ever, thank you all so much for reading. We're almost done, and the next chapter is in the hands of my beta now, and may hopefully see the light of day in a week or two.
When the disorientation of not being in control of her own Apparition cleared, Hermione found herself in a large, open room. Bright sunlight streamed in through long and narrow windows placed high up on the walls, affording absolutely no view of the landscape beyond. The walls appeared to be stone masonry, and the floor was worn flagstone, littered here and there with potion stains and sooty spell carbonization. She quite resented it when she realised it reminded her strongly of the Twins’ experiment room at their shop.

They’d stopped over at a rather dank place before Flooing here, the whirling green-flamed trip not doing anything to help the dizziness of her tandem Apparition, and Hermione was rather pleased that she managed not to humiliate herself when she stumbled out of the grate by being sick all over the floor. Instead, she’d allowed Draco to again take her arm when he’d glided out of the hearth, and let him lead her further into the room while she concentrated on calming her rolling stomach.

Large and battered tables were set up covered by crazy configurations of tubes twisting and turning before depositing their distillations into half-melted pots. Powders and roots lying haphazardly across the work surfaces, and Hermione shuddered at the mess. The fireplace that they’d come through was to her left, and she suspected the large painted pot on the mantle was full of Floo Powder. At least two doors that she could see lead off this room; both of them on the far side.

“I trust you’ll be comfortable here,” Lucius sneered - for the benefit of anyone listening, Hermione supposed, though the room seemed empty enough at the moment.

She took another deep breath, running formulae through her mind, though she knew she wouldn’t be able to plan her specific strategy until she saw what spell components and equipment she would have to work with. Still, the familiar study tactic helped to calm her, kept the terror below the surface and helped keep her mind clear to analyse her surroundings.

Draco stayed close behind her, silent though she could hear his soft breathing in the echoing chamber. His hand was clammy where it rested on her shoulder, and she could feel the sweat through her thin robes. So, despite their show of bravado, at least one of the Malfoys was not completely at ease with failure. Somehow, it made her feel better to know they risked something right along with her and that they would just have to trust her throughout the process, with no control over what her actions could bring whatsoever.

Lucius strode across the chamber and left through one of the doors, and Hermione was sure his silhouette actually diminished slightly as he made his way across the huge room. Malfoy tensed behind her. When he spoke, it was so quiet at that at first she almost missed it.

“Here, Granger. It will maybe keep you alive when the time comes.”
Something cool and smooth was slipped into her hand, where it rested in the pocket of her robe. The feeling of her wand was immediately identifiable, something her fingers could never mistake for anything else. Startled, Hermione started at Malfoy questioningly.

There was something in his voice; somehow, for once, the spoilt little boy she normally heard was only a ghostly shadow, overlaying and hiding something else entirely. Her eyes widened in shock. She drew a quick, steadying breath, and opened her mouth to speak; to try and say something while trying not to gap at this uncharacteristic behaviour.

"Don't, Granger. It isn't worth it." Again, she still heard the arrogant pureblood in his voice, but it was indescribably bound with… it wasn't anything so startling as compassion, or remorse, This was still Draco Malfoy, after all, and hadn't suddenly revealed that he was really someone else underneath it all… no, he was still the same, but now she thought she could hear something else in his voice, something more like… strength. It made her wonder if she had been just as guilty of not really giving him credit beyond her perceptions of him all these years, or if this was indeed the first time he had ever allowed anything else to creep into their conversations.

"Draco –" She tried once more, still rather unsteady with this unsettling revelation.

"Malfoy, Granger." The correction was firm, but not harsh, as she would have once expected.

She gazed at him searchingly for a long moment, loose tendrils of her hair escaping out of her morning's careful labour and springing to life between them, like a veil. Order finally seeped into her shaken thoughts. He was right, of course. But still….

“And for Merlin’s sake, don’t get caught with it, or we’re all in for it.”

The sound of a door opening quickly cut off these unwelcome thoughts.

A tall man had come striding into the room, followed by Lucius Malfoy. The new comer was gaunt faced, with a short black beard and dark skin. His features were handsome, but the effect was lost by the matted tangle of his hair, the crusted drool at the corner of his mouth and the sour smell. This was obviously a man who didn’t believe, as Hermione did, that personal hygiene was a common courtesy. He strode straight up to her, pausing only when he was so close that she could smell the tomatoes he’d had for dinner on his breath. He loomed over her, peering down at her as though examining some new potion ingredient, and Hermione felt that she’d have to smack him if he asked her to open her mouth so he could examine her teeth.

Two other wizards had made their way into the room, but unlike their companion, they showed considerable concern at her presence. Gaunt seemed to be a common feature in these wizards, she noticed, and Hermione was forced to wonder if they were feed quite enough. Still, the other men seemed much more lucid than her current examiner, and Hermione found herself focusing on them, to avoid the rather shivery feeling of the dark wizard’s gaze.

“She was one of Potter’s friends,” one of the two remaining wizards murmured, tightening his grip on his wand almost imperceptibly.

“So?” Lucius drawled, contemptuously.

“So, Potter could beat an Imperious Curse. What if -”

“Potter could beat the Imperious Curse because the Dark Lord could beat it, not because he was special in any way. The Mud-blood here will be perfectly safe. Unless you’d prefer to wait for him…” Lucius rolled his eyes over to the dark man, who was still studying Hermione, seeming
oblivious to the conversation going on behind him.

Identically pained expressions crossed their faces, and the one who’d been speaking nodded reluctantly. “Let’s get started, then.” He motioned the other wizard towards Hermione meaningfully.

“Let my son,” Lucius inserted smoothly. “I’m sure he would find the challenge of Ms. Wood here instructional.”

“We don’t need any wet-behind-the-ears kid fucking things up now,” the one who had remained quiet up to now spat derisively.

Hermione could feel her heart beat pick up in her chest, even as it felt as though her stomach was dropping out. The whole plan revolved on one of the Malfoys being the one to actually do the spell. Draco’s grip tightened on her shoulder, and she wondered if he knew her knees were shaking. The thought of Draco Malfoy knowing how nervous she was, was enough to stiffen her spine and force her heart to slow.

“Would you like me to give you a personal demonstration, then?” Draco offered softly, his eyes having never left the other wizards during their byplay, and there was no mistaking the menace in his voice. For a moment, the room was completely silent, and Hermione couldn’t help but hold her breath as her fate, and the fate of their plan hung in the balance.

A high-pitched giggle broke the tension and made them all jump. “She will make the Dark Lord rise again. She won’t be able to help it – too smart for her own good, this one is.”

The four other men in the room, along with Hermione just stared at him as he turned his back on her and casually sauntered over to the equipment table.

“And this is the man you’re counting on to bring back Voldemort?” Hermione couldn’t stop herself from asking.

“Shut it, Mud-blood,” the wizard who had challenged Draco’s ability snapped at her.

Their Blood Specialist was named Williams. It turned out that he was a mad as a hatter (who were driven mad by the same process that affected mirror-makers, which, ironically enough, was caused by a Muggle variation on the Calyx of Mercury solution; though she supposed mad as a Calyx of Mercury breather didn’t roll off the tongue quite the same way) but that somehow the twisting paths of his mind were able to grasp the complexities of a magic that left most wizards grasping in the dark. Hermione just wished that some of that genius could be turned toward daily bathing.

It had been two days since the Malfoys had forced her here with their little deal, and she had spent nearly all of it working the formulae over and over with Williams. The problem was, she was running out of time. He was close to not needing her as it was, and she spent a lot of her time trying to undermine his train of inquiry, even as she stalled him. She had come up with her exit strategy yesterday, the simple solution jumping out at her in her frustration and making her feel even more annoyed for having missed it this long, but now she was carefully brewing a distillation of Horehound that was being used in Williams current line of research to which she’d carefully added a mixture of Giant’s Toenails, Belladonna Root and Crocodile Tears, the last of which kept the brew from turning a revealing canary yellow, and ruining her efforts. The really nerve-wracking part was that she had no way of testing her theory, and reassuring herself that this would actually work - though she took great delight in the green colour Draco turned when she whispered her uncertainty to him.
Honestly, her time was almost up. She couldn’t delay much more, what with Williams ready to stumble onto the correct method at any moment, and she knew she couldn’t afford to put off her solution by even a day longer, but part of her couldn’t give up on Oliver. Every time she heard the fire flare, she had to fight to keep herself from whirling around, always expecting to see Oliver’s grim smile as he emerged from the Floo, and giving herself away to her watching captors who believed her firmly under the grip of Draco’s Imperious Curse.

Of course, Oliver hadn’t come - though she knew he tried his best. And though she knew she had to implement her plan and rely on the uncertain prospects of survival offered by her wand during the confusion, she couldn't help but push it off - though she was irritated that she was allowing herself to be swayed by the illogical certainty that he would find her.

She had finally faced facts this morning, and sternly convinced herself to give up on Oliver; she’d taken steps with the Horehound reduction, had carefully steered Williams’s madness into this attempt, and knew that in a few hours, one way or another, this would be over.

Draco’s voice startled her out of her revive.

"These bumbling nincompoops have made their last mistake, it would seem," he murmured so quietly she had to strain to hear him. "You'd better be ready with that plan of yours now, Granger - there's not going to be much of this place left once you're husband's through with it, I imagine - Don't react!" he hissed when Hermione almost yelped in excitement.

"Then I don't need to go through with this - the Ministry is sending Aurors and this will be done with," she murmured, even as her mind raced, confirming that things couldn’t be halted at this point.

"What are you, practicing to be Lavender Brown now? You're not that naive - if the Ministry bursts in now, there's every chance that at least some of these smelly nutters will hare off. I don't know about you, but I really don't want to have to chase them down all over again, when they have a new idea of how to fix Snake Face."

"Oliver will not allow any of them to escape," Hermione defended hotly, even though she knew it was certainly possible he would be unable to take them all down. There were probably escape routes built in here that she had no idea about, things meant to ensure that at least Voldemort's body could be saved in the event of discovery. Somehow, though, Draco Malfoy was not the one who was allowed to sit there and criticise.

Instead of arguing with her, he just stared, one eyebrow raised as if he knew quite well that she didn't fully believe what she was saying. Instead of acknowledging him, she just breezed past it.

"When is he getting here?"

"What do I look like, his secretary? Soon, I imagine; get your wide arse in gear, Granger, I don't particularly want to be here when the Ministry arrives."

Instead of answering, she deliberately ground her heel into the soft part of his instep as she walked away with a huff.

*Oliver was on his way!* Her heart wanted to sing, and she had to struggle to keep her expression suitably blank and detached while she handed implements to Williams while he worked. Thankfully, he was far too engrossed in his current counter-potion to notice anything, muttering and huffing to himself as various ingredients failed to give him the result he was looking for. Of course, as excited as she was, she was also terrified. Oliver was on his way, and she had no idea if
he’d manage to make it before Williams started the proceedings with her modified ingredients.

She wasn’t entirely sure, of course, but she definitely thought there might be an explosion.

Carefully, Hermione reached into her robe pocket again, to feel the comforting weight of her wand against her questing fingertips.

_Soon._

Williams was convinced he had it, and preparations were being made to make the attempt. Hermione watched curiously as six ragged Death Eaters were taking positions around the chamber, using their wands to remove concealing charms from various places in the room. Four snake statues appeared, placed on each compass point, she was certain. Their appearance made her shiver unpleasantly, as one of the wizards moved to stand in the middle of the chamber with a familiar black book, with a strangely pierced cover. At some unseen signal, they all began to chant sibilantly, and Hermione had to work to control her expression as the walls around her shivered, and became overlain with an illusion of another place, one she had thought lost beneath the second floor girls toilets, and she realised now why the Slytherin students had come back to help rebuild.

A flurry of activity distracted her, and she watched surreptitiously from under her lashes as four wizards entered the room, carrying something between them. They moved slowly as they crossed the room, as though trying to take extra care with their burden, eventually coming to lay it reverently on one of the tabletops closest to her. They talked quietly amongst themselves for a few minutes, but Hermione could hardly pay attention to what they were saying in her shock.

The had moved back slightly, revealing the object they’d lain down so gently, and Hermione got her first real glimpse at what Voldemort had become.

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Oliver couldn't believe how long it took the twins to get themselves together, and if they managed to forget one more thing that they just absolutely had to have with them, he might throttle them both.

His thoughts were filled with seeing Hermione: her soft brown curls, her wide and expressive mouth, and he knew he wasn’t particularly pleasant to be around just now. Just another step towards finding her – his last and best chance of finding a clue as to where she had been taken – and he had to keep reminding himself to loosen his fists before he hit something.

Morning's light filtered into Oliver's flat bravely, illuminating a collection of strange ... crap that two grinning maniacs had deposited on his kitchen table as soon as they'd dressed this morning. The fact that their dumping had forced Oliver to rather hurriedly rescue his coffee before it was pushed onto the floor didn't help improve any of its usefulness in his mind.

And why one of those items was bubble-gum pink was beyond him, but the colour was giving him a headache.

His whole body was tense. Ten days had passed, with no word on his wife's location. His _wife_. He had rarely allowed himself to think of her that way: afraid that the claim might undermine his rather careful control where she was concerned, and cause him to push her even harder than he already had that day in the barn. Now, though, it was a slender chain that helped keep her close. She was his, damnit, and he would get her back.

Charlie had already been waiting for him when he'd stumbled his way out of bed early this
morning. He'd handed Oliver a mug without a word, and if the coffee had had more whiskey in it that anything else, Oliver wasn't about to call him on it.

He hadn't been able to sleep, of course, instead spending his time tossing and turning until the coarse sheets lay in a tangled mess around his legs, and it had taken him a full ten minutes of muttered oaths and threats before he'd managed to free himself from them. He'd hoped to keep his worries to himself this morning, and had crawled his way from his bed and out into the dark kitchen as quietly as he could. Finding the other man there, though, had not been an unwelcome surprise.

Charlie was sitting at his cramped kitchen table, his feet propped on the chair beside, already drinking from his own mug. His face held none of the pity or concern that Oliver would have found intolerable, but instead was serene and composed as he pushed a second mug sitting on the table towards his friend when he came around the doorway. For a crude guy who spent most of his time with large lizards, Charlie was impressively perceptive, and not nearly as emotive as Bill. Oliver grunted his thanks, and stared out the dark window as he sipped, not really wanting to talk just yet. Charlie continued reading an out-of-date Prophet quietly across from him.

It was only three when George made his appearance, helping himself to a waiting mug as well, and moving to stand by the window sill in his rumpled pyjamas, obviously waiting. Ten minutes later saw Fred wander out, dark circles making his freckles stand out even more than usual. He patted Oliver's shoulder once on the way by, before heading for the fridge and pulling out a bottle of milk. He moved to join them at the table, turning his chair backwards so he could rest his elbows on the narrow back.

"We ready for this, then?" he asked quietly, after taking a gulp directly from the bottle.

"We have a few tricks up our sleeves that might be useful. When everyone's up we'll make sure to share."

Oliver grunted again, letting the conversation flow around him, rather than participating just yet.

"I've got Apparition markers from Percy, so at least we can expect the cavalry to join us when we call," Charlie joined in. "Provided he can find one or two Aurors to pull in from chasing Vampires, that is."

The remarks continued to flow lazily, sometimes the silence stretching for minutes at a time before anyone bothered to break it. Oliver just continued staring out of the window, waiting for the new day to finally break, so he could get on with the important things.

Like finding Hermione.

"We should leave once Viktor's up," George agreed, also quiet.

"Viktor is up," a gruff voice came from the doorway, and the Bulgarian moved to join them at the table.

And finally, Oliver tore himself away from the dark glass and planning began in earnest.

In the end, most of them had taken a pocket full of the Twins brain-children, but Oliver was secretly sure they were all determined to rely on their wands instead. Some of their products, though absolutely brilliant, were a touch ... unpredictable, and that was something they definitely didn't need right now.

They were all wound up, waiting for the day to get on enough to make their entrance. Oliver was
adamant that he wanted as many of the bastards as possible, not willing to let go of his chance of finding Hermione by being impatient now. They all passed time in their own ways, of course. Fred and George had their heads bent close together by the fireplace, wicked little grins telling Oliver that they were likely planning some new product. Viktor was sitting quietly in the room's only armchair, leafing through one of the only books in the small flat, using his first finger to aid him as he worked to decipher the foreign words. Charlie was playing a solitary card game, and the occasional muttered oath would tell Oliver when he was losing.

Oliver just paced, unable to alight on any one distraction, and instead found himself running through spells and wand movements in his head, and trying to remember any of Snape's long-ago advice for the duel that might be applicable. So far, he wasn't coming up with much that wasn't a rather caustic insult.

They had decided to wait for noon, feeling that midday was enough of a chance for their quarry to gather. Oliver just hoped that one of them would have the information he needed, or he was probably going to resort to taking Pureblood houses apart, one stone at a time, and he was fairly certain Percy would have something rather... official to say about that.

When the time finally came and Charlie looked up from his game and announced that now was as good a time as any, the release from the waiting filled Oliver with relief.

Apparating to the shack in Norway was the easy part of the plan, and it was every bit as unpleasant as Oliver remembered, but the dankness wasn’t the only reason they didn’t linger to re-group or double check plans; they knew that the enemy likely had spells set to announce someone’s arrival in this place, and they knew the game was now on. Someone knew they were here, and they only way to preserve any kind of surprise was to strike now. With a deep breath, Oliver headed grimly for the dark opening of the fireplace.

The shock of actually seeing her there almost blew everything for him.

Oliver came out of the fire grate first, immediately rolling out of the way for Charlie, and firing a simple spell as he went. The hex went wide, of course, because he wasn’t really aiming, more forcing his opponents to duck for cover. The chamber he found himself in looked strange, as if two separate rooms had been superimposed on top of each other. One was a rather large, sparsely furnished room, the other, full of dark stone pillars and twisting snake statues. The illusion was disorienting, to say the least.

And there stood his Mouse, not having the common sense to duck behind the table she was working at, and for a moment he was afraid she was under the Imperious Curse, the way she just stood there and stared at him, but a quick assessment reassured him that her face was certainly animated enough, and it looked rather like she was about to scold him. Somehow, he couldn’t contain the rather foolish grin, as he stood there, just staring back. She was motioning wildly to him, but he wasn’t sure what that was all about, and didn’t really care at the moment — right up until all the breath was knocked out of him as his back slammed into the flagstone floor five feet from where he had been standing. He could feel the spell as it went whizzing by just over his shoulder.

“Yer a heavy bastard, aren’t yeh?” Oliver complained, pushing at Charlie as he struggled to get up, while still staying low enough to not be the next target.

"And you're an oblivious one. What happened to finding cover and distracting the bastards so they didn't try to pick us off one by one as we got through the Floo?" Charlie asked gruffly.

"Hermione's here," Oliver heard himself saying, as if that explained everything. It probably did.
"Saw her. At least she wasn't so besotted as to ignore what was going on. Didn't you see her waving at you like a bloody flag?" Another spell just barely missed grazing his elbow, and Charlie actually reached over and yanked on Oliver's collar, pulling him down behind a hastily transfigured barricade. The plaid pattern made Oliver think it might have been a chair only sixty seconds ago.

Giving his head a good shake, Oliver forced himself to focus on the others, instead. Viktor was just coming through the fire grate now, his ungainly body rolling awkwardly across the floor as Charlie stood and let fly with an "Incendio," at a ragged looking wizard who was aiming for the Bulgarian's erratic progress.

With a pained hiss, the Death Eater dropped, cradling his hand where Charlie's spell had burned him. Oliver wasn't sure, but he thought he already saw painful blisters rising. Viktor was the last one supposed to come through the Floo, so he knew the rest were already behind cover somewhere. Cautiously, he peered around the edge of Charlie's make-shift barricade, and noticed Hermione was no longer by the table in the centre of the room. For a moment, his heart stopped, as he panicked and began looking wildly around the room trying to find her again, trying to vainly peer through thick smoke and random spell effects as hurled curses collided and mixed with uncertain results.

Enough. Sternly, Oliver forced himself to stop. Hermione being here only gave him added incentive to do his job, and do it well. If he kept keeping his brain in his trousers, he certainly wouldn't be the man Hermione needed right now, and there was no way in hell he was going to allow another one of these bastards to lay a hand on his wife. His Mouse was smart — smarter than him, and though he found it hard to remember sometimes when looking at her small stature or delicate hands, Hermione was more than capable of keeping out of the thick of things; and probably more than able to give her captors a right good licking if given half the chance.

Things exploded rather quickly from there. Spells were flying thick and fast, and the smells coming from various places around him were milling together and blending into something awfully offensive to the nose. From where he crouched off to one side, he tried to take objective stock of the battle. Spells were being hurled from various points around the room, but given the frequency of small explosions and the haze of some kind of... what appeared to be laughing gas over one unfortunate wizard who honestly seemed to be in pain he was howling so hard, proved the twins were hard at work somewhere. He could make out at least seven other gaunt-faced wizards firing back at them... and two familiar platinum blond heads could just be made out through the thick air. Malfoy.

Oliver’s grip tightened on his wand. While he couldn’t actually say he owed him one for Hermione, seeing as how he won their duel, the little weasel still had it coming for keeping him off his broom for two bloody months as his leg healed. And just for being a tetchy little twat, of course. Oliver was fairly sure you didn’t need a reason beyond that when it was Malfoy. Somehow, he was actually grimly satisfied to see him here. It gave the whole situation an entirely new edge knowing that he wasn’t just taking down faceless nutters, but got the chance to ride Britain of two such blemishes; to hell with Percy and his probable causes.

The air was so thick; he could hardly see two metres in front of him. Somewhere to his left he could make out harsh guttural syllables that told him Krum was holding his own, with direct, no-finesse spells that got the job done. For a bloody seeker, the man’s about as subtle as a fork to the bollocks, Oliver thought wryly.

They were outnumbered, of course, but that was one fact they had carefully not discussed in all their planning; they had already known it going in. Still, he couldn’t think of four better men to have his back, even if one of them was bloody Krum.
“Impedimentia,” he growled, whipping his wand around to the dark-skinned wizard howling hexes across the debris-strewn battle zone. The small space, and sheer number of participants was making things more complicated than Oliver liked. Any spell that was dodged stood the chance of hitting a friend; any area-affecting hex could catch a companion as well, and over all this hung the constant risk of hitting Hermione with some kind of ricochet or accident. Unfortunately, their dark-robed quarry had no such compassionate concerns, and Oliver and his friends found themselves fighting a rather uneven battle.

A tall, heavy set woman was briefly visible from behind her own transfigured barrier, and Oliver barely had time to register the hate in her hollow eyes before he was reacting, shoving Charlie into the floor, and taking out a heavy cast-iron candleholder as they slide through it. Bits of plaid and stuffing debris rained down on them as Charlie’s barricade exploded under the force of her assault. A muttered thanks, and they were both moving again, getting separated in the general melee.

Moving as quickly as he could, Oliver almost scuttled across the intervening space, wobbling uncertainly the last few steps as a ricocheted Jelly Legs Curse managed to catch him, and he threw himself behind the colonnade, just barely managing to pull his useless legs behind the rather dubious cover before something else struck the flagstone in front of him, sending up a spray of small stone chips.

There was so much noise; it was conversely almost silent in that Oliver could no longer pick individual noises out of the general chaos. His ears burned in protest, but no longer actually registered the sounds surrounding him. He’d lost sight of Malfoy again, and he took a moment to mutter a quick “Integritas,” and thankfully, the uncertain numbness faded from his legs almost instantly. He was almost on the other side of the room now, a good thirty metres from the fireplace they’d burst from what seemed like hours ago, but was probably closer to ten minutes. Taking a deep breath, he snuck his head past his stone cover, trying to get a feel for where his closest enemy lay hiding, but what he actually saw caused the breath he’d been holding to whoosh out in a painful rush as he stared blankly.

Living on borrowed blood had obviously not been kind to Tom Riddle, and for a few moments, Oliver was sure he was staring at a corpse, the skin was so waxy and lifeless, the body so shrunken he could practically see the skull right through it where the flesh thinned over the temples and jaw, when a shallow, struggling breath shook the frail frame. Dark robes draped his body, but couldn’t completely hide the skeletal hideousness beneath. He was laid out on a table and held down with thick straps, like his followers were afraid their god would get up in the middle of the night for a wee sleep-stroll, or possibly a midnight cuppa. From the look of him, one good stumble would shatter every bone in his fragile body, and Oliver had the burning urge to run up and push him, hard, to see if he was right.

A large, battered table was set up not two metres away from where the Dark Lord rested, and standing between them was the tallest, maddest looking wizard Oliver had ever seen. Dark matted hair stood out at all directions as he held his wand aloft, obviously mid-experiment, as he worked seemingly oblivious to the fighting all around him, and Oliver’s heart plummeted at the prospect of that corpse-like wizard being able to get off that table and join the fray. From his peripheral vision he caught a shock of red hair, and one of the twins, unrecognizable at this distance, stood up to take aim at the gesticulating wizard, and he felt himself relax slightly.

Until he saw Hermione crouching about half a metre away, of course, also rather carefully watching the twin.

There was too much space between them — he had no hope of reaching her on the other side of the mad wizard as she was, and he watched as right before his rather horrified eyes, with a swish and flick, Fred/George sent their spell speeding straight at their target — and the girl hidden entirely
too close for Oliver’s comfort.

That was, until Hermione darted forward just enough to clear the table legs she crouched behind, and sent her own spell hurtling towards the same target.

Oliver had to pull himself back with a startled oath as the twin’s curse struck the tall wizard’s seemingly unprotected back, only to bounce off of Hermione’s hastily erected shield. The sound of the two spells colliding, like the sizzle of lightning as it sheared over a flat surface, could be heard over the general noise, even from where Oliver knelt. *Had they put her under an Imperius Curse after all?* He pushed that worry from his mind. It didn’t matter. She wasnae responsible for her actions; she still needed him, perhaps now more than ever.

_Fred/George_ had been drawn into another skirmish farther down the cavernous room, and Oliver turned his attention back to the strange man muttering to the corpse on the table, and the determined girl crouching once again between the thick mess of table legs. Of course, that’s when he saw the boy.

A second table, set so haphazardly that at first glance it appeared to be no more than a part of the general mess, sat so close, that if Voldemort were to roll over, he would have to no more than stretch one thin arm to reach it. This table was positioned closer to the spell-caster, and his body had been obstructing Oliver’s view, preventing him from noticing the pathetic little heap the small child made where he was strapped down. Whether the child still lived, Oliver couldn’t tell from where he stood, but he made no move or whimper, despite the explosions and screaming and the menacing figure looming over him, and occasionally prodding him with a wand. _What in Merlin’s name was going on here?_

He didn’t know if it was safe to try and reach Hermione. If she were under someone’s control, she could immediately attack him, and if he were completely honest, his petite wife intimidated him when it came to shear numbers of spells known and creative ways of using them.

But then, she was sitting there, _waving_ at him again.

Well, if he was going to hell anyway… Taking a deep breath, he watched carefully for his opportunity, and dove for Hermione’s position.

From about twelve metres back, _Fred/George_ entered the fray again, winding up and letting fly with some kind of small pouch. _Oh no…_

The vibrations rumbled through his body before his ears actually caught up to the boom. Of course, it could have simply been overlooked by his ears in the shock of finding himself suddenly crawling through ankle-deep muck and algae-filled water. Oliver glared to himself, imagining the next time he managed to catch up to the twins. Surprisingly, the eruption of the small swamp didn’t even seem to faze the madman chanting by the tables. Oliver was now close enough to hear his high-pitched incantations, and he even seemed to stop occasionally to talk to himself, or possibly his victims.

The stagnant smell coming off the muck beneath him was actually helping to clear the noxious sulphur fumes that had been making it so hard to think moments before, and at least the tall reeds and undergrowth that seemed to come with this new development would help to hide him a little better from Hermione, until he had a chance to assess what was going on.

He really shouldn’t have let himself think that way.

The jumble of tables were slowly settling into the uncertain new flooring, and the movement very
distracting as he continued to try and scan the area for his wife, while still keeping an eye out for any more unexpected contributions from his friends.

"Merlin’s balls," he nearly shouted, though he tried hard to clamp down on the curse when he caught sight of the owner of the hand that had shot out and grabbed him, nearly taking him out of his skin. Seeing she had his attention, Hermione reached up to put an only slightly muddy finger to her lips, shushing him, before turning to crawl a further into the mess of sinking furniture.

When she finally settled, with her back to the trunk of some kind of huge woody-reed, Oliver was able to get a good look at her. Her face was drawn, the corners of her mouth pulled down whenever she wasn’t consciously looking at him, when they would, seeming with great effort, turn up into a small smile. The swelling feeling in his chest, he told himself, was strictly from the fact that her genuine smiles confirmed that odd as her actions were, she was still thinking as Hermione. Now was absolutely not the time to give into the rather strong urge to wrap her in his arms and kiss her until she gave in; he wasn’t entirely sure there ever would be a time, but he was sure that if there was, this was definitely not it.

He was therefore incredibly startled when Hermione took the decision out of his hands, and launched herself at him like a springing wildcat, clinging tightly with both arms round his neck.

The force of their collision drove Oliver back on his heels, and he could feel more cold water soaking his trousers, but for that moment, didn't care in the slightest. The shock didn't stop him from immediately responding, pulling her in close enough to bury his nose in her hair and breathing deeply of her own unique scent. For that moment, dangerous as it was, nothing else existed around them. The sounds of the battle ranging around them faded - there was only the warmth of Hermione's skin on his, the welcome tickle of her hair as it brushed against his nose and the desperate way he was crushing her curls as he fisted them with trembling hands. He could feel the vibrations in his chest as he murmured to her, though he was fairly certain she couldn’t hear him when he was aware of no sound reaching his own ears — which was probably for the better as it was probably something rather embarrassingly besotted anyway. He could feel her cheek dimpling were she pressed into the hard part of his shoulder, where years of fighting a broom in all kinds of weather had built the muscles solidly, but she didn’t seem to mind too much as she seemed to actually be trying to cuddle in closer.

Of course, almost as soon as she’d done it, she’d pulled away, the whole exchange lasting no more than a few seconds, before she was staring back at him, her expression smooth and business-like, and completely focused on the tasks before them.

"We've no time for explanations right now, I'm afraid," she said quickly, seeing that Oliver was preparing to demand answers. "Is it just the five of you, then?"

Oliver nodded slowly, still working on his distraction by having her here again. "What's with the Conjurer over there?" he jerked his head in the direction of the other tables.

"Williams," Hermione rolled her eyes with a sigh. "He's their Blood Specialist."

"An' ye do know that he seems to be tryin' tae raise Voldemort while you're sitting here protecting his back?" He winced at the accusation in his voice. He knew her well enough that he should be willing to go on a little faith at the moment.

Hermione's eyes darted, almost guiltily. "I know. But we need to let him finish."

"What?"
"Look, just focus on the others right now. I'll keep my eye on him," she insisted firmly. "I don't have time to explain — you'll just have to trust me."

He looked at her for a long moment. This went against all his instincts of course — actually standing by and letting him raise that monster, uncontested? But he was surprised at how easy it was to ignore all that, when she was the one asking him to. "Alright, lass," he agreed with a tense nod.

The chanting had reached crescendo, loud shrieking floating over the buzz of the new swamp's crickets and the various noises of battle. Oliver moved away from Hermione, keeping her close enough to protect her back, and tried to get a sense of what was happening in the rest of the room. He could see a lot fewer points of ignition now, Fred/George had moved off, leaving a bound and unconscious figure on the floor in their wake. A few other wizards lay unmoving as they'd fallen, but none of them were his friends, so he ignored them. To his right, he could see a knot of two or three pressed up against the jutting, jagged remnants of one of the massive pillars, firing hastily from around their tattered barricade of fallen masonry. Viktor was determinedly returning fire, stoically sending answering hexes and curses to each volley. Oliver raised his wand, thinking for only a moment. "Conclacio," he murmured, with a smug grin.

The Death-Eaters hadn't seen him, of course, so he had them completely by surprise, as the floor beneath their feet turned into a slick sheet of ice. One, with dark, close cut hair, whirled wildly, to find the source of the new threat, and flicked his wand menacingly in Oliver's direction. "Protego," Oliver shouted, just in time to parry the blade that had materialised just inches from his body. Rolling painfully on protesting muscles, he focused his energy carefully and yelled, "Vomica Limax!" at the now-flailing trio.

The dark-haired wizard ducked, but his companion behind him was not so lucky. His whole body went stiff for a moment, a look of confusion on his face, before he doubled over. Though Oliver couldn't hear the retching from here, thankfully, he still grinned grimly. The appearance of the large, wriggling slugs seemed to provide the momentary distraction for the remaining two wizards trapped behind the barricade with him that Viktor was waiting for, and his next spell had their barrier down and the three of them practically glued to the wall behind them, caught up in something horribly pink and sticky. They struggled, unable to extract themselves, and Oliver made a mental note to inquire after that spell when this was over.

Things weren't going so well everywhere, though. Oliver caught sight of Charlie, blood caked from some unknown wound, struggling to return fire on his attackers. He caught Viktor's eye, and the Bulgarian nodded when he caught sight of Charlie, and began making his way over to help. Nether Fred or George was visible at the moment, and Oliver had to push aside the worry that they may have joined the motionless bodies littering the floor.

"Densaugeo!" he heard Hermione shout from behind him, and for a moment wondered why she sounded so gleefully vengeful. Definitely not a lass yeh’d like tae cross, he reminded himself.

Williams was at a fevered pitch, yelling and waving wildly, and Oliver almost waited for the lightning bolt to come down to animate the scene. Williams’ eyes were rolling in fear, as if aware that something was not quite right, but he seemed possessed of the energy now; a part of the spell he was casting, and somehow Oliver knew that it was too late for him to stop.

Voldemort’s corpse form had suddenly come alive, his waxen skin shinning with damp perspiration in the filtered light of their battlefield, as he writhed on the table to which he was strapped. His movements were jerky and unnatural, as if watching a golem or simulacrum of some sort instead of a man, and his mouth opened in a soundless scream of exultation.
That was when Oliver saw the shining silver fluid. It was staining the front of his robes, seeping from his pores as he sweat the mercury-tainted blood from his body.

“Oh dear. You might want to move a bit,” Hermione murmured softly, giving his shoulder a gentle nudge, but Oliver was far too caught up in watching the scene unfolding before him to really take note of her words.

“Wha’?” he managed to respond to the fact she was speaking, if not to her actual words, but with a good hard shove, Hermione was colliding with his chest, yelling, “Move, Wood!”

Automatically, his body curled around hers, responding more to the instinctive need to protect her, to keep her this time, than from any logical consideration. The explosion, when it came, was small as these things went, though still large enough to rain bits of glass and herbs and splinters down as far away as where Oliver and Hermione huddled. As soon as the shockwave passed, he immediately let go of Hermione, knowing in his still-fuddled mind that he had to find Williams, or whatever of him survived after a spell of that size back-lashed on him. He turned to Hermione swiftly, torn between what he needed to do and what he wanted to do.

The smudge was back on her cheek again, and this time he didn’t stop himself from reaching over to wipe his thumb over it. She held his hand there with both of hers, twisting her head to press her check more firmly into his palm before releasing him. “Go,” Hermione whispered, giving him a shooing motion with her hands. He smiled tightly, and moved off, taking cover behind the discarded barricade from an earlier fight. He took a deep breath, and forced himself to focus on what he was supposed to be doing.

Williams was no where to be seen, and with a quick look around, and a silent prayer that Hermione might be watching his back, he got into a half-crouch, and moved out into the more open area that the Blood Specialist had been moments before.

There was nothing remotely alive about what was left of Voldemort’s body. His skeletal fingers were curled and twisted as though clawing the air, his whole chest was now sunken, as though their was no longer anything left in the husk before him to inflate it. A silvery sheen covered everything, and dripped gruesomely from his robes and down the legs of the table. The body of the child was still huddled on the other table. Short soft-looking brown curls peeked out from under the dark hood, the one pale and rounded cheek Oliver could see told him the child had yet to lose the last of their baby fat, and from this distance, Oliver could determine it was a boy. There was no visible damage, but he still didn’t move, and Oliver couldn’t let himself linger on whether he lived or not. Two doors stared at him from the opposite wall, one of them slightly ajar.

His broke into a run, only half paying attention to the sounds of Hermione’s ‘Protego!’ and the slight jolt of the deflected spell between his shoulder blades. He didn’t bother reaching for the door handle, instead nudging the door open with his foot as he kept his wand extended in front of him. Torches flared in their heavy iron holders, set every three metres or so, and lit the rough stone stairs that spiralled down until they were lost beyond the curve.

He took them two at a time.

If it had been a play, and Oliver were merely the audience, he might later suppose it was almost anticlimactic; if it wasn’t for the deadly seriousness of the moment. Williams was struggling at the bottom, wand again raised as he muttered and cursed at the blank wall before him. There was no room on the narrow stair, no time to react, and the only thing that gave Oliver any advantage at all was Williams’ distraction. Already, he could see a crack opening in the wall before him as the stones and mortar ponderously began to rearrange themselves, like watching the way to Diagon Alley open. He turned, catching sight of Oliver, and shock only slowed him for a heartbeat before
he moved to strike.

“Viscrium In–” he began shouting.

“Contortusaum!” Oliver snarled, running on pure instinct. Flinging his spell out quicker than Williams could finish speaking, the unfortunate wizard was caught by both spells as they collided and combined weirdly, and Oliver and watched as Williams was slammed into the wall behind him with the force of a Hippogriff striking. Gasping hollowly, trying to suck oxygen from the air that his lungs just wouldn’t accept, Williams tried to struggle to his knees, but groped blindly to find his footing as his senses began to betray him. An anguished shriek escaped his lips as he held his head between unfeeling hands, before slumping back against the stones, still clawing desperately at his temples and ears with jagged nails, as though to exorcise something unseen.

With a final flick of his wand, Oliver had him wrapped in thick ropes, out of harms way for the moment. Without looking back, he turned and barrelled back up the stairs, leaving the stained and wild wizard to his new nightmares.

Clearing the doorway at the top of the stairs, which was now minus a door, he noted absently, Oliver found the fight still raging on. Pain crackled and blossomed across his shoulder as a stray *Incendio* creased him, and he pulled hastily back into the doorway. Peering more cautiously this time, he caught sight of the same heavyset woman as from earlier, shinny blond hair standing out in the smoky air. She moved to strike again, when her beautiful locks suddenly became a swarm of nesting snakes, hissing and attacking their mistress, tiny jaws dripping evilly. Oliver shot a grateful salute over to Hermione, and moved to join her again.

“I’ve lost the boy!” she shouted over the general noise, and Oliver still had to lean in to hear her.

“Get yerself behind cover, lass. We’ll find him when the dust settles. I’m sure he took one look at all this and found himself a nice little hidey-hole to crawl into,” he tried to reassure her, but his own stomach was dropping, hollow with dread.

She looked like she was about to protest, but after a moment’s hesitation, she nodded once, flinching unthinkingly as something struck somewhere close behind them. She was thinner than he remembered, but he wasn’t sure if that was just because this was probably the first time he’d seen her out of all those bulky layers since they left the Highlands, but something of the sallow quality of her skin told him it wasn’t entirely him, and he gripped his wand tighter to stop himself from drawing her close, where at least he could feel like he could protect her. Instead, he gave her hand a squeeze, enjoying it when she inexplicably tightened her own in response, and turned when he caught sight of a familiar blond head.

“Excuse me, lass. I’ve go’ something tae take care of,” he said gently, his gaze completely focused on his target. He disentangled himself from Hermione, and moved very deliberately towards the overturned table behind which Draco Malfoy was taking cover. A small glowing nimbus was darting around his feet, but Oliver didn’t spare it a glance to determine what sort of creature it might be.

Behind him, he could hear more spell-fire, and Hermione’s answering jinxes; but the noise was fading into the background of his conscience. The next few minutes looked bright and full of Malfoy’s pain, and Oliver couldn’t be a more enthusiastic administer. He settled easily into his duelling stance, standing lightly on the balls of his feet for quicker movement, and just as he brought his wand up, Draco glanced over his shoulder and saw him.

His eyes widened momentarily, the grey of them cold even from this distance, before narrowing once more, and his hand whipped out just barely in time to counter Oliver’s *Flagrante* Curse that
would have left Draco’s own wand blistering his palm as it heated.

“Arcesso Lethum!” Malfoy hissed, and the words seemed to slice the air like a knife blade between them. Oliver had only a split second to react as an inky dark cloud began undulating towards him, the Lethifold no more than a couple of centimetres thick, and incredibly deadly. Unreasoning terror may have lent him speed, but Oliver was shouting “Expecto Patronum!” before he had even a chance to blink, and his shoulders relaxed perceptibly when he felt the tingling presence of his hart Patronus. With unrestrained enthusiasm, she bounded forth from his wandtip, stamping and butting the Dark Magic construct until it simply imploded from her onslaught, and he brought his wand around again, coldly determined to end this.

He felt something tugging at his wand arm.

“Oliver – let him go,” Hermione was saying, struggling to make herself heard over Oliver’s fixated focus.

Gently, he tried to shake her off, not taking his eyes from his opponent. Malfoy merely raised an eyebrow, mockingly and smirked.

“Oliver–” Hermione tried again, sounding a little more determined. “He’s not a threat; he’s nothing more than an annoyance.” She’d brought her free hand up, gently turning his face to hers; so she could stare him down, he supposed.

He let out a breath, more than a little disappointed, and watched over Hermione’s shoulder as Malfoy gave him a jaunty salute with his wand, before darting for the fireplace ten metres away. Growling slightly, he narrowed his eyes, before getting a wicked little idea.

“What are you planning…?” Hermione started to ask, until she saw Oliver’s hart take off after the retreating Slytherin. In two bounds she had completely overtaken the pair. Without a single break in her stride – without slowing down even a bit – she trampled right over the marten still trailing at Draco’s heels. Wheeling quickly, she headed back, being especially careful to wickedly grind her small hooves in a few sensitive places before coming to stand before Oliver again. The large man grinned as he saw Malfoy flinch were he could feel his own Patronous’s pain.

“Oliver!” Hermione scolded, but he could see amusement dancing in her brown eyes, despite her glare. Ignoring her sputtering, he used his arm over her shoulders to pull her snuggly into his side, where, he was bemused to note, she immediately attempted to wriggle in even closer of her own accord.

The soft pops of multiple Apparations caught his attention, and he breathed a sigh of relief that someone had managed to get some Apparation markers set during all the chaos. Three Aurors appeared, wands already up and spells firing before the metaphorical dust had even cleared. Oliver was smug to note Charlie had been right – they were just in time to watch as Fred and George finished mopping up.

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When Oliver finally got home, the shadows at Cot Luchan had lengthened, and then faded into twilight.

The battle had ended shortly after the Aurors arrived, and Hermione had been relieved that none of her friends had been seriously hurt, though she was still more than a little irritated that they had attempted such a thing with just themselves in the first place. She could hear the slow tick of the clock in the kitchen, the soft sound comforting in the darkness. Charlie had been hit by a nasty Sword jinx, cutting his arm and shoulder where the tendon met the large muscles there, and was relegated to stay at St. Mungo’s overnight, much to his disgust. For the rest, assorted spell remnants and hexes had been removed in an hour or so, and Fred no longer had his nose growing out of his ear, and Viktor was able to remove the last of his apparent favourite Shark head Transformation that had been a little too enthusiastically cast.

Oliver, of course, had not stayed at the hospital. He’d waved off his injuries as minor, promising to have them tended to as soon as he had a moment, and after making sure Hermione was seen to, he quickly Floo’d to the Ministry offices, needing to give his report to Percy and mop up any remaining details.

That was five hours ago, and Hermione was trying very hard to ignore the loneliness his absence was causing.

It had been wonderful to be back home; though Cot Luchan had only been home for a scant two months before she'd had to leave, it was almost a sense of relief when she stepped out of the fireplace to be greeted by the rose slate of the kitchen, and the familiar mismatched, comfortably worn furniture. She hoped they didn't have cause to leave again for a long time.

Right now, she was curled up in her favourite chair; an oversized, over-stuffed armchair that was perfect to pull your feet up in. She'd pulled out a book, the horrible one that had started so much awkwardness with Oliver what seemed like forever ago now, and tried to settle in to read. Every little noise caused her to glance up anxiously, expecting to see the burly highlander at every turn, and she had been reading the same page now for the last twenty minutes. With a defeated sigh, she turned the book over in her lap, and threw her head back against the worn fabric of the chair back.
The truth was, she just needed to see him. She looked down to glare at the lurid cover of her book. Somehow, the handsome couple photographed there seemed to be taunting her, and she resolutely denied that she'd brought this book out in hopes of repeating their last encounter it had engendered. That was absolutely not something she would do, after all.

It had been so long since it was just them, and she was surprised to find that she'd missed it... that somehow the concept of them was more comfortable now.

The fire flared in the kitchen, the sudden green flare visible through the darkened doorway of the living room, and Hermione was briefly surprised at how dark it had gotten while she was lost in her thoughts. Oliver's tired movements could be heard in the kitchen as he puttered around, filling the kettle with water for morning.

"Hermione?" he called, his gruff voice soft, obviously thinking she might be sleeping.

She cleared her throat self-consciously, before calling, "In here!"

He appeared in the doorway, and she could just make out the white linen bandage tied around one palm, and the way his shoulders sagged which spoke to just how tired he was.

For a long moment, he simply stared at her, his eyes running over her face and body quickly before settling for just meeting her own rather self-conscious gaze. "Come join me?" he asked finally, holding out a hand to her. He seemed to be trying very hard to pretend he didn’t notice it shook slightly.

She swallowed, but scrambled to get loose from the plaid she'd thrown over her lap when the room had cooled down. Without a word, she took his hand gently in hers, being careful of the bandage.

It took only a moment to turn on the lamps, bathing their room in their soft yellow glow, and Hermione watched as he moved into the room and let himself fall into the bed with a small groan. She smiled softly at this - that was until he turned over and with a bit of a tug, had her tumbling down beside him.

"I'm not up to talking to yer chin, lass." He smiled at her bewildered expression.

She didn't know what to say to that, and for a long moment stayed with something safe, cradling his injured hand in hers as she traced the cloth tied there and resolutely kept her eyes focused on her trailing fingers. The tension was back, making her feel like she was on the edge of some big unknown, like a yawning abyss she could fall into if she wasn’t careful. "Did you have the healers look at it, then?" she finally asked quietly, unwilling to disturb the tense atmosphere. She looked up to find him watching her, an unknown expression on his face.

"It’s barely anything. I dealt wi’ it myself."

She gave him a scolding look, before pushing herself up off the bed, and stalking from the room.

"Where're you going, Mouse?" he called after her, sounding disgruntled by her abrupt departure.

"I've seen your idea of a field dressing too many times when it was Harry who was hurt, Oliver," she told him, coming back into the room carrying a few supplies. She crawled back on the bed, depositing the items beside them as she reached for his hand again.

With an amused smile, Oliver relinquished it to her, and she could feel him watching as she concentrated fully on removing the rough dressing with as much care as she could manage. His intense stare was making her fingers more awkward then she’d ever remembered them being, and
it took some tugging at the knots, but when it finally came loose, Hermione glared at him again. "And you didn't think this was worth treating properly?"

He didn't look particularly chastised by her complaints, if anything, his smile only grew more sly. "An' why would I do that when I know I've go' such a pretty nurse waiting at home for me?"

Heat bloomed on her cheeks and she didn't know how to answer that, so she bent over the burn again, being careful to work the comfrey ointment into the reddened and inflamed skin as gently as she could manage. Somehow, she wasn't entirely sure if the warmth she felt was coming from his large palm, or her own skin, but it left her even more flustered. When she was done, she used a clean bandage to tie it up again, and looked up to see Oliver still watching her. "Is there anything else?"

"Nothing worth gettin’ worked up about," he shrugged indifferently.

"Oliver!" she would have stamped her foot if she wasn't sitting on it, and knowing that only made her more embarrassed.

"Alright, lass, if it fashes ye.” He sat up, and began shrugging out of his shirt, and Hermione suddenly felt that perhaps this was a Very Bad Idea, but before she could marshal any reason to give him why she would suddenly change her mind, Oliver was casually flinging his t-shirt over the side of the bed, to land haphazardly by the closet door.

“I hope you’re planning on picking that up tomorrow,” she tried to scold, but didn’t think it sounded particularly effective when coupled with her suddenly perspiring palms and flushed cheeks.

Oliver stared up at her from where he lay against the pillows, one arm bent behind his head and propping his neck up, calmly waiting for her to begin, but she couldn’t really tell what he was thinking just then.

Curling her fingers tightly, she let her gaze wander over his physique, knowing this was going to end in embarrassment when he started looking at her knowingly again, with that one damned eyebrow raised at her. His chest somehow looked even broader when it wasn't confined in the tight material of the t-shirts he usually wore, and the skin still held faint traces of his tan from working outside all summer around their cottage. She could smell him again, his scent teasing her nose so that she was startled when she had the sudden urge to lean over and lick the skin, just to see what he tasted like.

Digging her nails into her palms just a little bit harder, she forced herself to stop ogling him, though she still let her eyes trace the path from his muscled chest to his hard ribcage and stomach, and that's when she finally noticed the abraded skin all down his left side. It looked shallow, but there was still dried blood there. His skin twitched under her touch when she trailed her fingers over the wounds, despite how gentle she tried to be, and she was worried she'd hurt him. She reached over for the damp cloth she'd brought, not entirely sure why she was so determined to do things the non-magical way, but somehow needing to feel his skin beneath her hands, and assess how he was for herself. She supposed mothers who kissed their children's foreheads to gauge a fever instead of using a thermometer must feel the same way; though she didn't feel remotely maternal right now.

The blood came away easily under her careful circular movements, and the skin underneath had already begun to close. The bruises were forming, just beneath the surface, and she knew by morning he'd be stiff and spectacularly colourful. She had to make him lift his arm so she could see all of it, it went so long down his side. The ointment smelled pleasant on her fingers, and she used the same gentle touch to slowly spread it over the wounds, from his sternum to almost his
waist. So concentrated was she on her task, that she was startled to realise the uneven breathing in
the room was Oliver's.

"Lass, if yeh don't stop that, ye're goin' ta kill me," he murmured so quietly, she wasn't sure if she
was supposed to have heard him or not, and she froze, suddenly unsure. His eyes, which had closed
under her ministrations, suddenly shot open, staring at her patiently until she met his gaze.

There was nothing patient in his expression, though. It looked strained, and Hermione dropped
everything she’d been holding in her hands when her fingers suddenly went slack and nerveless.
Slowly, Oliver reached out with the arm closest to her, gently cupping her face, running his thumb
over the round part of her cheek rhythmically, and watching her with hooded eyes.

When he made no other move for several long moments, seemingly content just to feather his
touch along her skin, Hermione felt herself wriggle a little closer, tentatively reaching out to do the
same. Using just the very tip of her index finger, she gently traced his jaw, along his nose, his
forehead, before giving in and running it slowly along his lips.

He groaned, and she jumped, startled, but he held her hand to his mouth when she tried to pull it
away. “Don’ stop, Hermione.”

Something about the sound of her name, something he rarely used, made everything sound so
much more intimate. The sound of it in his husky brogue did strange things to her stomach, and left
her limbs feeling like jelly but he didn't give her the chance to resume her actions, when he reached
for her, gently tangling his fingers in her thick hair and tugging her closer.

His lips were incredibly soft, and the kiss was gentle, despite the urgency and excitement she
thought she could feel thrumming between them. Every inch of her lips were grazed, and left
tingling in the wake of his.

She loved the feeling of his hair; somehow far softer than she would expect of a man, and the curls	angled between her fingers until she was tugging, and though she was sure she must be pulling too
hard, he didn’t seem to mind a bit when he groaned and pulled her closer, using his grip at the back
of her head, and his thumb, still resting against her cheek, to angle her head to his satisfaction.

His skin was warm under her touch, and she pulled away slightly, though he gave her a
disappointed look, to watch as she ran her fingers over his chest, loving the way his muscled
bunched and twisted under her touch. Oliver let his head fall back and he moaned softly. When she
bent down, hesitantly letting her tongue trail wetly over his collarbone and upper chest, he jumped,
and his normally hazel eyes burned dark as he stared back at her, before closing his arms around
her again, and rolling her so that she was now straddling his waist.

The new perspective startled her, and she gazed down at him slightly confused for a moment,
before she felt the warmth of his hands through the cotton of her shirt, which had seemed perfectly
adequate not half an hour ago, but now seemed far too thin. And far too there.

Oliver seemed to agree, because he wasted no time in finding the buttons, beginning at her neck
and with several deft flicks, had the top falling from her shoulders. He kept her eyes while he did it,
and she knew that if he thought for one moment she wanted him to stop, he would be out of the
room and into the shower before she could blink.

There was no way she wanted him to stop now, and with a shrug, she managed to get her shirt to
fall away reasonably nicely, without looking nearly as awkward as she would have expected. His
hands were now trailing along her arms, and it almost felt as if he were burning the skin in their
wake, his touch was so warm; or had all her blood pooled elsewhere? She whimpered as he moved
them lower, tracing the line of her ribs and circling her belly button, before gripping her sides and pulling her in for another kiss.

This one was much harder, and he wasted no time in encouraging her to open to him. The grip he had on her waist would have been uncomfortable under other circumstances, but right now, she needed to feel him hold her, needed to feel his touch on her skin so she could lose herself in the moment and just stop thinking for a while. She was tired of thinking, of always second-guessing where this man was concerned; tired of trying to be the rational one.

“Hermione,” he whispered against her jaw, seeming determined to taste every part of her.

She moaned in response, feeling far past the ability to form a coherent response, and she willingly went with him when he rolled her to his side again. Watching her intently, somehow keeping her gaze trapped, he slid off the bed, and stood before her at its foot, watching her intently, and a little mischievously.

Her breath caught when he reached for the zip of his trousers, and his hands slowed as he watched her carefully, but she just shook her head. Shimmying out of his denims, he left his dark blue boxers on for the moment, and instead reached to wrap one large hand around each of her calves. With a gasp, Hermione felt herself dragged across their sheets as he pulled her down to him, letting her legs fall to either side of his hips, and he grinned wickedly before leaning in to lay open mouthed kisses along her stomach and the hollow between her ribs, but even the amazing feeling of his tongue against her skin wasn’t enough to completely distract her from his hands, which were now lifting her hips, pulling her already-unbuttoned trousers down past her bum. He had to shift her slightly to pull them the rest of the way off, relinquishing her skin reluctantly before carelessly tossing them to the bedroom floor. With a devilish smirk, and a playful swat across her thigh, he sent her scrambling back up the bed before he crawled up after her to lay full length along her body.

The coarse feel of his skin against hers was erotic in a way she had never experienced before; somehow very masculine and powerful while he was laying in such full length contact with her own body. The tension was worse now, and his hands feathered the length of her, ghosting smoothly over her skin from her chin to her knees. They felt warm against her body, and paradoxaly made her shiver, and gooseflesh rise on her forearms and thighs. His eyes glittered down at her, dark with the surprising passion of the moment, and Hermione quietly admitted to herself that lust, at least, was certainly possible between them.

“Do ye want this, Hermione?” His hands were still busy on her body, concentrating on brushing the skin on the inside of her knees, and gently up her thighs. She throbbed lowly for that teasing touch to finish traveling higher, and was slightly shocked at her own wantonness even as she knew he would not allow it until he had her answer, free of the haze of sexual need.

She felt incredibly exposed by that – this was a clear, conscious decision he was asking for, and not one she would be able to hide behind as a choice in the heat of the moment tomorrow morning. And though she respected him for it, she also hated him, a little. She was so tired of not knowing what to do where Oliver was concerned.

His scent, like spices and apples and warm leather, was quickly becoming the most sensual thing she could ever remember smelling, and she nodded her head before she had even realized she’d done it, and she felt him shift closer, angling his head to take possession of her mouth. His smile was almost predatory, and extremely pleased.

Instead of kissing her, as she had expected, even turned her head obligingly to do, he tasted her. Starting with her jaw just below her ear, he explored the sensitive skin with his lips and tongue,
leaving her almost trembling in startled anticipation. When he actually used his teeth, nipping her with their blunt edges, a breathless gasp escaped her as she couldn’t stop her hands from rising to tangle in his hair and press him closer. He chuckled, his breath ghosting against her saliva-dampened skin. “I want ye t’tell me, lass. I need to hear you say it,” his voice was incredibly strained, and he almost groaned his words against her ear.

“I want this,” she barely managed to force the words out, as anything as mundane as breathing was easily overlooked she was finding, “I want you.” Somehow, these seemed to be the hardest things she’d ever had to say, and it almost felt freeing to admit it, though that might have only been because she found she had so very little oxygen to say it with.

“Aye, I’ll settle for those words for now,” and the look he gave her was burning and completely at odds with his upturned lips. “But I’ll have the others from you before long.” She didn’t even have a chance to wonder what words he meant before he was touching her again, and thought became impossible. It was the work of a moment to pop the hooks of her light coral bra, and his gaze as he smoothly pulled it away was openly admiring. He took his time, caressing her breasts as though to learn every nuance of her, cataloguing ever indrawn breath, every embarrassing moan and muffled curse before finally moving on to take care of their remaining clothing. This time, she pulled him closer, arching her body slightly to get greater contact between them, quickly becoming addicted to the feeling of his skin on hers.

His knee had found its way between hers, and she writhing against him, blindly seeking contact as his kisses became rougher, his own control becoming strained. It gave her a powerful feeling to realise that she affected him like that; could make Oliver Wood, a Quidditch star with multitude of groupies and female fans of dubious morality, groan harshly against her skin when she touched him, however much experience she lacked in comparison.

When his fingers finally found the source of her aching frustration they moved easily in the slippery heat, causing her to dig her fingers into his strong shoulder with need. “Oliver!” the hoarse shout was lost to the pounding in her ears. Later, she would remember to marvel at her own daring and lack of inhibition, but right now she was lost, drinking in every moment in a wonderful orgy of sensual stimulus.

The hairs on his legs were springy like thin spun wire where they brushed against hers, and in her highly sensitised state she felt she could feel each one individually, and she couldn’t help herself from arching her bare feet to run them up the backs of his calves, where the fine hairs tickled the souls of her feet wickedly. “Mouse,” he semi-moaned, semi-whined, and she guessed it tickled him too.

He seemed to take her amusement as a challenge, because suddenly his hands were moving far more determinedly and a great deal less lazily over her skin and she found it very difficult to concentrate on anything else. His lips were curved into a crinkled smile and his eyes glinted wickedly down at her when she failed to restrain her noises.

He seemed to take her amusement as a challenge, because suddenly his hands were moving far more determinedly and a great deal less lazily over her skin and she found it very difficult to concentrate on anything else. His lips were curved into a crinkled smile and his eyes glinted wickedly down at her when she failed to restrain her noises.

He seemed to enjoy her own slightly hesitant curiosity, as she experimented with touches and techniques that she had read of, or even been subjected to through dorm-room gossip between Lavender and Parvati. By the sounds he made, and the wonderfully strained expressions on his face, she made sure to file them away for later use. They didn’t climax together or anything ridiculous like that - sex being a learned skill like any other, and she certainly didn’t have a great deal of experience; but he was considerate of her in every way and seemed more than happy to have her body spread out before him to find creative ways of making her shudder beneath his touch. When he finally did coax her to orgasm, he didn’t seem at all disappointed that it was not due to the pleasure she felt at having him buried inside her. She had absolutely no doubt that, given
the opportunity, he would happily accept the challenge presented, and learn the rhythms of her pleasure in very short order; but for now, this was more than enough.

When he finally allowed her to collapse, he pulled her close to his side and cradled with her head to his chest as he ran his fingers along her spine. The light touch made her shiver and she cuddled closer, enjoying the heat of his body despite her sweat-soaked skin. She listened to his breathing as it caught, and eventually slowed under her ear, allowing it to soothe her until it was almost hypnotic. Still, he hadn’t said anything, though his touch never faltered on her skin, and she knew he wasn’t asleep.

She resolutely took a deep breath; she knew under what terms she had done this, and though she didn’t know his, she needed there to be no secrets between them – not about this.

“I love you,” she murmured against his skin, knowing it was loud enough he could hear, but being quiet enough he could pretend he didn’t if he chose.

She felt his breathing still beneath her cheek, before it resumed, louder than before. His hands slipped into her hair, cupping the back of her head and forcing her to look up, and she contrarily closed her eyes, suddenly not as sure as she had been a moment before that she was ready to face him; to deal with his gentle and kindly-meant admission that he cared, but not like that.

“Hermione,” he whispered, and the tone was one she’d never heard from him before. “Look at me.”

His expression, when she was brave enough to open her eyes, was nothing short of triumphant, as he leaned forward to slide his lips along the shell of her ear, down her jaw, and back up, he whispered, “I told ye I would get the words from you, lass. You don’t know how long I’ve waited to hear you say them.”

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Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:

As you've probably gathered from the title, I'm posting the last part as a series. I just felt, for one, that you all have waited long enough for Oliver and Hermione's moment that it deserved to be set on it's own (and also, you deserved to get it up faster, hence before I finish editing the last parts *lol*) This is by far the largest chunk of the parts that remain - the rest are between 1,300 and 2,000 words.

Love you all - it's been incredible.

-Ny(ruserra)
The trial was held before the Wizengamot a week later. It wasn’t a publicity stunt, and it wasn’t even particularly flattering to the Ministry, and in the end it left the participants with the feelings of being not quite resolved, but unlike the practices of his predecessors, Percy threw open the doors and made it very public, and somehow, everyone left feeling just a little more unburdened and with the beginnings of hope.

Thirteen witches and Wizards were indicted by the testimony of the participants, and fully eleven of them were brought in, to stand before the court in chains and take their turn in the heavy chair of judgment before their peers.

None of them were acquitted.

The Malfoys’ involvement was not mentioned, of course. Though Oliver informed Percy of everything that had happened he was disappointed when his friend agreed with Hermione, saying that they could hardly bring them up on charges for trying to help rid the community of the Dark Lord, no matter what their real motivations may be. When he considered the likely public reaction to that, Oliver was forced to concede, but at least they weren’t getting any public credit for their actions, either.

Oliver found her waiting in the Atrium, trying to avoid the pushing and shoving of the crowds by standing in the rather dubious protection of the large pillars. Though nether of their involvements had become public, the apprehension of the Death Eaters being credited to the small force of Aurors, Hermione had avoided attending the trials, preferring, she said, to let someone else deal with it this time around.

“How was it?”

He shrugged, noncommittally. “They were found guilty at any rate. Though, they kept going on about that illusion thingie they’d done—”

“The Chamber of Secrets. It was Sympathetic Magic.”
At his confused look, Hermione tried to explain. “Objects that have certain physical characteristics are believed to be magically representative of other objects. Such as the herb Eyesbright is thought to be exceedingly useful in any magic or ritual meant to affect the eyes, because the berries produced by the plant were believed to look like eyes. Or there are certain toadstools that are considered useful in, ah…reproductive magic, because of the shapes of some of the…” she flushed. “In Herbology, it’s referred to as the Doctrine of Signatures, and is thought of to be nature’s way of painting signposts, letting you know how things are supposed to be used. Voodoo dolls, and other forms of golem magic are another example—”

“An’ all this relates to Voldemort, how?” he interrupted gently, knowing full well how long this could take if she got going.

“It works a little differently, from discipline to discipline, but that’s the general idea. Back in our second year, Harry encountered a diary; Voldemort had succeeded in imprinting a simulacrum of himself into its pages, as a sort of insurance policy, I guess. That image—”

“Was essentially a golem!” Oliver groaned, catching on.

“Exactly. The diary was ruined later that year, but I guess they were hoping to still pull and echo of Voldemort from it. They probably thought that by using the Chamber, where he had cast the original spell, would strengthen it. Or perhaps they thought to pull an echo of him from the Chamber itself. By using the principals of Sympathetic Magic, whatever was done to the simulacrum, would affect the original.”

Oliver looked out over the crowd for a long moment, digesting this.

“They found the boy was missing from Schaveninger. No body this time; jus’… missing. You were right, we were looking for something else, we jus’ dinnae realise it.”

“How old?”

“In and aroun’ the same age as the other victims,” he stopped, hesitating.

“They didn’t find his body in the wreckage at the cabin, did they?” Hermione guessed sadly.

He shook his head. “No. Is it really possible tha’ they would try programming Voldemort directly into a child?”

“Possible. They were desperate, and it’s the only way I can see around what the Malfoys did.”

“What about around what you did?”

“I don’t know, Oliver. I did the best I could, but I couldn’t test it before hand; it was all theory.” She sighed, turning to look out over the crowd, trying not to flinch at all the hopeful faces. “Is Voldemort really back then?” Hermione asked, and her voice was almost childishly wistful at the thought of losing all they had gained since his defeat.

Oliver gently tugged her into his chest, so he could circle her in his arms, a reassuring barrier against the thoughts that clouded her owlish eyes. Resting his chin on her shoulder, Hermione could feel his deep voice rumbling in his chest against her back as he answered her. “I don’t know that we’ll ever know. They’ve got the best Legelmentalist working on what’s left of Williams, but he’s so far gone, I don’t think they’ll ever get anything useful out of him. His mind is beyond shattered.” She took comfort from the unthinking resolution in his voice that said louder than words that they were going to be okay.
“I still think those blond prats could hae been charged wit’ something. Seeing one o’ them bound in that ruddy chair–”

Hermione twisted uncomfortably in his arms. When she caught sight of her husband’s expression, she winced. “Oliver–”

“I mean, the foul shites were trying–” he continued, oblivious to Hermione’s attempt at a soothing injunction. Her next statement stopped him cold, though.

“Oliver, Draco has the Blood Sickness.”

The news hit him like a lead cauldron. He honestly didn't know how to react, and it wasn't until he could feel the sort of dry sucking of his lungs as they struggled, and he realised he’d forgotten to breathe. Slowly, he took in a deep breath, and then released it through his nose, not sure, after everything the foul shite had put him through, how he felt; or even how he should feel. Dimly, he noted that he wasn't surprised that for all their cunning, they couldn't keep the secret from his Mouse.

Seeing his expression, Hermione hurried on to explain, “There isn’t much Lucius Malfoy wouldn’t do for his son, and Austria brags one of the best medical research facilities in Europe. With their increasingly barbaric Muggle laws in place, they’ve opened up the way for …questionable testing.”

“All this, just so that one young man can grow up and have kids?” Oliver could feel his anger slipping into his voice, despite his efforts to keep it neutral.

Hermione looked away, staring into the sea of oblivious people that still streamed through the Atrium in the wake of the trial. Sunlight from the charmed skylights glinted off the gold Fountain of Magical Brethren, throwing glinting galleons of light on passing witches and wizards. Reluctantly, she spoke, but still didn't look away from the laughing, chattering mob.

“That’s if he’s lucky, Oliver. Many of the Blood Sicknesses kill. Quite slowly.”

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The quality of the silence changed, though Percy didn’t turn from his quiet vigil at the window. For long minutes, he continued staring out into the streets; far below, like people slowly awakening from a long slumber, witches and wizards moved through the streets. Hesitantly, pockets of threes and fours formed, and everywhere there was the subtle evidence of years of fear being dusted off and exposed to the truth of daylight. A smile ghosted across his pale face, hidden from the room at large as he resolutely ignored the office behind him, and the presence it concealed.

He could feel the air shift, almost imperceptibly as his un-invited guest waited patiently, allowing him his silent savouring of all he had striven for finally coming to fruition; really, as epitaphs go, this was not a bad way to go at all, he acknowledged. With a final, absorbing stare, he shifted his weight, and it was with that one, small movement that he acknowledged the shadows, even as he refused to legitimize the presence by turning around.

“We’re very much alike, you and I. Aren’t we, Mr. Weasley?”

His voice was a soft murmur; coldly curious, and yet with a hint of respect, as one addressing an ally, or an equal.

Of course, in a sense they were allies, as adversaries who had grown comfortable with one another, aloof from others, the lines blurring occasionally like a spy and his subject; and Lucius was right,
they were very, very much alike. Percy smiled again, and knew that though the dark window carried no reflection back the other man, it didn’t need to.

“So, in the end, you turn on your own master,” Percy observed softly.

There was a brief pause, as though he hadn’t really been expected to speak. “Master? My dear boy, Voldemort was, after all, just a jumped-up Muggle. Tell me, do you really see me falling in line with a Wizard who lacks even enough consistency to understand that he is, in fact, trying to eliminate himself? He was a means to an end. He was charismatic enough to rally the fanatics, and the less intelligent, but he was never really more than a figure head. He just never realized it.” Lucius laughed once, a short sound without any real humour.

Percy allowed his own lips to quirk at the irony. He’d suspected, of course, and what he hadn’t suspected, he’d learned over his time in office. Malfoy and the people he worked for had a very long view of the future, indeed. In every society, there were malcontents and those who could be preyed upon by their stronger, more determined peers. Lucius had just stood back and allowed Tom Riddle to gather them all for him; one neat, nice little package. “Those fanatics certainly threw enough kinks in your plan when they assisted the Dark Lord in rising again,” he remarked blandly.

“An inconvenience,” he acknowledged. “Why do you think we all waited for thirteen long years without making any move to further our plan? Loose ends. We knew he was still out there, and that he would be back. Why jeopardize everything we had done for the sake of a few years? The man was a loose cannon – far better to have him where we could see him, than to have him working against us from the shadows,” he paused. “It’s all about calculated risks.”

“You mean, you couldn’t control what you lot had created,” Percy corrected, still bland, and still keeping his back to the door, as if he were merely having a conversation with his own reflection. “And so you dumped him on an unsuspecting public, hoping Harry’d take care of the problem you’d created, you bastard,” the tone of the expletive didn’t change, and yet still managed to convey a great deal of anger.

“Now, now Minister, what kind of language is that?” Lucius asked, mockingly.

Percy ignored him, instead asking his one of his few nagging questions. “What’s in Austria?”

He could see, for one moment, as the ghostly image in the glass lost its smirking veneer, sighing almost inaudibly in the silent office. For a long moment, Percy didn’t honestly think he was going to get an answer. “Lebelung’s Centre for Magical Research.”

Suddenly the silence was deafening, as Percy ruthlessly contained his shock. It was several moments before he spoke again to the shadows behind him.

“I see. You really were playing a long game. Hermione would have never made it to the Goyles, would she?”

“What do you mean were?” Lucius’s voice was filled with cold amusement once more. “In the present circumstances, I see no impediment. The Austrian Ministry have been encouraged to take a less democratic view of the current blood crisis, and they’re prepared to overlook certain testing… irregularities that may forward a solution. With the research notes provided by Mrs. Wood and my late unfortunate associates, I imagine a potion or treatment can be devised in short order. Though it’s true, I’ve no doubt it would have been sooner, if Mrs. Wood had been under our …protection since the duel.”
“And you’re suddenly concerned with altruism? Somehow that doesn’t sound like you, Malfoy.”

Percy was confused with the pale face in the window tightened painfully, before smoothing out once more. His voice, however, betrayed nothing. “I expect to make a tidy profit out of all this. Imagine what people would pay for such a cure, when it’s their sons and daughters who are afflicted, and suddenly the succession of their line is facing a grinding halt.”

“All this – for galleons?” The Acting-Minister barely kept his fury in check, though he knew his quiet voice still shook.

“Nothing as crass as money, Minister. They would pay with things far more dear than their family fortunes.”

Something in his tight voice as he said this caught Percy’s attention, and suddenly he knew.

Standing behind him, wrapped in shadows was proof against all the school-aged speculation that Lucius Malfoy lacked any real sense of compassion or feeling at all, even for his own family.

Obviously for his son, he was willing to risk a great deal.

“And what have you gained, allowing all of your Pure-blooded cronies to be rounded up and sent to Azkaban?”

He could imagine the smirk on the other man’s face from the tone of his wintery voice. “You’ve just rather conveniently gotten rid of all their parents, leaving those poor young men and women in control of old, politically well-connected Pureblood families, and in some cases, fortunes.” Lucius leered mockingly at these words. “Young men and women, who, thanks to Draco’s patient work, belong to me.”

Percy nodded once, not really surprised, but a price he still considered more than fair, under the circumstances. He let out a deep breath, done with waiting, and with Malfoy’s gloating. “Is it to be something painful, then?”

Lucius gave another short laugh, this one honestly amused. “I considered it, you know. Being rid of you, but I think in the end, I’d rather work against you, then say, someone like Fudge. At least it gives one a sense of accomplishment.”

“I think I could almost take that as a compliment, if it came from someone slightly less reprehensible.”

There was silence in the room for a moment, and Percy took the opportunity to take in the hopeful atmosphere on the street so far below.

It really was worth it, of course.

“Obliviate.” Lucius’s voice was strangely gentle as it came out of the shadows; and the rest, was darkness.
Author's Note:

To me, this is the real end of the story, with all the loose ends tied up; or at least as many as I intend to tie up *lol*. I know some of you will be disappointed that there wasn't more Oliver/Hermione in this bit, but I promise to be back to them with the next post - though all that's left is a bit of fluffy indulgence :-)  

Thank you so much for all the wonderful reviews - I really, really tried hard to have this out yesterday for you guys, but life got in the way, so I hope one day earlier than planned is still a treat :-)  

Love,  

Ny(ruserra)
Adrianne Margaret was of course highly irritated with her brother for having taken himself and his wife away for a personal holiday just as his first nephew was to be born, but any plans she had for staying mad were circumvented by her obvious pleasure in the palpable improvement in their relationship. Of course, some of her pique might also have been dispersed by Oliver’s boyish excitement over little Julian Watson Walker; Adrianne and Jamie having followed the old custom of giving the child the Mother’s clan for a second name - and as the Wood family was a sept, or protectorate, of the much larger clan Watson, little Julian had quite the moniker to live up to.

Jamie was over the moon, of course, and Hermione couldn’t help but laugh with Adrianne as he and Oliver proudly made plans for Julian’s broom riding lessons, his club affiliations, the attributes of the witch he would eventually bring home, and his eventual residence in Gryffindor Tower – in that order.

Oliver’s days at the Ministry were slowing down, though he’d had to step in when Percy took strangely ill shortly after the trial, seeming very confused, until they had been forced to bring him to St. Mungo’s for a few days. The Healers there thought it was too much work and too much stress finally taking their toll on an exhausted man, so Oliver was spending long days keeping the newly awakened Wizarding world running, but from a safe, unidentified distance.

He and Hermione both tried resolutely to accept the whole incident at face value.

It had been nearly two months since little Julian’s birth, and Hermione had offered to take him off his frazzled mother’s hands for a few hours, while she took a much needed afternoon with her husband – and from the sounds of things, a certain hay loft. The details that had unwillingly come to mind when Adrianne had let that slip left Hermione blushing, and very, very glad Oliver wasn’t in the same room at the time; she wasn’t sure which she was more afraid of, that he might get ideas, or that he might hunt up Jamie to beat him within an inch of his life. Somehow, accepting that his sister had engaged in the necessary activities to produce a child, versus thinking about her person in proximity of a hay loft, might prove to be a bit too much strain on his brotherly tolerance.

Hermione didn’t have a great deal of practical experience with babies, but she was rather smug that she’d been doing just fine, thank you very much, with what she’d gleaned from the towering stack
of books she’d picked up as soon as she’d gotten back and seen Julian. Adrianne and Michael had both laughed, Adrianne trying to be diplomatic in saying that she thought something like this might be more of a hands-on learning process, while Michael had just outright busted a gut, but Hermione had persevered. To Oliver’s credit, he’d smiled, and would question her each night on things she’d learned, though he was so tired he often fell asleep before she got to finish.

It had taken some work, but Julian was now soundly asleep and perfectly content cradled in one arm; and the fact that she could manage this and still read with her free hand pleased her to no end. She was so engrossed she didn’t even hear Oliver until he was in the room with her.

“He treating you right?” he asked quietly, so as not to wake the baby.

Carefully, Hermione juggled her book one-handed, until she had managed to slip the bookmark in place before setting it down on the side table. Oliver had reached to help, but she’d glared and fumbled until she did it herself. Instead, Oliver moved to sit on the hearth on the other side of the table. He sighed as he lowered himself down, obviously tired, and let his head roll back on his shoulders.

“Did the Obliviators manage the problem at the underground in Leads?” she asked, knowing it had been in the Prophet this morning.

Oliver grunted, without opening his eyes. “Bloody wizards and their enchanted Muggle objects. D’yeh know, some daft old bint brought a self-propelling trunk with her? The thing had legs, for Merlin’s sake!”

Hermione tried to imagine the pandemonium that would cause on an otherwise prosaic weekday morning, and had to suppress a giggle for her husband’s sake.

Julian fidgeted for a moment, tiny arms and legs outstretched as far as he could as he searched for a new position before settling down once more, little face pressed even more firmly to Hermione’s breast. She chuckled. “I don’t think I’ll be able to help you in that department, little one. We’ll have to wait for mom.”

Oliver just watched the scene and his expression was so tender, Hermione quickly began fussing with Julian’s blanket so she wouldn’t have to meet it. Oliver just watched her for a moment, before breaking the silence.

“Mouse,” he started hesitantly.

This could be dangerous. “Mmmm?” she murmured, still focused a bit apprehensively on the baby.

“I, uhm, I won’t always be working for the Ministry; Percy’s starting to ease back into the job, an’ we’ve been talking…”

“Would this have something to do with the reappearance of that old leather journal of yours?” Hermione asked, trying not to smile at her husband’s obvious nervousness, and at her relief in the new direction of the conversation. She was pretty sure he blushed at the mention of his play book.

“Well, really, you’ve been spending a lot of time talking to Percy lately, an’ he says you agree that the Wizarding community is ready for something a little more cheerful – and I know it’s a lot of travelling, but I’ll be home as often as I can, you’ll see! An’—”

“Home from what, Oliver?” Hermione couldn’t resist dragging out his misery just a little bit longer; she wasn’t used to seeing the big man so uncomfortable.
“Coaching Puddlemere United,” he mumbled, looking down at his clasped hands.

Hermione stayed perfectly quiet, waiting. When the silence had stretched from one heart beat, to two, and then five, Oliver looked up, obviously ready to placate her anger. Instead, her lips were twitching as she tried to suppress a large grin.

“You knew!” he accused, one hand reached out threateningly to her ribs, where he had found just the other night that she was unbearably ticklish.

“Baby,” Hermione warned, smugly, jiggling her occupied arm ever so slightly for emphasis.

The devilish look he shot her promised later consequences, and for a moment Hermione almost lost track of the conversation, as part of her began anticipating what he might have in mind.

“Percy told you before me, then did he?” Oliver asked, a touch petulantly.

“Actually,” Hermione bit her lip, sheepishly, “I sort of suggested that he’d better get the Leagues up, because if he didn’t I’d help you with your campaigning – and I’m a much bigger nuisance.”

Oliver threw his head back and laughed. Julian, of course, promptly protested the loud noise, and Oliver shot Hermione an apologetic wince.

They had the twins over that night after Jamie stopped by to gather up Julian, to celebrate the League’s re-instatement and Oliver’s new position in it. George had brought a set of experimental Exploding Snap and he and Oliver were lounging about on the polished floor of the living room playing a hand. Fred watched on, making notes and offering occasional bits of wit as more often than not it was Oliver who fell victim to the new design’s vagrancies. Hermione just watched from her position of safety in her arm chair, and rolled her eyes.

“So that’s what you’n Percy have had your heads together about. You’ve been so secretive, I thought we might have to dust off the Extendable Ears,” George grinned at her, and Hermione just reached over and swatted him.

“All set to be a Quidditch wife, Hermione, or have you decided on something to keep you busy while Oliver’s away?” Fred laughed.

“Actually, I’ve been thinking a lot about that,” she started, slowly. “I wanted to do something that would help people relax again.”

“Well, you did a good job with that, Mouse. I cannae think of anything that will be better for everyone than getting something fun going again,” Oliver grinned crookedly and reached over give her hair a gentle tug.

“Good,” Hermione nodded sharply, once. “Because that wasn’t all I was talking to Percy about; I’m taking a position at the Ministry.”

Oliver looked over from his position sprawled out on the floor, with an indulgent smile. “Doin’ something to work wi’ your House Elves, are yeh?”

Hermione shook her head. “No, actually. I’m going to be your boss.”

Oliver missed the next card, not even noticing when it exploded in his hand. “Wha’?” he strangled.

“Well, only technically. I’m going to be the new Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports.”
The twins’ jaws dropped. “Hermione, you don’t even like Quidditch!” Fred protested.

“After nine years of it, I really don’t mind it. Frankly, I think I’m destined to be surrounded by it, regardless, what between Harry and Ron, Ginny and the two of you, and now Oliver.” She smiled a little ruefully, before getting serious again. “I think my ability to organize is exactly what is needed. Do you have any idea the state of these clubhouses? I don’t know why these boys seem to think they can live off of nothing but beer – and the lifestyles they lead! - but I’m going to make sure that they start living properly, and I can’t even get into the other changes that need addressing…”

The boys in the room seemed frozen in shock as they listened to her itemise her plans to revamp their sport.

“…we have a lot of lost ground to catch up on if we’re going to field a decent team in the World Cup, after all.”

Oliver seemed to find his voice at last, and chuckled soothingly at this optimistic statement. “Love, the teams have been out of the air for almost three years, there’s no way you’re going to be able to get them all in proper shape in only one season, much as we’d all love to see that…”

Hermione fixed her husband with a steely glare “Quidditch is just numbers, when you get right down to it, Oliver Wood, and if there is one thing I excel at, it’s numbers. It’s up to you captains to get your teams motivated and up to standard, and believe me, you will be hearing about it if you don’t. England could use the celebration that would come with winning the Cup.”

She looked slyly over at her gapping husband, quite enjoying his look of complete bewilderment, and told him, “And I think I’m going to officially re-name it the Wonky Faint.”

Chapter End Notes

**Authoress’s Note:**

One more to go *sniff* I can’t believe how hard this is to actually leave behind. Good thing I have plans well in hand for a new multi-chapter fic :-) I hope to see you all check it out when it eventually gets posted, probably in a couple of weeks.

I'll leave the long author’s note for the very end - but as always, thank you for each and every review *hugs*

Love,

Ny(ruserra)
Thirteen Months Later…

The fire crackled with the huge logs Oliver had split and dried earlier that year, and everywhere inside the tiny *Cot Luchan* was covered with Hermione’s festive touch. Majestic holly boughs had been harvested from their tree outside and placed over the mantle and back door, the bright red berries striking against the almost polished-looking dark leaves. Garlands of evergreen wrapped the stair rails and banisters, and little twinkling fairy lights peaked out from between showy foliage. For the most part, the fairies stayed put – and Crookshanks enjoyed playing with the ones that didn’t. Everywhere, the cottage smelled of turkey and stuffing, roast corn and spiced pie; Hermione had been busy since early this morning, surrounded by cookbooks, getting everything ready for their guests.

Oliver wandered into the kitchen, having just finished with the Prophet over his mid-morning coffee. Hermione was stirring something over the stove, concentrating carefully on her task, and he slipped behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and resting his chin on her shoulder, enjoying the scent of cinnamon in her hair, even though it was tamed into a tight bun.

“Anything important happening today?” she asked.

Oliver hesitated for a moment, not really wanting to disturb the Christmas mood, but reluctantly spoke up. “Lucian Edgecombe turned up dead this morning. The Prophet published it as suicide.” He exchanged a significant look with Hermione, and gave a sigh. “Oh, well. It’s Percy’s problem now, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is, Mister Coach of the Soon-To-Be-British-League-Champions,” Hermione elbowed him playfully.

Oliver took the time to kiss his way along her neck, being sure to spend special attention to the soft spot behind her ears, until he was rewarded with a low moan. “What time are they due?” he asked huskily.

He was answered by the sound of the door banging open, and Harry’s loud call of “Happy Christmas!”
“Right about now, I’d say,” Hermione said, wryly. Oliver just groaned, and banged his forehead against her shoulder.

Hermione had invited everyone who was important to her; the Weasleys, and Oliver’s family, Ron and Harry, and even Viktor, who she was surprised to have Oliver suggest. Her dad was sitting quietly, sipping eggnog by the tree, watching the fluttering fairies with a bemused expression. She wasn’t entirely certain, but she was pretty sure Fred had laced the cup with a generous helping of rum first, but she chose to ignore it.

Jamie and Michael and Oliver’s da were sprawled like boys in various cushions and bean bag chairs around the floor, arguing good naturedly about various players, proposed trades and team standings. Oliver occasionally added his two cent’s worth, but seemed content to be entertaining Julian with a small model Chinese Fireball that Charlie had brought. The little thing would strut around and occasionally belch a puff of smoke, and once, much to Julian’s delight, snaked out a long forked tongue to tickle his nose. Kena and Adrianne were placing armloads of packages beneath an overflowing tree, while Ginny tried to escape from under Ron’s belligerent eye to talk with a certain Bulgarian seeker, who had been giving her shy glances since their first meeting at the Ministry last week. Her desperate expression eventually won over Charlie, who with a smirk, challenged Ron to a game of Wizarding chess, completely distracting him for the rest of the evening.

Hermione was still in the kitchen, surrounded by overly helpful advice and admonishments from the eminently matriarchal Brighde and Molly. Hermione thought that perhaps she was in hell; they only called it Christmas. From the other room, she could hear Fred and George as they tried to catch Crookshanks, and feed him some kind of new product.

“When are you two going to give me a grandchild, then?” Oliver’s mother was asking, again, and Hermione forced herself to remember that Oliver still wouldn’t like it if she turned his mum into a purple toad.

Mrs. Weasley, who had been watching Hermione’s preparations with hands that positively itched to get involved, chose that moment to chime in with “You know, everyone always loved my turkey - I’d be glad to help you, dear.” And Hermione cursed Ginny’s newfound interest in Bulgarian exports for causing her to abandon Hermione to face Molly’s clutches completely alone.

When Crookshanks finally ran through the sweet potatoes, trying to get away from the twins, and Mrs. Wood began getting a bit too personal, commenting “You should speak to Oliver about trying this position next time you have him alone; he’s a strong boy, he could handle it - and I understand that it’s the best if you want to get pregnant, dear.” Hermione grabbed the spice jar she was working with so tightly she thought the glass might have squeaked in protest.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Weasley was examining the plum pudding, dubiously poking it with her wand, and, after casting a careful glance to see if Hermione was watching, began murmuring at it under her breath. With a satisfied sigh, she turned her attention to the carrots, and Hermione began counting down in her head...

“You know dear, you should try adding a glaze next time, it looks so much more attractive,” she offered, helpfully.

4. Hermione thought, and she began attacking the mashed potatoes with a renewed antagonism. When Molly began helpfully criticising dessert, Hermione’s blood pressure was causing her to see spots, and she whirled around, not entirely sure of what she was going to do, as long as it made them go away.
Oliver, with studied casualness, wandered into the kitchen, absently handing a sleepy Julian to the eager arms of his mother. He grinned, his lips crinkling, and Hermione immediately felt some of her tension drain. “Now, why don’t I give yeh a hand for a bit?” he asked, as he reached out, and wiped a smudge of flour off of her nose. She watched gratefully over his shoulder as Brighde tried to subtly shoo Molly from the kitchen.

Oliver pulled her in closer, rubbing small circles at the base of her neck. The warmth of his body was entirely welcome, despite the heat of the kitchen, and she found herself burrowing closer. “You must have some kind of amazing sixth sense,” she sighed.

She could feel his chest rumble under her check as he laughed. “You mean how you were about to whip your wand out and turn them both into bats?”

She sniffed at the accusation but couldn’t actually protest, before whispering, "We are *not* inviting them all again next year - we are leaving the country, if necessary."

He was trying not to laugh, much to her annoyance, and he must have felt her tense under his arms, because he promptly decided on a distraction. His fingers moved up, tracing the long line of her neck. The other hand lifted her chin when she stubbornly refused to cooperate. The tenderness in his gaze no longer flustered her, and she couldn’t stop herself from responding to his gentle command as he brought his lips down to hers.

No matter how long it had been, or would be, she would never get used to the heady feeling of being kissed by this man. He teased her, keeping his kisses light, refusing to give in to her attempts to deepen it. Pushing up on her toes, Hermione dragged her fingers over his hard chest, to trace the sensitive skin at the base of his neck. He moaned against her lips, and now it was her turn to tease.

“Hermione,” he growled, his voice sounding incredibly sexy when it was so gravelly, and she gave in, kissing him properly, nipping and licking his bottom lip before tangling her tongue with his.

Reluctantly, she pulled away, pushing gently on his broad chest to make him pull back enough for her to clear her head. He tucked her head to his shoulder almost protectively, rocking them gently, and Hermione let out a deep sigh, moving slightly so they could both stare at the face of the large wooden clock the Weasleys had given them hanging above the sink. The fourth hand’s progress was barely perceptible, having only recently begun its journey towards twelve.

The quiet ticking filled the kitchen and Oliver’s voice was husky in her ear as he leaned down to ask,

"Do you still want to tell them that you’re pregnant, then?"

-The End-

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:
First of all, thank you, thank you, thank you to each and every person who has read, is reading, or is going to read this story :)

This is going to be incredibly long. I found I had a pile of notes here at the end, but feel free to skip this part, if my creative journal stuff doesn't interest you.

Clan Wood does exist. I’ve tried to stay true to the historical details, but I did take some liberties with their tartan, strictly for visual reasons during the wedding chapter. The real tartan is a plaid that combines both emerald green and royal blue, with narrower lines done in black, white and red. Altogether, it didn’t fit with the image I was trying to create for the scene, and their tartan became a mostly blue construct instead.

A sept is a clan or family who falls under the protection of a larger clan or family, and the Woods really are, or have been in past, a sept of the Watson clan. I have found references to small households of the Wood family being found in Aberdeenshire, though they are more numerous in the lowlands, around Angus, Kinkardineshire and Perthshire. They did originally start as a Highland clan, but moved south, most likely around the time of King David I.

And as for little Julian Walker - Walker was my Grandfather's middle name, given to him by his Scottish mother, who of course, was a Walker ;-) Hey, it's my story, right? Somehow, it seemed a fitting tribute, as some of you know, my Grandfather passed away during the writing of this story – an event which interrupted the writing of it for nearly 15 months.

When I started to write this, I wanted to take a stab at making a Marriage Law story that wasn't so cliche. I'd read a number of stories that used this challenge, and was always left feeling frustrated afterwards, as the author often seemed to use it as an excuse to jam their favourite rare-pair together without the bother normally associated with trying to finesse such a pair into a relationship. Having said that, since then I have read some lovely Marriage Law stories that leave my poor attempt behind in the dust, but I accomplished what I set out to, I think; I've created a story that I enjoy reading, and that, to me at least, doesn't commit any of the obvious sins so rampant in this category – I hope!

The original rules for the Marriage Law Challenge - for anyone like me, who get's all geeky about details; was posted by chelleybean@ufie.org way back in 2004 on the Yahoo group WIKtT (or When I Kissed the Teacher). It was intended for a Severus/Hermione pairing. Excepting that, I tried to follow the rest as faithfully as possible, with only minor modifications:

**Conditions:**

Your choice of how his contract comes to be:

1. Severus's father, desperate to save the Snape family, selects her for her brilliance and power.

2. Severus falls in love with Hermione, but she rejects him, forcing him to take a more 'high handed' approach.

3. There must be a confrontation between Severus and Hermione's father.
4. No Rape! Hermione must either skilfully convinced or romantically won over into being a willing participant in the marriage bed.

5. Lucius Malfoy must challenge, either by duel or wizard court, Snape's claim to Hermione in an attempt to get her for Draco.

Now, all that said, I realise some of you will be thinking I've set this up for a sequel—I haven't. To me, this is how it had to end. Things rarely resolve themselves completely in life, and to end this story any other way just felt wrong. Not everything here is happy, but I think, overall, it is a happy ending. I hope you all agree with me that by doing it this way, I kept the integrity of the story intact.

I can't believe you guys stuck with me for four long years while I finished this story. I promised time and time again that I wouldn't abandon it - I honestly couldn't have done it without the support I've been given. I've received some of the most touching reviews for this story – things that have made me more confident in my abilities as a writer, things that have made me understand the writing process just a little bit better, and things that have just plain made me feel good on a bad day. I have gone through some of the most significant events of my life while writing this story, both good things and bad; I got married to my own personal Oliver after a five year engagement, I got diagnosed with a life changing condition, and I lost the first of my close relatives when my Grandfather passed. Some of the things you have had to say to me over this time have touched me deeply, and I want to thank you all.

I love you all.

Until next time,

Ny(ruserra)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!